Reifying the Sacred: A study of postmodern spirituality and futurism in science-fiction narratives

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Abstract

Contemporary science fiction (SF) narratives like Raised by Wolves, Devs, and See recontextualize spiritual discourses by embedding traditional religious motifs within futuristic, secular frameworks. These narratives explore spirituality through symbolic messianic figures, prophecy, and myth, blending scientific epistemology with metaphysical aspirations. Postmodern SF, influenced by capitalist structures, reimagines the sacred, creating a "hyperreal spirituality" where spirituality is commodified and safely detached from traditional religious practices. This simulated form of the sacred resonates with postmodern audiences by offering a vicarious, secularized engagement with existential themes. Through these stories, SF engages with spirituality without disrupting capitalist ideologies, positioning sacred ideas as consumable, speculative experiences rather than transformative encounters, reflecting a broader cultural shift towards secularized and commodified spirituality.

Keywords: Contemporary Science Fiction, Spirituality, Hyperreality, Postmodernism, Capitalism, Sacred, Messianic Figures, Prophecy

Introduction

Contemporary Science Fiction (SF) narratives, such as Raised by Wolves, Devs, See, etc. revisit and re-contextualise spiritual discourses by embedding traditional spiritual and religious motifs within futuristic narratives. They offer complex representations of the sacred engaging with timeless mystical ideas and the capitalist-inflected lens of the postmodern era. This intersection hints a broader cultural shift in how spirituality and religion are perceived, and thereby reinterpreted, within the dominant ideological frameworks enabling capitalist structures to assimilate contradictory elements without disrupting their hegemonic order. Employing various epistemological tools, such as symbolic messianic figures, prophecy, and mythologisation, etc. narratives of postmodern and futuristic SF simultaneously reify and 'hyperreal-ise' the conceptualisation of a sacred, one that oscillates between spiritual nostalgia and techno-cultural futurism.

This paper attempts to explore the postmodern SF tendency to deploy spirituality as a culturally modified reassertion of the sacred, suited to the experience of the postmodern subject through its various narratives, especially the visual ones. The paper argues that SF's engagement with such spiritual tropes offers a form of a controlled variant of mysticism within a capitalist framework - blending scientific epistemology with metaphysical aspirations - manifesting ultimately as a 'hyperreal spirituality'.

For Postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard, the overwhelming presence of media in the postmodern experience, along with the utterly saturated dominance of signs, the line between reality and non-reality that once clearly existed has now dissolved. He gives it the name "hyperreal" which is defined as something that blurs the line between the real and its various representations, resulting in images and experiences that are "more real than real" (Baudrillard 81). He explains, "simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (1). Considering SF under the purview of the Baudrillardian conception of hyperreality highlights how the sacred is abstracted, amplified and re-imagined to fit a secular and capitalist context. Thus, as far as a postmodern idea of spirituality is concerned, the boundary between an "authentic" religious position (as might be seen in traditional sacred practices) and the "simulated" versions that populate the media productions of popular culture could be said to have effectively collapsed. Postmodern spirituality becomes a creative synthesis of premodern truths

and modern values, transcending itself. Such synthesis can be assessed through the creative visions of SF, whereby the sacred is abstracted, and then reshaped for a secular and postmodern audience that is already used to consumption within the hyperreal space. Postmodern spirituality thus moves towards a simulated form, divorced from its original metaphysical roots to a degree that it is uncertain whether the reproduction is a recreation of the sacred or obscuring of the absence of it. As Baudrillard quotes King Solomon's Ecclesiastes: "the simulacrum is never what hides the truth—it is truth that hides the fact that there is none" (1). SF narratives thereby present a spirituality that is meticulously coded through secular epistemology and often only serves ideological ends. In that, they invoke a form of sacred that is both accessible to the contemporary postmodern subject and removed from its traditional metaphysical dimensions.

This hyperreal spirituality appeals to the postmodern subject's sensibility by providing a safe and distanced engagement with the sacred. It offers comfort without requiring any rigorous form of belief. The religious symbols, messianic figures, and prophecies presented in contemporary SF narratives fulfil a buried, subconscious desire for the sacred but do so in a way that keeps the experience vicarious and epistemologically secularised. Moreover, Carl Jung's ideas on mysticism, especially his notion of the collective unconscious, offer insight into why such narratives resonate en-mass. For Jung, mystical transcendence precedes organised religion. It signifies a deep psychic connection to archetypal images that inform the collective human subconscious. Jung says that, "the existence of the collective unconscious means that individual consciousness is anything but a *tabula rasa* and is not immune to predetermining influences" (par. 230). This psychological dimension aligns with postmodern SF narratives that appeal to individual and subjective encounters of the sacred. An event that bypasses institutional religious forms and instead presents a universalised spirituality.

For instance, Aaron Guzikowski and Ridley Scott's *Raised by Wolves*, unfolds on Kepler-22b, a distant planet where two androids raise a group of human children to establish an atheist human colony. They escape Earth after a cataclysmic war, between the 'Mithraic' which is a group of religious sun-worshipping people, and the atheists. The androids are programmed by atheist scientists, a group which aims to create a new society which is free from religious prejudices and conflicts, and in it instil rationality and secular human values. The central conflict between the couple of artificial intelligences, namely Mother and Father, as well as a faction of surviving humans is along the religious and atheistic lines even on the distant planet. This conundrum also reconfigures the creation myth by positioning A.I. as the entities responsible for humanity's ultimate survival and its salvation in a post-apocalyptic world where Earth remains inhabitable. Mother is a reprogrammed 'necromancer' - a powerful killing machine capable of immense destruction, but her role begins as that of a caregiver and a divine protector. Her interactions with the children - especially Campion who is the sole survivor of her initial group - functions as a mediator of the hyperreal sacred. The introduction of ancient symbols, visions and prophecies, as

well as Mother's capacity to give birth to a mysterious serpentine creature, imbues the story with mythological undertones that challenge the boundaries between technology, faith and the sacred. *Raised by Wolves*, through the viability of artificial parenthood, ultimately raises the fundamental question about human desire for spiritual connection and belonging. As Mother, Father, and the Mithraic characters navigate the harsh landscape of Kepler-22b, the narrative critically explores the cyclical nature of conflict, the allure of belief, the limitations of religious fervour and atheistic rationality in shaping a future society.

Raised by Wolves exemplifies postmodern SF's ability to reconstruct traditional spiritual themes within secular frameworks. As Baudrillard says, the postmodern era increasingly relies on simulations that offer the "real from its artificial resurrection" (Baudrillard 6). The androids simulate a quasi-spiritual role but their sacred authority is derived from technology rather than mysticism. Furthermore, an influence of capitalism is reflected in the commodification of life and creation as managed by advanced technologies, turning the sacred act of creation into a controlled and replicable process. Questions about creation, salvation and divine purpose remain tightly bound within a capitalist framework that demands resolution in terms of innovation and a libertarian or secular view of human progress. This teleological approach sharply contrasts with any traditional views of religion emphasising mystery or transcendence. Capitalistic influence is also visible in the selective nature of spirituality allowed to manifest within such SF narratives. Spirituality is presented often as secondary to scientific or technological discourse that drives the narrative. Such a restricted nature hints at a capitalist desire to allow spirituality only insofar it doesn't disrupt the materialist logic of production and consumption. In this sense, SF narratives create a hyperreal spirituality that is simulacra deprived of its transformative or revolutionary potential. This reification of the sacred within SF narratives requires a range of tropes that resonate with traditional spiritual narratives, yet at the same time reconfigured for a postmodern audience.

Devs, created by Alex Garland, follows the story of a software engineer Lily Chan, at a cutting-edge tech company called Amaya. Devs is an exclusive project shrouded in secrecy and it operates under the guidance of Amaya's founder Forest and its senior quantum physicist Katie. The narrative unfolds with Lily Chan being sent into a rabbit-hole, searching for answers about her boyfriend Sergei's death one day after he started working at the secretive Devs project. The Devs division is later revealed to be a highly sophisticated and advanced quantum-computing project which is able to predict events with absolute precision, based on scientific principles of determinism. This quantum computer being able to visualise both the past and the future, evokes religious and metaphysical questions, as it becomes a modern oracle that blurs the boundaries of technological innovation and divine omniscience. Forest, the founder of Amaya, who is driven by the loss of his wife and daughter, uses the Devs' quantum technology to reunite with his deceased daughter within the quantum realm, making the narrative a blend of scientific ambition and complete spiritual yearning. Through the philosophical debate over free will and determinism, the

universe of *Devs* shows human actions as predetermined - following the strict rules of cause and effect. Forest's assertion, "The universe is deterministic, and we have cracked it," encapsulates this belief in the inevitability of any and all events taking place in the universe. The physical space of the Devs facility also evokes a sense of the sacred, as it is designed with golden luminous interiors and a mysterious temple-like aesthetic. This space converges technology with metaphysical and religious overtones, symbolically positioning the quantum computer as an object of spiritual reverence. Through the ritualistic aspects surrounding it, such as secrecy, a divine reverence for the machine and the prophetic nature of the Devs technology, Garland's narrative situates *Devs* within the broader discourse reifying spirituality for a postmodern subject.

Devs employs a technologically induced prophecy that mimics religious visions presenting the future as preordained and knowable by a higher being, all the while questioning an individual's ability to know or alter it. This plays into a postmodern sense of fragmented temporality, where prophecy becomes less about divine revelation and more about algorithmic determinism, resulting in a displaced and reformed, or effectively modernised, spirituality. The scientific positivism constructs a secularised notion of prophecy, where spiritual awe is transferred from the religious context to a technological and scientific advancement. This shift exemplifies how postmodern SF utilises scientific discourse to produce a simulated version of the sacred, generating awe and existential questioning through secular, positivist frameworks rather than theological ones.

Raised by Wolves also employs prophecy as a narrative device, primarily with the android Mother who experiences visions and premonitions that influence her decisions. These visions in-fact stem from her programming which has been tampered-with and altered by humans, rather than a supernatural force. This blurring of religious prophecy and technological programming further exemplifies the hyperreal spirituality seen in postmodern SF. Such prophecies don't originate from divine revelation but from artificial codes, which the narrative, the characters and the audience treat with reverence otherwise reserved for the sacred. This inversion also resonate Raymond Williams's notion of capitalist ideology's ability to assimilate and neutralise contradictory elements. In these and more SF narratives, the traditionally divine role of prophecy is re-contextualised within a techno-scientific framework without disrupting the secular and capitalist basis.

Other prominent tropes in the reification of the sacred within SF are that of a messiah figure and the rebellious other, clearly found in the tv show *See*, as well as these narratives. In *See*, the futuristic human society has regressed to a pre-modern state after a virus renders all humans blind. Vision is then a rare and mystical trait. It assumes the status of ancient sacred knowledge and individuals who possess it are seen as prophets or messianic figures. The character of Jerlamarel is one of those few who possess the ability to see and he becomes a quasi-religious leader with followers who regard him as divinely gifted. Thus, vision in *See* functions quite like a simulacrum of spiritual insight which symbolically borders on the sacred within the narrative's epistemological framework. The post-apocalyptic setting of

See also creates a unique context for critically observing the contours of spiritual reverence and ideological power. Especially since they coexist in a world devoid of contemporary technology, a feature starkly different from most contemporary SF narratives. While vision is portrayed as spiritual authority, the narrative draws careful but apparent parallels with the power structures of a society rebuilding under a capitalist framework. This shift from technological advancement to atavistic reverence for natural, or even supernatural, abilities mirror a capitalist recycling of traditional spiritual tropes within a commercialised postmodern narrative. As Williams's theory of dominant ideology referred to before, even oppositional elements (here, reverence for primal traits rather than technological prowess) can be assimilated into the cultural hegemony without disrupting the underlying capitalist order. The trope of the rebellious other symbolises spiritual transcendence, or enlightenment through opposition, to the dominant ideological order. Carl Jung writes that, "[A]gainst the polymorphism of the primitive's instinctual nature, there stands the regulating principle of individuation. Multiplicity and inner division are opposed by an integrative unity whose power is as great as that of the instincts. Together they form a pair of opposites necessary for self-regulation, often spoken of as nature and spirit" (par. 96). In *Devs*, characters who question the determinism implied by quantum computing become conduits for a spiritual critique of technological hegemony. This rebellion, however, lacks true autonomy as the capitalist framework ultimately constrains it within itself. The rebellion, then, serves only as a narrative device to explore spiritual ideas, but its impact is limited within a hyperreal and controlled context. In *See*, vision also invokes the Jungian archetype of the seer or prophet, reflecting Jung's notion of archetypal symbols that recur across different cultures and eras. This connection to universal symbols provides a form of spiritual continuity, albeit one detached from organised religion and re-contextualised within a postmodern narrative, quite in the same way as *Raised by Wolves* and *Devs* do. The treatment of vision as sacred knowledge also aligns with Baudrillard's hyperreality, as the very idea of sight becomes an elevated, almost mythical quality.

These tropes collectively create a postmodern sacred - a reassertion of spiritual ideas in forms that are historically, traditionally and ideologically neutered. Such representations do offer a sort of a nostalgic appeal by recalling past spiritual certainties. But they ultimately reposition these certainties within a secularised framework. Across the narratives referred to here, i.e. *Raised by Wolves*, *Devs*, and *See*, and most contemporary SF narratives, is a common theme of postmodern spirituality. Each story mythologises aspects of the human experience that have a traditional association with the ideas of a sacred, and thereby reconfigure those ideas or concepts as hyperreal elements suited to the sensibilities of postmodern subjects.

There is also a sense of nostalgia which manifests through a utopian separation, which helps situate the sacred in a distant or alternate setting. This allows the audience a space whereby to engage with said ideas in a detached and hypothetical way, away from their own spaces of faith or belief. For instance, *Raised by Wolves* presents a spiritual conflict between atheists and believers, but on a distant alien

planet. This creates a spatial and an ideological distance which helps reifying its central spiritual discourse. *Devs* places its own variant of sacred questions within a high-tech and advanced world of quantum computing where determinism and free will are reified through algorithms. Lastly, *See* situates the sacred within a post-apocalyptic world where traditional religious structures are displaced and mythic traits are reimagined through organic faculties prevalent in the human species. Each setting allows for a hyperreal engagement with the sacred, treating spirituality as a speculative curiosity, which could appeal to a postmodern sensibility without requiring belief or direct relevance to the viewer's own life.

These narratives' temporal and spatial displacement reflects a capitalist strategy of controlled spirituality, offering audiences a safe, hyperreal form of engagement with the sacred that is consumable, entertaining, and ideologically contained. By positioning the sacred within distant futures, alien landscapes, or alternate realities, these SF stories keep spirituality at an accessible remove, allowing for exploration of existential themes without the disruptive power traditionally associated with religious experience. This approach reflects a postmodern need to mythologize spirituality in ways that suit capitalist frameworks, creating a sacred simulacrum that is appealing but ultimately stripped of its transformative potential.

In exploring these narratives, we see a pattern of postmodern SF constructing a hyperreal, nostalgic spirituality that appeals to a secularized, postmodern audience. By reframing traditional sacred themes - prophecy, vision, determinism - within scientifically mediated or dystopian frameworks, SF narratives reify the sacred as a speculative, consumable experience. Each narrative reflects the capitalist influence that commodifies the sacred, filtering it through secular ideologies and presenting it as a safe, consumable spectacle rather than a genuine existential encounter.

These narratives' hyperreal spirituality ultimately creates a paradox, offering audiences the comfort of engaging with sacred ideas while keeping these ideas at an accessible, distanced remove. In doing so, *Raised by Wolves*, *Devs*, and *See* exemplify the capitalist strategy of cultural containment described by Raymond Williams, where even potentially oppositional elements are assimilated into the hegemonic order without challenging its foundation. This reflects a broader trend in postmodern SF, where the sacred is no longer a transformative encounter with the divine but a cultural spectacle - a controlled reimagining of the spiritual that serves the ideological needs of a postmodern, capitalist society. By situating the sacred within a distant future, or a parallel reality, SF narratives disconnect the audience and the spiritual discourse. This separation creates a safe space for exploring spirituality in hypothetical terms, framing it as a speculative, almost anthropological curiosity rather than an immediate existential concern. This spatial and temporal displacement enables the audience to engage with spiritual ideas without confronting their implications in their own lived experience, creating a comfortably detached engagement with the sacred.

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