

Hegel and the Impossibility of the Future in Science Fiction Cinema

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1. The Present Future

Of all film genres, science fiction is the one most explicitly linked to the issuing of moral imperatives. This aspect of science fiction is tied to the futural mode in which it occurs. The science fiction genre, as J. P. Telotte claims, allows us 'to speculate, in the precise sense of the fantastic, on what might or might not be, now or in the future' (Telotte 2001, 141). By showing us a possible future - often either utopian or dystopian - science fiction films provide an image for us to realise or to fight against. Unlike genres focused on the present (such as melodrama) or genres focused on the past (such as the Western), science fiction, because it is futural, involves a clear break from what is and a plea for what ought to be. Science fiction directs us toward a better future, even if negatively, through the depiction of a nightmarish one. In this sense, the mantra that Sarah Connor scrawls with her knife in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron,

1991) - 'No Fate' - is emblematic for the genre as a whole.¹ The very depiction of a possible future in the science fiction film calls us to act in order to prevent or realise it.

We can see this demand for change in all of the great science fiction films, from Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) to Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and James Cameron's *The Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991). *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* warns us against losing our singularity through its depiction of pods replicating and replacing human beings. *A Clockwork Orange* cautions us against the dangers of Foucauldian disciplining procedures. And taking up a common idea in contemporary science fiction films, *Blade Runner* and *Terminator 2* warn us about either becoming machine-like ourselves or ceding control of the planet to the machines that we've created. In all of these cases, a negative image of a possible future seems to allow each film to author a critique of the present.²

Along these same lines, the most common indictment of science fiction cinema stems from its failure to take this critique of the present, this possible future, far enough. For instance, Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska lament that 'However hard it tries to imagine weird or wonderful futures or other worlds, science fiction cinema rarely escapes entirely from the looks, any more than the thematic concerns, of its own historical periods and fashions' (King and Krzywinska 2000, 90). For King and Krzywinska and numerous other critics, science fiction cinema has generally failed to break decisively enough from the power of the present and its prevailing ideology. Even when it succeeds in

¹ Even though *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (Jonathan Mostow, 2003) explicitly reverses Sarah Connor's proclamation of freedom in *Terminator 2* with its insistence that humanity cannot ultimately avoid a nuclear apocalypse, it nonetheless insists that how people experience that apocalypse - whether they survive it or not, for instance - is not preordained. In this sense, the moral imperative in the second sequel changes from that of the first, but it still remains a moral imperative concerning the future.

² The idea that science fiction cinema issues warnings or even moral imperatives is widespread. For instance, in his discussion of *Blade Runner*, David Desser claims that 'such a work can possess innate qualities that improve our lives and make us whole' (Desser 1985, 178), and in her account of 'future noir' science fiction films, Janet Staiger sees these films as 'random shots at deficiencies in present-day life' (Staiger 1999, 120).

providing images of an alternative future that call us to action, but it does not succeed to the extent that we would hope.³

In fact, many contend that science fiction cinema does not transcend the horizon of the ruling ideology at all. According to such critics, rather than envisioning an authentic future that calls into question the ruling ideology of the present, science fiction cinema tends, on the whole, in the direction of ideological conformity. That is to say, this cinema inures us to the ideology that we experience on a daily basis, naturalising that ideology. As Benjamin Shapiro argues, science fiction films often present 'a future that threatens to destroy not only everything we know, but how we know everything ... but even then, our collective social consciousness, our values and beliefs will survive. We are not and, in the final analysis, will not become the alien' (Shapiro 1990, 111).⁴ That is to say, science fiction film functions as the supplement of the ruling ideology as it attests to that ideology's permanence.

If there is anything approaching a critical consensus about science fiction cinema, it is this critique of the genre's link to the present ruling ideology and to present conditions of production - a critique that centres around the limits of its ability to depict an alternative future or to envision a thoroughgoing rejection of the ruling ideology. This consensus can provide a point of departure for

³ H. Bruce Franklin criticises science fiction cinema for its failure to imagine a future more livable than the present. As he puts it, 'The only future that seems unimaginable in Hollywood is a better one' (Franklin 1990, 31). Perhaps the predominant criticism, however, faults science fiction cinema for the emptiness of its critique and for its failure to show the proper way out of our contemporary problems. According to Per Schelde, 'so much of science fiction is comparatively subversive. But the subversion never goes very far. Very seldom does a science fiction film do anything more revolutionary than to whisper that something is wrong. Science fiction does not analyze problems and indicate routes to deal with them; science fiction names problems' (Schelde 1993, 242).

⁴ Because its province is the future, according to some critics, science fiction cinema's ideological complicity goes even further - aiding ideology in its attempt to incorporate the changes wrought by technology and science. According to Michael Stern, mainstream science fiction cinema's reliance on special effects indicates its ideological function in this direction. He claims, science fiction does not precisely tell people what to think - about technology, say - but rather forestalls thinking about technology in ways that are outside authorized categories of reflection. The enthusiasm of science fiction film makers and science fiction audiences for special effects is one way the genre helps to naturalize these categories, making them inevitable, taken for granted, and hence invisible' (Stern 1990, 72). Here, Stern takes the critique of science fiction cinema's inadequate imagination to its endpoint, indicting this cinema for closing off future alternatives rather than opening them up.

rethinking the ethical and political value of science fiction cinema, but only if we add a Hegelian twist. This twist would allow us to see the widespread failure of science fiction cinema to envision an alternative future not as a contingent shortcoming or an indication of a lack of imagination among creators of science fiction, but instead as a necessary - and fecund - limitation of the genre. Though many critics have linked science fiction cinema to the ruling ideology, this often takes the form of a critique because they assume that this cinema ought to depict something else - an alternative future or an attack on the ruling ideology.

But we might see this connection in other terms, beginning with the idea, derived from Hegel, that science fiction film cannot produce an authentic image of the future, and thus its failure to do so is structurally necessary. According to Hegel, no philosophy - and no art - can transcend its epoch and envision an authentic future apart from this epoch. As he puts it in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right*: 'Whatever happens, every individual is a child of his time; so philosophy too is its own time apprehended in thoughts. It is just as absurd to fancy that a philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as it is to fancy that an individual can overleap his own age, jump over Rhodes' (Hegel 1952, 11). Speculation about the future, in the case of philosophy or science fiction cinema, is never really about the future. Plato's ideal republic, as Hegel sees it, is not an ideal to be realised but an unconscious expression of the essence of the Greek society of his time. The future as such is foreclosed to our imaginings.⁵ Film theory has not often turned to the thought of Hegel, but Hegel's insight into our relationship to futurity make such a turn valuable in the case of science fiction cinema. When science fiction cinema depicts an imaginary future, it remains entirely within the scope of the ruling social structure.⁶

⁵ In his *Séminaire V*, Lacan makes a similar point about the impossibility of discovering anything futural in language. He notes, 'everything that occurs in the order of language is always already accomplished' (Lacan 1998, 39, my translation).

⁶ From a different perspective, Vivian Sobchack makes a related point in *Screening Space*. She argues that there is an inherent tension in science fiction cinema between its images of the future and the present conditions of production out of which it emerges. This cinema aims at escaping the present, but it always escapes from a particular historical vantage point. As Sobchack puts it, 'Science fiction's own historical limitations provide, at once, both the boundary conditions that the genre would imaginatively escape and the ground absolutely necessary to its signification of that escape' (Sobchack 1987, 302-303)

But this does not mean that we can reduce science fiction cinema to the operations of the prevailing ideology: the value of this cinema lies in its ability to allow us to see ideology in a way we would not ordinarily see it. Specifically, it exposes the closure of the ideological field. The point is not that ideology is closed in the sense that it is seamless and functions without a hitch. Ideology is not unassailable, but images of alternate possibilities or of sites of resistance do not undermine it. The incorporation of resistance that many cultural theorists point out does not occur after movements of resistance end but at the very moment of their emergence. The image of resistance is the lifeblood of ideology. Ideology feeds off the proliferation of such images because they suggest that ideology is not really closing off possibilities, that subjects are really completely free and not bound by ideology. As Slavoj Žižek notes, 'Ideology is not the closure as such but rather the illusion of *openness*, the illusion that "it could also happen otherwise" which ignores how the very texture of the universe precludes a different course of events' (Žižek 1992, 241). In order to function effectively, ideology relies on the belief that its control is not total and on subjects believing that they have not invested themselves fully in it. If we believe that we are resisting or that a form of resistance is readily available to us, we thereby fail to see the extent and nature of ideological control, which is precisely what science fiction cinema renders visible.

The weakness in an ideological edifice does not emerge through images of seeming alternatives but through its inherent antagonisms, antagonisms that become visible only when we recognise the closed nature of ideology. For instance, alternative business practices such as flexible hours, which appear to offer employees a measure of freedom, obscure the antagonism between the demands of capitalism and family values. By highlighting this antagonism, we do not escape ideology; instead, we experience its inability to provide the solution that it promises. Ideology offers the illusion of a meaningful existence safe from trauma, but the meaning it provides always devolves into nonsense. Whereas the image of openness or resistance obscures the nonsensical foundation of ideology, the recognition of ideology's closure - what in Hegel's terms one

might call thinking the absolute - renders visible the meaningless dimension of ideology. This is the recognition that science fiction cinema enables.

Science fiction cinema reveals the falsity of the sites of resistance or alternative positions that are available to us. It does so through its futural mode, but in the process it necessarily has recourse to a paranoid image of ideology. Science fiction cinema offers more insight into the functioning of ideology than any other film genre, but this insight arrives - as a result of the genre's futural mode - in a paranoid form, depicting ideology as the activity of an agent behind the scenes who manipulates subjects.⁷ In the standard science fiction film, the closed nature of ideology becomes evident, but this closure appears to be the work of some malevolent agency rather than a structural effect of ideology itself. The futural mode of science fiction film is at once responsible for its most radical insights and its most salient defects. In order to appreciate the former and avoid being seduced by the latter, one must approach science fiction cinema in the way that Hegel approaches Kantian morality, which shares both science fiction's insights and defects.⁸

⁷ Of course, not every science fiction film exposes the ideological closure or has recourse to paranoia. In fact, some of the most famous science fiction films - *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977), or *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985) - avoid both scrupulously. But as a genre, science fiction has a privileged position for showing us ideology in a way we would not ordinarily see it. This feature inheres in the genre as such, not necessarily in the narrative trajectory of science fiction films. The futural mode of science fiction cinema - perhaps the defining signature of the genre - makes it possible for this cinema to reveal the illusory nature of what seem to be alternative or subversive positions within contemporary ideology. From the imagined perspective of the future, today's supposed openings appear as false starts. They become visible as supplements of ideology rather than challenges to it. The great achievement of science fiction cinema lies in the way it allows us to rethink how contemporary ideology is functioning. But this achievement exists only as a possibility that particular science fiction films can either try to realise or not. Nothing guarantees that a particular science fiction will realise the possibility inherent in the genre, though many have. (It has been primarily - if not exclusively - dystopian science fiction films that have revealed the functioning of ideology through adopting a paranoid position. Dystopian films, which vastly outnumber their utopian counterparts, almost inevitably take up this possibility inhering in science fiction cinema as a genre.) Though it is the futural mode of science fiction that offers the genre this possibility, this futural mode demands an interpretative approach that grasps science fiction's illusory future as a revelation of the ruling ideology as a closed system.

⁸ Though one might extend this interpretive approach from science fiction cinema to science fiction literature, there is a clear difference between the two in their relationship to the future that complicates any automatic linkage. As a result of the inherent link between the cinema and technology, the futural dimension of science fiction is more pronounced in the cinematic form of the genre than the literary form. Not only is the

2. Kant, the Philosopher of the Future

Because science fiction cinema exposes the present through a futural lens, it bears a remarkable resemblance to the moral system of Immanuel Kant. For both Kant and his great inheritor Fichte, philosophy has its basis in an 'ought,' a moral imperative that presents us with an image - an alternative future - of what we should become.⁹ The moral subject, for instance, ought to treat others as ends in themselves rather than simply as means toward accomplishing some larger goal. Because moral duty involves what we ought to do, it remains always something imperfectly realised, always on the horizon but never accomplished. It remains ever futural. In fact, because, as finite beings, we can never actually realise the moral law, Kant takes this as evidence for the immortality of the soul. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, he claims that 'the highest good is practically possible only on the presupposition of the immortality of the soul, so that this, as inseparably connected with the moral law, is a *postulate* of pure practical reason' (Kant 1996a, 129). According to Kant, the realisation of our duty is futural to such a degree that we must postulate immortality in order for it to be attainable. To imagine moral duty as realised would be to taint it, to deprive it of its hallowed status and to render it pathological, which is why Kant claims in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* that one could not 'give worse advice

cinematic apparatus itself a technological device, but one of the primary appeals of the cinema is its special effects - that is, its ability to offer experiences that we can only imagine, that we cannot experience outside the cinema. Many theorists of science fiction film have pointed out, as Annette Kuhn notes in her introduction to the first volume of *Alien Zone*, that the link between the genre and special effects 'makes science fiction the most cinematic of genres' (Kuhn 1990, 7). The importance of the link between science fiction cinema and special effects becomes most evident when a film's special effects are poor or when they become dated - i.e., when they become overly visible as effects. Poor or dated special effects often completely disrupt the experience of a science fiction film for spectators, making it difficult for spectators to invest themselves in the fantasmatic scenario that the film offers. This indicates the extent to which the power of a science fiction film stems from its technological dimension. In contrast to science fiction literature, science fiction cinema is doubly futural - futural both on the level of content and on the level of the cinematic form itself.

⁹ This emphasis on the 'ought' occurs only in Kant's practical or moral philosophy, not his theoretical project. But Kant sees the practical as the foundation for the theoretical, and Fichte takes this idea even further, merging Kant's theoretical and practical philosophy around the centrepiece of the practical philosophy, the 'ought.'

to morality than by wanting to derive it from examples' (Kant 1996b, 63). Kantian morality, like science fiction, concerns itself with the future because of what it takes to be the inadequacy of the present.

Hegel's thought emerged as such in direct response to the futural mode of Kantian and Fichtean philosophy. One might say that Hegel's entire project originates in his effort to show the philosophical problems inherent in this 'ought' and to make clear that this alternative future is not really futural at all but a hidden supplement of the present.¹⁰ Like Kantian morality, science fiction cinema appears in a futural mode, and this is why Hegel's thought - and especially his critique of Kant - can provide a unique path into this genre. Hegel allows us to unpack science fiction cinema in order reveal both its hidden insights and its hidden defects, just as he does with Kantian morality, because he shows us the illusoriness of its futural mode.

The futural mode - the form of the 'ought' - permits Kant to see the nature of the universal in a way that no philosopher prior to him had seen. With Kant, philosophy takes a great leap forward by recognising that the universal exists within subjectivity itself in the form of duty. As Hegel sees it, Kant views the universal (in the form of duty) not as an external constraint imposed on the subject but as the expression of the subject's own subjectivity. What appeared to prior thinkers to be outside the provenance of the subject - moral duty - becomes with Kant the subject's essence. Kant's futural thinking enables him to envision a world, which he calls the kingdom of ends, in which the subject would transcend its limitations. This image of the future as a possibility for the subject to realise provides the basis for locating the universal within subjectivity because it evacuates all external barriers to this universality. Futural thinking is the key to the Kantian revolution that Hegel celebrates.

¹⁰ This is a claim that Gillian Rose makes in *Hegel Contra Sociology*. According to Rose, 'the overall intention of Hegel's thought is to make a different ethical life possible by providing insight into the displacement of actuality in those dominant philosophies which are assimilated to and reinforce bourgeois law and bourgeois property relations' (Rose 1981, 208). What Rose calls the 'displacement of actuality' here is precisely the illusory futural mode in which Kant and Fichte articulate their moral philosophy.

But at the same time, the futural mode of Kant's thought represents its fundamental stumbling block as well. For Hegel, the idea of a future reconciliation between the moral law and the subject - the idea that a realisation of morality is something to be achieved, something that ought to be accomplished - disguises the reconciliation between the moral law and the subject that already exists. Kantian morality opposes itself to nature, which stains the subject and which it works to transcend in the future. But in the act of positing nature as its opposite, this morality fails to see that nature is necessary for the moral subject to realise itself and thus an integral part of morality. Like fundamentalists who fail to recognise that their call for a return to traditional life requires the contemporary decadence that their fundamentalism rails against or like the sports fans who fail to recognise that support for their favourite team requires the existence of a hated rival, Kant does not see morality's dependence on what is opposed to it. Through his reliance on nature as that which morality combats, Kant pretends to a disjunction with the actual that does not exist. The defect of the present that ought to be remedied is inextricable from the moral duty that would provide the remedy.

Where Kant perceives a limit that morality must struggle against, Hegel sees an implicit transcendence of that limit. As Hegel famously says in his discussion of Kant in the lesser *Logic*, 'No one knows, or even feels, that anything is a limit or defect, until he is at the same time above and beyond it' (Hegel 1975, 91-92). In the efforts of Kant and science fiction to see the moral limitations of the present state of things and thus to see the future, both instead see a distorted image of the present itself. Film, just like thought, cannot transcend its own time, cannot anticipate a future that ought (or ought not) to be. One cannot give expression to a possibility that transcends the historical and cultural point from which one enunciates this possibility.¹¹ What we are able to

¹¹ The idea that science fiction cinema opens us space for playing with possibilities is a popular way of thinking about the genre. This is how Barry Keith Grant defines it, claiming that 'in science fiction, narrative point of view expands to entertain rather than contain new possibilities' (Grant 1999, 18). In his analysis of *Blade Runner*, Scott Bukatman takes a similar tack as he celebrates the film's exploration of possibility. He claims, 'City films and urban science fictions like *Blade Runner* "make a place" in which to test the tensions, and play out the contradictions, of concentrated cities, spectacular

conceive, even if we only conceive of it as a possibility, is always already our possibility, not a possibility belonging to the future. By grasping this, we can see how the imagined alternative world reveals the hidden contours of present.

3. The Ideological Closure To Come

Though science fiction cinema does not authentically envision the future, it does reveal the ideological closure of the contemporary social order like no other film genre. Just as the form of the 'ought' allows Kant to locate universality within the subject, the futural dimension of science fiction cinema allows it to locate apparent sites of resistance within ideology and thereby to reveal the totalising structure of ideology. It is, in short, science fiction's pretence of futurity that permits it to expose the falsity of the predominant openings within the ideological field in a way that no other genre does. In science fiction cinema, we see the ideological nature of the supposed alternatives available to us. But this is possible only if we see through the futural mode of science fiction films. In other words, we must interpret science fiction film in the way that Hegel interprets the Kantian moral law: not as an ideal to be accomplished (or a negative dystopia to be avoided, as is the case in most science fiction cinema), but as a disguised version of a morality (or an ideological form) that we have already achieved.

Science fiction cinema most often envisions the future by showing the logical development of some marginal or resistant aspect of contemporary society. Rather than focusing on the prevailing form of ideological control (as, say, political thrillers often do), science fiction films explore new and emerging forms. In the films that genuinely explore the theoretical possibilities of the genre, we see the full flowering of what we experience today as outside of the ruling ideology. This allows science fiction cinema to give the lie to our attempts to situate ourselves beyond ideological control. With the aid of the

societies and the continuing struggle to exist in the bright dark spaces of the metropolis' (Bukatman 1997, 86).

science fiction film, we can grasp the full extent of our ideological situatedness by seeing the illusory quality of our purported resistance.

Perhaps the privileged site of resistance to ideology in modernity is the private life of the subject. One of the most popular targets in science fiction cinema is this idea of the private self as a refuge. Films such as *Fahrenheit 451* (François Truffaut, 1966) and *Logan's Run* (Michael Anderson, 1976) depict ideology controlling how individuals think. We see people investing themselves in brutal social practices because ideology prevents them from seeing the brutality as brutality. Other films go further to specify how this ideological control works. By showing the impossibility of distinguishing between human and replicant, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) shows the ideological nature of memory itself. The film reveals that the memories of Deckard (Harrison Ford) are not authentic but have been placed in him in order to deceive him into believing in his humanity. Similarly, *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1997) depicts the private fantasy of Murdoch (Rufus Sewell) - his image of a place he knew as a child called Shell Beach - as the key that sustains and furthers his immersion within ideology. The private retreat from ideology to which Deckard and Murdoch cling becomes in both films a dimension of ideological control and the key to its effectiveness. Their private freedom - their oasis of personality free from ideology - comes to signify the ultimate site of ideological manipulation.

During the late 1960s and 1970s in the United States, the peace movement was the principal site of resistance to the ruling ideology. While the culture at large became increasingly centred around spectacle and consumption, the peace movement provided an alternative space where subjects could opt out of capitalist competition and choose a lifestyle based on cooperation and living together communally. But despite its seeming radicality, this alternative remained ideological: the harmony that it privileges works to obscure antagonism and deliver subjects from the trauma of subjectivity just as much as capitalist ideology. This ideological function of the peace movement becomes evident in the 1978 remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Philip Kaufman), which depicts interstellar spores invading the earth and colonising

human hosts. This colonisation brings a harmonious bond among those colonised, but at the cost of their singularity. In the film, the communal ethic becomes a way of escaping antagonism and trauma, which is the function of ideology. Without taking the side of capitalist individualism, the film reveals the ideological underside of the apparent alternative to this individualism.

Over the last few decades, the peace movement and similar alternative lifestyles have lost their position as the chief form of resistance within contemporary capitalism. What has arisen in their place is less politically engaged idea of resistance organised around sustaining the health of the body against the dangers unleashed by modern industry. Resistance to contemporary capitalism now takes the form of eating natural foods, biking to work instead of driving, avoiding pharmaceuticals, and so on. Though this form of resistance seems less likely to disturb the foundation of capitalist society, it also seems less invasive than the peace movement. That is, if the natural food movement does not accomplish anything politically, at least it does not do any harm (and in fact keeps people healthier). But what *The Island* (Michael Bay, 2005) illustrates is that the ideal of the pure body actually serves the contemporary index of ideological control. In the isolated society depicted in this film, unknowing individuals keep their bodies pure in order to have their organs harvested for others living in the outside world. *The Island* shows how the ideology of the pure body transforms the body into the ultimate commodity. Even if no one is harvesting the organs of consumers of local organic food, the priority that the health of the body has in their thinking readies them for the scaling back of civil liberties done for the sake of bodily security.

Though science fiction cinema most often explores progressive modes of resistance to ideology (like flower power in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* or the natural food movement in *The Island*), it also targets conservative forms of resistance as well. In a film like *The Handmaid's Tale* (Volker Schlöndorff, 1990) we see how fundamentalism operates hand-in-hand with contemporary capitalist ideology. The film shows a future society in which environmental degradation has rendered almost all women infertile, thus enabling a fundamentalist coup that attacks the culture of consumption and erects a rigid

regime of traditional values. But as the films reveals, this fundamentalism operates hand-in-hand with the licentious activity that it opposes, and the society that it creates is simply a new form of contemporary consumer society rather than one that practices traditional values. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the absence of an alternative in the fundamentalist alternative becomes visible.

By illustrating the emptiness of every proffered alternative, science fiction cinema makes obvious the role that sites of resistance play in the functioning of ideology. By working to resist ideology through the apparent openings that it offers, we fall into the fundamental ideological trap - the idea that there is a place beyond ideology that we might access and occupy. Such a place remains thoroughly ideological because it necessarily appears beyond antagonism. It is only when we experience the closed nature of ideology - which is the insight to which science fiction cinema leads us - that we can break its hold over us by grasping the internal antagonism that ideology works to obscure. If we cannot escape ideology once and for all, we can struggle against it, but this struggle depends on recognising the way that ideology is at odds with itself.

Science fiction cinema can play a role in this project as long as we treat it in the same way that Hegel treats Kantian morality: through its seeming discontent with how things stand now - its demand that we heed its warning and change ourselves or our society - we can see an image thoroughly reconciled with the world from which it emerges. The discontent of science fiction cinema (and of Kantian morality) is imaginary. It pretends to reject a world to which it remains inextricably wedded. The key in approaching this genre lies in refusing to accept its initial premise - the very idea of an image of the future. In doing so, we can unlock what fantasies of the future have to tell us about our present ideological deadlock, which is exactly the use to which Hegel put Kantian morality.

4. The Danger of Paranoia

If we know how to approach science fiction properly, then, it would seem as if the genre's illusion of depicting a possible future is, at worst, innocuous, and, at

best, a way of proffering films that expose the prevailing ideological closure from within the mainstream. What this misses, however, is the chief defect shared by thought that focuses on a possible future. All images of the future - both Kant's and science fiction cinema's - necessarily succumb to paranoia, to positing an Other who prevents or authorises the realisation of desire. The paranoid subject confronts the non-existence of the big Other - the fact that no authority authorises the structure of the symbolic order, that this structure does not rest on a secure foundation - but refuses to accept the idea that the big Other itself remains constitutively incomplete and unauthorised.

For Lacan, the fundamental characteristic of the big Other is its self-authorising status: nothing outside the big Other guarantees or supports it. As he puts it in 'The Subversion of the Subject':

No authoritative statement has any other guarantee here than its very enunciation, since it would be pointless for the statement to seek it in another signifier, which could in no way appear outside that locus. I formulate this by saying that there is no metalanguage that can be spoken, or, more aphoristically, that there is no Other of the Other. (Lacan 2006, 688)

There is no authority that in itself is not also lacking. But the paranoid subject imagines just such an authority - an Other behind the big Other, an Other pulling the strings, like the spores in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* or Coahaagen, the ruler of Mars, in *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990). This is why paranoia necessarily involves conspiracy theory: the imagined Other of the Other is always the agent of the conspiracy that directs the functioning of the big Other. In the figure of the Other of the Other - a figure that inevitably appears in science fiction cinema as the source of ideological manipulation - the paranoid subject finds an authority not beset by lack, and this is why paranoia, at the same time that it haunts the subject, provides a measure of comfort as well.¹²

¹² The Other of the Other offers the paranoid subject a firm foundation, which is why Cyndy Hendershot claims that 'paranoia offers, whether individually or culturally, the relief afforded by control and meaning within a frightening world' (Hendershot 1999, 3).

The ideal of a non-lacking Other provides the key to the functioning of paranoia. Paranoia adopts an attitude of skeptical doubt toward ideology, but this doubt stops with the Other of the Other. Thus, because of its investment in paranoia as a mode of representation, science fiction cinema's ability to reveal the working of ideology reaches a limit: its distrust of ideology (of the big Other) does not extend to the Other of the Other, the hidden agent responsible for ideology. The problem with paranoia - and thus the problem with both Kantian morality and science fiction - is its faith in the non-lacking Other of the Other who authorises the structure of ideology.¹³ Faith in this figure - and its wholeness - acts as a barrier that blinds paranoid subjects (and spectators in science fiction films) to the truth of their own activity.

This blindness is evident in Kant's conception of morality as an ideal always yet to be accomplished. Kant's futural conception of morality inherently tends toward a belief in an Other of the Other who embodies and authorises this ideal. In Kant's case, this non-lacking Other of the Other is God, a figure without which Kant's moral system cannot function. As he puts it in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, 'it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God' (Kant 199b, 241). Ironically, one of the great achievements of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is its demolition of the various proofs for the existence of God in the Transcendental Dialectic. But at the end of this work, as Kant turns to a discussion of practical reason and the moral law, he reasserts the possibility of proving God's existence, albeit as only a moral, rather than a logical, certainty. Unlike most popular theologians, Kant does not derive the moral law from the existence of God - we should not avoid killing because God commands us not to kill - but proceeds in the opposite direction. For Kant, the bare fact of the moral law allows us to be certain - subjectively certain, not objectively so - about the existence of God. As he notes toward the end of the first *Critique*, 'As far as practical reason has the right to guide us, we shall not regard actions as obligatory because they are commands of God, but shall regard them as divine commands because we are

¹³ In much science fiction cinema, this non-lacking Other is often a corporation, the embodiment of a capitalist ethos and capitalist ideology. The corporation plays this role in *Soylent Green* (Richard Fleischer, 1973), *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), *RoboCop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987), and *Running Man* (Paul Michael Glaser, 1987), to name just a few.

intrinsically obligated to them' (Kant 1996c, 745-746). The Kantian conception of the moral law leads us to God.

God - or the non-lacking Other - plays a necessary role in Kantian morality due to this morality's orientation toward the future. If, with Kant, we posit the moral law as a duty to be accomplished rather than, with Hegel, as an accomplished fact, we must at the same time posit an entity that explains our failure to have already accomplished it and at the same time offers the possibility for accomplishing it. Without God, either we should have already accomplished our duty (because it was possible), or we would never be able to accomplish it (because it was impossible). God or some similar non-lacking Other allows us to sustain the moral law as an unaccomplished possibility. It is the reliance on the non-lacking Other that links Kantian morality with paranoia. God remains perfect while condemning humans - through the moral law - to perpetual failure.

Hegel's critique of Kantian morality focuses on just this barrier - and hence a Hegelian look at science fiction cinema can illuminate a parallel barrier in its ability to reveal the functioning of ideology. Hegel sees how Kant's version of morality strips from the subject any moral agency. The stringency of the Kantian moral imperative leaves the subject outside of moral action altogether. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel claims that, in Kant's moral system, 'Because the universal *best* ought to be carried out, nothing *good* is done' (Hegel 1977, 376). Moral perfection remains the province of God and thus unapproachable for human subjects. In this way, the paranoid structure lets the subject off the hook and allows the subject to avoid accomplishing a moral act. In his *Lectures on Natural Right and Political Science*, Hegel makes this clear: 'what this philosophy amounts to is merely a yearning for what is supposedly good. Beautiful souls ... have held fast to this standpoint. If, however, they go over to action, they enter the sphere of limitedness. They foresee this and therefore fear every contact, remain enclosed within themselves, and revere their inner infinitude' (Hegel 1995, 127). The paranoid dimension of Kantian morality allows the subject to avoid the responsibility that stems from acting. Moral perfection exists as an

ideal completely outside of the subject, leaving the ideal untainted and the subject uninvolved.

Science fiction films, because they are futural in the same way as Kant's moral philosophy, partake of this paranoia in the most explicit way. As with Kant, their paranoia lets the subject off the hook through the positing of a non-lacking Other of the Other. Though science fiction films do not often evince faith in Kant's kind of God, they nonetheless posit the structural equivalent of the Kantian God. This Other of the Other acts as the source of the subject's dissatisfaction, like Dr. Tyrrell in *Blade Runner*, the creator of the replicants. This figure allows the subject to see itself as unreconciled with itself. In *Blade Runner*, Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) can view Tyrrell as the source of his imperfection (because Tyrrell created him with a limited life span), and Batty approaches Tyrrell in the film seeking a cure for his imperfection. This image of Tyrrell is the paranoid element in the film because it allows Batty (and the spectator) to imagine a barrier that thwarts the subject's reconciliation with itself. For Hegel, the subject is always reconciled with itself, whether it realises this or not, and the task of philosophy is to make the subject aware of this. But futural thought - what we see in *Blade Runner*, for example - has its basis in a belief that the subject is not reconciled to the present, that it remains dissatisfied with the present and committed to altering it. Hence, it must posit a barrier to its reconciliation that lies outside of itself, an Other, which is depriving the subject of its full satisfaction. Science fiction films have a unique ability to expose ideology, but because they posit an Other as a barrier to desire, they necessarily view ideology as a manipulation perpetuated by this Other. Rather than see, as Hegel would, ideology as our own manipulation of ourselves perpetuated through a structure of the big Other, science fiction sees it as the paranoid does - as someone pulling the strings to manipulate us.

This paranoia is nowhere so evident as in Andy and Larry Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999), and it serves to undermine the film's depiction of ideological closure. According to *The Matrix*, machines, which have taken over the planet, disseminate ideology in order to sustain their hegemony over human beings and to continue to employ them as an energy source. Their deployment of

ideology works to keep humans content with life in cages, unwilling to revolt against the machines and their rule, and unaware of the actual desolate conditions in which they exist. While humans suffer as a result of this ideological control, the machines enjoy their rule of the earth. Hence, the film posits the machines as an Other consciously manipulating the workings of ideology and benefiting from it.

The machines, unlike humans, are not deceived and are not lacking. They exist behind the scenes, beyond the symbolic world that they have constructed for humans, and thus they remain free from the deception of the ideology that sustains this symbolic world. By positing an undeceived Other in this way, *The Matrix* actually offers viewers an assurance that someone remains in charge, that we are not on our own. At the same time, this schema exculpates the subject her/himself from any responsibility for ideology: the Other produces ideology, not the subject. Despite its depiction of ideology at work, the film's futural mode forces it to succumb to a paranoia that ends up apotheosising the Other and condemning the subject to acting only within the shadow of the Other. This recourse to paranoia, however, is not an accidental feature of *The Matrix*; it is implicit in the genre of science fiction, with its commitment to a futural mode. Though science fiction films offer us a radicality not found in other mainstream films, we must pay for this radicality with a dose of paranoia, which complicates the political valence of these films.

The inherent paranoia of science fiction cinema dramatically undermines the radicality of its critical attitude toward ideology. Through its recourse to paranoia, this cinema disguises the operations of ideology while revealing them. By retaining an Other of the Other, paranoia constructs an image of ideology without fissure. In other words, for the paranoid, ideology works smoothly - there is no hitch in its functioning - because the agent directing it is not subject to lack. This image of ideology hides the power that the subject has to confront ideology. The paranoid structure of *The Matrix* works in precisely this way: the film does depict a successful revolt against the agents, but the one who accomplishes this revolt is no ordinary subject. He is, according to the film, the 'One' - a being not subject to castration, a non-lacking being himself. Such a

being is necessary because the film envisions ideology as a successful operation directed by a non-lacking Other behind the scenes.

Paranoia fails to see that this Other behind the scenes cannot remain completely behind the scenes. That is to say, the Other is part of the game as well, just as much as the subject itself. The Other does not exist in a metalinguistic position, outside of the language game that it attempts to direct. Even those who disseminate ideology and benefit most from it are themselves the dupes of the very ideology that they disseminate. This is because no position exists outside ideology from which a subject can author an ideological deception: to disseminate ideology is at once to become the dupe of ideology as well. That is to say, even the American ruling class is not immune to the deceptions of American ideology; or even Stalin is not immune to the deceptions of Stalinism. But by granting the Other a position behind the scenes and outside of ideology, paranoia constructs an Other complete in itself, an Other who is actually immune to ideological deception.

As a result of its tendency toward paranoia, revolt in science fiction cinema is at once too difficult and too easy. It is too difficult because the Other of the Other it imagines does not lack and thus seems invulnerable to attack. For instance, the corporate executives in Norman Jewison's *Rollerball* (1975) manipulate their society from behind the scenes, which renders almost impossible any attack on them. Even Jonathan's (James Caan) defiance at the conclusion of the film - which gains the sympathy of thousands of spectators at a rollerball match - does not have a fundamentally disruptive effect on corporate power that we can see in the film itself. The aloof position of the Other of the Other paints far too pessimistic a picture of revolt, minimising its ability to actually have an impact on the Other.

But revolt is also too easy because science fiction film personifies the agent of our ideological manipulation in this figure of the Other of the Other. As a result, in the world of science fiction cinema it seems as if we can actually triumph over ideology once and for all. In Alex Proyas's *Dark City* (1997), for example, Murdoch can put ideological manipulation to rest by destroying the Strangers who control his world. After their defeat, the human inhabitants of

Murdoch's world can live in a world of their own making, not a world controlled by ideology or the big Other. Here, science fiction cinema paints too bright a picture, imagining a world that completely transcends ideology. Each time we want to celebrate the genre's radicality, we run up against the misleading politics of its inherent paranoia.

It is, of course, not a matter of being for or against science fiction cinema. The genre offers both the radical edge of mainstream cinema and the threat of expanding the paranoia of an already paranoid age. The problem is, however, that we cannot simply opt for science fiction cinema's critique of ideology while discarding or dismissing its paranoia. The two necessarily co-exist: the paranoia of science fiction cinema enables its critique of ideology, and both derive from the futurity that defines it. This, then, is the limit of science fiction cinema, just as it is the limit of Kantian morality. One must read both Kant and the science fiction film with Hegel in hand in order to benefit from their most radical insights and arm oneself against their most seductive traps.

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