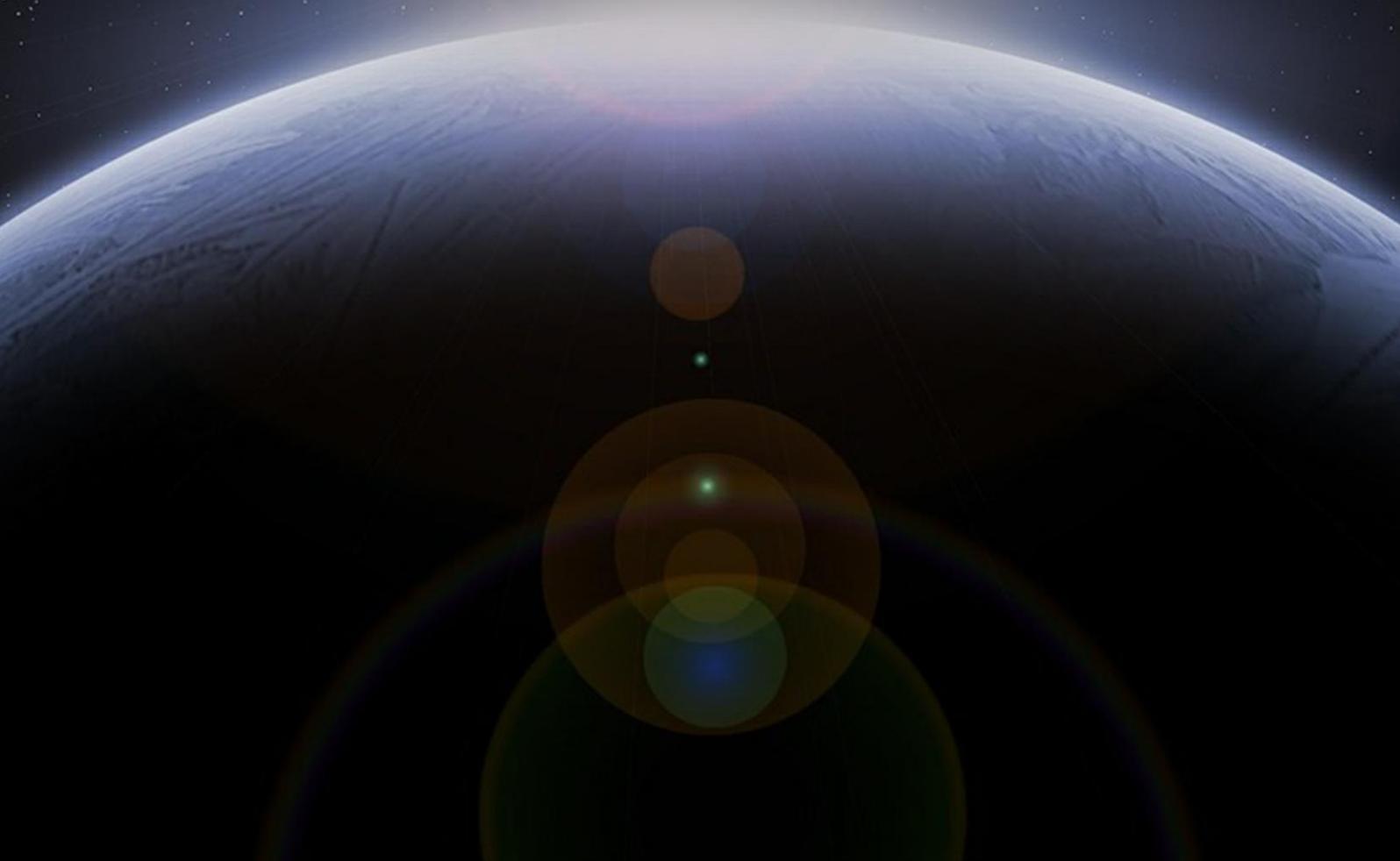


# VI INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON MYTH CRITICISM MYTH AND SCIENCE FICTION

theater | film | video games | series | comic

## Scientific Justification

by José Manuel Losada



A platitude: myth and science fiction are bad companions. Like all bold affirmations, it has its objective: to claim its space; likewise, as all bold statements, it should be nuanced.

Myth and science fiction seek to explain the world, to answer everlasting questions: the origin of life and cause of death. But explanations are not sufficient for mankind: one wants to make approving or condemning judgements. Myth as well as science fiction project contradictions in unprecedented circumstances with an aim to adhere or condemn. Given the projective capacity of our imagination, we put forward improbable scenarios that allow us to see in a new light the consequences of a future situation.

Similarly to myth, science fiction has incorporated in its thematic list the anxieties of our time. Famous novels and films of the genre have tackled contemporary apprehensions: a nuclear catastrophe of immeasurable consequences (*Godzilla*), the necessity of emigrate to spatial colonies (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*), or the fear of the excesses of a questionable use of science (*The Island*).

Here we find another converging point between myth and science fiction. The mythical stories come up with extreme situations and consequences of these excesses. From the beginning of the industrial revolution these extraordinary scenarios have been represented largely by science fiction. It seems as if the relentless progress of this genre threatened the existence of myth. This attempted usurpation runs in parallel with the exponential progression of the advances of empirical science.

That said, in light of science fiction, the violation of the limits is not characterized by its optimistic nature. Apart from a few promising productions, the horizon is filled with dystopias on the irreparable enslavement of humanity in the hands of machines. We are far from the dreams of positivism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the experimental method provided incredible hopes to empirical science.

In this respect, the first release of the Wachowski (*The Matrix*) turns out to be highly instructive. The machines have overcome and enslaved humans, reducing them to mere batteries whose conscience is continuously fed through Matrix, a virtual system implemented in the nervous system. This film, filled with mythical references (Zion, Morpheus, Neo, Niobe, Seraph, Persephone...), is an attempt to liberate humanity from the alienation metaphorized in the machines. Neo represents the two chronological extremes of myth. On the one hand, he is the man of the past (he searches the origin when humans were able to make their own decisions); on the other hand, he is the man of the future (he embodies an evolved “post-human” superman, who knows the truth on the Matrix system and derides it). If it wasn't for the lack of a supernatural transcendent dimension, *Matrix* would be an entirely mythical account.

The concurrent search for explanation and judgment on absolute questions do not allow us to confuse mythology and science fiction. It would be unwise, for example, to talk about mythological adventure in *Metropolis* (novel of T. von Harbou, film by F. Lang). The evocation of biblical myths (Moloch, Babel) do not convert the text or the film in mythological narratives. Myth and science fiction are not interchangeable. The same thing that links myth and science fiction (the desire to explain) is what distinguishes them. The

former resorts to transcendent aetiology, the latter to scientific aetiology. That is why they both need their own discipline of study with their own methodology and hermeneutics.

But let us continue to discuss similarities. Myth and science fiction experience substantial changes in the society of image; consider a distortion that affects both equally: the prominent role of the dramatic effect, occasionally parasite of the narration: the reader is absorbed by the wonders that lie before his eyes. Immediate consequence: the message of the myth is sidelined in favour of the dramatic effect.

This overwhelming impression has produced a considerable change in modern times with the invention of cinema. A film or an episode of a series, both mythical, tend to privilege the dramatic effect over the narration. The same occurs, with a variation, in science fiction. This genre projects the progressive domination of science as research moves on; even dystopias rivet, by contrast, this same scientific domination. This is what happens in the first science fiction texts: the *Icaromenippus* by Lucian presents a daring philosopher who, helped by two wings, climbs Mount Olympus and the moon, from which he observes Asia and Europe, with such good visibility that he can even distinguish what happens inside the houses. The mythological and satirical passages do not affect the nature of this story, where more importance is conferred to the dramatic effect than to the narrative.

This distortion of the narrative effects becomes more apparent in the passage from the written to the cinematographic medium. *A Trip to the Moon* by Méliès has been an unprecedented success. So much so that the director came up with different sequels, more or less freely inspired by other works of Jules Verne. Méliès did not hesitate to extend the spectacular shots: thus, the sequence in *Trip to the Moon* where the star gets bigger as the spaceship approaches, is substituted in *The Impossible Voyage* by another one in which the spaceship travels until it penetrates the sun. The result is a series of ridiculous situations which relegate the intricacies of science to a secondary plane. The power that science fiction had come to celebrate is replaced by the picturesque celebrations of the explorers' return.

Science fiction presents the dramatic effects of science in a credible way. This credibility is based on a relationship of analogy that makes the reader or spectator incline to believe the screenings of what he knows or thinks he knows: the most rational aspects of the known world act as bait and enticement for the acceptance of the less rational of the unknown. The skill of the narrator comes into play; his skilful manipulation helps to achieve the mimetic effect of literature.

Therein lies another element in which, once again, science fiction and myth converge and come together: mimesis. Literature is the art of mimesis. Superman turns in the opposite direction to the earth's rotation in order to reverse time; Satan descends to Tartarus in search of demons that will support his rebellion; two episodes drawn from science fiction and mythological stories respectively, incredible or credible according to a variety of factors (contextual setting of the narrative, aptitudes of the sender, dispositions of the receiver...). That said, just as myth throws in the extraordinary event without explaining it, science fiction puts great interest in providing it with disquisitions and scientific or para-scientific explanations; the former grants part of its truth to the latter, so that the combination acquires

a logical similarity that demands our credibility. None of this occurs in myth, where fiduciary, authoritative and numinous factors play the role that modern times attribute to science.

The place occupied by science in the development of the arguments of the genre deserves an analysis. Occasionally an event or discovery trigger the plot: Pym discovers the chemical particles that allow changes of size and invents a helmet capable of controlling the ants (*Ant-Man*); in others, a scientific error or a collateral damage are at the origin of the plot: as a consequence of an excessive exposure to gamma rays, Banner suffers a mutation that transforms him into a furious beast (*The Incredible Hulk*, 2008). Together with these classic arguments of para-science in the plot of the genre are other more sophisticated ones. Thus, through the recourse of the theory of the multiverse, one confers the existence of hypothetical parallel or alternative universes which, considered as a whole, include what exists. The origin of Marvel Universe or Universe DC is no different, whose adventures appear endowed with a continuity that give coherence to all the arguments. When isolated universes interpenetrate, the routine is disrupted and tension is created. Aliens from other universes emerge in ours, as in *Pacific Rim*, where the *kaijus* cross an interdimensional gate and arise through a breach in the bottom of the Pacific Ocean to destroy the human race.

We were missing magic. Exiled for major reasons from the world of experimental science, it slips into science fiction. It is not surprising: both share a similar tendency for acceleration and extrapolation. Let us remember that magic is a shortcut: when the established order in the subject acquires signs of unbearable slowness, myth (and fantasy) make use of magic: nothing as simple as to resort to an object (a wand, a ring or fire) to glimpse the past or the future, convert the stones into gold or dominate the mind of the opponent. Magic is to the mythical story what para-science is to fiction: a credible shortcut to save time or to achieve impossible goals through the usual course of our world.

Where does myth start and where does it end? How far does science fiction go? What significance does the crossing between both narratives have? As always, what is crucial and indisputable is to analyse the kind of transcendence in each case, the utmost criterion to identify and distinguish myth and science fiction.

The participants of the conference will consider these reflections and may consider appropriate to add any further considerations with the aim of studying the relationship between myth and science fiction. In this way, we will all continue to provide some keys to interpreting modernity and postmodernity, as well as culture and reflections of our present society.