The Superheroes
from Romantic Literature to Science Fiction:
New "Messiahs" and their Endless Eschatology

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*The anthropologist must ... characterize
our culture as profoundly irreligious.*
Cl. Kluckhohn[1]

*Religion may have merely changed its theater and neglect
to place its name on the marquee. The move from cathedral
to the tube, silver screen,
or computer display offers the faithful many of the values
those in traditional religion always sought*
J. S. Lawrence – R. Jewett[2]

*The net is increasingly becoming a monastery
for the spiritually disposed.
As in "real" monasteries, a user may seek community
at specific times or in particular sites,
and there are myriad opportunities for self-reflection,
prayer, meditation, and scripture studies.*
Tom Beaudoin[3]

In their prolific work on the reproduction and enrichment of American mythology through film and the subsequent shaping of American

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1. Clyde Kluckhohn, *Mirror for Man*, McGraw Hill, New York 1949, p. 247.
2. John Shelton Lawrence – Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero*, W. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, UK 2002, p. 248.
3. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith. The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco 1998, p. 89.

ideology, J. S. Lawrence and R. Jewett descîbe the superhero[4] as follows:

> The monomythic[5] superhero is distinguished by disguised origins, pure motivations, a redemptive task, and extraordinary powers. He originates outside the community he is called to save, and in those exceptional instances when he resides therein, the superhero plays the role of the idealistic loner. His identity is secret, either by virtue of his unknown origins or his alter ego; his motivation is a selfless zeal for justice. By elaborate conventions of restraint, his desire for revenge is purified. Patient in the face of provocations, he seeks nothing for himself and withstands all temptations. He renounces sexual fulfillment for the duration of the mission, and the purity of his motivations ensures his moral infallibility in judging persons and situations. When he is threatened by violent adversaries, he finds an answer in vigilantism, restoring justice and thus lifting the siege of paradise. In order to accomplish this mission without incurring blame or causing undue injury to others, he requires superhuman powers. The superhero's aim is unerring, his fists irresistible, and his body incapable of suffering fatal injury[6].

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4. In American literature, the term *superhero* is used collectively to denote superhuman heroes in general. In the context of this paper the term will only be applied to heroes with supernatural powers (e.g., Superman, Batman, etc.) to distinguish them from their traditional ancestors (e.g. Count Monte-Cristo, Fantômas etc.) for whom I will use the term *superhuman hero* or just *superman*.

5. The term *monomyth*, coined by James Joyce (*Finnegans Wake*, 1939), entered the fields of comparative mythology and narratology thanks to the seminal work of Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). In a more general sense, it denotes the mythological archetype or the fundamental unit of mythical structure found in all human cultures. In its narrow sense, it refers to the so-called "hero's journey", described by Campbell as follows: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Commemorative edition, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2004, p. 28). According to Campbell, the hero's journey, which can be epitomized in the triptych: "Departure-Initiation-Return", reflects rites of passage and coming-of-age. See, also, his interesting interpretation of Joyce's use of the term *monomyth*: "This is what Joyce called the monomyth: an archetypal story that springs from the collective unconscious. Its motifs can appear not only in myth and literature, but, if you are sensitive to it, in the working out of the plot of your own life" (Joseph Campbell, *Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation*, ed. D. Kudler, New World Library, Novato, CA 2004, p. 104).

6. J. S. Lawrence – R. Jewett, *op.cit.*, p. 47.

Lawrence and Jewett are referring in particular to the superheroes of American mass culture, but their description largely covers the superhuman heroes who populated the 19th century European popular novel[7], before migrating to the USA to live a new life in comic-books, radio broadcasts, television screens and the movies. In this paper, I will describe the journey of this popular, as it turned out, hero and his evolution into a "cosmic messiah", within the context of American mass culture. Since I could not possibly give a full presentation and analysis of the legion of American superhuman heroes, I will limit myself to a few characteristic examples. I will also briefly touch the ideological and political function of this type of hero, a topic of central importance but beyond the scope of this paper.

The first steps: the Byronic origins and the European upbringing

Although heroes with superhuman powers appear in mythologies throughout the world, the superhuman hero is a product of 19th century thought, philosophy, and literature[8]. Certainly, his most famous

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7. The first to point out the strong presence of superhuman heroes in popular novel was Antonio Gramsci (*Letteratura e vita nazionale*, 1952). Based on his remarks, Umberto Eco studied systematically the subject, extending his research in comic books and the movies. Cf. Umberto Eco, *Apocalittici e Integrati. Comunicazioni di massa e teoria della coltura di massa*, Bombiani, Milano 2008 (1964); *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1984; *Apocalypse Postponed*, ed. by Robert Lumley, Indiana University Press, Bloomington / Indianapolis 1994.
8. It should be noted that despite Eco's studies on the subject (cf. *The Role of the Reader*, *op.cit.*) most American scholars still fail to recognize that the origin of the American superhero lies in the European literary tradition, much less in Lord Byron's poetry. A handy example is the aforementioned work by Lawrence and Jewett, which lacks even the slightest reference to European data. Exceptions include Jess Nevis' *The Evolution of the Costume Avenger: The 4,000 Years History of the Superhero* (Praeger, Santa Barbara CA 2017), which devotes two chapters to Victorian supermen (pp. 92-121 and 123-143), and Peter Coogan's, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Monkey Brain Book, Austin TX 2006, pp. 122-164). Both authors oversimplify that superhuman heroes come from ancient mythologies, but they do not discuss the essential differences between mythical heroes and modern supermen, nor do they take into account the specificities of the cultural environment then and now. It is also interesting that they consider Mary

expression is to be found in Nietzsche's Zarathustra[9], but the truth is that the superman, before being placed in a philosophical context, had already made a remarkable advance in Romantic literature[10]. Although his path was prepared by John Milton's Lucifer (*Paradise Lost*, 1667) and the 18th-century Gothic novel, it was Byron who gave him his fateful traits and perfected his personality[11].

The Byronic hero is an alienated, mysterious and melancholy spirit. His passions and powers are far superior to those of ordinary people, whom he treats with contempt as inferior beings. He fights an inner demon,

Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to be the ancestor of the "scientific superhero", i.e. the one created with the help of science. However, this view seems to be based on *Frankenstein*'s film adaptations rather than on the novel itself. It is well known that, as early as 1910, the Creature was portrayed in the cinema as a destructive superman, which essentially distorted the meaning and content of the novel. Director Guillermo del Toro has stated that he would like to make a faithful "Miltonian tragedy" version of *Frankenstein*; this would have been more in keeping with Mary Shelley's concept (cf. Mike Sampson, "Guillermo talks!", JoBlo.com, www.joblo.com/guillermo-talks/ [retrieved 20.3.2023]).

9. Nietzsche elaborates the concept of the *Übermensch* in his works *Thus spoke Zarathustra* (*Also sprach Zarathustra* 1883, 1891) and *Beyond Good and Evil* (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886). In the context of his philosophy, he condemns Protestant morality as "slave morality" and promotes the superiority of morality that derives from the will to power. The human will must create the superman, who will be beyond good and evil and by his power will destroy everything obsolete and decadent. For a brief introduction to the philosophy of Nietzsche, cf. Frederic Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 7. Modern Philosophy. Part II. Schopenhauer to Nietzsche, Image Books, New York 1965, pp. 165-194; Walter Kaufmann, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, Anchor Books, New York 1960, pp. 207-239, and "Nietzsche, Friedrich", in Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 5, The Macmillan, New York ²1972, pp. 505-514. On the moral philosophy of Nietzsche in particular, see E. M. Albert – T. C. Denise – S. P. Peterfreund, *Great Traditions in Ethics. An Introduction*, American Book Company, New York 1953, pp. 253-277.

10. The debt of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* to Byron's dark heroes has been pointed out by Bertrand Russell, "Byron and the Modern World", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 1 (1940), pp. 24-37 [= *A History of Western Philosophy*, Simon & Shuster, New York 1965, pp. 746-752]. Moreover, according to Gramsci's observation, much of the so-called "Nietzschean transhumanism" has as its source and theoretical model not Zarathustra, but Count Monte-Cristo, see Gramsci, *op.cit.*, pp. 186-191.

11. For a description of the Byronic hero, the stages of his formation and his models, see Peter L. Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero. Types and Prototypes*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis ²1965; M. H. Abrams, "The Satanic and Byronic Hero", in: M.H. Abrams – G. H. Ford – D. Daiches (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 2, Norton, New York ³1974, pp. 854-863.

the tormenting memory of an immense yet unspoken guilt, which leads him to inevitable damnation. He lives by a simple and rigid code of his own: to the one he truly loves, he remains faithful to the death. He relies solely on himself, unyielding in the face of any obstacle, natural or supernatural, and exerts an irresistible attraction, mixed with the terror caused by his cruel and distant character. He fights for a higher cause –usually freedom– and remains committed to his struggle until his last breath, even though he knows that this struggle will fail; and he faces death without fear, almost with contempt, taking responsibility not only for his crimes on earth but also for his punishment after death.

Byron began to sketch his hero in the opening stanzas of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) and completed the character in the dark protagonists of the poetic romances collectively entitled *Turkish or Oriental Tales* (*The Giaour*, 1813; *The Bride of Abydos*, 1813; *The Corsair*, 1814; *Lara*, 1814). From this poetic universe, the modern superman will begin his journey to influence 19th-century life, art and philosophy, becoming a model for the behavior of *avant-garde* youth. The most famous among his literary descendants include Eugene Onegin in Alexander Pushkin's eponymous poem (1833), Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Captain Ahab in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851). But much more popular and powerful in their effect were the pale imitators of the Byronic hero who rose to prominence in the novels of the so-called "popular literature", which reached a much larger number of readers with the help of a mass medium – the newspaper. One of the first was Prince Rodolphe de Gerolstein by Eugène Sue, who opened the chorus of popular superheroes with his novel *Les Mystères de Paris*, published in series in the *Journal des Débats* in 1842-43; Athos (*The Three Musketeers*, 1844) and Count of Monte-Cristo (1844-45) by Alexandre Dumas; and Rocambole, the main character in a series of novels by Ponson du Terrail (from 1857 to 1870). Since then, hundreds of superhuman heroes have filled the pages of the popular press before making their way to Hollywood as part of the glamorous American dream.

The transition of the superhuman hero from Byron's poetry to the popular novel is already a source of several differentiations with which Byron would certainly not have agreed. The original Byronic hero

remained a morally autonomous figure, in the sense that he chose to follow a solitary path, without committing himself to either the forces of good or the forces of evil. The popular supermen, however, slowly but steadily emerge as champions of the good and the just, protecting the underprivileged and, of course, punishing the evil. Indeed, both Rodolphe and Edmond Dantès seem to be inspired by a Christian charity that directly evokes the image of the Victorian "active aristocracy"[12]. So, Prince Rodolphe will establish a model farm at Bouquenval, where the poor and underprivileged live under his benevolent protection, and the "Pauper's Bank" to support the unemployed workers. Dantès, on the other hand, will combine his desire for revenge with the idea of a divine mission. Significantly, the doubts that plague him on the verge of completing his plan of revenge disappear as soon as the manuscript of Abbé Faria falls into his hands –like a *deus ex machina*– with the following succinct command: "Tu arracheras les dents du dragon, et fu fouleras aux pieds les lions, a dit le Seigneur" ("Thou shalt tear out the dragon's teeth, and shall trample the lions under foot, saith the Lord")[13]. Even more striking is the case of Rocambole, who starts out as a criminal, but soon turns to virtue. Such conversions are not only unknown, but abhorrent to Byronic heroes, who stick to their choices to the end.

We can see that the diversification of the reading public, or rather the targeting of authors at different audiences, brought about significant changes. In contrast to poetry, a genre intended for the educated and cultured and therefore fewer readers, prose, which even in the 19th

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12. In contrast to the "inactive (or "idle") aristocracy", interested only in luxury, re-creation, and the preservation of its acquisitions, the "active (or "real") aristocracy" had to be aware of the situation of the working class and provide for its needs through charity. The distinction was formulated by Thomas Carlyle in his *Past and Present* (1843) and developed by Benjamin Disraeli in his novel *Sybil or the Two Nations* (1845). On the subject, see M. Levin, *The Condition of England Question: Carlyle, Mill, Engels*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 1998; J. V. Nixon, "'if all had bread': Father Gerard Hopkins, the Condition of England Question and the Poor of Nazareth House", *The Hopkins Quarterly* 35 (2008), pp. 19-46.
13. Alexandre Dumas, *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*, Gallimard, Paris 1998, vol. 2, p. 1353. The English translation is from the edition: Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Monte-Cristo*, George Routledge, London/New York 1888, vol. II.

century was considered of inferior aesthetic value[14], was a literary genre suitable for "mass consumption" by uneducated readers without high expectations. Obviously, such readers would not be able to understand the philosophical presuppositions of the Byronic hero, and would thus be led into dangerous and certainly undesirable responses if they adopted that "blasphemous" and "radical" way of thinking[15]. Moreover, the possibility for such readers to identify with the Byronic hero was rather minimal: Manfred's philosophical meditations, young Harold's melancholy wanderings, or Cain's passionate quest for knowledge would be alien to the poor workers, the peasants, and the illiterate proletarians who were moved to tears by the sequels to Sue's novels. Thus, the Byronic superman gradually adapts to their particular interests: his extraordinary powers are now put at the service of the needy, while those who oppress the weak attract his vengeful wrath; and finally his rebellion against the secular order is absorbed into his new "messianic" mission. It is precisely on this basis that the "consolatory structure", as Eco calls it[16], comes into operation. At the end of every popular novel,

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14. The reservations of European intellectuals about the literary value of prose, prevalent at the beginning of the 19th century, persisted to a lesser or greater extent until about the 1880s; cf. the relevant comments of Henry James, *The Art of Fiction*, in *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Morris Shapira, Cambridge University Press 1981, pp. 49-51.

15. It is worth citing two examples that reveal at least reservations about the influence of Byronic poetry. The first one is from the novel *Persuasion* by Jane Austen (1818): Anne Elliot advises Benwick to stop reading poetry –especially Byron's poetry– because it increases his pain and grief at the death of his beloved and suggests a series of prose texts with moral content (Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, Harper-Collins, London 2010, pp. 91-92). The second one comes from the Greek short story "The Stoker" (1853) by A. R. Rangavis: Ophelia is surprised that a simple stoker, Arthur Willis, is reading Byron's *Cain* and tries to dissuade him politely, pointing out the "wild and dark" meanings of the work that petrify faith and fill "the soul with the poison of despair" (A. R. Rangavis, «Ὁ καμινάπτης», *Διηγήματα*, vol. II, ed. by D. Tziovas, Kostas and Eleni Ouranis Foundation, Athens 1999, pp. 271-272). It is noticeable that both statements come from narrative prose texts. It should also be mentioned that the judging committees of the University of Athens Poetry Competitions, held in the Greek capital in the 19th century, officially condemned Byron's poetry for its "blasphemous" and subversive content, see Pan. Moullas, «Ἡ ἀθηναϊκὴ πανεπιστημιακὴ κριτικὴ καὶ ὁ Ροΐδης», in: *Ἡ Κριτικὴ στὴ νεότερη Ἑλλάδα*, EMNE, Athens 1981, pp. 59-68, and *Ρήξεις καὶ Συνέχειες. Μελέτες γιὰ τὸν 19ο αἰῶνα*, Sokolis Publications, Athens 1993, pp. 279-300.

16. Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, *op.cit.*, pp. 130-141.

evil is rooted out, the wicked are punished, justice is restored, and the innocent and the oppressed can now enjoy the happiness and prosperity that was stolen from them for so many years. But all these were not won by the people's own struggle; they were a "gift", a "blessing" bestowed upon them by their superhuman defender. Through the adventurous plots of popular fiction, readers were trained to expect redemption for their sufferings in earthly life from a cosmic Messiah.

Je vais … peu à peu redevenir moi[17]:
Back to antisociality

  With these essential changes, the popular superman is now ready to play many different roles, always carrying out his redemptive mission. Towards the end of the 19th century, he moved to the American continent, as a wandering gunslinger, or a masked vigilante, or a defender of white men seeking their fortune in Far West. In Europe, however, some of his transformations, though extremely popular for a time, proved less fruitful. I am referring to the two supermen of the third phase of the popular novel[18], Maurice Leblanc's Arsène Lupin (1905) and Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain's Fantômas (1911). These two characters are perhaps closer to the Byronic prototype, in the sense that they recall the "noble outlaws"[19], the "wonderful criminals" who clash directly with

17. "I will … gradually become myself again", Arsène Lupin's words (Maurice Leblanc, *Arsène Lupin gentleman-cambrioleur*, Pierre Lafitte, Paris 1907, p. 106).
18. For the three phases of the popular novel, see Umberto Eco, Ὁ Ὑπεράνθρωπος τῶν Μαζῶν. Ρητορικὴ καὶ ἰδεολογία τοῦ λαϊκοῦ μυθιστορήματος, transl. Efi Kalliphatide, Gnosi, Athens 1988, pp. 100-101 and 134-136 (Greek translation of: *Il superuomo di massa. Retorica e ideologia nel romanzo popolare*, Tascabili Bompiani, Milano ²1990).
19. The "noble outlaw", a development of the "villain" of the Gothic novel, is one of the first versions of the Romantic hero. The most prominent is Karl Moore, the protagonist of Schiller's drama *The Robbers* (*Die Räuber*, 1781), although Goethe's Götz von Berlichingen (1773) preceded him – cf. Thoslev, *op.cit.*, pp. 65-83. The ancestor of all of them seems to be Robin Hood, a legendary figure of English folklore from the 13th century. Joseph Ritson's monumental publication of folk poems, songs and stories about the "celebrated outlaw" (*Robin Hood: A collection of all the Ancient Poems Songs and Ballads now extant, relative to that celebrated Outlaw Robin Hood*, 1795) probably influenced the formation of the noble outlaw type.

the social order and the law, and of course they emerge victorious, completely ridiculing their persecutors – i.e., the police. But this victory does not concern the community. Lupin and Fantômas do not care about the poor, nor do they have any interest in restoring justice. We suspect that the purpose of their illegal action is not wealth *per se*, but to prove their intellectual superiority over law and order. They cannot and will not integrate into society because of their over-smartness and they have fun at its expense, humiliating the institutions that make it cohesive and functional. The messianism of their like-minded brethren turns into an evil spirit. However, behind this evil is no longer Milton's Lucifer, but Goethe's Mephistopheles.

Readers and audiences alike, since the first film adaptations of the novels were made in 1913-14, readily sided with the criminals, possibly because they were fascinated by their creative energy and vitality[20]. At a time when France was experiencing its greatest imperialist pride, Fantômas and Lupin finally became the ideal types of French heroism[21]. The time was ripe: the total collapse of the old world after World War I had shattered any notion of "order" and harmony. Thus, Fantômas partly embodies the absurdity of the interwar period[22], while Lupin expresses its nostalgia for the lost old world through his unshakable attachment to French tradition. But obviously the two charming criminals could not survive for long outside the circumstances of their time. The heroes of mass culture are supposed to affirm the authority of order and law, not

20. In 1913-14, Louis Feuillade directed five films starring Fantômas: *Fantômas* (1913, in three sequels), *Juve contre Fantômas* (1913, in four sequels), *Le mort qui te* (1913), *Fantômas contre Fantômas* (1914, in four sequels) and *Le faux magistrat* (1914, in four sequels). The leading roles were played by René Navarre and Edmond Bréon. In 1914, Émile Chautard directed *Arsène Lupin* with Georges Tréville in the leading role.
21. Cf. Eco, Ὁ Ὑπεράνθρωπος τῶν Μαζῶν, *op.cit.*, pp. 132-139.
22. As is well known, Fantômas became the favorite hero of the Surrealists, who were fascinated by the dominance of the iterative scheme in each of his new adventures: while Juve and Fandor manage to trap him, he always escapes capture unexpectedly; yet, despite his mythical robberies, he is inexplicably poor at the beginning of the next adventure. For the iterative scheme, see Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, *op.cit.*, pp. 120-122. On the Surrealists' admiration for Fantômas, see Robin Walz, "Serial Killings: Fantômas, Feuillade and the Mass-Culture Genealogy of Surrealism", *The Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal of Film and Television* 37 (1996), pp. 51-57.

prove their inadequacy; or, in their most "radical" version, they become the bearers of a private justice and ultimately serve the triumph of good. As a result, Fantômas and Lupin ended their fictional lives with no literary offspring. And it could be said that with them, the life cycle of the superhuman hero in European literature has come to an end.

Across the Atlantic: moving to the New World

While France was fascinated by the adventures of noble outlaws, the American writer Edgar Rice Burroughs gave the reading public a new version of the superhuman hero, Tarzan of the Apes (1912). His premises are, of course, romantic: Rousseau's "noble savage" is certainly his most famous ancestor. Tarzan is initially part of the savage world, but as he grows up, he will separate himself from it and impose himself on both animals and humans – he will become the "lord" of the jungle, regaining the title he would have inherited had he been in the civilized world. Thus, by virtue of his race and his aristocratic origins, he takes it upon himself to rule over the jungle according to the principles of peace and justice and to bring order where there is disorder. In other words, he subjugates what should be free and interferes with the internal laws of the world in which he lives – according to the principles of Western societies, of course. In this way, he becomes the bearer of "civilization", not by reinventing it, as Robinson Crusoe did, but in a manner recalling the theories and alibis of colonial Europe. In an essay published in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, Eco aptly describes him as "the vanguard of the 'policemen of the world'"[23]; the timing may not have mattered, but it's worth noting that Tarzan's life and deeds in many ways embody the principles and concepts of American ideology as enacted in the framework of American foreign policy.

Tarzan is the first popular superman to really become a mass-market product: Burroughs' novels have been translated into more than 56

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23. Eco, Ὁ Ὑπεράνθρωπος τῶν Μαζῶν, op.cit., pp. 141-142. Cf. J. Berglund, "Write, Right, White, Rite: Literacy, Imperialism, Race, and Cannibalism in Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan of the Apes", Studies in American Fiction 27/33 (1999), pp. 53-76.

languages, adapted into comic books and, since 1918, countless films and television series have been made about the adventures of the "lord of the jungle". The same will happen with the next transformation of the superman, who will bear the very name: Superman, alias Clark Kent. The year was 1938. Action Comics publishes the first issue of Superman's adventures, created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. It is perhaps the first time that the term "Superman" has a literal meaning, as the hero, despite his human form, is not an earthling. This solves the problem of his supernatural powers and abilities, but on the other hand it creates several complications, such as the fact that he can't find an equal opponent (which is why extraterrestrial enemies are occasionally introduced into his story). Furthermore, as Smallville and Metropolis, Illinois, soon prove too limited for his extraordinary powers, Superman takes it upon himself to save the Earth, or even our galactic system. In this way, the superhuman hero's sphere of action is extended to its widest possible limits: Superman transcends the narrow borders of the national space in which the popular supermen of the 19th century acted, and becomes the vigilant guardian of the entire cosmos.

Superman introduces a new class of superhuman heroes, the *superheroes*. Their main attribute is that they literally have supernatural powers, not only in terms of physical strength, but also in terms of senses (e.g., sight, hearing) and abilities (they can fly, run at the speed of light, etc.). This leads to another feature, their dual nature (human and superhuman), which corresponds to their double identity[24] (Superman/Clark Kent, Spiderman/ Peter Parker, Batman/Bruce Wayne, etc.). The way in which

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24. The double-identity device had been used in relation to superhuman heroes before Superman; examples include the protagonist of Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian* (1902), Scarlet Pimpernel in Baroness Emmuska Orczy's eponymous novel (1905) and, of course, Johnston McCulley's Zorro/Don Diego de la Vega (1919). It should be noted, however, that the mysterious identity is one of the main traits of the Byronic hero. In the poem *The Giaour* (1813), the protagonist remains anonymous until his death, and shortly before he dies, he asks to be buried in a secluded corner of the cemetery and to have a simple cross placed on his grave, without a name or any other distinguishing sign. The double-identity theme appears also in the "twin" poems *The Corsair* and *Lara* (1814): the dark Conrad, who fought as a corsair against the Ottomans from an island in the Bay of Corona (Greece), is revealed to be the self-exiled Count Lara.

supernatural powers are acquired is related to the dialectic of the two natures (human and superhuman) in each individual case. On this basis, superheroes can be divided into three categories. The first includes the extraterrestrials (Superman, Hawkman, Captain Marvel, Mr. Spock, etc.); they have inherent supernatural powers, and their human form is a secondary, acquired element – in other words, the human element is subordinate to the superhuman. In the second category, there are those who have acquired supernatural powers as a consequence of a scientific or technological accident (Spiderman, Hulk, Daredevil, etc.); in this case, the superhuman element is not inherent but acquired and the heroes have to transform themselves in order to activate their powers – in other words, the hero has two natures that are different, alternating, and in a way equivalent in their hyspostasis. Finally, the third category includes those who owe their extraordinary powers solely to the use of technology (Batman, Ironman, Captain America[25], etc.) – in this case, the human nature of the superhero remains unaffected and the superhuman element is no more than a technological *persona*.

One might think that with the integration of science, and especially technology, into the world of superhumanism, the development of these miraculous heroes has reached the limit of its possibilities. However, towards the end of the 20th century, between 1986 and 2006, another type of superhero appeared which could be called a "metaphysical superman"[26]. In this case, the hero is either an immortal (like Connor McLeod in the *Highlander* film series, 1986-1995), a vampire (like the

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25. Captain America (first appearance 1941) could also belong to the second category, as he became a superhuman being after participating in a scientific experiment to create super-soldiers, see T.B. – M.F., "Captain America", in: *The Marvel Comics Encyclopedia*, DK Publishing, London 2009, pp. 60-65; Cord Scott, "Captain America", in: M. Keith Booker (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, Greenwood, Santa Barbara CA / Oxford 2010, vol. 1, pp. 82-84. In my opinion, it is more appropriate to place him in the third category, because here too we have the use of technology (apart from the experiment, there is a super-weapon, Captain America's shield) and the human nature of the hero is not substantially affected.

26. This is perhaps the only case where Byron's influence is directly acknowledged, cf. Atara Stein, "Immortals and Vampires and Ghosts, Oh My! Byronic Heroes in Popular Culture", *Praxis*, Special Issue: Romanticism and Contemporary Culture (February 2002), available at rc.umd.edu/praxis/contemporary/stein/stein.html, [retrieved 22.3.2023].

characters in *Underworld* film series, 2003-2016, or the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 1997-2004, and *Angel*, 1999-2004), or a ghost returning from the world of the dead (like rock star Eric Draven in *The Crow*, 1994). The "metaphysical supermen" are essentially a subspecies of the first category: their powers come from their own nature, and the human element is no more than a disguise, albeit of limited functionality. In fact, they add nothing more to the realm of superhumanism than the element of horror. Given that after a period of decline there has been a resurgence of interest in superheroes since the mid-1980s[27], we would say that the emergence of "metaphysical superheroes" was rather a (commercial) attempt to associate the superhero with the so-called fantasy genre[28], though it seems not to have had the expected success.

May the Force be with you: Redeemers of the Universe

These variations are essentially external modifications of a plot which, as Eco pointed out, contains the conditions of its consumption[29], because whatever unpredictable and paradoxical elements it may contain, it is in fact based on the device of iteration. Whatever the origin of the superhuman hero, whatever his background, whatever his place in the universe, whatever his opponents, the plot is always the same:

> A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions
> fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce

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27. The renewed interest in superheroes and the subsequent renaissance of the genre is marked by two comic book stories: *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller (1985) and *The Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon (1986), cf. Coogan, *op.cit.*, pp. 1-23.
28. The term "fantasy" denotes a genre of speculative fiction with magical and super-natural elements, typically set in a fictional universe with no basis in reality. Fairy tales, folk tales, and literary works such as the novels by J. J. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis or J. K. Rowling fall into this category. See J. G. Saricks, *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction*, American Library Association, Chicago 2001, pp. 36-60; E. James – F. Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012.
29. Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, *op.cit.*, pp. 112-117.

temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity[30].

The religious wording of the description is striking. However, it is not the product of arbitrary assumptions or over-interpretation. Contrary to what happened in Europe, in the framework of American mass culture messianism has not only been preserved, but has played a dominant role to such an extent that, over time, it has become the most recognizable attribute of the superhuman hero (especially in the superhero class) and also the keystone for the formation of the "alternative religious movements" of mass culture. One of the reasons, perhaps the most important, is that American ideology itself was formed entirely on the religious terms that the Puritan colonists brought with them to their new homeland. At the core of this ideology is the idea that the Puritan colonists were the "Chosen People" whom God intended for a new "Promised Land" (North America), while at the same time giving them a specific "mission" (e.g., to build an earthly paradise on the new continent, to spread His Word to the "heathen Indians" and "civilize"them, etc.)[31]. It seems that the

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30. J. S. Lawrence – R. Jewett, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

31. On this wide subject, which of course cannot be analyzed in the present study, see Paul Heike, *The Myths that Made America. An Introduction to American Studies*, Transcript, Bielefeld 2011 (open access at https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1wxsdq). Cf. Zsolt K. Virágos, "Myth, Ideology, and the American Writer", *Angól Filológiai Tanumányok / Hungarian Studies in English* 21 (1990), pp. 29-44, and "Versions of Myth in American Culture and Literature", *Angól Filológiai Tanumányok / Hungarian Studies in English* 17 (1984), pp. 49-84, and the comprehensive article by Claude Fischer, "Pilgrims, Puritans, and the ideology that is their American legacy", *Berkley Blog*, 24.11.2010, available at blogs.berkeley.edu/2010/11/24/pilgrims-puritans-and-the-american-legacy/ [retrieved 5.4.2023]. For a study of the subject in relation to superheroes, see Anthony R. Mills, *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema. The Marvel of Stan Lee and the Revolution of a Genre*, Routledge, New York / London 2014, pp. 4-21. Cf. Lawrence and Jewett's observation that whereas "the classical monomyth seemed to reflect rites of initiation, the American monomyth derives from tales of redemption. It secularizes the Judeo-Christian dramas of community redemption that have arisen in American soil" (J. S. Lawrence – R. Jewett, *op.cit.*, p. 6). Interesting, too, are the remarks of Julia List, "'Call me a Protestant': Liberal Christianity, Individualism, and the Messiah in *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *Dune*, and *Lord of Light*", *Science Fiction Studies* 36, 1 (2009), pp. 21-47, who explores the theme in three science-fiction novels.

American soil was particularly fertile for the cultivation of the messianic aspect of the superhuman hero, who in this sense embodies, symbolizes and "justifies" the Puritan settler himself.

The fundamentally religious background of American ideology explains the presence of messianism and other religious elements even where they are least expected, i.e., in science fiction. It is remarkable –and at first sight contradictory– that the more technological the world of the superhuman hero, the stronger the presence of the religious element and the more explicit the redemptive mission. Let us consider some typical instances.

Before he became a superhero, Silver Surfer[32] was a young astronomer named Norrin Radd who lived on the planet Zenn-La (in the heaven). But the idyllic life on the distant planet is threatened by Galactus, a monstrous cosmic force that devours planets. To save Zenn-La, Norrin submits to Galactus and becomes his herald. As a reward, he is given a new body (humanoid with metallic skin) and superpowers and uses his surfboard-like craft to travel through space in search of new planets to be devoured by his malevolent master. He eventually arrives on Earth, where he meets the Fantastic Four[33], who help him gain self-awareness. As a result, he decides to betray Galactus and save Earth, and is exiled there as punishment. He will now take it upon himself to defend Earth whenever it is threatened, without ever becoming part of the human world.

Norrin's sacrifice for the salvation of the (*his*) world already places him in a messianic context. But his genealogy is even more interesting because it combines and interweaves biblical stories, reversing their symbolism. Galactus is the counterpart to the biblical God: he is not the creator of the world, but its destroyer; he "creates" Silver Surfer (not with his own hands, but by imbuing him with the Power Cosmic) in order

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32. Silver Surfer made his debut in 1966 as a guest in the *Fantastic Four* superhero-team comic. Two years later the solo title *The Silver Surfer* was launched. See A. D., "Silver Surfer", in: *The Marvel Comics Encyclopedia*, *op.cit.*, pp. 298-299; D. R. Hammontree, "Silver Surfer, The", in: M. Keith Booker (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Comic Books*, *op.cit.*, vol. 2, pp. 574-575.
33. The Fantastic Four team consists of the superheroes Thing, Invisible Woman, Mister Fantastic and Human Torch. They first appeared in 1961. See T. D. – M. F., "Fantastic Four", in: *The Marvel Comics Encyclopedia*, *op.cit.*, pp. 112-113, and Craig Cowler, "Fantastic Four", in: M. Keith Booker (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Comic Books*, *op.cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 198-200.

to lead the world to its destruction. Silver Surfer, in turn, seems to be a combination of Adam (he is "created" by Galactus) and Lucifer (he is an angel of his master): he initially obeys his master until his encounter with the Fantastic Four, who, as another serpent, urge him to disobey; he interferes with Galactus' plan of destruction (like Adam interferes with the plan of salvation); as punishment for his disobedience, he is banished from heaven (like Adam and Lucifer).

But there is more. In his first visit to Earth, Silver Surfer appears as a white angel descending from the sky to announce the destruction of the planet, recalling images from the *Apocalypse*. After his conversion and punishment, his parallels with Christ are apparent, and are confirmed in each new adventure: the silver superhero has healing powers (though he cannot raise the dead), renounces Mephisto's[34] temptations, and is rejected by the human society he strives to save[35].

Before moving on to the next example, a general observation is useful. Both Silver Surfer and all superheroes up to the late 1970s act in a scientifically and technologically advanced world or can create it by virtue of their wealth (e.g., Batman, Ironman). In contrast, the human world they defend is more traditional, simulating the real-life conditions of the readers or viewers – remember that the Kents, Superman's stepparents, were farmers. In terms of the plot, this divergence between the two worlds is a convenient explanation for the heroes' superpowers, but it also has ideological implications. The redemptive action of the

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34. Mephisto first appeared in 1968 (*Silver Surfer*, nr. 3) and is Silver Surfer's most dangerous enemy. Inspired by Goethe's Mephistopheles, he is the perennial tempter who tries to lure people with various offers in exchange for their souls. His favorite targets are superheroes because they have pure souls and completely selfless motives, see P. S. – M. F. "Mephisto", in *The Marvel Comics Encyclopedia*, *op.cit*., p. 212. It may be added here that a similar temptation scene exists in the movie *Spider-Man* (2001), when Green Goblin, as another devil, lifts Spider-Man above New York City and promises to offer him all earthly pleasures if he goes with him, see Niall Richardson, "The Gospel according to *Spider-Man*", *Journal of Popular Culture* 37, 4 (2004), pp. 694-703, where he points out that "superhero narratives are often crude allegories of the Bible's stories" (*ibid*., p. 695).

35. See, for example, *Silver Surfer*, nr. 2 (Oct. 1968), 5 (Apr. 1969), 10 (Nov. 1969). Cf. Jean Paul Gabillet, "Cultural and Mythical Aspects of a Superhero: The Silver Surfer 1968-1970", *Journal of Popular Culture* 28, 2 (1994), pp. 203-213.

superheroes highlighted the positive face of science and technology, reflecting the Western world's faith in technological progress and reinforcing its optimistic outlook at a time when Cold War competition required huge investments in highly developed weapon-systems and space programs. The fact that the opponents of superheroes also have scientific and technological means of a correspondingly high level provides an opportunity to stress the position of the neutrality of science and technology and to transpose the problem into a Manichean moral framework: the villains always use these neutral means only for destruction, whereas the heroes –especially the superhero-messiah– will always use them for salvation[36]. Thus, through the messianic status of the superhero, the "good" use of science and technology is sanctified – at first sight, because in reality what is sanctified is the use of science and technology by the Western (especially American) world, which is by definition "good" thanks to an implicit process of identification with the superhero[37].

But what happens when humans also live in a world of high scientific and technological development? The answer is provided by *Star Trek*, a television series that began in 1966 and continues intermittently to this day[38]. We are in the very distant future. The starship *Enterprise* is travelling across the galaxy on a mission to bring peace to the universe and to intervene and settle things according to the humanitarian principles of the Commonwealth, which, not surprisingly, are identical to those of the Western world; in other words, much of the Tarzan story is being repeated in a science fiction context. The crew of the spaceship is made up of earthlings and aliens who live together in

36. For an interesting analysis of the use of science in relation to Spider-Man, see Salvatore Mondello, "Spider-Man: Superhero in the Liberal Tradition", *Journal of Popular Culture* 10, 1 (1976), pp. 232-238
37. As Wm. Blake Tyrrell puts it: "redemption is the means by which the myths, whether Star Trek's myth of science or that of America as World Savior, hide from believers the realization that their violence is identical to that of their enemies", see W. B. Tyrrell, "*Star Trek*'s Myth of Science", *Journal of American Culture* 2, 2 (1979), p. 290.
38. To date, there have been five seasons of the TV series (1966-1969, 1987-1994, 1993-1999, 1995-2001, 2001-2005) and thirteen films (1979-2016). For details, see imdb.com/search/title/?title=Star+Trek and the official website intl.startrek.com.

conditions of equality and harmony. Her captain is James Kirk (whose surname means "church" in Scottish[39]) and her sub-commander is Mr. Spock from the planet Vulcan, a perfectly rational humanoid, devoid of emotions, with telepathic abilities and greater physical strength than humans. These two characters act as superhuman saviors in a world that not only appears to have no need of God, but also associates traditional religion with falsehood, superstition, and primitivism. For example, in the episode "Who Mourns Adonais?"[40], the crew of the starship arrives on an unexplored planet and encounters a giant man who claims to be the god Apollo and asks them to kneel before him, offering them, in exchange for their faith and devotion, "a human life as simple and pleasant as it was those thousands of years ago on our beautiful Earth so far away". When they refuse, Apollo destroys their weapons in a demonstration of his power. Kirk discovers and destroys the source of god's power, who, now in normal human dimensions, says: "I would have loved you as a father his children. Did I ask so much of you?", to receive the following response from Kirk: "We have outgrown you... You asked for what we can no longer give". After the crew's outright refusal to worship him, Apollo's body begins to lose substance and he admits that the age of the gods has gone.

Of course, the refusal to worship the old gods and the proclamation of liberation from the slavery of idolatry point to the early Christians, but Kirk is not speaking as a defender of Christianity. To the multicultural and multi-racial society of *Star Trek*, all religions are myths, designed to enslave people by misleading them. This very message is underlined in an episode with clear biblical allusions, entitled "The Apple"[41]. The crew arrives at another unexplored planet, whose environment is so idyllic that it is compared to the "Garden of Eden". But this paradise turns out to be extremely dangerous, because its rocks are explosive and

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39. Zsolt K. Virágos, "Myth, Ideology, and the American Writer", op.cit, p. 39.
40. *Star Trek*, season 2, ep. 2 (22.9.1967), script by Gilbert Ralston. The script available at tor.com/2009/09/082/star-trek-re-watch-who-mouns-for-adonais/ [retrieved 10.4.2023]. Cf. Lawrence – Jewett, *op.cit*., pp. 234-237.
41. *Star Trek*, season 2, ep. 5 (13.10.1967), script by Max Ehrlich. Available at tor.com/2015/12/22/star-trek-the-original-series-rewatch-the-apple [retrieved 10.4.2023]. Cf. Lawrence – Jewett, *op.cit*., pp. 247-253.

the bushes around explode when someone touches them. After losing several crew members, Kirk orders them to leave the dangerous place, but an energy field prevents them from leaving and pulls the starship towards the planet. As they cautiously move towards a primitive village, they capture a humanoid, Akuta, who claims to be "the eyes of Vaal", the great dragon god. Kirk asks him to take them to Vaal, and indeed the humanoid leads them before a rock in the shape of a dragon's head. Spock discovers that the rock is the entrance to an underground complex but is protected by a powerful energy shield. Then the crew meets the villagers, who are young and healthy but seem primitive. They have no knowledge of technology, as Vaal sends them the rain and the sun and provides them with everything they need to live but forbids physical contact because there is no need to "reproduce". When Kirk discovers that the inhabitants are feeding Vaal with the explosive rocks, he decides to destroy Vaal in order to free the *Enterprise*[42]. That same night, a young local couple see two crew members kissing and do the same. Vaal realizes this and orders Akuta to kill the strangers. The villagers attack the crew but are eventually captured and Kirk orders the rock to be destroyed. When it's all over, he tells Akuta that he and his people can now live a normal life. Akuta, frustrated, observes that Vaal has been putting fruit on the trees and taking care of them, only to receive the following reply from Kirk: "You'll find that putting fruit on the trees is a relatively simple matter... You'll have to learn to take care of yourselves. You might even like it... You will be able to think what you wish, say what you wish, do what you wish. You will learn many things that are strange, but they will be good".

The inversion of the biblical story is obvious. While Adam's exile from Paradise means a life of toil and suffering, Kirk presents the loss of

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42. Kirk's decision risks wiping out the indigenous society. Spocks disagrees with his captain's plans stating that this society may not be ideal, but it is a viable one, and adds that their intervention would violate Commonwealth orders. Kirk, however, insists that his principal duty is to save the ship and its crew, stressing that the natives "aren't living, they're just existing. It's not a *valid* culture" (my italics). His words reveal the ideological pretext that the Western world, and the United States in particular, must intervene in any part of the world where the principles of "democracy and humanism" are not applied, which is still a justifying basis for American foreign policy.

the extraterrestrial paradise as an opportunity to develop "civilization", which can be enjoyable, and as the only way to ultimate freedom. After all, as the captain of the *Enterprise* points out: "We put those people back on a normal course of social evolution. I see nothing wrong with that". But just to make sure the message gets through to the *Star Trek* audience, the episode ends with Spock's interpretation of the biblical analogy: "In a manner of speaking, we have given Adam and Eve the apple, the awareness of good and evil, if you will, and because of this they have been driven out of paradise". Kirk notes that this interpretation casts him in the role of Satan and asks if he or any of the crew look like Satan. Of course, everyone quickly answers in the negative.

A world, then, that does not need gods and religions to be moral and harmonious, that is guided by humanistic principles, that places the highest value on the good of freedom, and that optimistically follows the path of scientific and technological progress. It could be the science fiction of the Enlightenment, the secular "eschatology" of reason. In this sense, the messianic character of Spock and Kirk is fully explained. First, Spock was almost automatically treated by the audience as a divine figure: the information he receives from his powerful and fast computer makes him appear omniscient, while his alien nature makes him appear omnipotent; and if he does not appear all-merciful because of his lack of emotion, he is nevertheless righteous precisely because he acts rationally. Kirk, on the other hand, was just as easily identified with a "Christ" who redeems without suffering. As a rule, he prioritizes the salvation of others, risking not only his position but also his own life. Thus, *Star Trek* ultimately projects a secular "humanistic theology" that focuses on the "spiritual formation" of the individual, reflecting the personal beliefs of the series creator Gene Roddenberry[43]. No wonder, then, that the show has spawned a pop religion and its fans (the Trekkers) claim that it has

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43. See James F. McGrath, "A God Needs Compassion, but Not a Starship: *Star Trek*'s Humanist Theology", in: K. S. Decker – J. T. Eberl (eds.), *The Ultimate Star Trek and Philosophy: The Search for Socrates*, Wiley, Malden Mass. 2016, pp. 315-325. On Roddenberg religious views, see Lawrence – Jewett, *op.cit.*, pp. 233-261 sq.

"changed their lives", "redeemed them on a personal level", and that they have experienced a "personal revelation" in its episodes.[44]

The epic *Star Wars* film series was treated in the same way as early as 1977, when the first trilogy began with *Star Wars: A New Hope*[45]. Its creator, George Lucas, who had first appeared as the director of the masterful (but superhero-free) science fiction film *THX 1138* (1971), was an admirer of Joseph Campbell and his work on myths and is credited with being the first to consciously use archetypal motifs as models for his storytelling[46]. This may partly explain the reluctance to classify these films as "science fiction", since Lucas himself defined them as "fantasy and space opera films"[47].

Although the emphasis in all the films is on the hero's journey to maturity, there are also religious elements, though these are not specific to one religion but rather to a fusion of, mainly, Christianity and Buddhism. For example, the sage Yoda, who preaches the power of forgiveness and advises Luke Skywalker not to give in to evil, could be either a Buddhist or a Christian saint. The mysterious Force is a

44. For more, see Lawrence – Jewett, *op.cit.*, pp. 247-264. Cf. Michael Jindra, "It's About Faith in our Future: *Star Trek* Fandom as Cultural Religion" in: B. D. Forbes – J. H. Mahan, *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, University of California Press, ³2017, pp. 223-240. It should be noted that, in addition to *Star Tre*k publications, special official and unofficial websites and theme parks, a whole industry of products (figurines, clothing, video games, etc.) featuring the characters and the series logo has been created. The same has happened with the *Star Wars* film series.
45. The film series consists of three trilogies, but they were not shown in chronological order of the fictional events. The first trilogy consists of episodes IV (*A New Hope*, 1977), V (*The Empire Strikes Back*, 1980), and VI (*Return of the Jedi*, 1983), the second of episodes I (*The Phantom Menace*, 1999), II (*Attack of the Clones*, 2002) and III (*Revenge of the Sith*, 2005), and the third of episodes VII (*The Force Awakens*, 2015), VIII (*The Last Jedi*, 2017), and IX (*The Rise of Skywalker*, 2019). The first two trilogies were written by George Lucas, who sold the rights and production company to Disney in 2012. This was followed by the third trilogy, a series of films focusing on the descendants of the main characters or other *Star Wars* characters, and television series. For more information, see imdb.com/find/?q=Star%20Wars&ref_=nv_sr_sm and the official website starwars.com/.
46. On George Lucas' religious views and his relationship with J. Campbell see Lawrence – Jewett, *op.cit.*, pp. 269-272.
47. Ryan Britt, "Is *Star Wars* sci-fi or fantasy? How George Lucas changed 'science fiction'", *Inverse*, 15.2.2021, available inverse.com/entertainment/is-star-wars-science-fiction-or-fantasy [retrieved 22.12.2022].

kind of metaphysical energy that permeates the universe and can grant superpowers to those who use it. However, it has a light and a dark side: the Jedi Knights are on the light side because they seek to unite with the Force, to align their will with its will, while their opponents, the Sith, have succumbed to the dark side because they use the Force to satisfy their destructive desires. Interestingly, though, the prayer "May the Force be with you", which quickly entered the vernacular, implies the divine dimension of the Force, and is uttered only by the Jedi[48]. The name *Sith* is also reminiscent of the Old Testament's Seth, the third son of Adam, whose generation was saved from the Flood and continued humanity. It is possible that the choice of name implies that the Sith (as descendants of Adam on a metaphorical level) have an innate tendency towards evil, and at the same time that the Jedi, as their adversaries, are on a higher moral level than humans. However, the most obvious example of religious imagery is in the film Star *Wars: The Return of the Jedi*, the third episode of the first trilogy (1983). Darth Vader has killed the Emperor but absorbed fatal jolts of the dark Force. Luke wants to take him away from that place, telling him: "I've got to save you", and Darth replies: "No, you already have". Immediately afterwards, he dies, and his body disappears into the light side of the Force, an image reminiscent of the Ascension of Christ.[49] Later, when Luke sets fire to Darth's armour, he sees in a vision his father (as Anakin Skywalker, since he is now saved), Yoda, and Obi-Wan Kenobi

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48. According to Lucas, he invented the Force to inspire "a certain kind of spirituality" in young audiences, suggesting a belief in God without endorsing any particular religion. The Force is a non-denominational religious concept, "distilled from the essence of all religions", presupposing the existence of God and clearly defined concepts of good and evil. See Ryder Windham, *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace. Movie Scrapbook*, Random House, New York 1999, and the documentary *The Mythology of "Star Wars" with George Lucas* (2000); the transcript of the discussion available at billmoyers.com/content/mythology-of-star-wars-george-lucas/ [retrieved 20.12.2022]. Cf. Chris Taylor, *How Star Wars Conquered the Universe: The Past, Present, and Future of a Multibillion Dollar Franchise*, rev. ed., Head of Zeus, London 2016.

49. Cf. "Darth Vader", on the official *Star Wars* website, starwars.com/databank/ character/ darthvader [retrieved 21.12.2022]. Remember that Darth Vader is Anakin Skywalker, Luke's father. He was originally a Jedi and there was a prophecy that he would succeed in bringing balance to the Force. However, he was tempted by the offer of a high-ranking Sith official and turned to the dark side of the Force.

(his father's former teacher) as luminous beings, surrounded by the light side of the Force. The resemblance to the icon of the Transfiguration of the Savior is more than obvious.

The last example is chronologically and aesthetically closer to our time. It is the series of films collectively known as *The Matrix*[50], also a huge commercial success. On the one hand, the films capture (but also anticipate) the postmodern reality of digital life; on the other, they embody the cultural and ideological traits of postmodernism, characterized by the mixture and confluence of motifs, images, and perceptions, the fluidity of boundaries, the acceptance of multiple (and sometimes contradictory) approaches and interpretations.[51]

From the very beginning, the names of characters and locations define the religious framework of *The Matrix*. The main character's name, *Thomas*, refers to the "unbelieving Thomas" (and indeed Neo/Thomas distrusts what Morpheus reveals to him), and his surname, *Anderson*, literally means "son of man"[52]. As a hacker, he uses the nickname *Neo*, i.e. the new one (the new Adam?), which is an anagram of *One* (=The Chosen One). His companion in the revolutionary group is called *Trinity*. The last human city and the rebels' stronghold is called *Zion*. Morpheus' ship is called *Nebuchadnezzar*, while another one is called *Logos*.

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50. *The Matrix* (1999), *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003*)*, *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), written and directed by the Wachowskis, and *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021), written and directed by Lana Wachowski. The production of comics, animated series, video games, etc., followed the commercial success of the film.

51. The intertextuality and interpretive polysemy of *The Matrix* was almost immediately noted and commented upon by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek, "The Matrix or Malebrance in Hollywood*"*, *Philosophy Today* 11, 26 (1999), pp. 11-26. See also his lecture at the symposium "Inside the Matrix: Internationales Symposium im Zentrum für Kunst und Medien" (Karlsruhe, Oct. 1999), entitled "The Matrix, or, the Two Sides of Perversion" (available at lacan.com /zizek-matrix.htm [retrieved 22.12.2022]). It should be noted that Žižek described *The Matrix Resurrections* as "boringly postmodern", see "Boringly postmodern and an ideological fantasy: Slavoj Žižek reviews *Matrix Resurrections*", *The Spectator*, 12.1.2022 (available at spectator.co.uk/article/a-muddle-not-a-movie-slavoj-i-ek-reviews-matrix-resurrections/ [retrieved 22.12.2022]).

52. The name *Anderson* (Ander+son) –and *Andersen* in Scandinavian countries– is patronymic and means "the son of Ander". It comes from the medieval English *Andreuston*, which means "the son of Andreus (=Andrew's). *Andreu* (and *Andrew*) is the English equivalent of the Greek name Ἀνδρέας, which derives from the ancient Greek noun ἀνήρ (=man; see, *LSJ*).

Beyond the names, however, analogies and correlations with biblical themes can be seen. There is the prophecy of the coming of "The One", who will free mankind from the tyranny of the machines and the virtual reality of the Matrix. Morpheus, who sees in Anderson the fulfilment of the prophecy, corresponds to John the Baptist, not only because he prepares the way for The One, but also because he constantly warns that time is running out. Neo is "created" by the machines and spends his entire "life" in a capsule symbolizing the womb – it is a kind of "virgin birth". Cypher betrays Neo and the rebels as another Judas. Neo is "sacrificed" to save Trinity and Morpheus and is killed by the agents, but after a while he is "resurrected" and fights with renewed, greater powers (*The Matrix*)[53]. Trinity is killed by Johnson's bullet and Neo "resurrects" her (*The Matrix Reloaded*).[54] When Bane/Johnson blinds Neo, he ironically calls him "the blind messiah". Walking among the machines, the blind Neo can see light everywhere; the audience, however, sees him moving in a field of light, as if floating – an image that suggests the Resurrection or Ascension of Christ (*The Matrix Revolutions*). Finally, Neo and Trinity are "resurrected" in the fourth film of the series, which after all has the word *Resurrections* in its title.

A "postmodern messiah", then, in a chaotic landscape where nothing has a definite form and there is no certainty about the distinction between the idol and the original, between the being and its reflection. The basic feature of the Matrix world is confusion. Its religious background is essentially a melting pot in which elements of Christianity, Gnosticism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, etc., are confused and blended. There

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53. Cf. *The Matrix. Numbered shooting script* (1998), available at dailyscript.com/scripts/ the_matrix.pdf [retrieved 10.1.2023]. On the religious references, see Lawrence – Jewett, *op.cit.*, pp. 295-300; Russell J. A. Kilbourn, "Re-Writing "Reality": Reading *The Matrix*", *Revue Canadienne d'Études cinématographiques / Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 9, 2 (2000), pp. 43-54; Andrew Godoski, "Under the Influence: *The Matrix*. A look at what made *The Matrix* such an influential piece of filmmaking", *Screened.com*, 12.5.2011 (screened.com/ news/ under-the-influence-the-matrix/2218 [retrieved 10.1.2023]); Yelyzaveta Babenko, *Analysis of the Film* The Matrix, Grin Verlag, München 2011.
54. The fact is recalled by the dying Trinity in the third film of the series (*The Matrix Revolutions*).

is also a mixture of indirect or direct philosophical references to Plato (the myth of the cave, the theory of ideas), Descartes (*Meditationes*), Kant (*Critique of Pure Reason*), Jean Baudrillard (*Simulacres et Simulation*; indeed, this particular book appears as an object in the film), etc.[55] In other words, the film tetralogy contains a message for all tastes, for all believers and fans. And, as in the case of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, it inspired another "pop religion", *Matrixism*[56].

The examples could go on and on, but one does not have to refer to every single superhuman hero of mass culture to agree with the statement that they serve as a substitute for the figure of Christ[57]. Nevertheless, there is another one worth mentioning, precisely because of its paradox. In 1995, the producer and director Tony Salerno created a direct-to-video children's series with the aim of promoting and strengthening Christian faith. The protagonist is Bibleman, a typical masked superhero who, of course, has a double identity: his real name is Miles B. Peterson and he is a wealthy tycoon who turned to God and Bible study at the most difficult time in his life. Having found salvation, he has decided to fight evil. Bibleman wears a suit identical to Batman's and carries a lightsaber similar to that of the Jedi Knights. The difference between him and the typical superhero is that he does not use violence against his enemies, but quotes from the Bible[58]. The series ran until 2010 and had a brief revival from 2016 to 2020, but it never spread beyond a few evangelical churches in the United States and Australia – even there it was not as successful as expected.

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55. More in William Irwin (ed.), *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Open Court, Chicago 2002, and *More Matrix and Philosophy: Revolutions and Reloaded decoded*, Open Court, Chicago 2005.

56. See Casey Kazan, "Matrixism – 'The Path of the One' Religious Movement", *Daily Galaxy* 19.4.2007, available at dailygalaxy.com/my_weblog/2007/04/the_matrix_neo_. html [retrieved 10.1.2023]. On the emergence of new "alternative" religious movements, usually based on mass culture, see J. Gordon Melton, "Perspective: New New Religions: Revisiting a Concept", *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 10, 4 (2007), pp. 103-112, and the more detailed study by Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: a Hyper-Real Testament*, Peter Lang, Brussels 2005. Cf. Zsolt K. Virágos, "Versions of Myth in American Culture and Literature", *op. cit.*

57. Lawrence – Jewett, *op.cit.*, pp. 6-7.

58. Lawrence – Jewett, *op.cit.*, pp. 289-290. Cf. the official website bibleman.com/.

Inside Every Utopia Is a Dystopia[59]
– or An Eschatology without end

As early as the 19th century, the fulfilment of the mission of the superhuman hero was tantamount to the creation of a utopian society, such as the model farm of Rodolphe de Gerolstein. Of course, from one point of view, superman's redemptive action *per se* –the punishment of criminals, the triumph of truth, the vindication of justice, etc.– can be considered utopian, not in the sense of the unattainable that is associated with the term *utopia* today, but in the sense of Aristotle's οἷα ἂν γένοιτο (what could or would happen, *Poetics* 1451a-b), i.e., the possibility of the realization of this redemption, whatever its content. This was, after all, the basis on which the "consolatory structure" was built: the hope that what the superhuman hero had miraculously achieved in the world of fiction could be realized in the world of reality[60].

By analogy, we would say that utopia, or rather *eutopia*, is the "new Jerusalem", the "eschatology" of superhumanism. However, only European supermen could enjoy it. Their American counterparts either abandoned the community they had just saved and continued their wanderings, ready for their next mission of redemption, or they were constantly fighting to save the (temporarily) restored paradise from the next internal or external threat. After all, as the American writer Toni Morrison observed, "All paradises, all utopias are designed by who is not there, by the people who are not allowed in"[61]; more on this later.

But whatever the place of the superman in the eutopia he creates, the utopian societies of the future gradually began to disappear from the map of superman narratives, to be replaced by dystopias. The study of American utopian novels from the last decades of the 19th century to the end of the 20th shows that this shift is linked to the transition from agricultural to industrial production: utopias, either as literary texts or

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59. Title of an article by John Crowley *Boston Review*, 19.4.2017 (bostonreview.net/articles/john-crowley-man-who-designed-future/ [retrieved 20.2.2023]).
60. On utopianism in *Star Trek* see Lawrence – Jewett, *op.cit*., pp. 244-245.
61. Interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, PBS NewsHour, 9 March 1998 (transcript available at pbs.org/newshour/show/toni-morrison [retrieved 20 February 2023]).

as actual attempts to organize an ideal society, are associated with small communities in the countryside; the American industrial metropolis becomes the site of dystopia[62].

A similar shift, albeit for different reasons, can be seen in science fiction narratives. Until the 1970s or so, science fiction created scientific and technological utopias, emphasizing the importance of the "good" use of science and technology, as discussed above. Since then, however, and apparently under the ever-increasing threat of environmental crisis, utopias have been transformed into terrifying dystopias[63]: apocalyptic images, but without the slightest expectation of a "new Jerusalem". As Zsolt K. Virágos has aptly observed, contemporary apocalyptic visions are essentially non-teleological[64].

Thus, the arena of the modern superman is a monstrous dystopian megalopolis where either chaos reigns due to unbridled freedom (e.g. Batman's Gotham City or Detroit in *The Crow*) or totalitarianism, the absolute control of citizens by technology (as in *The Matrix*). Interestingly, the second type of dystopia is much less common in superman narratives and in the milieu of mass culture in general. Instead, it has inspired writers such as Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*, 1932), George Orwell (*1984*, publ. in 1949) or Ray Bradbury (*Farenheit 451*, publ. in 1953), and directors such as Fritz Lang (*Metropolis*, 1927), Jean-Luc Godard (*Alphaville*, 1965), and François Truffaut (*Farenheit 451*, 1966), not to mention George Lucas for *THX 1138*, whose theme is how technology facilitates the enforcement of totalitarianism.

So superhuman heroes with unimaginable powers are afraid to take on totalitarianism? Or are even they powerless in the face of it? These are certainly rhetorical questions, although one suspects that an affirmative answer would be ideologically advantageous and perhaps closer to the truth. The point is that the superhuman hero of mass culture has to

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62. See Thomas Halper – Douglas Muzzio, "Hobbes in the City: Urban Dystopias in American Movies", *Journal of American Culture* 30, 4 (2007), pp. 379-390 (here: pp. 380-382).

63. Andrew M. Greeley, "Varieties of Apocalypse in Science Fiction", *Journal of American Culture* 2, 2 (1979), p. 282.

64. Zsolt K. Virágos, "Myth, Ideology, and the American Writer", op.cit., σ. 37.

serve order, law and justice, so that he can only fight the chaos that, according to Thomas Hobbes' political theory, is caused by freedom, the absence of the state, the lack of institutions and laws. Thanks to the superhuman hero, then, the spread of chaos is prevented and there is no need to impose totalitarianism, i.e., total control over the citizens, in order to protect their security and well-being. This would be a positive reading, which could lead to the conclusion that the superhuman hero leaves his eutopia in order not to become a tyrant himself. However, it has been well described how superhumanism skilfully undermines the democratic ethos, ultimately demonstrating the inadequacy of the state and institutions to uphold the terms of the "social contract"[65].

On the other hand, the repetition of the same basic plot, in which the "earthly paradise" is constantly under siege by the "forces of evil" and its redemption is never final, raises suspicion that the superhuman hero himself is essentially inadequate, despite his "messianism". Let us return to the theme of his inability to integrate into the society he saves. The lone rider lost in the sunset or the superhero on the top of a skyscraper gazing at the city lights are now stereotypical images that summarize perhaps the most basic attribute of the superhero: the status of man (and therefore society, in any sense of the word) is forbidden to him if he is to continue to act as a superman; if he chooses to live as a man, he must renounce his superhuman status and thus his redemptive mission. Of course, even if he falters for a while, he will act altruistically, i.e., he will sacrifice his personal desires for the good of humanity – after all, only this choice gives the opportunity for the production of new films, new episodes, new comics.

However, the argument of profit does not negate the deep and substantial division that runs through all superman narratives. The superhuman hero moves in a world without moral ambiguity, where good and evil are clearly distinguished, in a Manichean universe characterized by dualism, by irreconcilable opposites, an element that fully reflects the dualism inherent in Western civilization. This dualism, which is also reflected in the double-identity device, is most evident in the case of

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65. On the undemocratic function of superhuman heroes, especially superheroes, see J. S. Lawrence – R. Jewett, *op.cit.*, pp. 29-33, 307-364.

superheroes, whom we have divided into different categories according to the dialectic of their human and superhuman qualities. In theological terms, we could say that their background is either monophysite, i.e. one of the two elements predominates (e.g. the superhuman in Superman, the human in Batman), while the other takes the place of an acquired quality, an accidental property that does not affect the hero's essence, or dyophysite, i.e. the two natures are completely separate and do not unite (Spiderman). Thus the "redemption" they offer cannot be final, because *it cannot provide an ontological restoration*, but only a restoration of order; hence their eschatology has no end – no finality and no purpose. That is why superhuman heroes cannot or dare not confront dystopia in its totalitarian version: because they perceive freedom only in the form that Hobbes condemns. In this respect, and to return to the realm of narrative, we could say that dystopia is ultimately equivalent to the failure of messianism.

Afterword

In 1969, Ray Bradbury published a science fiction short story called "The Messiah"[66]. The story takes place on the planet Mars, where the first human colonies have been established. Along with the colonists, priests of various denominations and religions have come to spread the word of God. Among them is Roman Catholic Father Niven, who as a child had a strong desire to meet Christ and so became a priest. One night he is awakened by a noise and goes to the church to see what is going on. He hears the sound of drops coming from the baptismal font and, as he approaches, sees in the shadows an indistinct figure[67] with its hand outstretched over the baptismal font; on the palm of the figure's hand there is a red wound from which drops of blood are falling. As the figure moves towards the light, Father Niven is astonished to see that

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66. The short story is included in the collection *I Sing the Body Electric!*, Knopf, New York 1969.
67. In the text, the figure is called "Ghost", which could be a playful ambiguity of reference (Holy Ghost).

it is Christ, who looks equally frightened and begs the priest to avert his eyes so that he will no longer have this appearance. The mysterious figure turns out to be a Martian who, like his kind, has telepathic powers and the ability to take the form of the thoughts or desires of anyone who looks at him. Out of curiosity, he visited a human settlement, but his form kept changing according to the wishes of those he met. So the people began to follow him, and to escape he sought refuge in the church, where he was trapped in the form of Christ. Once again, he begs the priest to set him free, for if he remains in this form for any longer, he will die. The priest agrees, on the condition that the Martian will return every year at Easter in the form of Christ so that he can relive his illusion. He agrees, and Father Niven, before releasing him, requires his "blessing".

When the Martian leaves, the priest bursts into tears. In the description of the final scene, the name Simon-Peter is mentioned twice. Perhaps this is because Father Niven is aware, even if he does not admit it, that by choosing the illusory image of Christ, he has *actually* denied Christ himself, in his own house[68]. I think Bradbury's short story is the best comment on the popular "messiahs" of superhumanism. But also on their fanatical followers.

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68. See also Thomas J. Salerno's comment, "Ray Bradbury's sci-fi story 'The Messiah' and the Eucharist", *Voyage Comics*, 19.9.2021 (available at voyagecomics.com/2021/07/19/ray-bradburys-sci-fi-story-the-messiah-and-the-eucharist/, retrieved 3.3.2023), although I don't agree with his view that the story is incomplete.