SOFIA SJÖ

Postmodern Messiahs

The changing saviours of contemporary popular culture

Introduction

The messiah myth is alive and well in the modern world. Contemporary science fiction film has taken the myth to heart and given us an endless stream of larger than life heroes. The heroes of the present are, however, not exactly the same as the heroes of the past. A changing world demands new things of its saviours. Using a textual and narrative analysis based on insights gained from feminist film theory and cultural studies, this article looks closely at the messiah theme in science fiction films and TV series from the last three decades. The study explores the changes that have occurred in relation to images of the body, the attitudes and personalities of modern heroes, gender, questions of power and ideas of the transcendent. The article then discusses what these changes both between newer and older heroes and between contemporary heroes and the traditional messiah story might say about religion and spirituality in the modern world. Finally the article explores the question of why the messiah myth still finds an audience today.

Religion and popular culture

Religion and popular culture have not always gotten along well. Religious groups have more than once criticized the images of popular culture, while popular culture has presented critical portraits of religion. Despite this sometimes conflictual relationship, the connection between religion and popular culture cannot be denied. The importance of popular culture today has made it clear that for an understanding of religion in today's society one must also look to popular culture. According to John D. Caputo, a lot of people today receive their religion via popular culture (Caputo 2001: 78–90). Scholars have also shown how people, for example, use films when creating religious sys-

tems of meaning (Axelson 2008). Films and other forms of popular culture may not mirror us directly or influence us in a direct manner, but as Adam Possamai puts it 'there will always be an element of truth in them' (Possamai 2005: 23).

In other words, by looking more closely at religion in popular culture and exploring how the media influences viewers' ideas on, for example, questions of meaning, we can receive important information about religion and spirituality in the world of today. By looking at recurring themes in popular culture, it is also possible to recognize trends that might reflect deeper issues in our society. These images should of course not be interpreted in a simplistic manner. Films can always be understood in many different ways, but when a story structure keeps returning, there is definite reason to be observant. One such recurring theme is, no doubt, the myth of a messiah. In the following it is therefore the messiah myth in science fiction that will be in focus.

It can perhaps seem odd to look to a genre that looks to the future for an understanding of today's world, but when the subject is spirituality and postmodernism this becomes quite natural. Science fiction has always been interested in religion and mythology (Mendlesohn 2003: 264–75). It is also a genre that, although often talking about the future and different worlds, still is a comment on the world of here and now (Hollinger & Gordon 2002: 4). It is also easy to find connections between postmodernism and science fiction. According to *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, science fiction is 'perhaps the ontological genre par excellence. We can think of science fiction as Postmodernism's non-canonized or "low art" double' (Clute & Nicholls 1999: 950). This is not to say that all science fiction is postmodern, but the genre can still be seen as an interesting comment on a modern or postmodern world, and, as we shall see, its saviours.

Messiahs and messiah myths

Before we continue with a closer look at messiah myths in science fiction, a short definition of what is meant here by the term messiah is in order. The idea of a messiah can be found in many religions. Often the myth appears among peoples who find themselves to be in a difficult situation, for example, set upon by foreign rulers. Naturally the beliefs differ somewhat in different cultures. However, the core of the myth is usually the same: someone will come and lead the people to a better life (Schäfer & Cohen 1998: 3–38).

The version of the messiah myth that we find in contemporary science fiction, has, quite naturally, borrowed many themes from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, though it can sometimes be difficult to recognize under the layers of action and special effects. In the stories, humankind, planet Earth, or the whole universe is in danger, due to everything from asteroids hurling towards Earth, attacks by vicious aliens or robots, or evil humans scheming to take over the planet; in short, an apocalypse, of a sort, is expected. Luckily there is someone who can combat evil and save the day. This person is usually a young man, who after many struggles is ready to meet his destiny and become what he was meant to be. The hero's story often follows the journey of the hero as it is portrayed in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), a work that seems to have inspired quite a few film-makers (Gordon 1995: 73–82). By means of, for example, self-sacrifice, however, a lot of heroes also show a clear connection to the Christian tradition. It has been pointed out that many of the heroes in the western world have been given somewhat messianic traits. This does not, however, mean that all heroes are messiahs or that every hero who stretches out his arms in a crucifixion-like manner is a Christ figure. For a better understanding of what constitutes a messiah, let us look more closely at the various saviour characters we can find in popular culture.

A hero is, quite naturally, a leading character who, by his or her actions, saves the day. Most saviour characters can be considered to be heroes. What kind of saviours they are, however, is a different matter. A division has been made between Jesus characters, Christ characters and messiah characters. A Jesus character is simply a character who appears in a Jesus film, that is to say a film about the historical Jesus. A Christ character is a character who in a more allegorical way can be related to Jesus. The character might for example sacrifice his life for others, or in a symbolic manner take the sins of others onto his own shoulders (Malone 1997: 59–60). A messiah character is a character that, in one way or another, saves the world or humankind and is, at the same time, surrounded by a clear religious theme. The character might, for example, be expected through prophecies, or in other ways be part of a religious world. A messiah character can be a Christ character but all Christ characters are not necessarily messiahs.

Quite a few different saviour characters can be found in popular culture then, but differences can also be recognized among the messiah characters, as we shall see.

Bodily mass and bodily control

Let us start our analysis from the outside, with a look at the bodies of heroes and messiahs in popular culture over the last couple of decades. The issue of bodies and religion is a many-sided one. Religions present complex and sometimes contradictory ideas about the human body (Knauss 2007). The analyses here will, however, be restricted to a few basic themes in relation to bodies and ideals of the body in popular culture—ideas that can, nevertheless, be related to some of the more spiritual themes we will look at. The 1980s and early 1990s have become known for their 'larger than life' heroes, portrayed by actors such as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. With their swelling muscles these characters can be said to reflect a male ideal of the time. The articulation of masculinity that they represent has, however, also been seen as a somewhat disturbing sign. As Yvonne Tasker has shown, these characters should not be understood in any simplistic manner. The characters break with the divisions of labour in classical cinema, in which the male character advances the narrative and woman functions as spectacle. The male hero of the 1980s and early 90s 'controls the action at the same time as he is offered up to the audience as a sexual spectacle' (Tasker 1993: 16).

The most obvious messiah character of this period is perhaps Arnold Schwarzenegger's Terminator in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991). In *T2* the characters are in many ways defined by their bodies (Nilson 2004: 43–4). And the most impressive body of all belongs to the machine-saviour. The Terminator in *T2* returns as a 'cyborg messiah protecting a human messiah, John Connor' (Kozlovic 2001). As John Lyden puts it, the Terminator 'takes the burden of being humanity's "saviour" off John by taking the sins of humanity on his own sinless self' (Lyden 2003: 214). While the character Reese could be seen as a messiah figure in the first *Terminator* film (1984) despite the weakness of his body, it is quite obviously through his bodily strength and solidity that the Terminator becomes a saviour.

How then are the bodies of more contemporary heroes different? The super muscular heroes are, in many ways, a thing of the past. This does not, however, mean that the bodies of the heroes of today are any less impressive. In *T2* it is the solidity that makes the hero while the villain is characterized by his fluidity (Tasker 1993: 83). This more fluid body does at least to some degree seem to have been inherited by the messiahs of the last decade. In *The Matrix* (1999) we find a multi-dimensional messiah. This character is not only expected, he also suffers, dies, returns and even ascends to the skies (Ford 2000). Compared to the messiah in *T2* it is, however, interesting to see how

the body of this messiah is not defined by its obvious physical strength, but by the body's flexibility and ability to challenge the laws of physics without using brute force. This body is also defined by its ability to be penetrated, since it is by jacking into the matrix, a computer programme, via plugs in their bodies that the characters can help save humanity. In this way the messiah of *The Matrix* can be said to be feminized in a way that the Terminator is not.

It is not, however, just by becoming less muscular, or less defined by their muscles, that the bodies of modern saviours have changed. The gender of these bodies has changed as well. While in the traditional story it is woman who gives birth to a male messiah that then saves the woman and the world (Ortiz & Roux 1997: 142), in an increasing number of films and TV series the messiah is a woman. There is not room here for a detailed analysis of the bodies of female messiahs. It can, however, be established that female saviours, just as at least some male saviours, through their bodies challenge traditional ideas of femininity and masculinity. In saving the world, they are often allowed to be physically strong and active, as, for example, Ripley in *Alien 3* (1992). In the stories there can also be seen a need to control and explain away the deeds of these women. Often they are shown to be driven by 'natural' motherly instincts. They are also often clearly presented as exceptions and not normal women and with their physical strength they can be said to put forward traditional masculinity as an ideal for all saviours (Inness 1999). In films such as *The Fifth Element* (1997) and *Children of Men* (2006) women might be presented as the true saviours, but the stories are really about men. However, by their mere presence female messiahs are causing interesting changes to the myth.

How then have the attitudes of modern heroes changed?

Changing relations, changing attitudes

The traditional hero is a lonely figure who takes on himself the destinies of others. He is also a character that seldom shows his feelings. In this way the traditional hero and saviour can be said to represent a quite traditional masculinity that sees emotions as unmanly and the loss of control as a failure (Ross 2004: 231). Many of the heroes in popular culture still fall into this mould. There are also several examples of heroes who fail due to their emotions. This attitude to feelings can, when the subject is messiahs, for example, be found in the *Star Wars* films. Anakin Skywalker in *Revenge of the Sith* (2005) becomes evil through his feelings, feelings that are also quite clearly connected to fe-

male characters. The women might not be represented as evil in these stories, but they are still indirectly made to carry the burden for the evil deeds done.

There are, however, also characters that break with this traditional image. It would seem that as the female characters have become stronger and have been given a more decisive part to play, the more important they have also become for the male heroes. And, as a consequence, more space has also been given to the emotional lives of heroes and saviours. For Neo in *The Matrix* it is the love of Trinity that drives him to the end. While this in itself is nothing new, a lot of heroes are paired up with women for whom they fight and die, still, the extent to which Neo is bound to Trinity is somewhat unusual as is the important part Trinity is given in the story. It is for her that Neo departs from the path set out for him and in this way risks losing the faith of humanity. While the story ends in quite a traditional manner, Trinity in the third film, *Matrix Revolutions* (2003), dies after giving Neo the strength to go on (Haskell 1987: 186–71). During the main part of the film it is still their love that is at the centre. Similar storylines can be found in films such as *Wing Commander* (1999) and *The Terminator*.

It can then be argued that the changes that are occurring are due to the parts played by female characters in the stories, or rather the changing attitudes towards what parts women can play and what is correct female or male behaviour. To some degree this is true, but clear exceptions can also be found. Not the least among female messiahs - just as female heroes have inherited the physical strength of the traditional male hero, they also, it would seem, have inherited their attitude. A female messiah such as Ripley in *Alien 3,* is in many ways one of the guys. She becomes a clear Christ figure in the story (Loughlin 2004: 120), but, as in the other *Alien* films, she saves the world in quite a traditionally male fashion. That is to say, she shows few emotions and for the most part keeps her feelings under control. A character with similar characteristics is Sarah Connor in *T2*, a character who is not a messiah, but definitely takes part in the fight against evil (Ortiz & Roux 1997: 145).

There are, however, also some interesting exceptions to this character mould. One such exception is Buffy in the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003). This character is in many ways allowed to be both traditionally female and male. In contrast to many female heroes preceding her, Buffy is given a clearly female name which, as Sara Crosby has pointed out, 'identifies our hero unequivocally with women' (Crosby 2004: 161). She is strong and active, but also sometimes emotional and in need of others. This need to trust others is, however, not represented as a weakness. As Sharon Ross has pointed out, it is rather the other way around. The times Buffy gets into trouble are the

times she is separated from her friends (Ross 2004: 231–52). Also in this way the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series breaks with the traditional way for the hero to do his deed. Even though Buffy is the main hero, she is not the only one. When the world is in need of saving, everyone, not just has to, but is allowed to, pitch in. Thus the hero is no longer a lonesome male, but a group of people, both male and female. This is also something we can recognize in the film *Deep Impact* (1998). Which brings us to our next question: that of power.

The destiny within

In the traditional messiah myth, the messiah is usually sent from above. Behind his power is a divine power that chooses the saviour for humanity. Although the saviours of contemporary popular culture might have some god-like characteristics, their supernatural powers, for example, separate some of them from normal humans and their alien technology might make them seem god-like from a human perspective (Ruppersberg 1990: 32–7), God as such does not have a part to play in these stories. Instead the stories depend on a mostly human messiah, who becomes a saviour through his own struggles. Anakin Skywalker might be created by The Force, but this force is not God. Bryan P. Stone has compared The Force to the Holy Spirit in Christianity. There are some likenesses to be found, but as Stone points out, The Force is 'impersonal and in no way is meant to serve as shorthand for the activity or presence of a supreme-being or deity' (Stone 2000: 135). Neo in *The Matrix* might in turn be created by a, in some sense, supreme-being, the computer programme named Oracle. This Oracle is, however, not in charge of Neo and is, in the end, in need of saving, just as are the rest of the characters.

The saviours of today's popular culture are, in other words, quite independent characters that through their own actions, or the actions of some other humans, become the chosen ones. This does not, however, mean that religion, or religious symbolism, also disappears from the stories. Instead the saviours of popular culture are very often surrounded by a clear religious language and religious symbolism (Ostwalt 2000). Many messiahs can be seen as religious seekers and their religious struggles are in turn given a central position in the story. It is not until the saviour characters face their spiritual heritage that they can become what they are meant to be. For example, Christopher Blair, in *Wing Commander,* does not become the saviour of the story until he has been able to face his pilgrim heritage. The pilgrims, in turn, are said to have travelled so far out into the universe that they have started to

see themselves as gods. In a similar manner, Luke Skywalker in the *Star Wars* film has to face his background and find his place as a Jedi.

Here we can see some differences between male and female messiahs. Female messiahs might have been given access to religious power by being allowed to save the world. But in the stories with female messiahs some more traditional power structures prevail. Gods or goddesses do not that often come into the picture here either, but it is noteworthy that the religious leadership in these stories usually stays in the hands of men. Female messiahs are in some ways not religious seekers in the same sense as the male messiahs are. The religious voices in these stories are instead given to male characters. In *Alien 3,* for example, Ripley says that she does not have a lot of faith. Faith instead becomes the sphere for the male prisoners. In a similar manner, Leeloo in *The Fifth Element* is clearly stated to be a world saviour. She does not, however, appear to be interested in religion, though her contact on Earth is a male priest. Max in the TV series *Dark Angel* (2000–2) shows an interest in religion, but the only choice she is given is a religion led by men. Max is also created by a male character, the mystical Father, whose messianic destiny, as Sara Crosby puts it, she in many ways fulfils (Crosby 2004: 156). This is something she in turn has in common with Buffy. However, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* there is to be found a challenge of the traditional power order, when the character Willow is eventually allowed to become the most powerful religious character.

The faith of saviours

Many messiah characters, or at least several of the male messiah characters, are thus clearly religious characters that also can be seen as religious seekers. But what kind of religion is it that is represented here? Several messiah characters can, as we have seen, be related to the Christian tradition. In other words, they have characteristics that we recognize from the story of Christ. Neo, in *The Matrix,* who both dies and is resurrected in the first and in the third film, in a way saves the world by dying for it. It has also been pointed out that Neo is dead for 72 seconds on screen. If you translate that to hours you get three days (Nathan 2000: 37). The Terminator in *T2* in a similar manner gives his life so that the humans may live and, as John Lyden has pointed out, it is perhaps not by coincidence that John Connor has the same initials as Jesus Christ (Lyden 2003: 214). In the *Star Wars* films we also find a character who gives his life for

others. Of Anakin Skywalker we are also told that he does not have a father and that his mother was a virgin when she gave birth to him.

Despite these and other connections to Christianity, these characters are not Christian characters. During their struggles they are connected to several different religious traditions. According to William Sims Bainbridge, the religion in *Star Wars* can best be compared to scientology. In the attitudes of the Jedi masters, Bainbridge also recognizes Zen Buddhist themes (Bainbridge 1997: 399–406). The religious notes in *The Matrix* have similarly been compared to Zen Buddhism. The training Neo goes through to become the messiah comprises, among other things, several forms of Asian martial arts. The effect this has on how the character's body is characterized is then connected to religion, though not to Christianity. The attitude to the world that we find here, that reality is just an illusion, has also been compared to Buddhism. In the stories scholars have, moreover, found strong Gnostic tendencies (Dailey & Wagner 2001), but also challenges to a Gnostic attitude (Bowman 2003). In the circular structure of the world and the life of the One, themes from Hinduism can in turn be recognized (Fielding 2003).

If we turn to the female messiah characters, Ripley is not, as has been pointed out, a religious character, but she has nevertheless been compared to both the Virgin Mary and Eve and the fallen Christ (Loughlin 2004: 113–20). She is, in other words, not quite a typical Christ figure, but rather a character that because of her gender and through the story structure, gives us a darker version of the myth. Buffy, in turn, can be seen as a Christ figure to some extent, especially in season five, where she gives her life for her sister and for the rest of humanity. In this series an interesting mixture of religious themes, however, appear. The series borrows themes from several religions, but often also creates new religions, although there might be a majority of Christian characters. It is most interesting, however, that the religion that wins the day is a goddess religion, which is to some extent in the series connected to Wicca.

The religions we find in popular culture among messiah characters are, in short, often a mixture of themes from many religious traditions. This, in turn, makes the religious struggles of the messiah a many-sided affair. A final point, where the messiahs of contemporary science fiction break with the traditional messiah myth, is in relation to where the religious struggle is supposed to lead. Both messiahs of religious traditions and messiahs of popular culture usually, as we have seen, appear in an apocalyptic setting. The world is about to come to an end. And both groups of messiah save the day in some way. The difference is that the messiah in the traditional myth usually leads the people into a different world or time—a world or time that is clearly connected to

the transcendent. As heroes in general, the messiahs of popular culture strive to achieve a form of change, but this change is very directly connected to life here and now. This concern with life here and now is one thing that, as we shall see next, the popular cultural version of the myth has in common with religion in the real world.

Film and the real world

To say that film directly reflects our reality or affects us in a straightforward manner is, as has been pointed out, not a correct assessment of the relationship between film and reality. To state that film and other forms of popular culture say nothing about us or do not influence us at all, is, however, just as incorrect. This is also true of the relationship between religion and film. Phenomena such as the Jedi religion clearly show us that film can influence people's religious views. Though most people who state that their religion is Jedi are probably not entirely serious, there still seem to be quite a few for whom being a Jedi plays an important part (Possamai 2005). What then can the stories of saviours that we have looked at here possibly say about religion in the world of today?

If we start with the later part of the analysis, that is to say with the presence of a mixture of religious themes in many films with a messiah theme, a quite obvious reflection of religion in the modern world can be found. First of all, religion has not disappeared. The religion we find is, however, not always the form of religion that traditional religions represent. The mixture of religions in the films can be seen to reflect the idea of a spiritual supermarket where consumers can 'pick and choose the spiritual commodities they fancy', a phenomenon that is common when talking about New Age, but is not limited to this movement (Hanegraaff 2002: 258). Religion in short appears as a commodity in today's world. The root of a certain religious theme does not seem to be as important as that, in some way, it fits into the believer's world view. Religious ideas are mixed to create a whole that makes sense for the individual. The religious world of, for example, *The Matrix,* in the same sense appears as a blend of ideas from several religious traditions.

On a deeper level the films reflect tendencies in the religious world of today. As Paul Heelas, among others, has shown, we can at least in advanced industrial societies nowadays see a clear turn from 'religion' as 'defined in terms of obedience to a transcendent God', to 'spirituality' defined as 'experience of the divine as immanent in life' (Heelas 2002: 358). As we have seen, God

does not really play a part in the films and TV series that we have analyzed here. The times when gods appear they are, as in the fifth season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* not always represented as good and also as beings that can be defeated. According to Conrad Ostwalt, what we see in many contemporary apocalyptic films, in relation to how God is portrayed, or rather not portrayed, is a postmodern spiritual tendency. 'The secular apocalypse in film is postmodern in that it has undermined the binary opposition of God-human' (Ostwalt 2000). If we define postmodern spirituality, as Wouter J. Hanegraaff among others has done, as the religion of the self (Hanegraaff 2002: 258), then the religion or spirituality we find in many contemporary science fiction films with a messiah theme, is most definitely postmodern. As we have seen, the personal struggle of the messiah, in these films, becomes a major theme and this struggle is not about finding one's position in relation to a greater force, but instead to find power and strength in oneself.

In several contemporary science fiction films and TV series we can, in short, find reflected the phenomenon of detraditionalization. Traditional religion gives way to new forms of spirituality and authority is no longer found in an external authority, but in the individual self. We can also see reflected here the turn to life in the here and now rather than life after death which also is a part of the spirituality of today (Heelas 2002: 357–75). Still other modern trends in relation to religion can be found in the material. The presence of female messiahs reflects an interesting change in today's religious world. As Susan J. Palmer has pointed out, the 'feminizing' process today seems to take place in religions outside the mainstream. 'A wealth of utopian literature has appeared in the 1980s and 1990s that exalt women as world saviours and rulers of the future' (Palmer 1997: 160). This is clearly a phenomenon that modern popular culture has taken to heart. To some extent the material also reflects what Linda Woodhead has called the sacralization of the feminine (Woodhead 2002: 341–2). In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as we have seen, we can find the Wiccan tradition represented together also with other forms of religion. At the end of the series, the character Willow for a moment herself becomes a goddess of light.

If we look to popular culture, it would seem then that postmodern spirituality, if we choose to use that term, has made a clear breakthrough in our society. There are, however, also some themes in the material that rather reflect a more traditional view of religion and spirituality. These themes do not perhaps make the religion in the films and TV series less postmodern, but it does, to an extent, limit the challenge to traditional religion that can be said to take place. This limit is interesting in itself, as it too can be considered to say

something about religion in the modern world. The themes I am thinking of relate to questions of power and gender.

Firstly, although a religious authority in the form of a god or other supreme being is mostly lacking in the material, this does not mean that all forms of traditional religious authority have been erased. On their journeys towards becoming messiahs the future saviours are usually educated by an older religious specialist, of a sort. Anakin and Luke Skywalker are both trained by Jedi masters. Neo is educated by the believer Morpheus. Christopher Blair learns about his heritage from the pilgrim Taggert and Buffy has the watcher Giles at her side, who at least tries to educate her about her role. These religious specialists then represent an older tradition. This tradition is to some extent challenged in the stories, but a great respect is still often shown the old masters. The idea of a religious hierarchy, then, exists in these stories and the appearance of the messiah does not, as such, change this hierarchy, it just puts someone else on top.

Secondly, though the spirituality of the messiah can best be described as a religion of the self, where the individual is at the centre, it is worth pointing out that in almost all of the films and TV series, it becomes quite obvious that the position of a messiah is not open to everyone. It is not just the religious hierarchy that prevails: so does the idea that some people are chosen and some are not. In other words, though the messiahs bear similarities to other spiritual seekers in the real world of today, their stories still tell us that we cannot all become saviours. This position is still usually given to a chosen one, someone who is human, but not exactly like everyone else. An exception could here, again, be *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, where, in the end, everyone, chosen or not, is given a central part to play in the struggle against evil and where the essential hero also chooses to share the powers given to her with a whole group of others. Usually the stories make it clear that it is not just anyone's spiritual journey that is represented here. The modern messiahs of popular culture may have broken with God, then, but the stories still tell us that someone is closer to the spiritual realm than the rest of us, and more importantly, this someone is almost always male.

Thirdly and finally, these stories, as we have seen, make it quite clear that the religious sphere is not open to anyone and it is more often open to men than to women. In many ways contemporary science fiction films and TV series challenge the traditional myth of a messiah. Even though they present us with some female messiahs it is still clear that gender structures are harder to break down and change than some other structures—especially, it would seem, when they are connected to religion. This, in turn, reflects some import-

ant tendencies when it comes to religion in our world. Even though equality between men and women is something that is seen as obvious in many areas of our society, religion is still often left out of this attitude. There are today, of course, many religions and religious groups that give women the same access to religious positions as men. However, a lot of traditional religions and new ones still restrict women to traditional roles such as that of mothers (Palmer 1994). That not even science fiction, a genre known for challenging ideas, can seem to break through these structures, points to how deeply rooted they are. It is also interesting to see how the spiritual development that the male messiahs go through is left out of the stories of the female messiahs. Not even the changes that have occurred in the messiah myth in popular culture lately would thus seem to be enough to really make a place, other than as mother and victim, for women in this myth.

Conclusion: the need for saviours

The messiahs and messiah myths in contemporary popular culture have, as we have seen, gone through several changes. Today we meet characters that are different from the traditional hero and messiah, both when it comes to the body and when it comes to attitudes. The body has not lost its importance, but it has rather become even more impressive as the audience's demand for mind-blowing action has increased. The heroes' gender has also changed and as female characters have been given a more important part in the action, the emotional lives of heroes have become more complex. The stories also reflect many attitudes to religion and spirituality that we can find in the real world. The messiahs of contemporary popular culture are not sent from above, their spiritual struggles instead become struggles within and the spirituality they represent is a spirituality of the self. The stories, however, also make it clear that gender still makes a difference and gives us different stories for men and women.

In all of this, we can perhaps find a beginning to the final question explored here: why is the messiah myth still so popular today? I would like to conclude this article with five possible answers. The first has a lot to do with what has become clear above. The messiah myth that we find in the popular culture of today is not exactly the same myth as the one we know from religions such as Christianity. The myth has been changed and challenged so that it better fits the world as we see it today and the ideals we believe in. The authority is not placed beyond, but within. By letting go of its ties to a deity or supreme being

the myth has become more human. In this way it has also perhaps become increasingly directed towards issues that directly concern us. Here we can, in turn, find a possible second answer to the popularity of the messiah myth. The messiah myth, as we meet it in contemporary science fiction, allows us to reflect on actual issues in our world. Machines might not be taking over the world today, or asteroids might not be hurling towards Earth right at this moment, but this does not mean that people do not feel threatened by the various changes that are taking place.

The way the messiah myth solves these problems might in turn give us a third answer. While the turn to the individual and the self might be something that inspires us, the fact that the stories usually also make it clear that we are not all meant to be messiahs can perhaps be quite reassuring. We might live in a culture that tells us that it is up to us to make things happen, but it can perhaps still be nice, once in a while, to dream ourselves away to a world where it is actually up to someone else to save the day. A fourth answer can, in turn, be found in the way the messiah characters in popular culture are portrayed. God might not be present here, but the special abilities that the saviours very often portray and the difference the aliens, monsters or machines represent still brings the transcendent or non-human to life. In this way the stories perhaps fulfil a human need for something that is more than what we can explain.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the messiah myth still finds an audience today because of its ability to entertain. In its modern form and combined with everything that special effects today can do, the myth often becomes two hours of action-filled enjoyment. It is perhaps not pleasurable to everyone, but for large audiences it seems to do the trick. In the darkness of the cinema, or on the softness of the TV sofa, there will, however, always be something else than just entertainment that meets us, something that might say more about us than we think.

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