The Apocalypse is Always Now: Collapsing Worlds and Aesthetic Intervention in French Science Fiction

By

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Abstract

This dissertation participates in an emerging and exciting discourse on French science fiction. Owing to the well-established relationship between science and science fiction, coupled with our rapidly-increasing reliance on science and technology as the filter through which we think to comprehend the world and our place in it, the excavation of narratives that reflect and participate in that crucial relationship is more important than ever. In this dissertation I analyze three primary science fiction texts across three distinct visual media – Claire Denis' 2018 film *High Life*, Alejandro Jodorowsky and Mœbius' 1980s bande dessinée *L'Incal*, and the recent streaming television series *Missions* – each of which I read as an aesthetic and narrative representation of a world in collapse. *Collapse* is a term I use inclusively, to encompass collapses that are external – ecological, economic, political – as well as those that are internal – psychological, emotional, intellectual, corporeal, and spiritual. Despite the (hazy) distinction between outer and inner collapse, I formulate these collapses across narratives as interrelated, where exterior collapse results from, but also perpetuates that which is interior. Ultimately, in my admittedly, but rightfully, pessimistic reading of these texts, collapse comes to be understood as a cyclical process that is perpetually in the works, and which we, as inferred by these science fictions, can never escape. Throughout this study I propose that the science fictions at issue here, and others like them, function as key aesthetic interventions, providing us with accessible platforms from which to confront and to counter the many crises of the contemporary moment. In this aesthetic capacity, I assert that science fiction can help us to grasp the vast complexities of the rapidly shifting paradigms that define reality and that determine just how civilizations function.

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Introduction

As it was in the beginning, so it is today:
all these dystopias of the future are sermons
dedicated to changing the ways of a society
before it proves too late – tales of *unprogress*
that have always had their starting point
in the perceived weaknesses, failures,
and disorders in contemporary society.
- I.F. Clark[1]

All hope abandon, ye who enter here.
- Dante, *The Divine Comedy*

This dissertation is about the end of the world. Or, it would truly be more accurate to say that it's about *ends of worlds* rather than *the end of the world*, per se. The tone throughout my analyses in the following chapters is, rightly, given the subject matter, pessimistic and skeptical. If you haven't got the stomach for an annihilating journey into the black hole of oblivion that awaits us at the tail end of a concentrationary society – Chapter 1 on Claire Denis' 2018 science fiction film *High Life* – an esoteric, futuristic acid trip to another spiritual plane on a quest to conquer the Darkness that threatens to engulf all of existence – Chapter 2 on *L'Incal*, the 1980s comic series by Alejandro Jodorowsky and Mœbius – or the logic- and reason-contorting depths of the televisual representation of a conspiracy theory that claims human civilization came from Mars millions of years ago – Chapter 3 on the three-season streaming television series *Missions* (in which I even go so far as to cite Tucker Carlson, speaking of reason-contorting depths) – then maybe this isn't the dissertation for you. I'm particularly drawn to this set of science fiction narratives because they share a certain kind of aesthetic, one that is unique to the genre. The

[1] Emile Souvestre, *The World as it Shall Be*, trans. Margaret Clarke (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), xxiv.

look and feel of the neo-feudal, technocratic future space dystopia and the post-apocalyptic environmental annihilation landscape are of particular appeal to my cynical, late-capitalist, Anthropocene sensibilities. Perhaps that's because such an aesthetic resonates so forcefully with the present moment, rife as it is with the anxieties and fears brought on by the daily onslaught of, stated plainly, *bad news* – from headlines that forebodingly announce the decline of democracies and the resurgence of oppressive totalitarianism, to the unchecked rise in economic inequality and despair, to the dire warnings that come to us with increasingly urgent frequency of an impending but non-specific tectonic change in the global social order, to ecological catastrophes and biosphere collapse in all corners of the globe, and everything in between. It does so often seem as though anything bad that *can* happen *is* happening, and all of it at the very same time. From that perspective, what one of the main characters in *High Life* says in response to his own oppressive circumstances resonates strongly: "Sometimes I just can't stand it,"[2] he laments – an apt refrain in the context of the vast complexities of life in the twenty-first century, the seeming brutality of which can, at times, get a little hard to handle. Be it caused by ecological collapse or the final failure of the neoliberal democratic ideal, some kind of apocalypse is now always just around the bend, if not already underway. Science fiction seems to be attempting to reckon with these new realities that humanity faces, not by ignoring the contradictions and hypocrisies of the current moment in the form of mere entertainment and distraction, but by embracing them and speculating on a future that is based on the existential threats of the present. Which is to say that science fiction embraces and explores the meaninglessness and skepticism of what is now a postmodern era shaped by the failed promises (or, at least, *perceived* failures) of the past and the dissolution of which those failures are the result. In this embrace of the *meaningless*, I attempt to

[2] *High Life*, directed by Claire Denis (2018; Andrew Lauren Productions), Amazon streaming.

suggest in this dissertation, science fiction paradoxically seeks to create a *meaningful* aesthetic, one that has the potential to perform a vital role, to intervene in the collapses that are happening all around us, every day.

The texts that are the primary focus of the chapters that follow this introduction are studied – with what is admittedly a rather pessimistic tone – as aesthetic representations of the zeitgeist of a world in collapse, the very world we live in, the early twenty-first century, late-capitalist Anthropocene. When I use the word "collapse" throughout this work, I do so inclusively, referring to the end of both interior and exterior worlds, collapses that are both real and merely perceived, ends of worlds that are at once material and also imaginary – the end of belief systems, of economies, of civilizations, and of ways of being in the material universe – apocalypses for the human as much as for the nonhuman. Apocalyptic collapse, in some form or another, is ultimately the subject of each of the three aforementioned narratives that comprise the primary texts taken up in this work. The aesthetic result of responding in the form of visual representation to the processes of collapse and our collective responses to those processes – as, in my analysis, the narratives at issue here do – is necessarily fraught with precisely those characteristics that I argue permeate the aforementioned zeitgeist. In my reading of these texts each of them is infused with those traits – anxiety, oppression, paranoia, confusion, apathy at times paradoxically juxtaposed against a spirit of rebellion, a turn away from science and logic toward pseudoscientific oppositions to long-held orthodoxies, away from status quo religious systems of belief toward esoteric mysticisms and consciousness-expansion rituals mined from the ancient past, and an increasing preference for the mind-numbing ecstasy of fantastical techno-escapism over the anchor of tangible material reality. All the while those shared

characteristics float over a general subtext that is an explicit indictment of extractive, colonial capitalism.

Each of the narratives in my study attempts to aesthetically and narratively confront the results of the world in collapse through dystopian, speculative science fictions across three media – cinema (*High Life*), bande dessinée (*L'Incal*), and streaming television (*Missions*). Despite these differences and the differing formal restrictions and allowances of their respective media, they all exhibit numerous commonalities in terms of theme, content, and, ultimately, aesthetic intervention. There can be no doubt that principal amongst those shared characteristics mentioned above is the fact that each of these narratives is sending a message to its audience in the form of an explicit warning: *Humanity is going to destroy itself if we don't change the way that we interact with the world*. And although the authors of these narratives are courageous enough to proffer such a portentous message, ultimately not one of them goes so far as to pretend to offer any answer nor to propose any definitive solution to the problems they wish us to confront nor to the questions they provoke us to ask. These texts present narrative explorations of the many complex ontological and epistemological as well as moral and ethical paradoxes inherent in any speculation on the future of humanity.

That future, which is indivisibly united with the future of the planet, is at the forefront of public discourse these days. And science fiction plays an increasingly visible and significant role in the formation of that discourse, which has itself begun to sound a lot like science fiction. Indeed, not so long ago science fiction, philosophy, and religion were perhaps the only appropriate realms for popular speculation on what are truly unknowable issues – the future of the world, the nature of existence, and the possibility that reality may not be what it appears to be. Science fiction narratives have often taken up the task of representing the many paradoxes

that speculation on such existential *unknowables* produces as we seek to know that which cannot be known and to search for answers to questions that perhaps cannot truly be answered. But the realm for such speculation seems these days to have expanded beyond the science fiction narrative – the future of the planet Earth and thus of humanity as well as the nature of reality, givens that have always been up for debate in science fiction, are now also up for debate in a broader real world, non-fiction context, influenced, without doubt, by the speculative futures of science fiction.

As human awareness of the detrimental effects our activities have on the environment of the living celestial body that sustains us increases, we are being forced, individually and collectively, to open up broad, profound inquiries into the nature of our relationship with the world. Defining this relationship necessitates a confrontation with rigid paradigms of existence and with ossified models of reality that have been in place since at least the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and that are fundamental to our basic concept of what it means to exist in the universe and to be human relative to all other known forms of existence – the sentient in contrast to the non-sentient, the animate versus the inanimate, the human over the nonhuman, fiction differentiated from non-fiction. We must now confront rapidly shifting paradigms that are reshaping the contours of knowledge and being by asking ourselves fundamental ontological and epistemological questions: What precisely is *being*? What does it mean to *exist*? What is *reality*? How and why have we constructed and categorized these concepts? And perhaps most importantly: how can we know for sure?

To ask these questions, to even approach asking these questions, is to destabilize humanity's assumed superiority in an existential hierarchy that we ourselves created, which assures us that we are, collectively and individually, the masters of the universe – from the

cosmic *macro*verse all the way down to the quantum realm of the *micro*verse. But it's not easy to live in such a destabilized world. A great deal of anxiety is produced when the permanence of humanity's existence is called into question and when the moral consequences of our actions – past, present, and future – are openly scrutinized, as I argue they are in each of the narratives studied in this work. While articles in the news, pronouncements by politicians and pundits, and interviews with popular cultural figures may bring us "facts" about events and discoveries, present us with informed (and no shortage of *uninformed*) opinions on the possibility of a not-so-distant future rupture in human existence, and sow the seeds of existential dread, they do not provide us with a platform for asking crucial existential and philosophical questions nor for imagining scenarios where those questions may play themselves out and where we may speculate on future outcomes. In order to explore such fundamental, necessary philosophical questions and to seek answers to those questions, we must, as the billionaire, space-faring industrialist Elon Musk (more on this guy a bit further along in this introduction) once declared, aspire to "do the things that expand the scope and scale of consciousness, [so that] we are better able to understand what questions to ask."[3] So how and where do we ask those questions? How do we go about doing the work of deconstructing and of demythologizing the outmoded paradigms of knowledge and of being that still dominate the now all-too-narrow *scope and scale of our consciousness*? How do we begin to confront this potential, perhaps even immanent, rupture in the assumed permanence of the world and of human existence in that world? My assertion is that the dystopian science fiction narrative is one of those methods of confrontation, providing us with a platform for conscious (and conscience) experimentation.

[3] Catherine Clifford, "Why a science fiction writer is Elon Musk's 'favorite philosopher'," *CNBC*, July 23, 2019, https://www.cnbc.com/2019/07/23/why-hitchhikers-guide-author-is-elon-musks-favorite-philosopher.html.

The texts in this corpus each take part in a broader philosophical mission that employs speculation, displacement, and metaphor in order to bring the spectator into the kind of complex ontological, epistemological, moral, and ethical investigations that question the dominant cultural acceptance of the inflexible, progressively obsolete and even harmful anthropocentric, binary ontological modalities under which the whole of human society operates. This complex array of philosophical inquiries seeks to address the existential crises with which humanity has continuously and with ever-increasing severity been confronted since the rise of industrialization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But to *philosophize* is to do very hard, very important work. The American philosopher Wilfrid Sellars once explained the importance of doing this work:

> The ideal aim of philosophizing is to become reflectively at home in the full complexity of the multi-dimensional conceptual system in terms of which we suffer, think, and act. I say 'reflectively,' because there is a sense in which, by the sheer fact of leading an unexamined, but conventionally satisfying life, we are at home in this complexity. It is not until we have eaten the apple with which the serpent philosopher tempts us, that we begin to stumble on the familiar and to feel that haunting sense of alienation which is treasured by each new generation as its unique possession. This alienation, this gap between oneself and one's world, can only be resolved by eating the apple to the core; for after the first bite there is no return to innocence. There are many anodynes, but only one cure. We may philosophize well or ill, but we must philosophize.[4]

[4] Wilfrid Sellars, "The Structure of Knowledge," in *Action, Knowledge and Reality: Studies in Honor of Wilfrid Sellars*, ed. Hector-Neri Castañeda (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), 295-347.

I am suggesting in this work, and to extend Sellars' metaphor, that science fiction is like his "multi-dimensional conceptual system," and the primary texts I have selected for this study are akin to "the apple with which the serpent philosopher tempts us."

The onerous demands made by such necessary philosophical inquiry into the nature of existence and knowledge are much like the outwardly less formidable demands made by the science fiction narratives in this corpus – philosophy *and* science fiction each require a certain kind of alienation, a removal of oneself from one's own perspective and the temporary suspension of one's beliefs and biases.[5] The dystopian science fiction narratives at issue in this dissertation entice the reader into doing the difficult work of philosophy, the sort of work that must be done in the effortful attempt at the expansion of consciousness, a necessary undertaking as we adapt (or fail to do so) to the many collapses that are happening all around us and the many unknown ones that are yet to happen. By employing visual narrative these science fictions do for the reader the imaginative heavy lifting, so to speak, that philosophy requires. The science fiction texts I have selected use that visual and narrative speculation to bring these inquiries to a popular audience, who might otherwise never overtly encounter the criticisms and indictments that we must so urgently face as we look anew at the orthodox frameworks that undergird all of existence and that are increasingly shown to be insufficient to address the exigencies of the contemporary moment. This is the kind of onerous yet urgent work that must be done, and that science fiction is doing, if we are to expand the scope and scale of awareness, of human consciousness, and save ourselves and the nonhuman agents with whom we share the planet from what is otherwise an imminent collapse. Such a monumental endeavor requires that we seek out whatever tools are necessary to help us make that happen. Science fiction is and always

[5] Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), parts II and IV.

has been one of those tools. The overarching framework within which I have placed the narratives in the following chapters presents them, but also science fiction more broadly, in a certain respect, as aesthetically-rendered philosophies, narrative visual inducements to do this kind of philosophical work that is so often inaccessible in the material world beyond the confines of high scholarship and academia, but that is so very crucial to our collective ability to respond to the many crises that characterize contemporary earth-bound existence.

While these narratives describe possible futures, they're less about predicting the future than they are about commenting on the present, the state of which, if we take Jean Baudrillard's suggestion that the world we live in is now created by science fiction, the genre had a hand in producing to begin with.[6] Science fiction narratives have been critically describing the world of the present (while simultaneously also creating it) by speculating on the worlds of the future and the past, and by using science, space exploration, time travel, and technology to form those descriptions since at least the seventeenth century. Because science fiction is in the business of describing and building relatable, believe worlds (lest it venture into the territory of the fantasy genre), it is a genre that must rely heavily on its aesthetic – to build a world is, after all, to build the "look" and "feel" of existence – and on the spectator's reception of, or encounter with, this aesthetic. Since science fiction worlds are also our own, the aesthetic components that make up these worlds are worthy of some critical investigations. And so in this context, the work I attempt to do in this dissertation, like the work I say these narratives are doing, is one small but important thread in a much larger tapestry of necessary interventions.

The urgent need for such critical and imaginative interventions, be they academic, cinematic, graphic, or televisual, is reflected in real-world discourse by the very first words of

[6] Jean Baudillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 125.

the alarming statement written by the British documentarian and naturalist David Attenborough in his foreword to *The Economics of Biodiversity*, an independent report that was commissioned by the British Crown in 2019. "We are facing a global crisis," he forewarns, "We are totally dependent upon the natural world. It supplies us with every oxygen-laden breath we take and every mouthful of food we eat. But we are currently damaging it so profoundly that many of its natural systems are now on the verge of breakdown."[7] While the report is, of course, not a work of science fiction, it is, much like the primary texts that comprise the focus of this dissertation, a response to a world in collapse. And like the science fictions I analyze in the following chapters, the report paints a picture of what our future might be like – in terms of both the best and worst possible outcomes – and makes suggestions for ways to steer ourselves away from the catastrophic future that we are currently constructing, which will be the result, the report claims, of our "massive collective failure"[8] to manage our relationship with the biosphere on which we depend for our very existence. The report is a scientific and economic one. But the subject matter on which it dwells – the end of the world, or, at least, a *potential* end of *some kind*, to the world in *some way*, and our collective responses to the processes that lead to that end – likens the work being done in the report to the function of apocalyptic science fiction narratives, in my formulation, and also illustrates the sometimes blurry relationship between scientific claims and science-fictional ones (a relationship that will be further discussed in the following chapters).

In the late nineteenth century, the work of another prominent scientist straddled, although differently, that same line between science and fiction. In Camille Flammarion's 1894 novel *La fin du monde* – an important precursor to the dystopian science fictions at issue in my study – the

[7] Sir Partha Dasgupta, The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review. Abridged Version (London: HM Treasury, 2021), 1.
[8] Dasgupta, Economics of Biodiversity, 11.

French astronomer and writer also describes a future, the twenty-fifth century in this case, in which global society is forced to face the seeming inevitability of its own disastrous collapse, and outlines the ways in which this fictional society is responding to the crisis. In terms that resonate strongly with the uncertainty and fear that the many catastrophes, ecological and otherwise, elicit in our own real-world experience in these, the early decades of the twenty-first century, Flammarion expresses the dread that infuses the zeitgeist of his fictional world, in a way that hauntingly evokes the spirit of our own era:

> [L]'attente, l'incertitude est souvent plus terrible que la catastrophe même. Un coup brutal nous frappe une bonne fois et nous assomme plus ou moins. On se réveille, on en prend son parti, on se remet et l'on continue de vivre. Ici, c'était l'inconnu, l'approche d'un événement inévitable, mystérieux, extra-terrestre et formidable. On devait mourir, sûrement ; mais comment ? Choc, écrasement, chaleur incendiaire, flamboiement du globe, empoisonnement de l'atmosphère, étouffement des poumons …, quel supplice attendait les hommes ? Menace plus horripilante que la mort elle-même ! Notre âme ne peut souffrir que jusqu'à une certaine limite. Craindre sans cesse, se demander chaque soir ce qui nous attend pour lendemain, c'est subir mille morts. Et la Peur ! la Peur qui fige le sang dans les artères et qui anéantit les âmes, la Peur, spectre invisible, hantait toutes les pensées, frissonnantes et chancelantes.[9]

While the conditions Flammarion describes here – some of which eerily echo our own – are couched within the framework of a highly-speculative fiction, they are also, no doubt, reflective of widespread anxieties in the late-nineteenth century stemming from the breakneck pace of

[9] Camille Flammarion, *La fin du monde* (Paris: Flammarion, 1894), 4.

industrialization and concerns at the time about what kind of future humanity was creating for itself and the moral implications of an increasingly dehumanized, technologized society.[10] In some respect, the late-nineteenth century was experiencing a collapse of its own – the final demise of a pre-industrial world that had thrived for millennia, and a quickening journey into an unknown future.

Likewise, we humans of the twenty-first century are living through an era of rapid technological change. We, too, are experiencing an increased (and ever-increasing, it seems) level of anxiety – at the stratum of the individual, but also at that of the collective – as we fumble, polluting and warmongering our way through the undiscovered countries of the cybersphere and as we teeter at the edge of the precipice of an A.I.-human singularity, the arrival of which could, Stephen Hawking ominously warned in 2014, "spell the end of the human race."[11] Our science fictions, like Flammarion's, are responsive to the twin phenomena that characterize so much of the twenty-first century zeitgeist – fear and excitement – and to the blinding ecstasy that grips us as we go tripping through the unknown domains of a future that gets weirder and less comprehensible with each passing day. Just as *The Economics of Biodiversity* and *La fin du monde* are both responses to worlds in collapse, so too, is the present work at hand. This dissertation is the result, in no small part, of my attempt to confront in a meaningful way – emotionally, academically, intellectually, creatively – the many tragedies of the world today, in particular, climate crisis, ecological collapse, and what I see as a global

[10] Joel Mokyr, Chris Vickers, and Nicolas L. Ziebarth, "The History of Technological Anxiety and the Future of Economic Growth: Is This Time Different?," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 29, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 32.
[11] Rory Cellan-Jones, "Stephen Hawking warns artificial intelligence could end mankind," *BBC News*, December 2, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-30290540.

cultural politics of oppression coupled with refusal and inaction.[12] The whole of this text represents an effort on my part to engage with what I feel to be an absolute necessity, the imperative to contribute somehow, even if only obliquely and in the smallest of ways (from a "big picture" perspective), to solution building. Effectively, the analyses in the chapters that follow, as well as the texts that are analyzed, are bricks in the wall, so to speak, of my own, perpetually under-construction, sense-making apparatus. This is my response to the urgent need, an exigency to which we all have no choice but to reply in some way, to confront the increasingly unthinkable world we inhabit, a world characterized more and more each day by disastrous ecological collapse and the escalating social upheavals that the processes of collapse precipitate. The results of which are increasingly impossible to ignore and even harder to comprehend – arresting pandemics, millions of people displaced by sea-level rise and desertification, seascapes colonized by islands of waste, entire regions around the world consumed by fire, encampments of the destitute, the ill, and the homeless spread in every city, all occurring simultaneously, as billionaires shoot convertible automobiles into space on phallic rocket ships for no good reason other than to wile away our precious resources on ego and the nihilistic embrace of a late-stage capitalism that, in my evaluation of it, can best be described as libidinal, techno-capitalist accelerationism.[13]

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[12] Nina Glick Schiller, "Cultural Politics and the Politics of Culture," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 4, no. 1 (May 4, 2010): 2. I will use the phrase "cultural politics" a number of times in this work. I am referring to the whole of the complex web of ideas, ideologies, customs, behaviors, economics, forms of governance, etc. that constitutes the means through which, as Schiller says, "relations of power are asserted, accepted, contested, or subverted."

[13] For more on this particular brand of accelerationism that advocates for a kind of pedal-to-the-metal increase in the rate of technological development that is, as accelerationists see it, the only way to arrive at a post-capitalist future, see Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek's 2014 text *#ACCELERATE MANIFESTO for an Accelerationist Politics* at https://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics/.

While, as I have already mentioned, there is a subtext in the science fictions I have chosen to analyze that is a sharp indictment of capitalism, I don't consider the work I have done in these pages to be a direct indictment of capitalism, nor is it a direct denunciation of specific political systems – such critiques have not been my primary approach, although, challenges to these systems are a subtext here, as well. However, I do see a way in which, I hope, the present work is one that participates in a much broader call for radical, sweeping change, as do the science fictions that comprise the primary focus of my analysis. The idea mentioned earlier, as expressed by Baudrillard, that the worlds of science fiction are now the world we live in, is to say that the aesthetics of the genre have become, to an extent, the aesthetics of the material world. In the context of our contemporary techno-industrial capitalism, which Mark Fisher declared has become the defining framework through which we conceptualize existence,[14] the speculations in science fiction – particularly, I would argue, where technological development and space travel are concerned – comes to shape the endeavors of those who are responsible for creating the material artifacts that shape our reality and that determine the trajectory of future development. Thus it is they to whom, at least to a certain extent, interventions, science-fictional and otherwise, must be directed. Taking that as fact (assuming Baudrillard is right, and I believe he is) implies that the aesthetic of the science fiction genre, as it both responds to and informs the contours and conditions of the material world, is indeed a political intervention – if science fiction shapes the world, as it does, then it cannot but also be political.

If we're looking for some hard evidence of that connection between science fiction, capital, the shape of the material world, and the political, we need look no further than the aforementioned endeavors of the modern space-faring billionaire, who like myself and the

[14] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books), 2.

writers and science fiction creators mentioned so far, is also responding to a world in collapse, albeit with an entirely different purpose. For example, the two men who are at the forefront of "space tourism" – a recreational pastime meant only to be enjoyed by the absurdly wealthy – and who helm the development of technologies that would enable extractive colonialism to expand beyond Earth, Jeff Bezos (as of this writing, according to Forbes' daily-updated, real-time list of billionaires, the third richest person in the world with a net worth of $152 billion)[15] and Elon Musk (the richest person in the world by a long shot with a net worth of $230 billion)[16] have both been very public about the influence that science fiction has had on their respective plans for expansion into space. Musk often uses Twitter, the social media platform that he currently owns, to tweet about science fiction and has named products and features made by his Tesla and SpaceX companies after words and expressions used in popular science fictions.[17] Musk and Bezos have both expressed the belief that developing space colonies is the only way for the human population, and more importantly, capitalism, to continue to grow. Musk even refers to his vision of a future space-oriented capitalism as "Muskism" (there's certainly *nothing* narcissistic about that 🙄), which the political historian Jill Lepore describes in horrifyingly, yet accurately apocalyptic terms:

> [Muskism is] an extreme, extravagant form of capitalism, really extraterrestrial capitalism that insists that the government really has no role in the regulation of economic activity, at the practical level. At the cultural level, it really is engaged with selling the idea of futurism as a way to impose economic conditions that

[15] "The World's Real-Time Billionaires: Today's Winners and Losers," Forbes, accessed June 27, 2023, https://www.forbes.com/real-time-billionaires/#731b88b53d78.
[16] Forbes, "Billionaires."
[17] For example, Tesla's Model S has an optional driving feature called "Plaid Mode" that takes its name from the concept of "going plaid" that was featured in the 1987 Mel Brooks film *Spaceballs*, and to which I myself make a footnoted reference later in the chapter on *L'Incal.*

> come from the very deep past […] dating from the age of imperialism when British imperialists were colonizing countries around the world […] So Muskism always has within it this extreme capitalism, always has within it a kind of ironic twist. Like, "You think this is bad?" We're gonna go back to when things were worse.[18]

Likewise, Bezos says that he plans to "deploy"[19] his billions, not here on Earth because, as he explains, "… if we don't [colonize space] we will eventually end up with a civilization of stasis,"[20] lacking the "growth and dynamism" that it will take to grow the human population until we number in the trillions – a necessary eventuality in the eyes of the rapacious capitalist – which he believes his version of extraterrestrial capitalism will generate.[21] Bezos' designs for this future characterized by the infinite growth of capital and of extractive expansion is known to be influenced by *The Expanse*, a series of dystopian science fiction novels written by James S.A. Corey (the pen name used by Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck) that were later adapted into a television series. Bezos liked the series so much that after its initial three-season run on the SyFy channel, he purchased it and gave it another three seasons on Amazon Prime, which just happens to be the global media behemoth that he himself owns and that is the source of the billions he is using to turn his oppressive, science fiction-inspired, libertarian, space-expansion fantasy into a reality. As stated above, *The Expanse* paints a picture of a very dystopian future – in both its print and television versions – where those who inhabit the colonized worlds beyond Earth live

[18] Daniel Estrin, Mallory Yu, and Sarah Handel, "How a love of sci-fi drives Elon Musk and an idea of 'extreme capitalism'," *NPR*, April 19, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/04/19/1093352683/elon-musk-twitter-scifi-technology-futurism-takeover.
[19] Mike Murphy, "Jeff Bezos thinks his fortune is best spent in space," *MarketWatch*, May 1, 2018, https://www.marketwatch.com/story/jeff-bezos-thinks-his-fortune-is-best-spent-in-space-2018-05-01.
[20] Murphy, "Bezos."
[21] Paris Marx, "We Don't Need Space Colonies, and We Definitely Don't Need Jeff Bezos," *Jacobin*, July 20, 2019, https://jacobin.com/2019/07/space-colonies-jeff-bezos-blue-origin.

in impoverished, hand-to-mouth conditions, stripped of agency from birth and wholly controlled by their employers, the corporations that own the colonized worlds. There simply is no way to interpret this text as anything other than an anti-capitalist one, an *indictment* of capitalism and inequality, not the proponent of capitalism's eternal *enracinement* that Bezos takes it for. *The Expanse* is, rather, an attempt to aestheticize and thus render accessible the version of the calamitous, anti-humanist future of accelerationist fetishism that we may well be actively pursuing – at least, if the billionaires have anything to say about it, which, tragically, they do. And yet despite the techno-dystopian, extraterrestrial-capitalist future that *The Expanse* details, this is the future that the likes of Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk (the list of names that could be included here is far too long to enumerate) are currently attempting to construct – a utopia, indeed, for the corporate class; a living nightmare of slavery and misery for *everyone* else. And we have given them the power to make it happen. As Paris Marx writes in an article in *Jacobin*,

> While Bezos and Musk might have deluded themselves into believing that space colonization will be our salvation, *The Expanse* suffers no such delusions. It gives us a much more realistic glimpse of what space colonization driven by capitalism might look like: a terrible deal for anyone who isn't enormously wealthy or in a high-ranking position in government or the military. Most of us would still be under the boot of those in power, or cast off to survive [in] poverty …[22]

This is the future they are selling us. And although I cannot understand why – I guess truly comprehending the depths of this depravity is well beyond the scope of my own sense-making

[22] Paris Marx, "Jeff Bezos and His Billionaire Space Fantasy," *Jacobin*, December 14, 2019, https://jacobin.com/2019/12/jeff-bezos-the-expanse-space-fantasy-sci-fi-syfy/.

frameworks – it would seem, evidenced by the current state of things, that we are buying it, hook, line, and sinker.

All around us are constant challenges to our ability to make any sense of what happens in our increasingly surreal lives. We are daily stalked, whether consciously or not, by what the scholar of philosophy and the horror genre Eugene Thacker describes as "the furtive, always-looming threat of extinction."[23] In his characterization of the moment, he explains that, "In spite of our daily concerns, wants, and desires, it is increasingly difficult to comprehend the world in which we live and of which we are a part. To confront this idea is to confront an absolute limit to our ability to adequately understand the world at all."[24] The inability to comprehend is, in no small part, where science fiction does some of its most interesting work. Texts in the science fiction genre attempt to address this inability, extrapolating their speculations from the unthinkable dilemmas of the present so as to help us do the work of conceptualizing potential solutions, or new, perhaps never-thought-of ways of making change so that we might undertake the building of a world that avoids arriving at the dystopian futures that so much of science fiction depicts, including the three primary texts addressed in the chapters that follow. Thinking these *unthinkables*, trying to come face-to-face with the horrifying *ir*reality of the reality of our own self-inflicted annihilation, and finding ways to make the changes that must be made in order to mitigate as much of the coming tragedies as possible, is precisely, urgently what we must do. As the title character in Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 science fiction film *Stalker* asserts when it comes to finding alternative paths around a seemingly insurmountable dilemma: "The way is easy, and yet, it's confused beyond words."[25] In order to untangle that confusion and arrive at

[23] Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011), 1.
[24] Thacker, *Dust*, 1.
[25] *Stalker*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (Mosfilm, 1979), Criterion Collection streaming.

ways by which we might make any progress at all we need what Thacker calls in his definition of supernatural horror, "site[s] in which this paradoxical thought of the unthinkable [can take] place."[26] My proposition throughout this dissertation is that science fiction is, if not *the* site for such philosophical and critical thinking, then it is at least a significantly important one that has the potential to prompt us to respond to that "always-looming threat of extinction" that collapse poses.

There is, I feel it's important to point out, a significant problem in my own assertions when it comes to the change-making potential that I see in science fiction. In light of what I have written above, with respect to the ways that the billionaire-corporatist class is actually bringing the aesthetics and moral corruption of dystopian science fictions into reality, coupled with my insistence on the potential of science fiction to motivate change-making in the material world, I feel like a short caveat is in order here, a bit of a *buyer beware*, or *be careful what you ask for* trepidation that complicates my overall thesis. Yes, there is evidence that science fiction does in fact inspire people to bring ideas taken from science fiction into the material world – a point that the aforementioned relationship between science fiction and the real-world world-building currently undertaken by the billionaire class illustrates quite well. As Jill Lepore reminds us, "Billionaires, having read stories of world-building as boys, are now rich enough, as men, to build worlds. The rest of us are trapped in them."[27] While the narratives I focus on in this work are dystopian in their outcomes, and my reading of them is, for the most part, pessimistic, I am ultimately arguing for the potential in science fiction to engender *positive* change. However, in the real-world present, the science fiction future that is quickly becoming

[26] Thacker, *Dust*, 2.
[27] Jill Lepore, "Elon Musk is Building a Sci-Fi World, and the Rest of Us Are Trapped in It," *The New York Times*, November 4, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/04/opinion/elon-musk-capitalism.html.

reality doesn't seem to reflect the kind of change-making that I insist science fiction can help us to bring about. It would seem, all evidence indicates, that those who currently hold the reigns of power in our increasingly-globalized society, those who possess all of the resources required to do anything at all to counter or adapt to the processes of collapse that are happening all around us, and whose designs for the future are unquestionably taken directly from popular science fiction narratives, as they themselves have made clear time and time again, are reading science fiction from an entirely different perspective. They seem to interpret the very same texts that I read as harsh indictments of capitalism, authoritarian technocracy, and extractive colonialism, as inducements to the very same. And so what science fiction is ultimately, thus far at least, making of the real-world future is precisely the opposite of what I am encouraging. This demonstrates that not only might dystopian science fictions possess the potential to actuate favorable outcomes when read as the cautionary tales that they are, but also that they possess an opposite kind of potential in that they can be seen as blueprints for building the oppressive and post-apocalyptic worlds they depict. In this light, my conclusions at the very end of my analyses and the optimistic suggestions I ultimately make for the future, would justifiably be seen as naïve miscalculations, demonstrations of my own inability to truly face the devastating realities that are reflected back at us in the very texts I study.

Any attempt to come face-to-face (including my own attempts, apparently), as I mention above, with the unpleasant realities of the moment, in our limited capacity to perceive them, encounters another problem (in addition to the one I just mentioned). That's because, as the professor of philosophy and proponent of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), Graham Harman, asserts, "since reality is always radically different from our formulation of it, and is never

something we encounter directly in the flesh, we must approach it *indirectly*."[28] While I do not consider myself to be either an Object-Oriented Ontologist or a Speculative Realist, per se, I do find the central proposition of OOO to be useful in my approach to the science fictions in my work – that being the "*withdrawal* or *withholding* of things from direct access."[29] The incomprehensibility of the dire circumstances that the world – not just humanity, but the nonhuman world, as well – currently faces creates a kind of withdrawal of reality from access. This inaccessibility necessitates the use of accessible methods of indirect approach to reality. The argument I make throughout the following chapters is that these science fictions become such sites of indirect approach. Narratives of science-fictional speculation become here essential tools, heuristics of sorts, that help us to reach a kind of observational platform from which we may confront and begin to comprehend our impending crises.[30] Only with such tools can we rebel against the long-held orthodoxies that have increasingly come to be seen as woven into the fabric of the universe, and thus eternally immutable – a devastating falsehood that enables the maintenance and proliferation of the very structures of oppression that have led us into collapse.[31] All of which necessitates the undertaking of a fundamental, radical reform of our

[28] Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (New York: Pelican Books, 2018), 7. Along with Harman, the list of scholars of OOO and Speculative Realism includes Steven Shaviro, Ray Brassier, Quentin Meillassoux, Ian Bogost, and Timothy Morton. Some of whom are cited throughout the following chapters.
[29] Harman, Object-Oriented Ontology, 7.
[30] J.F. Martel, *Reclaiming Art in the Age of Artifice: A Treatise, Critique, and Call to Action* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015), xix. My thoughts here are influenced by the words of Martel, the independent scholar and co-host of the *Weird Studies* podcast, who writes, "art is the only truly effective means we have of engaging, in a communal context, the psyche on its own terms … [B]y rethinking art in that light we can reorient ourselves individually and collectively toward alternative modalities of being …"
[31] Martel, *Reclaiming* Art, xix-xx. Again, what I say here is akin to what Martel writes about "The all-consuming razzle-dazzle of sound and light with which we are bombarded," that, as he describes it, "fools us into taking as self-evident a picture of life that in reality belongs to nobody, effectively producing an artificial space wherein the market and the state can thrive as though they were inextricable parts of the cosmos rather than the mutable accidents of history that they are."

cultural politics – which currently has little to no discernible consideration or respect for existence at all, not even our own. And so we must change the way we engage with the very concept of Being in the world, the notion of Existence itself. We cannot confront the gravity of our situation, we cannot do anything to advance reform, if we cannot grasp what will happen if we do nothing. Which is to say that without drastic reforms, without reconfiguring our relationship with World and with Being, the world as we currently live in it may well become *the world without us in it* – an apocalyptic world of collapse and ruin.

Via varying modes of representation, each of the narratives discussed in the following chapters works to address collapse and the processes that lead to it, by connecting elements of the past, as it is perceived in the present, to the speculative future. In some respect, these invocations of the real-world past serve to render their fictive representations, of both the present and the near future, all the more believable, *pre-histories of the future*, as the scholar of science fiction, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. puts it, that extend beyond the diegesis.[32] This, in my analysis, serves an immersive purpose. By including references, aesthetically and dialogically, to a past that is known to the viewer, science fictions can, effectively, make that viewer more likely to identify a science-fictional world-in-collapse with their own, contributing to the affective sensation that the viewer is part of the world built within the narrative. Extradiegetic historical references, be they directly stated or merely implied by visual and/or audio cues, can also lend to the construction of a future world that weaves itself convincingly enough into the fabric of extradiegetic reality to allow the viewer to see this fictive depiction of a future world as one that authentically extrapolates from real material circumstances, potentiating a wholly believable impending reality. The apocalyptic, or at least, apocalypse-*oriented*, futures that are laid out in

[32] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 6.

each of these narratives are well within the realm of possibility, from the perspective of the perceived reality that forms the basis of their future designs. As I say in the first chapter of this work, on Claire Denis' *High Life*, it is not unreasonable for us to imagine that our current circumstances could potentiate futures that are not unlike those presented in these narratives. In the case of *Missions*, in fact, that projection of a viable future also happens to be one that is evidenced, diegetically, by events in the very distant past where our future collapse replicates an identical collapse that occurred deep in human history. The effect here, in the case of each of these narratives, is that reality for the viewer, even if only for the short period of time during which the narrative is consumed, ceases to be separate from reality as it is being experienced by the characters on the screen or in the graphic panels on the page. In a sense, the texts at issue in this dissertation are merely doing what so much of science fiction does, effectively collapsing time, from the perspective of the viewer, by condensing the past, present, and future into a unified narrative space. While viewing (viewing *and* reading, where *L'Incal* is concerned) any one of these science fictions, the viewer experiences time differently than the way that time, in our limited perception of it, is experienced in the world once we leave the narrative dimension, where time is observed as a seemingly linear progression that renders the past, the present, and the future as distinct, definitively-parsed units. This is, of course, not necessarily a characteristic unique to science fiction, yet it is one that, I would argue, is shared across works in the genre. The point here is that this immersive compression of time, achieved through an aesthetic rendering of alternative realities rooted in our own real-world conditions, is just one of the ways that works in the science fiction genre are attempting to perform a function that is vital to our ability, going forward, to respond to the processes of collapse that are already well underway. Science fiction is loaded with potential for aesthetic intervention in the urgent, necessary

processes of adaptation that must be undertaken as we devise models of survival in an otherwise incomprehensibly changed world. The science fiction writer Cory Doctorow believes that science fiction is such an important genre precisely because it is the only one that can win what he calls the "ideological battle … that neoliberalism is waging, through technology, to extinguish the imagination."[33] The reason, as he frames it, is quite clear and accords with my arguments in these chapters. "I believe," Doctorow maintains, "the genre presents alternatives to the world we live in, and it's the only one that does. It tells us that things could be different."[34]

The following chapters are meant to be taken as individual analyses, connected, in my reading, by the target texts' shared attempts to craft an aesthetic and narrative response to worlds in collapse. In analyzing the representational qualities of each narrative, I have tried to formulate an overall framework that presents these science fictions as aesthetic interventions in the many crises that assault existence and that confound individual and collective efforts to comprehend the world at the moment of their respective publications. I have described the ways in which each text crafts an aesthetic and narrative representation of, respectively, a specific system, philosophical concept, set of practices, or theory. Collectively, the chapters attempt to unearth the potential that lies within each text to function as aesthetic inducements to change-making in material reality and as platforms from which we might imagine ways to resist and then to counter deeply-entrenched historical and cultural orthodoxies that prevent us from doing what we must in order to adapt to changed conditions as we are always and inevitably approaching *the end of the world*.

[33] Laura Fernández, "Cory Doctorow, science fiction as a weapon against the metaverse: 'We are not free, and we don't know it'," *El País*, June 21, 2023, https://english.elpais.com/culture/2023-06-21/cory-doctorow-science-fiction-as-a-weapon-against-the-metaverse-we-are-not-free-and-we-dont-know-it.html.
[34] Fernández, "Cory."

Chapter one is an analysis of Claire Denis' 2018 English-language film *High Life*. Two concepts are taken up in this chapter: Firstly, via an analysis of the film's representation of the black hole phenomenon, I discuss the formation of what I refer to as "the black hole sublime" as it relates to a cinematic effort to accurately represent that which is unrepresentable – in this case, a specific spatiotemporal phenomenon – along with the affective results of such an attempt; secondly, by mapping Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman's notion of *concentrationary cinema* onto this film, I show the ways that the traumas represented in *High Life* are, specifically in the science-fictional context of a carceral space mission, related to the devastating potential for existential annihilation that lies within a black hole. Taken together, I use these concepts to tease out the ways in which *High Life* participates, along with the other texts in these chapters, in an overall indictment of the trauma-inducing processes of social, moral, and environmental collapse. Ultimately, I argue that this film's attempt to visually render the existential dread produced by the black hole phenomenon, coupled with the physical and psychological traumas produced by incarceration and torture, come together to create a concentrationary aesthetic that evokes the sublime in complex and troubling ways. The aesthetic experience that this film brings about, for the characters in the film as much as for the viewer, produces an affective response that, unlike the Kantian formulation of the sublime, causes a *collapse into* rather than an *elevation beyond*. This chapter tries to demonstrate that, in science fiction films like *High Life*, we can see the ways in which the traumas of the past, present, and future catastrophes of modernity – the Nazi concentration camps of the past, the depletion, both present and future, of Earth's resources, and the fictionalized devastation of the black hole are the disasters focused on in the context of this chapter – are, by now, a permanent feature of a world that is forever in collapse, and from which we can never escape.

In chapter two I explore the truly transformational aesthetic of Alejandro Jodorowsky and Mœbius' seminal 1980s comic series *L'Incal*. I call it "truly transformational" because its influence on the aesthetics of crucial texts in the science fiction genre, on the genre as a whole for that matter, ever since its initial release has been well established in scholarship, but also in popular culture. I expand on this influence with examples and in greater detail in the body of the chapter. I discuss *L'Incal* not only as a text with a transformational aesthetic, but also, in its visual and textual narration, a text that tells a tale *of* transformation. It pushes the genre well beyond any of its previous boundaries, rendering a science-fictional aesthetic that is also, as I say in the chapter, "a metaphysical exploration of the contemporary soul." The narrative is infused throughout with themes of duplication, messianism, unorthodox religious practices, and esotericisms – most notably, The Tarot. I argue in this chapter that Jodorowsky and Mœbius have crafted an artifact with a psychedelic, science-fictional aesthetic that is intended to inspire its spectators to participate in the esoteric, consciousness-expanding practices that are aestheticized in its graphic panels and promoted in its written text. I assert that this, even more so, perhaps, than the texts in the other two chapters, is an aesthetic narrative of resistance that quite explicitly asks its spectators to join with the characters on the page, and with its creators, in active confrontations with the kinds of outmoded orthodoxies that I have previously discussed. *L'Incal* is, itself, an overtly-formulated aesthetic and narrative intervention. On one level, its aesthetic and content are a disruption of the genre, evidenced by the significant changes in science fiction storytelling and world-building that it influenced. On another level, it is also politically disruptive in that it blatantly aestheticizes a challenge to the anthropocentric, human versus nonhuman binary that is crucial to the maintenance and proliferation of extractive colonial capitalism. In the context of the narrative, which takes place in a distant future techno-dystopian

world ruled by a cultish authoritarian religious sect, that extractive colonial capitalism has gone full tilt. Having colonized the whole of the galaxy, the colonial expansion project turns inward, literally turning the body into the source of its seemingly eternal extractionary enterprise, even going so far as to make agents out of nonhuman objects so as to develop yet more territory from which to extract resources. In this aspect, the text's indictment of capitalism is direct rather than a matter of subtext. I argue that, in the end, Jodorowsky and Mœbius suggest that the only way to counter the ongoing processes of collapse is via an aesthetically-induced spiritual enlightenment. And yet, at the end of *L'Incal*, despite the main character's journey on the path of said spiritual enlightenment, and in a temporal twist of fate, he finds himself, in the very last panels of the text, starting the journey all over again at the exact moment and in the very same situation where he started. Here again, just as I assert is the case in *High Life*, the traumatic, catastrophic events of the past are shown to be permanent, inescapable features of a world in perpetual collapse.

Chapter three on the streaming television series *Missions* addresses the aesthetic representation of a real-world, pseudo-scientific conspiracy theory that challenges (or tries to, at least) the standard theory that explains the origins of human civilization. The series' engagement with collapse is quite literal here – after a manned, billionaire-funded landing on Mars, humans discover sites, artifacts, and technologies that prove a human civilization existed on Mars millions of years in our distant past. Our Martian ancestors were forced to leave Mars, which had once been a lush, verdant paradise, and re-settle on Earth when their industrial activity and pollution, advanced beyond our own current level of development, brought about the collapse of the Martian ecosphere, rendering the planet incapable of supporting human life. This series is an obvious cautionary tale, indeed, and an overt indictment of our own anthropocentric, techno-

industrial society. In this chapter I present *Missions* as an aesthetic rendering of the kinds of panic-laden oppositions to scientific knowledge claims and rebellions against orthodoxies that come about in times of heightened anxiety and instability. In particular, I focus on Mars Origin Theory, which posits, just as the series does, that human civilization began on Mars and was seeded here on Earth many millennia before we believe it to have begun. Mars Origin Theory challenges, not just the timeline of human civilization, but also the standard theory of evolution as well as knowledge claims about human origins posited by religious orthodoxies. By the end of the series, the implication is that despite knowing that human activity, identical to our own, had, at least once before, brought about a devastating civilizational collapse and ravaged an entire planetary ecosystem, we will still do absolutely nothing to correct course. We will make the same mistakes we have already made, in the same self-destructive cycle, over and over again. This chapter is concerned with how this series, and science fiction more broadly, participates in responding to disruptions in the fabric of human society while it also contributes to the creation of those disruptions, thus playing a part in the realization of the very conditions that necessitate such an anxious aesthetic response to begin with. Yet again, as in my analysis of *High Life* and *L'Incal*, we find ourselves, in the final tally, in an irredeemable situation – able to see the inescapable, imminent collapse before us, but unable, or perhaps unwilling, to engineer a transcendence beyond our own self-destruction.

And finally, in the conclusion, I try to take a different tack, to end what has been a somewhat bleak journey through three dystopian science fictions by facing in a (slightly) more optimistic direction. In this section I invoke the concept of *Collapsologie*, developed and elaborated on in a series of texts by the French ecologists Pablo Servigne, Gauthier Chapelle, and Raphaël Stevens, to respond to the following question: *Et après que tout s'est effondré*? This

section brings a fourth narrative of collapse into the project – Luc Besson's 1983 science fiction film *Le dernier combat*. Through the lens of Collapsologie I offer a reading of Besson's film that responds to the aforementioned question, suggesting, in my analysis, that the film depicts a post-collapse world that is surprisingly … *optimistic*. I analyze the narrative as one of unexpected transcendence, where the oppressive status quos and rigid orthodoxies of the anthropocentric past need no longer be maintained. Even more than that, in the world Besson has created, as I read it, only those who can embrace the emerging realities of a collapsed world, rather than denying or refusing them, are capable of devising the kinds of heterodox systems and adaptive strategies that are necessary for thriving in a forever-changed world. The patriarchal, hegemonic global orders of the past cannot adapt. They refuse to even try. And so they have no place in a new paradigm. The suggestion here is that maybe there is transcendence, after all, to be found, if one looks hard enough, in dystopian French science fiction.

Claire Denis' *High Life* and the Black Hole Sublime:
A Concentrationary and Oneiric Mode of Representation

How can one not be overwhelmed by the black hole,
the deadliest force in the universe?
A long, dark tunnel to nowhere.
- Lt. Charlie Pizer, *The Black Hole*

A black hole is a void in space, according to Stephen Hawking. Which is to say that, by definition it exists, paradoxically, as a nothing of sorts. It is a presence that is also an absence. A black hole is what happens when a star with a certain mass reaches the end of its life span. Having consumed the entirety of its lifeforce over the course of millions of years, hundreds of millions even, the star's own gravitational force causes it to collapse in on itself, forming a region of space-time from which nothing, not even light can escape. Objects can cross the boundary, the event horizon, of this newly formed phenomenon, entering the black hole's density, but nothing can ever get out. Beyond the event horizon, at the center of this void, entirely hidden from view, lies a point of infinite density, a singularity where the known laws of science crumble, an event of such ontological and epistemological significance as to occur beyond the reach of human knowledge. We are not able to truly know the nature of the black hole phenomenon, nor what exists beyond its event horizon. Our experience of it is nil. Our understanding and perception of the black hole's existence are and can only be limited to technologically-mediated intervention – the presence of black holes in distant galaxies has been detected, "proven" by instrumentation – while what lies beyond the event horizon, within the black hole itself is known only to the complex proofs of highly abstract mathematics and science, inaccessible to all but a few.

Though the term *black hole* was not coined until 1969, the existence of the phenomenon had been theorized since as early as the eighteenth century by the English philosopher John Michell and the French scientist the Marquis de La Place. It was not until the 1960s that our technology had advanced enough for us to detect spatial phenomena that would lead to the confirmation, in 2016, of the existence of black holes. And yet, we still cannot see them. We can only know them by virtue of technologically-mediated intervention. Even the "image" of the M87 black hole released in 2019 is not a photographic image. It is a computer rendering of gases flowing around the black hole that is based on computer analyses of observations made by eight different radio telescopes on Earth. The phenomenon itself and the theorized infinitely-dense singularity that lies beyond the event horizon remain hidden from view. The only way to see a black hole, as Icelandic author Andri Snær Magnason describes it, is to look beyond it, to look at its periphery.[35] It is a known entity that is experientially unknown and wholly unknowable, it is an astral body without body, it *is* and yet it contains that which *is not*. Existence can't both belong and not belong to the same object at the same time and in the same place. Something cannot simultaneously be and not be. And yet the place beyond the black hole's event horizon is a *presence* – a phenomenon whose perceivability opens it up to the possibility of representation – that is also an *absence*. The phenomenon's characteristics of presence/existence and absence/non-existence each imply the other, bringing irreconcilables together, making a stable identification of either state impossible to render. Any representation of this place beyond is problematic because it will always necessarily rely on the absence of that which it claims to make present by representation.

[35] Andri Snær Magnason, *On Time and Water*, trans. Lytton Smith (Rochester: Open Letter, 2021), 10.

Science Fiction narratives often take up the task of representing the paradox that is created when we claim to know of the existence of that which we also claim to be unknowable. It is only science fiction that can transmit to us the experience of that which we absolutely cannot access in material reality. But how to represent the beyond – something that may or may not exist – of the black hole phenomenon's event horizon when its presence, its form, is not only unknown but unknowable? This question of representation plays on a multidimensional dialectic – between the known and the unknown, between absence and presence, and between science and fiction – that opens up a place where different views on existence and modes of representation can be explored, where ontological (im)possibilities can find form, where the unknown, unknowable might somehow become the known.[36] The black hole fits squarely within these dialectical oppositions. What form would the representation of such a paradoxical phenomenon assume?

Figure 1. The black hole as swirling blue vortex. *The Black Hole*, directed by Gary Nelson (1979, Walt Disney Productions), Amazon Streaming.

[36] It seems to me that any attempt to cinematically represent a concept or a thing necessarily depends on the non-existence of that thing in the time and space in which it is being represented. The representation of the black hole at the end of Claire Denis' film *High Life*, for example, did not exist until it was digitally made manifest. Here we witness what might be another dimension of this dialectic of representation – the fictional black hole in the film only exists fleetingly in space and time at each moment that it is presented on someone's screen.

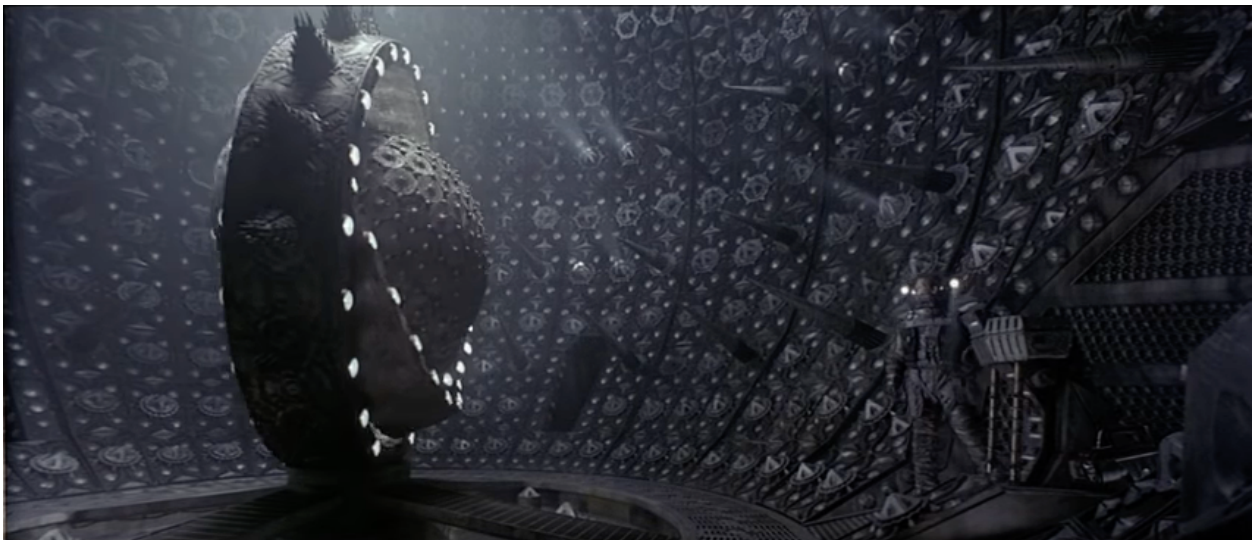

Figure 2. The black hole as industrial death machine, harnessed for its power. *Event Horizon*, directed by Paul W.S. Anderson (1997, Paramount Pictures), Amazon Streaming.

Figure 3. The black hole named Gargantua. *Interstellar*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2014, Legendary Pictures), Amazon Streaming.

Several attempts to cinematically represent black holes have been made – *The Black Hole* (1979, see fig. 1), *Event Horizon* (1997, see fig. 2), and *Interstellar* (2014, see fig. 3) to name a few, and most notably, (in terms of the scope of the present work) Claire Denis' science fiction film *High Life* (2018, see fig. 4). Ultimately, in each of these films an encounter with a black hole brings about destruction. And in all but the 1979 film *The Black Hole*, which is a Disney production, each representation of a black hole is a device that makes us aware of an

overwhelming horror. In *Event Horizon*, that horror is the unknown, destructive potentiality of technological advancement and human avarice. In *Interstellar*, the horror lies within the results for humanity of impending environmental destruction. *High Life* encompasses those same inducements to horror, and then some. Denis' rendering of a black hole produces a sublime mode of representation that is concentrationary and oneiric. The film's narrative is presented in a complex temporal and spatial organization that traps the viewer in a present perpetually haunted by past traumas as well as by the projection of our real-world catastrophic, traumatic future. This insistence on the constant presence of the traumatic past and the foreclosure of the future invoke notions of the concentrationary, while the film's attempts to represent that which cannot faithfully be represented – black holes, the collapse of the future, the end of existence that is yet to arrive – brings irreconcilables crashing together, producing a sublime aesthetic of destruction and oblivion.

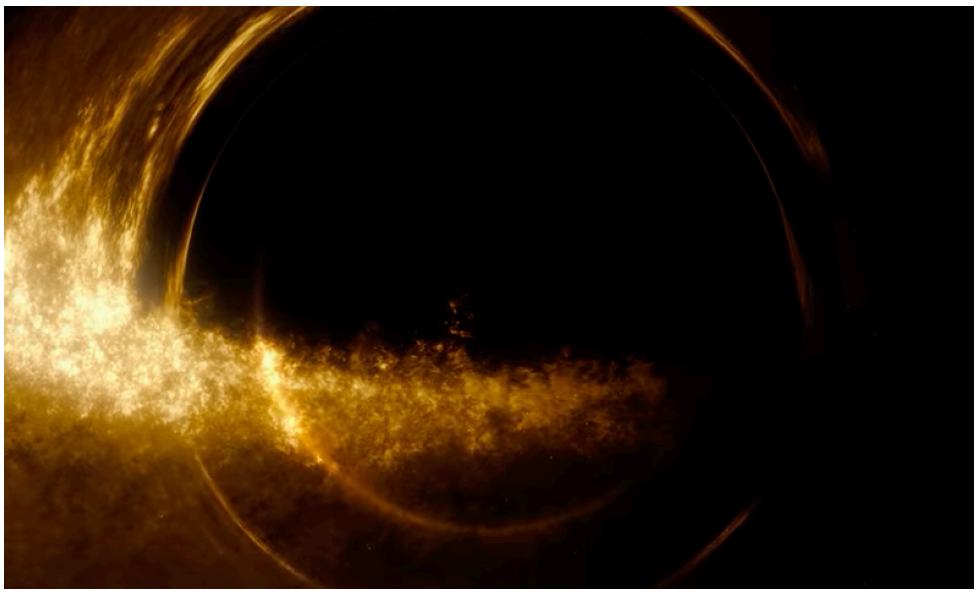

Figure 4. The blackhole as sublime dreamscape. *High Life*, directed by Claire Denis (2018, Andrew Lauren Productions), Amazon Streaming.

Each of the films mentioned above is a demonstration of the way that science fiction represents that which cannot be faithfully represented, that which exists in the realm of the unknowable, beyond experiential possibility. Science fiction's attempts to represent the kinds of unknowables brought to light by the black hole phenomenon necessarily makes an aesthetic issue of those unknowables. But since these are beyond imagination's grasp, any attempt to represent them must be discordant – an aesthetic disruption, a visual or imaginative discontinuity that prompts the experience of the sublime. In *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* Lyotard expresses the difficulty we confront in the sublime when we attempt to represent the unrepresentable:

> Il [le sublime] a lieu quand … l'imagination échoue à présenter un objet qui vienne, ne serait-ce qu'en principe, s'accorder avec un concept. Nous avons l'Idée du monde (la totalité de ce qui est), mais nous n'avons pas la capacité d'en montrer un exemple. Nous avons l'Idée de simple (le non-décomposable), mais nous ne pouvons pas l'illustrer par an objet sensible qui en serait un cas. Nous pouvons concevoir l'absolument grand, l'absolument puissant, mais toute présentation d'un objet destinée à « faire voir » cette grandeur ou cette puissance absolues nous apparaît comme douloureusement insuffisant. Ce sont là des Idées dont il n'y a pas de présentation possible, elles ne font donc rien connaître de la réalité (l'expérience), elles interdisent aussi l'accord libre des facultés qui produit le sentiment du beau, elles empêchent la formation et la stabilisation du goût. On peut les dire imprésentables.[37]

[37] Jean-François Lyotard, *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants: correspondance, 1982-1985* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1986), 27.

In *High Life*, the space beyond the black hole's event horizon that the film's protagonist enters at the end of the film cannot be represented – while we can very abstractly conceive of that beyond and use the theoretical language of science to describe it, imagination cannot grasp the infinite potential for existence (or non-existence) beyond the event horizon. The fact that the potential for limitless conceptions of being in the beyond may or may not exist only heightens the inevitable discord in attempts at aesthetic representation that potentiate the experience of the sublime. Anxiety is part of the discord that induces the sublime response. In *High Life*, this anxiety is not only caused by the *unknowableness* of existence beyond the black hole but is also coupled with the fear and panic that the unknown of (non)existence after life inspires. *High Life* attempts to give concrete, visual form to the nightmarish realities and moral devastation of incarceration, violence, and forced labor coupled with the terror of unknowable existence.

When the anxiety of the existential unknown is made aesthetic, as it is in science fiction, the sublime experience it creates becomes all the more unendurable, a self-shattering event, happening at the horizon where what was once thought to be known fades beyond the limits of human comprehension. In the case of *High Life*, as is also the case in other science fiction narratives, the sublime response to aesthetic representations of the unknowable corresponds to Lyotard's suggestion that the unrepresentable is best captured by abstract works of art – the ending sequence in *High Life* is indeed reminiscent of a Barnett Newman painting (see fig. 5), or perhaps one of Mark Rothko's famously emotive color fields (see fig. 6).[38] But a science fictional, black hole sublime may also be a response, as Jameson says in his formulation of

[38] Gary K. Wolfe, *The Known and the Unknown: the Iconography of Science Fiction* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1979), xiv. Wolfe notes that "the image of the barrier between known and unknown" in science fiction texts "is so ubiquitous in the genre that it transcends the label 'icon'." Considering that attempts to represent the boundaries of knowledge are somewhat common in science fiction, it might be important for me to point out that I do not think every attempt to capture unknown *beyonds* gives rise to the sublime response. Which is to say that every attempt to render the unknowable

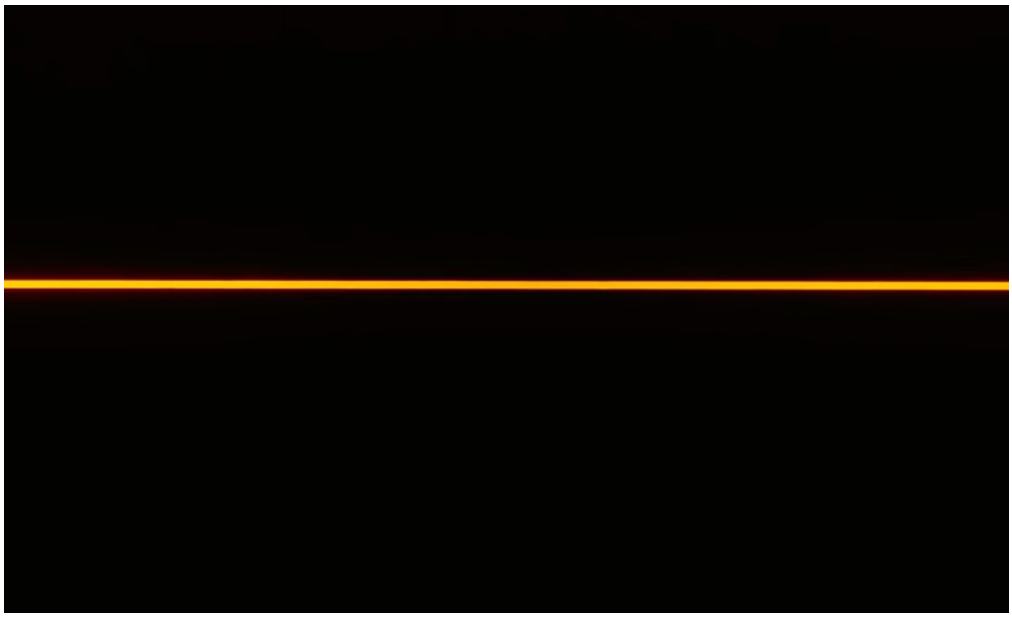

Figure 5. *High Life* closing sequence no. 1, a Newmanesque abstraction of light. *High Life*, directed by Claire Denis (2018, Andrew Lauren Productions), Amazon Streaming.

Figure 6. *High Life* closing sequence no. 2, Rothko-like in the finale. *High Life*, directed by Claire Denis (2018, Andrew Lauren Productions), Amazon Streaming.

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does not create an aesthetic that potentiates the sublime. The sublime does not reside, as Kant would say, in the object – it resides in the subject; Alex Greenberger, "Olafur Eliasson Light Installation Stars in Claire Denis Film 'High Life'," *ARTnews*, April 9, 2019, https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/olafur-eliasson-light-installation-stars-in-claire-denis-film-high-life-12321/. In 2014 Denis collaborated with the installation artist Olafur Eliasson on the three-minute film *Contact*, named for the lightworks exhibition it features and that resemble the shots at the very end of *High Life*. Eliasson was later hired as a production designer for the film and is said to have designed the space craft.

the hysterical sublime, to forms of technology whose power and prevalence in our lives (but also, arguably, *over* our lives) increases at breakneck speeds and to orders of magnitude that are more and more incomprehensible with each new technological intervention. A Kantian reading of the sublime at play in *High Life* suggests that the film attempts *cinematic* representation of "the immeasurable magnitude of the universe, the metaphysical consideration of eternity"[39] made visual *and* temporal. One may wonder at the many unfathomable great depths beyond the event horizon (the dynamic sublime), one may marvel at the size of a black hole and the unimaginable human force and ingenuity that must be expended in order to reach one (the noble sublime), and one may be transported beyond oneself when confronting the mysterious power and perfection of a black hole and its incomprehensible distance form Earth (the mathematical sublime). And yet, Kant's formulations of the sublime do not seem adequate here. For him, the experience of the sublime resulted in elevation. It was a confrontation that affirmed the moral status of the experiencing subject. The black hole sublime in formulation here is, instead, a sublime of devastation and rejection, one of *collapse into* rather than *elevation beyond*. It is the revelation of the incomprehensibly finite results of human failure and inadequacy, the realization of an impending, inevitable destruction.

The black hole phenomenon is a central plot device in *High Life*. The nature of the black hole, the existence of which is known to scientists while also being, paradoxically, impossible, makes it a peculiar choice for a filmmaker. Just how does one represent, in a necessarily visual medium, that which, beyond all but the high abstractions of mathematics, is thoroughly unrepresentable? And what kind of response might the resulting aesthetic of the filmic presentation of such an unknown, unknowable natural phenomenon produce in the viewer?

[39] Immanuel Kant, "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime," in *The Sublime Reader*, ed. Robert R. Clewis (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 110.

Absent the computer-generated renderings of what a black hole *might* look like to the human eye, no one has ever seen one. (Not that we would know it if we had.) We've certainly seen depictions of sublime-inducing natural phenomena before. In this respect, there's nothing new about trying to represent something as awe-inspiring as a black hole, which is after all, a naturally-occurring phenomenon (unless it's not, but that's perhaps an issue for a different kind of text[40]). But the black hole is truly something different. Its unknowableness in the face of its existence as a known phenomenon renders it immutably novel, perpetually inaccessible to faithful representation (and even perhaps inaccessible to abstraction because its true form is beyond experience, so even an abstract representation is only an abstraction of an already abstract conceptualization). A black hole is not like a waterfall, a canyon, or a powerful storm, the sublime majesty of which artists have been rendering for centuries, and with which Kant's notion of the sublime was largely concerned. The black hole evades any faithful representation in another, perhaps more crucial way – unlike all other known natural phenomena, a black hole cannot be experienced. I can stand in the eye of a hurricane and literally feel its dizzying power crackling in the air all around me. I can dive into a waterfall and feel in my body the terror of the risk of death coupled with the awe of the possibility of survival. I can stand tip-toed on the precipice of the Grand Canyon, teetering in the horrifying, transcendent moment of possibility – I either fall forward, down the canyon and into death, or I collapse backward, alive, onto the hard ground beneath me. But I cannot stand in the center of a black hole nor balance on the edge of its event horizon. I cannot dive, fall, nor collapse into its incomprehensible density. It can only be abstractly, intellectually conceived of by the subject because it lies wholly beyond the realm

[40] The notion that a spatial phenomenon, like a black hole, may not be a naturally-occurring one links this with the third chapter in this dissertation on conspiracy theory and the French streaming television series *Missions*.

of experience. In this way, the black hole reconfigures the notion of phenomenological experience and thus alters the subjective experience of the sublime. Like other natural phenomena, the black hole can bring about terror and awe in the subject. But in this particular affective response, the black hole induces a sublime that does not elevate the subject as it does in the Kantian tradition. Reason cannot comprehend nor can imagination present to consciousness what truly lies beyond the black hole's event horizon at the moment of its singularity. The infinite curvature of space time, the bending of known reality that occurs there is incommensurable. As a result, representations of the black hole will always be, as Lyotard says of the *imprésentables*, inadequate. Confronted with such an attempt, the subject becomes paralyzed, rather than elevated, and must turn away, back down from the incommensurable complexity of even the mere concept of the black hole. Attempts to represent something so complex, so known and yet so infinitely unknowable, produce a unique sublime – the black hole sublime – one of paralysis and rejection. Wrapped up in the vast complexity of the black hole that *High Life* attempts to represent is also the film's attempted representation, albeit not the dominant theme, of a near future effected by another issue of incommensurable complexity – that of the effects of impending environmental and thus civilizational collapse.[41] *High Life* is a film that, by virtue of its attempts to represent these complex *imprésentables*, brings to the viewer an unsettling awareness. It is a work of art that makes us aware of the overwhelming horror of human destruction. In this way, the black hole sublime is akin to the holocaust sublime formulated by John Sanbonmatsu, who asserts that "the holocaust sublime encourages the viewing subject to 'face' overwhelming horrors of the past."[42]

[41] My analysis of the texts in the following chapters will address this issue, as well.
[42] John Sanbonmatsu, "The Holocaust Sublime: Singularity, Representation, and the Violence of Everyday Life," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 68, no. 1 (2009): 102.

At issue in this chapter will be the ways in which *High Life*'s aesthetic, formal structure, and narrative, together, amount to the creation of a sublime mode of dreamlike representation that makes *High Life* another in an ever-growing corpus of films that draw anxiously, and often unawares,[43] from the cultural reservoir of what Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman, in their extensive work on the profound and lasting cultural effects of the Nazi concentration camp, identify as *concentrationary cinema*. An aspect of their notion of the concentrationary as it relates to cinema (and art, broadly speaking) underscores the imaginal representation of trauma as a subconscious substrate that is pervasive not only at the level of the individual, but at that of the social and historical. They propose that the concentrationary is "not simply confined to one place and time but, now unleashed on the world, is a permanent presence shadowing modern life, and that memory (and art in general) must be invoked to show this permanent presence of the past haunting the present so that we can read its signs and counter its deformation of the human."[44] In much the same way that dreams play out the reverberations and consequences of trauma for an individual dreamer, so too does concentrationary cinema engage in giving expression to the far-reaching ramifications on the whole of Western society of not just the traumas of the Holocaust, but also of the devastating effects of the progression of modernity.

After a précis of the narrative, subsequent sections of this chapter will 1) discuss the ways in which particular aspects of the journey depicted in the film – the effects of sublight travel on

[43] Brian E. Crim, *Planet Auschwitz: Holocaust Representation in Science Fiction and Horror Film and Television*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 5-7. Crim suggests that "[a]rtists may construct powerful allusions to the Holocaust unintentionally, highlighting the extent to which the Holocaust permeates culture." He goes on to say, "Using a traditional linear narrative or simple documentary style to describe the unrepresentable risks fetishizing the event and deflecting from the trauma."

[44] Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman, "Series Preface – Concentrationary Memories: The Politics of Representation," in *Concentrationary Memories: Totalitarian Terror and Cultural Resistance* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2014), xvii.

perceptions of reality, sleep, reproductive experimentation, black holes and oblivion, trauma, and flashbacks – all contribute to the creation of a particular kind of sublime mode of representation, an oneiric, nightmarish cinematic example of the concentrationary that is uniquely science-fictional, and 2) highlight the ways in which certain aspects of the concentrationary are shared by the conceptualization and cinematic representation of the black hole phenomenon.

High Life: "Oblivion Awaits"[45]

Upon waking from a dream, the dreamer often has difficulty recounting the specifics of the dream. The events and images, so tangible and vivid to the sleeping, dreaming mind, quickly fade into diaphanous impressions, receding from conscious memory into the oblivion of the subconscious. By the end of *High Life*, thus far Denis' only science fiction endeavor, the viewer is left with a similar impression, not knowing what exactly she has just seen, finding it difficult to decipher the film's enigmatic narrative logic. Likewise, many critics in the popular press and in online reviews did not seem to know what to make of this film, referring to it, in more flattering reviews, as the filmmaker's masterpiece, something of a meditative existential black hole mystery, and in the *least appreciative* commentaries, as unwatchable child pornography.[46] The spectrum of reactions to the film speaks to its bewildering complexity – with *High Life* Denis has indeed crafted a space-based SciFi mindfuck that is as anxiety-provoking as it is aesthetically mesmerizing.

[45] This expression appears in the film's English-language promotional material.
[46] Please do note that there is no child pornography in this film. There is, in one of the film's only scenes invoking human tenderness, a naked infant being bathed by her father (Robert Pattinson), but no child porn. There are those viewers who assert otherwise – look no further than the film's comments section on Amazon where user Byte USA referred to the film, in an October 3, 2019 review, as a "Disgusting and gross […] piece of shit posing as art" and claims to have "reported the film to FBI" for illegal child pornography. There are many such comments – of the 914 customer reviews left at the time of this writing, thirty-one percent of them give the film one out of five stars.

Aboard a ship that looks to be more rundown psych ward than futuristic space-faring vessel – divided into claustrophobia-inducing cell-like dorms, oppressively austere hallways, and antiseptic industrial laboratories – a young, attractive crew (the protagonists are played by Juliette Binoche as Doctor Dibs and Robert Pattinson as Monte) consisting entirely of death row inmates journeys to the outer reaches of known space at near lightspeeds. The stated purpose of their mission is to travel to a black hole and once there to harness its energy using the Penrose Process[47] – a real-world theoretical energy-extraction process – while also submitting to medical experimentation, particularly of the reproductive sort: the female prisoners are inseminated with semen harvested from the males, who receive some form of narcotic (the nature of which is implied to be both recreational and somniferous) in exchange for their contributions. When the crew is uncooperative, they are restrained, sedated, and effectively raped by Doctor Dibs while they sleep – the extraction of fluids manually forced, and the insemination performed without consent. Sleep and dreaming are necessary biological, human processes that, moreover, provide a temporary state of liberation from the confines of conscious existence. In *High Life* these processes are disrupted, the conscious world invading the sleeping mind, aware of the violation that is taking place, but unable to wake. Here, slumber is forced and facilitates sexual assault and involuntary medical experimentation, but also has the effect of obliterating the last semblance of liberty accessible to the prisoner-crew in the film's penal environment.

In his introduction to *Concentrationary Art*, Silverman discusses the importance of dreams for prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. "In one sense," he explains, "dreams have become the only means of defense for the camp prisoner against the terrible reality of

[47] The Penrose Process was theorized by the English physicist Roger Penrose in 1971 and posits that energy could be extracted from a rotating black hole. The successful application of this hypothetical process would result in an infinite supply of energy.

concentrationary life, which is itself a form of 'unreality.' In the dream, the prisoner finds a retreat and a form of solace and salvation…"[48] The cosmic environment in which *High Life*'s narrative takes place may itself be likened to a form of "unreality." In this context, the benefit of deliverance offered by the sleeping, dreaming state is transformed into yet another custodial instrument within an already punitive carceral system. The narcotic inducement of sleep and the violation of the prisoners' bodies during sleep disrupts the dreamful respite it offers, bringing the events of the conscious world into that of the unconscious, blurring the boundaries between the two domains, thus robbing the prisoners of solace, of the only remaining way for them to experience freedom. This is reminiscent of the mingling of dreaming and waking life experienced by victims of the Nazi concentration camps, for whom "[d]reams are … not so much a separate world but rather they mingle with the prisoner's waking life to create a strange, composite world. It is the world of the waking dream that allows the prisoner to be both present and absent at the same time, here and elsewhere, and therefore curiously absent from the very rigors that he was forced to undergo every day…"[49] Their freedoms having been taken from them – even that of peaceful sleep and dreaming – by a technologized carceral entity, the listless prisoners in *High Life* exist in liminal "composite" zones, neither awake nor asleep, neither dead nor alive.

The goal of the experiments in procreation onboard the prison ship is to engineer a human strong enough, by virtue of genetic superiority, to be unaffected by long-term exposure to the harmful background radiation emitted in space. The crew has agreed to this journey and to

[48] Max Silverman, "Introduction. Lazarus and the Modern World," in *Concentrationary Art: Jean Cayrol, the Lazarean and the Everyday in Post-war Film, Literature, Music and the Visual Arts*, ed. Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman (London: I.B. Taurus, 2019), 5.
[49] Silverman, "Lazarus," 6.

the experiments in exchange for commuted sentences. Or so they are led to believe.[50] It is not long before the prisoner-astronauts realize that theirs is a one-way suicide mission – there will be no return to Earth, no last-minute death sentence commutations. All of the prisoners will die on this voyage, most of them in violent exchanges at the hands of their crewmates – beatings, rapes, stabbings – or as the result of medical experiments gone wrong. Those who do not perish on the ship will meet their ends within a black hole, their mission's final destination.

The visceral nature of the violence depicted in this film includes a particularly gory scene in which Boyse (Mia Goth) – the mother of Monte's daughter Willow (Scarlette Lindsey and Jessie Ross), the only space-born child aboard the ship who survives beyond infancy – experiences the phenomenon known as spaghettification as she attempts to take a shuttle beyond the black hole's event horizon.[51] This kind of bodily corruption along with temporal and spatial dysphoria are key aspects of the notions of disruption and discontinuity characteristic of much of the film's oneiric narrative and formal structure. Owing to such discontinuity, the film's sequencing and overall narrative arc become difficult to recount after watching the film, in much the same way that it is difficult to reconstruct a dream upon waking because the logic criteria of the dream world is "so different from those regulating conscious thought."[52] The black hole

[50] The crew having been lied to and the subsequent revelation of the truth once their journey is well underway signals another point of commonality with the series *Missions* discussed in chapter three.
[51] Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black* Holes (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1988), 88-89. Spaghettification, as described by Hawking, is what would happen to a human being who attempts to approach a black hole. He explains that the farther one is from a black hole the weaker its gravitational force, so as one gets closer, "the gravitational force on [one's] feet would always be greater than the force on [one's] head. This difference in the forces would stretch [the body] out like spaghetti or tear [it] apart before" one even reached the event horizon. Denis' cinematic representation of this phenomenon is not an easy watch. By way of description, when I think of this moment in the film the words *squish*, *crunch*, and *splat* come to mind. Again, from Hawking: "One could well say of the event horizon what the poet Dante said of the entrance to Hell: 'All hope abandon, ye who enter here.' Anything or anyone who falls through the event horizon will soon reach the region of infinite density and the end of time."
[52] Laura Rascaroli, "Oneiric Metaphor in Film Theory," *KINEMA* (Fall 2022): 7. https://doi.org/10.15353/kinema.vi.982.

serves as a metaphor for the film's many traumatic disruptions. The nature of the black hole makes it a phenomenon, much like a dream, whose formal and manifest characteristics defy representation within cinema's conventional discursive practices. And so, Denis does not have recourse to the more traditional methods of classical narrative construction, but instead employs techniques – radical montage, disorienting flashbacks, temporal discontinuity, an agitating soundtrack – in a palimpsestic dream logic narrative structure that are characteristic of Pollock and Silverman's notion of concentrationary cinema. As the above description of the film suggests, there are numerous aspects of *High Life* that merit an approach in light of this category, and in what follows, I will elaborate on this dimension, exploring the ways in which the film's ambiguous aesthetic and its discontinuous, disruptive formal and narrative structure, all come together to create a traumatic dreamlike mode of cinematic representation and experience that can be read as a work of concentrationary cinema.

A Concentrationary Space Odyssey

In their collection of essays entitled *Concentrationary Cinema: Aesthetics as Political Resistance in Alain Resnais'* Night and Fog, Pollock and Silverman assert that the systems of terror unleashed by the Third Reich infected the entire social fabric, not only of German-occupied Europe, but also of post-Holocaust modernity, injecting a contagion of violence and totalizing control into the very DNA of human existence. The French writer and concentration camp survivor David Rousset, cited by Pollock and Silverman, refers to these systems of terror constructed by the Nazis as symptoms of *l'univers concentrationnaire* (the concentrationary universe). In Pollock and Silverman's formulation, the concentrationary becomes a disease that permanently transforms who and what we are. Its infection goes beyond our social, political, and

economic structures, "seep[ing] into the cultural imaginary, the repertoire of images, self-understandings and cultural representations that we encounter through cultural forms."[53] Now a compositional element of the social fabric, the concentrationary transgresses the boundaries that suppose to separate the reality of the waking, conscious world from the imaginary domains of the sleeping, subconscious mind. A constant menace to everything that is and can be possible, the concentrationary disrupts the entire social order, becoming an integral part of the systems and artefacts that we create.[54] This plague of the concentrationary is with us now and will always be with us.

Science fiction addresses such disruptions in the social order by projecting contemporary conditions into the future and thus opening up unique spaces – speculative formulations which are unavailable to historical fiction and documentary – that allow us to consider the various potential end results of the historical processes at work in the maintenance and infinite continuation of a malignant political and cultural status quo. The speculative and rhetorical nature of science fiction enables exploration of formal and philosophical dimensions associated with the concentrationary that may otherwise be out of reach. The science-fictional speculations at play in *High Life* couple the uncertainty and inherently violent processes associated with space travel and the black hole phenomenon with the effects of incarceration and invocations of

[53] Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman, "Series Preface – Concentrationary Memories: The Politics of Representation," in *Concentrationary Imaginaries: Tracing Totalitarian Violence in Popular Culture* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2015), xvii.

[54] Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman, "Introduction: Concentrationary Cinema," in *Concentrationary Cinema: Aesthetics as Political Resistance in Alain Resnais's* Night and Fog *(1955)*, ed. Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman (New York: Berghahn, 2011), 18; Silverman, "Lazarus," 5. David Rousset warns that "the existence and the mechanism of that crisis [the concentration camp] were inherent in the economic and social foundations of capitalism and imperialism. Under a new guise, similar effects may reappear tomorrow. There remains therefore a very specific war to be waged. The lessons learned from the concentration camps provide a marvellous arsenal for that war." Rousset is not the only camp survivor to have issued such forewarnings; see also Primo Levi, Robert Antelme, and Jean Cayrol, to name just a few. In the form of films like *High Life* and others, contemporary artists continue to warn us of the latent potential in our society for crises like the Holocaust to occur again and again.

traumatic historical memory. By doing so the film is uniquely enabled to investigate not only the oblivion of existential erasure and negation shared by the black hole and the concentration camp, but also narrative disruption and issues of trauma and witnessing – all of which are linked to the concentrationary. At the heart of their analysis, Pollock and Silverman pose the question: "[C]an a concentrationary legacy be located in post-war and contemporary popular culture in the form of an unconscious and politically unprocessed concentrationary imaginary?" (2015, p. xvi). On my reading, *High Life* is a film of disruption that, with its dreamlike formal structure, its oneiric aesthetic, its evocations of the sublime, as well as its enigmatic narrative content, attempts to process a correlation between historical trauma and the totalitarian elements of contemporary culture that suggest the notion of the concentrationary.

In her own words Claire Denis has given a clear indication of this correlation and thus an affirmative response to the fundamental question posed by Pollock and Silverman. In an interview with *Cinema Scope* magazine, Denis commented that Doctor Dibs (the character played by Binoche), who in the narrative conducts the reproductive medical experiments on the crew, is not a mad scientist character, as some have suggested, but is, according to film critic Adam Nayman, "a Kapo in a concentration camp."[55] This statement, provocative to say the least, invites us to investigate the ways in which the hierarchies established in the narrative warrant Denis' description of one of the film's key characters and to contemplate how the film evokes or represents the image of the concentration camp. Aside from the medical experiments conducted on the ship, there are other narrative parallels that would seem to validate this comparison – everyone on the ship is a criminal, each of them convicted of some crime or other (the nature of these crimes is never disclosed to the viewer; with the exception of Monte who, as a child,

[55] Adam Nayman, "Soft and Hard: Claire Denis on *High Life*," *Cinema Scope*, January 2, 2019, https://cinema-scope.com/features/soft-and-hard-claire-denis-on-high-life/.

bludgeoned a young girl to death with a rock) and each of them sentenced to death. Likewise, criminality – mere existence being the crime – was one of many reasons used by the Nazis for imprisonment in the camps. In addition, the environment that locates the narrative – outer space – also evokes a particular aspect of the concentrationary: everyday life for the prisoners onboard the ship, removed from a strictly localized context, is moving through an inhuman, uninhabitable space that is hostile to human life. There is but a layer of metal between the prison-crew and the perilous vacuum of space – an existential menace that, in this context, exists perpetually alongside everyday life, as does death for the victim of the concentration camp.[56]

A montage sequence that brings together flashbacks of unidentified freighthoppers on a train (suggestive of the internee transports used by the Nazis), people in prison cells, a child in a police interrogation room, and a dog being violently dragged around on a leash – an invocation of senseless violence and control that may also metaphorically equate the prisoners to animals – is accompanied by a voiceover of Monte describing himself and his fellow space prisoners. "We were scum," he laments, "Trash. Refuse that didn't fit into the system." – reminiscent of Nazi rhetoric pertaining to the collection and effective disposal of European Jews and other minority groups who were the targets of the Third Reich's genocidal mission. On the ship the film's characters are not just prisoners, they are also the ship's crew, slave laborers. They do all of the work on the ship under an ever-watchful eye – an entity that much like the boss figure in many a modern, exploitative wage-labor oriented organizational hierarchy (evidence of the concentrationary plague that is an integral part of the systems we create is all around us) could be likened to the commandant in a Nazi concentration camp. At the top of the ship's hierarchy is a

[56] Max Silverman, "Concentrationary Art and the Reading of Everyday Life: (In)Human Spaces in Chantal Akerman's Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975)," in *Concentrationary Art: Jean Cayrol, the Lazarean and the Everyday in Post-war Film, Literature, Music and the Visual Arts*, ed. Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman (London: I.B. Taurus, 2019), 127.

computer that keeps the prisoner-crew on a 24-hour cycle of terror by turning off the ship's life support once per day until a report is registered by the prisoner in charge, who is effectively the Kapo.[57] As previously mentioned, the prisoners were not told the truth about their journey when they agreed to go – the implication is that they were led to believe that once their mission was complete they would return to Earth and be set free – akin to the promises of relocation that the Nazis often made when Jews and other prisoners were taken to the concentration camps. Once the journey begins, they discover that the length of their journey will not be measured merely in months or years but in decades, thus there will be no return to Earth in their lifetimes. For them, the only escape from this prison ship will be death.

Like the hierarchies in concentration camps spoken of in the documentary films *Shoah* (1985), *Death Mills* (1945), and *Night and Fog* (1956), there is a comparable hierarchy amongst the prisoners in *High Life* that, below the computer (the commandant in this scenario) and Doctor Dibs (the Kapo), is very difficult to discern. It is clear that at least one other character – who refers to herself as "the pilot" – enjoys the privilege of *not* being subjected to medical experimentation and that some prisoners have more power than others, but it seems as if they are the only ones who know what that hierarchy is. These arbitrary hierarchies are similar to those recounted in memoirs written by camp survivors who describe them as nebulous systems of power, one of the purposes of which was to cause infighting amongst the prisoners as they competed for resources and favor, distracting them from the exploitations of which they,

[57] Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 82. In this respect, the ship may be seen as a representation of the future apex of what Mbembe refers to as "the high-tech tools of late modern terror" that the state uses to aid in enacting its necropolitical agenda. With its own intelligence, the ship is the ultimate realization of the goals of the contemporary surveillance state – to surveil as well as to exert totalitarian control over the processes of life and death. The derelict condition of the ship in the film seems like a fitting visual commentary on the moral corruption inherent in the late-modern development and application of technology.

collectively, were all victims.[58] Effectively, nonsensical power structures served to further isolate prisoners who already existed in a state of remove from the living world and the work the prisoners did in the camps often had little, if any, purpose other than the systematic destruction of their humanity.[59] In the camps "we were nowhere" writes Emmanuel Levinas, "we were no longer part of the world."[60] Primo Levi even described the camps as "black holes" of existence.[61] The prisoner-crew in *High Life* shares a fate similar to that of the internees in the concentration camps – torture and totalizing dehumanization, followed by existential oblivion and historical effacement[62] brought on by the black hole.

The oblivion brought on by the concentration camps, of memory and of lived experience, may be likened to that of dreaming, one of the main components of which is oblivion. This aspect of concentrationary memory is attested to by internees who, upon liberation from the camps, reported being unable to accept that what they had just experienced could have been real. For the survivor, the camp was a black hole from which words and memories could not escape, "un trou noir" declares Alexis Nouss in *Mémoire et survie*, "un désastre. En dehors de l'histoire, en dehors du réel, en dehors de langage."[63] It is as though the survivors were waking from a

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[58] David Rousset, *A World Apart*, trans. Yvonne Moyse and Roger Senhouse (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), 50.; Rousset, *A World Apart*, 46. Rousset describes this environment within the camps: "[T]he camps themselves were not favorable to political discussions. The criminals had nothing but scorn for such matters, and the mental outlook of most of the prisoners was entirely absorbed in their obsession with food … Mistrust affected the relationship between the internees and severely restricted any exchange of opinion." He explains further that there was 'no question of human feelings' in the camps. "The internees lived under social conditions which did not admit of such considerations."

[59] Griselda Pollock, "Concluding Remarks," in Concentrationary Art: Jean Cayrol, the Lazarean and the Everyday in Post-war Film, Literature, Music and the Visual Arts, ed. Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman (London: I.B. Taurus, 2019), 236.

[60] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 153.

[61] Primo Levi, *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, trans. Sharon Wood (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 262.

[62] See Crim, *Planet Auschwitz,* p. 189, in which he discusses the concentrationary in the HBO series *Westworld*.

[63] Alexis Nouss, "Mémoire et survie: une lecture de Paul Celan," *Études françaises* 34, no. 1 (1998): 87, https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/etudfr/1998-v34-n1-etudfr1087/036093ar/.

particularly vivid nightmare, the details of which were so illogical and elusive as to be incommunicable in any logical or even believable way. Likewise, dreamers find it difficult to logically recount from memory even the most vivid of dreams. While many remember nothing of their dreams, to such an extent that they do not accept the fact that they dream at all.[64] For the victims of the Nazi concentration camp "[l]ogic and morality," writes Primo Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved*, "made it impossible to accept an illogical and immoral reality."[65] What the prisoners had experienced became for them "a kind of infinite, untransmittable knowledge,"[66] lost forever in the *trou noir* of the concentration camp.

The Black Hole and the Concentration Camp

It is not just the nature of the confinement, the ship itself, the experiments, the hierarchies, and the dreamlike blurring of the boundaries between states of sleep and wakefulness that evoke notions of the concentrationary. So too might the black hole phenomenon itself connote certain similarities with the effects of what was experienced within the concentration camps. The intended human effects of the world created by the Nazis within the camps are not, figuratively speaking, entirely dissimilar to the effects that a black hole might have on a human's existence.[67] There can be no human meaning in a black hole. A voyage into a

[64] Rascaroli, "Oneiric Metaphor," 6.
[65] Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 127.
[66] Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, trans. Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (Marlboro, VT: The Marlboro Press, 1992), 289.
[67] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (London: Meridian Books, 1958), 444. To clarify, I am not equating anything at all to life as it was experienced in the Nazi concentration camps. Arendt attests to the incomparable nature of that experience. "There are no parallels to the life in the concentration camps," she observes. "Its horror can never be fully embraced by the imagination for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death." I am formulating an abstraction here in which the black hole phenomenon, which also stands outside of life and death, would assert an existential effect that stands to obliviate the human.

black hole is an evacuation of all ideologies, projects, experiments, philosophies. The black hole phenomenon signifies the non-existence of all human notions.[68] It either contradicts all knowledge or negates it by erasing existence altogether (which is perhaps why Einstein contradictorily asserted that black holes *must* exist while also refusing to allow himself to believe in their existence).[69] For the prisoners of the Nazi concentration camps the outside world ceased to exist the moment they entered the camps – their histories, their works, their possessions, their own bodies were no longer their own. They could make claim to no life before or beyond the camps. *L'univers concentrationnaire*, David Rousset's account of his own experience as a prisoner in a concentration camp, attests to the way that conditions within the camps would have brought this about. Within the camps, the Jew was, Rousset observes:

> a natural-born, predestined, non-assimilable heretic, doomed to Apocalyptic hell-fire. Death by itself was therefore not the complete answer. Expiation alone would bring satisfaction and appease the Great Lords of the Master Race. The concentration camps were the astonishing and complex means of expiation. Those who had to die went to their protracted death at a carefully calculated pace, so that their physical and moral degeneration, induced step by step, at last brought home to them the fact that they were creatures accurst, incarnations of Evil, and not human beings.[70]

For the Third Reich, the death of the Jewish body was not enough. Nothing short of existential annihilation could bring about their desired purgation. The Nazis were actively attempting to rewrite history as if the prisoners had never existed. Although it does so with none of the intent,

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[68] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 68.
[69] The presence in the universe of the black hole event is itself a contradiction of knowledge, as its existence appears to defy the physical laws of the universe.
[70] Rousset, *A World Apart*, 64.

the black hole phenomenon in *High Life* brings the same oblivion to its victims. Moreover, as humanity's last hope for survival (as implied by the narrative), the prisoner-crew's demise also brings oblivion to the sum total of human Being.

Once the prisoners in *High Life* enter the black hole, there is no going back, there is no escape. There may be existence of some kind *on the other side* (which, as far as is currently theorized, would mean to have one's mass entirely deconstructed and to then join with the black hole, becoming indistinguishable from its density), but it would not be life as they (nor we) know it. By the same token, as soon as the prisoner entered a Nazi concentration camp, there was no going back, there was no escape. There were some who survived the concentration camps, including those like Rousset, who lived to write books about their experiences. But there was no going back. And one should take care not to conflate *survival* with *escape* – many prisoners survived the camps, but one might argue that none of them escaped. Because the camp, as an entity, had come to dwell within the normalcy of quotidian life, even liberation could not bring an end to the death-in-life existence that characterized victims' everyday lived experience.[71] None of the victims were freed from the enduring effects of the camps. Nor are any of us – we can never escape the concentrationary present, forever haunted as it is, by a catastrophic past.[72] Rousset makes it clear that the concentration camp "continues to live on like a death star loaded with corpses."[73] The prison-ship in *High Life* is itself a kind of death star, inhabited by a living-dead prison-crew, each of them waiting for their turn at the black hole and the oblivion that it holds in store. A black hole and its traumatic effects would be inescapable and infinitely everlasting, so too are the traumas of the concentration camp. The density of a black hole and

[71] Pollock, "Concluding Remarks," 240.
[72] Silverman, "Lazarus," 9.
[73] Rousset, *A World Apart*, 109.

the existential void that its event horizon obscures from view attract everything in the surrounding universe towards it. Likewise do the terrors and traumas of the concentration camps have a density and gravity of their own, forever calling us back, attracting our gaze from the present and the future, and from the many histories yet to unfold.

Like the black hole, *High Life* resists the forces of cause and effect and the continuity of traditional narrative progression, necessarily producing a fractured story. The past, the present, and what may be the future in *High Life* do not seem to necessarily exist as literally separate temporalities, but rather as multiple dimensions of a very pregnant now. It is as if the gravitational attraction of the approaching black hole is folding time in on itself, at least from the perspective of the film's characters, but also in some way from the perspective of the audience. Time is formally and narratively disrupted in *High Life* by traumatic flashbacks, narrative ellipses, and discontinuous sequencing. As part of his discussion in *Afterimage: Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust* of the Sidney Lumet film *The Pawnbroker* (1964), Joshua Hirsch notes, "Formal disruption … is no mere aesthetic experiment; it is the cinematic symptom of a disruption in history" (2004: 109). If formal characteristics of disruption are principal elements of the concentrationary – as they are according to not only Hirsch, but also Pollock and Silverman – then *High Life* can indeed be considered a concentrationary film, not only in aspects of its narrative, but also in its form.

Bringing in the Despair: Flashbacks and Witnessing

To watch this film is to immerse oneself in a portrayal of the not-so-distant future that is, at the very least, an enigmatic one – paradoxically as nightmarish as it is serene. Aspects of the film's visual aesthetic lend a sense of calm – crucial scenes are awash in warm, glowing ambers

Figure 7. Doctor Dibs (Juliette Binoche) in blue. *High Life*, directed by Claire Denis (2018, Andrew Lauren Productions), Amazon Streaming.

or suffused with shades of electric blue (see fig. 7). This calming effect is made all the more remarkable when juxtaposed against the film's temporal disruptions and violent outbursts. The near future that is laid out in *High Life* bears the traces of residual memories and of residual histories which, in this case, originate from our real-world present. Denis draws on the impossible limitlessness of space – more specifically on the unknown boundlessness of the black hole phenomenon – juxtaposed with the terror of confinement to craft a sublime aesthetic meditation on the violence and trauma characteristic of the post-industrial human experience. The traumatic events depicted in *High Life* are both individual and collective traumas. The crew members are traumatized at the level of the individual (by their own actions as well as those of others) and as a collective assemblage of incarcerated victims. The bodily nature of the traumas depicted on the screen – the rape, the beatings, the stab wounds inflicted with broken pieces of

glass, not to mention the terrorizing deformation of spaghettification – coupled with Denis' use of close-ups and rapid cuts in sequencing renders the violence in a particularly intimate way that turns the passive viewer into a helpless witness. Indeed, sitting through this film may bring the viewer to feel as if they have become a member of this collective of trauma.[74] At times, the viewing experience can even feel like an act of self-torture, the sense of which is heightened by virtue of the agita brought on by perplexing discontinuity accompanied by a soundtrack that juxtaposes oppressive silences with ear-shattering cries. All of which is underpinned by the brutal low-range throb of the film's sound mass that often seems to hover just below the surface of the audible, as if to constantly and subtly provoke unease, a mounting sense of irritation and dread.[75]

The film's aesthetic characteristics and the sublime effects they produce bring into relief the film's principal themes of loss, violence, inexpressible grief, and the profound, everlasting effects of traumatizing experience. In these ways, one might say that with this film Denis has not strayed far from familiar territory. Although she does not typically find her subject matter amongst the terrors of confinement, usually preferring the vast openness of colonial landscapes or the eroticism of the bourgeois Parisian domicile, this time the backdrop is instead a prison vessel traveling through the infinite void of obsidian-black space. Like most of her films, *High*

[74] Joshua Hirsch, *Afterimage: Film, Trauma, and the* Holocaust (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 16. Hirsch suggests that while there may be no direct evidence of "film-induced trauma" or "direct trauma" it may be possible that "film viewing can lead to symptoms of posttraumatic stress."
[75] Chelsea Douglas et al, "Auditory Scene Analysis and the Perception of Sound Mass in Ligeti's Continuum," *Music* Perception 33, no. 3 (2016): 287. Sound mass occurs when a musical composition attempts to eliminate the characteristics that distinguish music from noise, privileging timbre, or tonal quality, over discrete variations in pitch. Douglas, et al. explain: "Sound mass exists when the individual identities of multiple sound events or components are attenuated and subsumed into a perceptual whole, which nevertheless retains an impression of multiplicity […] attaining a degree of density, complexity, and/or homogeneity that is perceived as saturation. This phenomenon may be observed in the perception of many everyday sounds such as shattering glass, swarming insects, and rustling leaves." The use of sound mass in film has become something of a trend. For some notable examples, see the films of Greek filmmaker Yorgos Lanthimos.

Life is, in one of its many dimensions, a story of brutal physical and emotional trauma. But it's also a continuation of Denis' historical archaeology, exploring the destruction wrought by the longstanding French colonial resource extraction project which, as her films show us, did not end with the death of the colonial Empire.[76] In Denis' own words, "The history of colonisation cannot disappear."[77]

High Life is a film that focuses not only on the continuation of France's historically extractive colonial economics, but Denis now extends those extractive processes to include the incarceration of and control over the colonizing body via the traumatizing mechanisms of forced reproduction and the violence implicit in non-consensual experimentation. A colonialism that once focused on expansive extraction and the assertion of power over life, here turns itself inward. It goes deep into the mind and the body, making the self the target of its destructive extractionary politics. In this formulation, the colonialist project becomes an increasingly necropolitical one, no longer oriented merely towards control over who gets to live and who must die, but now towards the annihilation of the self, which may well mean the extinction of what makes human *human*. Without the self there would be no individual agency, no autonomy, because the self would cease to exist, and thus no longer be present to exercise any concept of freedom. In Achille Mbembe's notion of the necropolitical, there is a movement pushing the liberal democracies of the world away from mere expansionary pursuits towards a politics in

[76] This is exemplified in Denis' films *Chocolat* (1988), *Beau Travail* (1999), and *White Material* (2009).
[77] Hermione Eyre, "Claire Denis on filmmaking and feminism," *Prospect Magazine*, June 21, 2010, https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/culture/54214/claire-denis-on-filmmaking-and-feminism.
Extractive colonialism in the context of French science fiction is further discussed in each of the following chapters. The primary texts that feature in this study each have, at the very least, a colonial subtext. This shared characteristic provides a kind of evidentiary support for my assertion, mentioned several times throughout this work, to do with the continuation and inward expansion of France's extractive colonial politics. Of course, this could only be proven by a much more extensive assessment of a larger body of French science fictions, but it does seem more than coincidental here, even if the limited scope of my project relegates my assertions to the realm of the anecdotal.

which those democracies no longer seek only to "exercise dictatorship over … their enemies"[78] as they did in the past. Rather, their aim has now become to also exert that destructive, totalizing authoritarian power over themselves. The inversion of the colonial that I am suggesting in *High Life* would in some respect perhaps go further than Mbembe's necropolitics because it is no longer just about control over who lives, who dies, and how they live and die.[79] It is here about an annihilation of the self within the living that seeks to go beyond the elimination of individual freedom to the eradication of its existential possibility. So too did the Nazi concentration camps have the total "destruction of moral subjectivity, the possibility for action and the capacity for thought," and thus of the sum total of the self, as their goal.[80] Ultimately, the journey in *High Life*, the experiments, the confinement, the prisoner-crew's knowledge that they will never be free, the violence, the psychological and physical traumas of light-speed space travel, all of it compounds to result in the demolition of the prisoners' humanity. "Earth was fucked. We were fucked, too. The mission. Everything was fucked." This is how Monte expresses the realization of the results of these destructive processes – an ultimate, totalizing despair.

The status of the prisoners in the film as self-possessing humans and thus their moral standing is brought to ruins by the destructive politics of their carceral space mission – as Monte refers to it: "Our first-class suicide ride."[81] There is no escape for these prisoners, not from their annihilationist present nor from the haunting traumas of their violent pasts. The meandering flashbacks that punctuate the narrative – rather than introduce flashbacks with dialogic cues and

[78] Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 2.
[79] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 80.
[80] Pollock, "Concluding Remarks," 236.
[81] Monte's statement here is a mischaracterization of his fate. He and the other prisoners may have chosen to participate in this voyage rather than stay in prison on Earth – not exactly a true exercise of freedom of choice – but they were deceived as to the end results. This is not suicide. This is murder at the hands of the state – necropolitics in action.

dissolves, Denis abruptly cuts to them without any explanation or narrative context – allow the characters to maintain contact with their pasts, which considering their circumstances, may seem to them to be more real than their present realities.[82] The illogical presentation of these flashbacks is reminiscent of a dreamer's attempt to recount the details of a dream after waking from it, and the greater the length of time that passes between the dream and the telling of it, the more illogical the fragments of the dream and its narrative re-presentation become. The flashbacks in *High Life* seem to reflect a similar effort to impose a narrative onto memories of events occurring in the increasingly distant past.

The narrative that wants to speculate on future outcomes (for the characters in the film as much as for all of humanity, in both diegetic and extradiegetic contexts), thus allowing for the realization of the unique representational and analytical opportunities afforded by the science fiction genre, does so by presenting constant references to the past – fictional pasts from the supposed perspectives of individual characters as well as real-world historical pasts. Here, flashbacks link the past to the narrative present and in so doing aid in connecting the past-in-the-present to the future, as well – an essential characteristic of science fiction – thus extending indefinitely the life of the concentrationary. The real-world past invoked in *High Life* renders the narrative's fictive present all the more believable, giving credibility to the events and circumstances in the film as a believable "pre-history of the future"[83] in our real world, beyond the film's narrative confines. The reasons for Monte's journey may be open to speculation on the part of the viewer, but the real-world past associated, via images of television broadcasts from Earth that appear sporadically on television monitors placed around the ship, gives

[82] Silverman, "Lazarus," 5.
[83] Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven Beauties*, 6.

credence to whatever speculative reasons we might come up with.[84] The nature of these broadcasts seems to imply that the characters in *High Life* have the same social/cultural history that we do. It is then reasonable for us to theorize that our present could potentiate a future similar to that presented in the narrative (in itself a traumatizing potentiality). The images from Earth that appear on these screens – note that in the film they are not referred to as television shows, news, sporting events, or movies but as "images", thus evoking the description of a dream rather than a signal broadcast – are all, owing to relativity, history by the time they reach the prison ship, ersatz manifestations of a world that no longer exists. I would argue that they are testimony, a kind of witnessing. They're proof that the real-world past exists in the narrative's fictive present. The effect here is that life on Earth, even in times long-since gone by, ceases to be separated from the prisoners' lives in deep space, many years and millions of miles away. The present in this film is a transformation into science fiction of not only our contemporary experiences and anxieties but also of historical traumas. This is reflective of a key aspect of the concentrationary in that the traumatic past exists alongside the present of everyday life. The concentrationary is an integral part of the systems and artefacts that we create,[85] thus the present constructed in *High Life* is also a transformation of the enduring historical traumas of the Nazi concentration camps into science fiction.

Memories of the traumatic past and the scars – physical and psychological – left by those traumas, interrupt the narrative by way of non-sequential intermittent flashbacks that, given their non-traditional formal presentation, might just as well be dreams, nightmares, or perhaps even

[84] One image in particular that repeats several times throughout the film is of a scene from a 1914 film, *In the Land of the Headhunters* – a white settler "ethnographic" film – does some very heavy lifting, indicating that although this is a science fiction film, it is also a film about colonialism and resource extraction.
[85] Pollock and Silverman, "Introduction," 18.

fantasies, the violent products of a death row inmate's errant daydreams. The viewer cannot be certain. Nor can we be certain who exactly is having them. The location of a flashback in the narrative structure does not necessarily provide a framework indicating to whom the flashback belongs. The scene may cut from prolonged solemn focus on Monte's face to what appears to be a flashback, but there is no indication of his presence in whatever place and time the flashback (memory, dream, nightmare) is occurring. The purpose of this ambiguity remains unclear. Yet these flashbacks, in particular some of those that seem to be most closely associated with Monte, are shot from a first-person perspective, giving the impression that this particular traumatic event is being witnessed first-hand by the viewer, even perhaps going so far as to suggest that this is in fact the viewer's own memory. Denis herself explained that these flashbacks contributing to the film's non-linear sequencing are intended to "bring in all the despair."[86] The use of formal techniques to invoke traumatic historical memory and to recreate the experience of witnessing is a crucial aspect of concentrationary cinema. It is as if Denis intended for the images presented in flashback to not only represent the narrative traumatization of the characters on the screen, but to also reproduce the trauma in the viewer's own mind, as if they had seen it first-hand, or perhaps even been a victim themselves. In their text on testimony and witnessing as it relates to literature and the Holocaust, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub suggest this very notion: The witness to the testimony of trauma "comes to be a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself."[87] Therefore, the witness to the traumatic testimony, they go on to explain, "by definition partakes of the struggle of the victim with the

[86] Dan Schindel, "Claire Denis on Black Holes, Olafur Eliasson, and the Making of *High Life*," *Hyperallergic*, April 16, 2019, https://hyperallergic.com/495099/claire-denis-on-black-holes-olafur-eliasson-and-the-making-of-high-life/.
[87] Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History (New York: Routledge, 1992), 57.

memories and residues of his or her traumatic past."[88] Via the viewer the narrativized traumas in *High Life* reoccur again and again with each new spectator. The influence of the concentrationary on the configuration of these cinematic traumas brings into representation the historical occurrence of the concentration camp, contributing to its unending reoccurrence.

The confusion over what is real and what is not, what is flashback and what is fantasy, and exactly which traumatic past the viewer is participating in, is somewhat fitting considering the setting – on a space prison cum research vessel millions of miles from earth that is traveling towards a black hole at ninety-nine percent the speed of light. In such a context one might not only experience a distortion of sensory input that confuses the conscious appearance and sensation of the material universe but might also have a little trouble discerning the past from the present, reality from a dream, a memory of the past from a vision of the future. This distortion of temporal, spatial, and cognitive frontiers muddles the qualities of wakeful consciousness with the oblivion of dreamful sleep – all induced by the insomniac, carceral atmosphere that exists within the confines of the prison-ship as well as by the vastness of space, an imperceptible oblivion, beyond the vessel's thin walls. For Monte and his fellow inmate-crewmembers, the warped consciousness precipitated by traveling through hyperspace results in a kind of temporal and cognitive dysphoria that effectuates a waking-dream state in which the contours of reality may become difficult to comprehend and the assumption of a linear progression of time may be challenged. The flashbacks key the viewer into these diegetic distortions by confusing the spectator's sense of the narrative logic. As he stares out into space through the ship's observation window, Monte sums up these distortions in a lyrical account of his own observation: "At ninety-nine percent the speed of light, the entire sky converged before our eyes.

[88] Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 57.

This sensation – moving backwards even though we're moving forwards, getting farther from what's getting nearer. Sometimes I just can't stand it."[89] In the context of *High Life*'s proposed science-fictional representation of the concentrationary, Monte describes here his vertiginous reaction to the mission's need for constant movement. The only chance these prisoners have for survival, nay for the implied survival of humanity, is to keep traveling towards the black hole, which perversely offers them the potential for sustained life at the expense of life itself.[90] Monte's articulation also describes the trompe l'œil effects that light speed travel would perhaps have on the human sensory apparatus, theoretically causing a blurring of perception and of perspective, mimicking the aforementioned obscuring of reality and dream.[91]

The narrative's jarring timeline-induced whiplash and the space-distortion-induced disequilibrium of constant sublight travel that Monte describes make sense for a film about, at least in part, the attempted exploitative anatomization of a black hole. Monte's description of the disruptive effects of light speed travel on human perspective also functions as an apt, albeit abstract, description of the structure of the film – the narrative starts out in the present (Monte's

[89] This is not the first time we've heard this kind of trompe l'oeil effect expressed in one of Denis' films. In *Chocolat* (1988), a semi-autobiographical film about a family living in colonial Cameroon, François Cluzet's character says, of the impression given by gazing into the distant Cameroonian horizon: " … quand la terre touche le ciel, exactement, c'est l'horizon … Plus tu t'approches de cette ligne, plus elle s'éloigne. Si tu marches vers elle, elle s'éloigne. Elle te fuit … Tu vois cette ligne. Tu la vois, elle n'existe pas." (" … right where the earth touches the sky, that's the horizon … The closer you get to that line, the further away it moves. If you walk towards it, it retreats. It backs away from you … you see the line. You see it, yet it doesn't exist.")

[90] This could also be interpreted as a commentary on the dizzying effects of the rapid, unrelenting forward march of modern "progress." For more on the necessity for constant motion and the link between the future of the world and the destiny of Being, see Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, pp. 3 and 28.

[91] Bing Zhang, "Astronomy at the Speed of Light: Future space probes traveling at relativistic velocities would doffer a unique vantage point for studying the universe," *Scientific American*, July 3, 2018, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/astronomy-at-the-speed-of-light/. The cinematic representation of the human perception of space during interstellar travel is achieved in *High Life* by a special effect that causes the foreground to recede while the background dilates and advances, effectively causing a vertiginous blurring of space within the visual field. The film's visual effect here is perhaps not too far afield from what might be experienced in reality.

present, our speculative near-future) and as time moves forward, flashbacks constantly take us back, always moving us towards the future from the present while simultaneously reaching towards the past, as if the film is persistently asking us to question the perceived distinctions between past, present, and future, between speculative fiction and lived reality, between the presence of wakeful being and the oblivion of sleep.

The Obscurities Beyond

By the end of *High Life* there is no one left alive. After an assumed entry into a black hole (an occurrence which should have resulted in death via the aforementioned spaghettification) that is the mission's intended destination – note that this aspect of the journey is never shown on screen, it is only inferred – Monte and Willow are shown standing together, seemingly alive, space helmets removed, awash in the film's trademark, mysteriously sourceless, Caravaggesque amber glow – where are they exactly? And how are they standing when we just saw them board a vessel with seating-room only? Questions that can only remain unanswered. When Monte turns to his daughter and suggestively ends the film with the words, 'Shall we?' the tone he strikes and the close-up on his face as he speaks leave us wondering for whom exactly his entreaty is intended. Who is this solicited *we*? And shall we *what* precisely? At the narrative level it would seem obvious that "we" refers to the two characters on screen. However, discontinuity and obscurity are the hallmarks here and so the meaning of Monte's question and to whom it is truly directed are beyond the bounds of determinate interpretation – *omnium exeunt in mysterium*, as is the case in much of Denis' body of work. I would argue, nonetheless, that the end of the film presents us with a paradox. On the one hand, the narrative seems to imply that the fate of humanity is tied to the fate of this prison-crew and the outcome of their mission – if

they do not succeed, which was never a possibility from the start, human existence will soon come to an end, humanity having depleted and/or spoiled the last of the Earth's resources. With the death of the crew and the failure of their mission comes the end of human Being. On the other hand, Monte's last words, "Shall we?" seem to imply that this is not the end, there is a new beginning awaiting them beyond the reality of their destruction via the forces of the black hole, which perhaps becomes, for Monte and Willow and thus for humanity, the only place that grants access to life beyond the ravages of the concentrationary. In this light, the black hole is, akin to Felman and Laub's notion of the black hole of memory and silence created by traumatic experience, the "concentration of death, [that] is also the concentration of life."[92] In keeping with its liminal obfuscations, Denis denies us – the characters and the viewer – a resolution to the film's many traumas.

In an essay on post-war American science fiction "Imperfect Futures and Ominous Imaginaries," Sherryl Vint argues that dystopian science fiction films have a structural difficulty they must confront, which is the kind of resolution that cinema typically wants to enforce. "Cinematic closure tends toward endings that suggest a single cathartic decision or decisive agent can remake sedimented systematic injustice in a moment, prompting us to question how much dystopian film simply reconciles us to the very inequities it critiques. It often provides emotionally satisfying but imaginary resolutions to real – and ongoing – problems."[93] With *High Life* Denis confronts this limitation in cinema. She gives us an ending that is something like half of a resolution, a partial satisfaction – we see father and daughter standing together, seemingly alive, even after they have, it is assumed, flown their vessel beyond the black hole's event

[92] Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 65.
[93] Sherryl Vint, "Imperfect Futures and Ominous Imaginaries," in *Future Imperfect: Science Fiction Film*, ed. Rainer Rother and Annika Schaefer (Berlin: Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, 2017), 34.

horizon, an act which cannot be survived (at least not in the way we understand survival). Despite the real-world 'knowledge' that the human body could not withstand the stresses of a black hole's density, Monte's provocative utterance, "Shall we?" may be Denis' suggestion of the (slim) possibility of some form of transcendence, or a tacit recognition (that is also a refusal) of the desire for cinematic resolution.

High Life employs a concentrationary logic, showing us that the traumatic events of the past do not stay in the past. The monster that is trauma, that is fascism (which by the nature of the mechanisms that enable its rise is a globally traumatizing process), does not just die and stay dead. Trauma is an undead zombie colossus that does and will inevitably rise again and again and again. For the victims of trauma, the traumatic event is never adequately described in the past tense because it is always a recurrence in the present of "the historical occurrence of an event that, in effect, *does not end* [emphasis in original],"[94] a menace that forever haunts the future. If the timeline in this film is difficult, well nigh impossible to determine, that is because the past traumas to which it might be referring are not in the past for the victim, nor for the witness, who both bear the burden of the traumatic, traumatizing historical reference. Nor is the concentrationary universe relegated to the past. The concentrationary is at play in *High Life*, but the film rejects the label of mere entertainment (perhaps evidenced by its poor audience reception) and so does not, I suggest, participate in the ongoing normalization of the logic of the concentrationary – which, according to Pollock and Silverman, is at risk when the concentrationary is engaged in popular culture. By cinematically representing a "time and place [that] are haunted by an elsewhere, and life is permanently haunted by death," *High Life* makes of itself an unsettling example of concentrationary cinema that "does the work of warning

[94] Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 67.

performed by an agitating, ever-anxious and haunting memory of a past."[95] The aim of this work is to recognize via its dreamlike mode of cinematic representation "the contamination of everyday life by an alienating concentrationary logic" and to "make us vigilant against [its] normalization."[96] In this respect, *High Life* succeeds.

[95] Pollock and Silverman, "Series Preface," xvii.
[96] Pollock, "Concluding Remarks," 240.

The Subversive Ontology of *L'Incal*:
Jodorowsky and Mœbius Take the Nonhuman Turn

> This book is made first of pictures – the tarot playing cards – and secondly of written words. Through the sequence of the pictures stories are told, which the written word tries to reconstruct and interpret.
> - Italo Calvino, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*

> The aesthetic imagination is not strictly a human faculty, but a force of nature that courses through the human just as it courses through all things.
> - J.F. Martel, *Stay with Mystery*

> At the heart of the human is nothing human.
> - David Lapoujade, *Powers of Time*

If you were to imagine a world infused with subjectivity, where agency is not reduced solely to the human subject, who himself lives in complex relations with a world of other agents, a world in which nonhuman xenomorphs and humans join together along with sentient nonhuman phenomena in a metaphysical quest to infuse the whole of the universe with a techno-spiritual enlightenment, all with a dystopian future aesthetic clearly influenced by the 1980s, you might come up with something that looks a lot like the world built in *L'Incal*, Alejandro Jodorowsky and Mœbius' seminal comic series.[97]

The narrative opens *in medias res* with a man being thrown from a bridge (see fig. 8). Throughout the next few panels we watch as the narrative's protagonist, John DiFool, falls head

[97] Going forward, the word "incal" will be used in two different ways – *L'Incal* when referring to the text itself, and "the Incal" when referring to the object in the narrative who uses that name. I'm just footnoting this here to avoid confusion.

Figure 8. DiFool falling into the lake of acid waste. Alejandro Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal intégrale* (Los Angeles: Humanoids, Inc., 2013), 6.

first, his arms stretched before him, legs akimbo, towards the lake of acid waste that pollutes the ground level of the futuristic vertical city shaft he calls home.[98] This particular part of the crowded metropolis is known as "suicide alley," owing to the number of people who are so often seen throwing themselves from the many-storied buildings and floating pedestrian walkways that crowd the city. It makes sense, then, that the throngs of spectators watching DiFool as he falls

[98] Graeme McMillan, "Alejandro Jodorowsky Reflects on 'The Incal,' 40 Years Later," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 12, 2020. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/alejandro-jodorowsky-reflects-on-the-incal-40-years-later-4075077/. In this interview, Jodorowsky refers to this image of DiFool falling as "the most important image in the text." He explains, "For me, it [the fall] was important because it's the end of the story – he falls like this in the beginning, and he finishes like this [in the end]." This image did not appear in Mœbius' original version of the introductory series of panels. It was drawn and inserted later at Jodorowsky's insistence, which is why the page is numbered 1bis rather than 1.

Figure 9. DiFool instigates a wave of suicides.
Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 7.

would mistakenly assume, as they do, that he's killing himself. A caption in one early panel (see fig. 9) announces that DiFool's fall has inspired some amongst the witnesses to follow suit: "Comme d'habitude à 'suicide-allée une chute mortelle provoque une épidémie de suicides."[99] Despite DiFool's last-minute rescue just a few panels later, these suicides set the tone, in part, for the entirety of the journey that is to follow, characterized as it will be by a particularly fatalistic, dystopian quality – a characterization that is attested to by the fact that DiFool's epic voyage ends exactly the way it began, at the exact same moment, even. He falls towards The Great Acid Lake in the beginning, and he will do it again in the end just as he did it before. John DiFool is presented as a perpetual falling man, stuck in "a narrative circularity framed by a near-identical

[99] Alejandro Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal intégrale* (Los Angeles: Humanoids, Inc., 2013), 7.

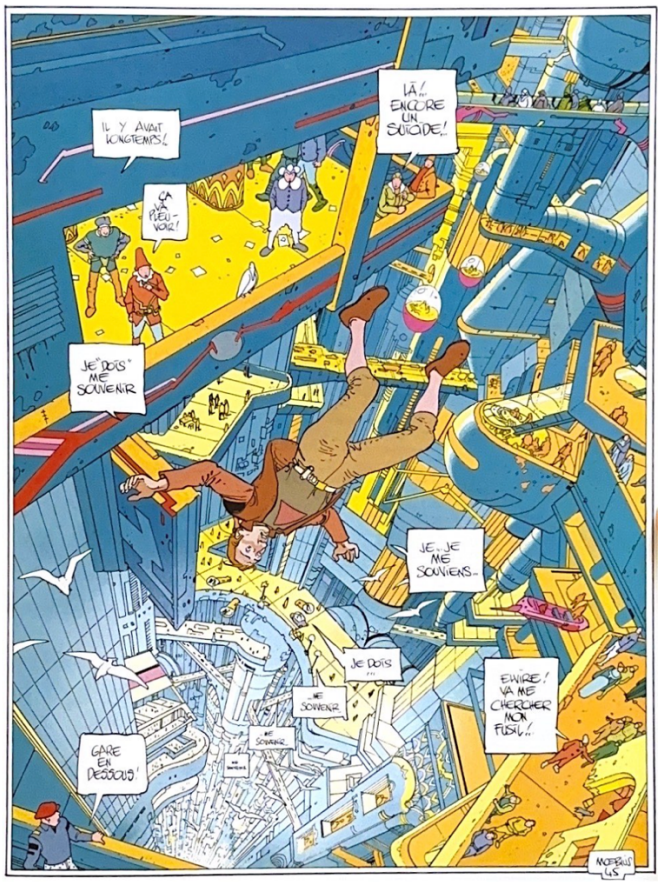

Figure 10. DiFool falls in the end, just as in the beginning.
Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 307.

beginning and end … [the] hero eternally returned to his point of departure."[100] In the text's very last panel (see fig. 10), we see DiFool in mid-fall, just moments before the rescue that we witnessed at the beginning.

Through "a vast system of intricate associations whose subtle cogs are activated by an accumulation of successive images,"[101] Jodorowsky – the Chilean-French writer, film director, and self-declared shamanic psychotherapist – and the Belgian comics artist Mœbius (the science

[100] Jean Annestay and Christophe Quillien, *Deconstructing The Incal*, trans. Montana Kane (Los Angeles: Humanoids, Inc., 2017), 6. The likeness of John DiFool to The Fool card in the Tarot will be explored later in this chapter. But it's interesting to note here, briefly, that depictions of DiFool falling in much the same way that we see at the very beginning of *L'Incal,* will be seen repetitively throughout the visual narrative and mimics the image of The Fool in the Ryder-Waite Tarot deck. In this particular deck The Fool is seen, in joyous folly, stepping off the edge of a cliff.
[101] Annestay, *Deconstructing*, 6.

fiction alias used by Jean Giraud) launch a genre-defying graphic odyssey. *L'Incal* is many texts at once, as much science-fictional conte philosophique as it is metaphysical exploration of the contemporary soul, "an analytic quest, a journey of initiation, a coming-of-age novel,"[102] all mixed with a touch of noir detective novel and a dash of roman picaresque. While *L'Incal* is not deferential to the conventions of any specific genre, it does take cues from other science fiction texts. It was first published in French in serial form from 1981-1988 in the comic book anthology series *Métal Hurlant* – a quarterly publication that was popular enough even to spawn an American version, *Heavy Metal*. An exploration of the science fiction form far beyond both Jodorowsky and Mœbius' earlier efforts, *L'Incal* is a critical text for the comics/graphic medium as much as for the science fiction genre across media. It incorporates themes of duplication, messianism, religion, and esotericism, but also characters and aesthetics from Frank Herbert's *Dune* as well as Jodorowsky's 300-page illustrated screenplay for his own film version of *Dune* – effectively a graphic novel in its own right, and an oddly iconic project considering that no filming ever actually took place.[103] The incomplete *Dune* project itself truly began its life in the panels of Jodorowsky's first comic series, the Spanish-language *Fábulas Pánicas*, published from 1967 to 1973 in the Mexican monthly cultural supplement *El Heraldo de México*. It's fair to say that *L'Incal* has a rather complex lineage, which seems only right, given the complexity of the text itself.

In his dissertation on space-time in the science fiction genre, Andrew Clark describes some of the similarities between *L'Incal* and Herbert's *Dune*, both of which take place in a multi-planetary, space-faring empire beset by constant struggles between highly-technologized

[102] Annestay, *Deconstructing*, 6.
[103] For a deep dive into the (un)making of this non-existent cinematic masterpiece, which failed, in no small part, because Jodorowsky presented potential funders with plans for a fourteen-hour epic, I recommend Frank Pavich's excellent 2013 documentary *Jodorowsky's Dune.*

opposition forces.[104] Owing to its well-documented *Dune* pedigree, the text is often and mistakenly characterized as something of an adaptation of Herbert's text. However, the differences between the two narratives are such that, as Clark explains, *L'Incal* becomes more of a "parallel process" than an adaptation.

> Jodorowsky picks up on *Dune*'s metaphysical sub-text, but in his comic it becomes super-text, an unashamedly New-Age quest for enlightenment replacing *Dune*'s ambivalence towards prophecy and religious dogma … in which a somewhat similar setting is turned to vastly different ends. [W]hereas Herbert provides broad sociological recipes for society, Jodorowsky is concerned almost exclusively with the personal and subjective … play[ing] fast and loose with time and space.[105]

Unlike Frank Herbert's tragic hero Paul Atreides, John DiFool is far more pathetic than tragic. DiFool's a stoner, an idiot (and not of the savant sort). He is in no way a messianic savior. The word *fool* is in his name (in the text's original French, as well). And yet it's these very qualities – his bumbling foolishness, his total lack of respect for any authority (out of laziness, mind you, not because of some commitment to an anarchical ideology), and the absence of any belief system at all – that make him the perfect medium for Jodorowsky's new-age odyssey, the eventual embodiment of spiritual enlightenment. In Jodorowsky's own description, DiFool is "quelqu'un d'un peu niais, d'une certaine bêtise et qui ne s'éveillera à la sagesse que peu à peu. C'est donc un nul, un zéro total[.] John DiFool est capable de tout … toujours soumis à la tentation. Il peut voler, trahir, faire n'importe quoi[.] C'est pourquoi tout peut lui arriver."[106] A

[104] Andrew Clark, "Reading Space-Time: A Chronotopic Analysis of the Science Fiction Genre" (PhD diss., The University of Auckland, 2017), 9.
[105] Clark, "Space-Time," 149.
[106] Jean Annestay, *Les Mystères de L'Incal* (Geneva: Les Humanoïdes Associés, 1989), 33.

self-aware protagonist who is already committed to an ideology would not be the right kind of hero for this particular quest. In *Dune*, it is only the savior of prophecy, the spiritually- and physically-trained, weirding descendent of a powerful religious and aristocratic elite who has any hope of saving mankind from itself. In *L'Incal*, however, it is only the fool who can transcend himself and save the whole of the universe from the encroaching darkness. When the worlds of sci-fi mythology go looking for a champion, it is the Atreides-like heroes to whom they usually turn, to those who are driven by honor, prophecy, and faithful commitment to family above all else. But not so for Jodorowsky, for whom only the one who is good at nothing can be capable of everything, precisely because of all that he lacks.[107]

The French writer Jean Annestay, in his text *Les Mystères de l'Incal* writes: "*L'Incal* parle du monde de l'esprit et de ses zones obscures, il parle des grands symboles qui régissent les cultures humaines, il parle de la société contemporaine et il parle aussi de ses propres auteurs."[108] According to Jodorowsky himself, *L'Incal* is what we're all looking for. It's how we should really live. It's who we really are. "*The Incal* is," Jodorowsky declares, "the secret of life."[109] It is no small task, indeed, for a single text – or any single artifact or cultural phenomenon, for that matter – to attempt to effectively address the fundamental notions, these "grands symboles," this primary "secret" that, according to the narrative's author, govern the whole of contemporary human culture. It makes sense then, given the high degree of complexity such an endeavor would demand, that the result would be a text that resists conforming to any one standard of interpretation, or that there is any interpretation at all at which, across the board, all readers

[107] *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert (2022, A24), Amazon Streaming. The language I'm using here is a paraphrase in a moment of dialogue in the popular film by the Daniels that works so perfectly in this description of DiFool.
[108] Annestay, *Les Mystères*, 8.
[109] *Jodorowsky's Dune*, directed by Frank Pavich (2023, Sony Pictures Classics), Amazon Streaming.

would arrive. For that matter, the text is resistant even to being interpreted the same way twice by the same reader.[110] It would also make sense to question whether Jodorowsky's claims are in any way justifiable – can a single text really and truly, not to mention *successfully*, address what is tantamount to … everything, everywhere, all at once? Does *L'Incal* ultimately succeed in legibly, let alone logically, revealing "what we're all looking for" as Jodorowsky would have it? Does the confusion and befuddlement that the narrative engenders in those who approach it speak to the complexity and profundity of its message, or is *L'Incal*, perhaps, just frankly not very well written?

"Moebius' drawings add to Jodorowsky's text a layer of meaning that is difficult to quantify, but which functions in some places as a commentary on the narrative and in others as a more direct visual representation of the esoteric and satirical themes that the writing develops."[111] The graphics are indeed transcendent and their influence on science fiction, and thus on the continuing evolution of the aesthetics and technics in the real, is undisputed. But the story itself? *L'Incal* dwells in ambiguity. It lacks any clear historical framework and moves inexplicably from one plotline to another and back again, often relying wholly on the visual plane to carry us through a bewildering labyrinth of interconnected themes. Jodorowsky's narrative is somewhat subservient, even, to Mœbius' graphics and functions "as an intermediary between the zones where the story actually happens," much like the void of outer space, "an area where time and distance are essentially meaningless."[112] While the graphics do function in

[110] New Zealand film director and actor, Taika Waititi – who was announced in November of 2021 as the screenwriter and director of the upcoming movie version of *The Incal* – says that the more you read *The Incal*, the more you experience it, the more it unlocks for you. "Sometimes I re-read it," he recently described his encounters with the text, "and I feel like I know less. Then sometimes I'll read it and I'll know twice as much as before, I'll see something that I've not seen. It's always changing for me." Waititi implies here that, at the very least, agency is indeed at stake in the narrative.
[111] Clark, "Space-Time," 151.
[112] Clark, "Space-Time," 153.

tandem with the text, they also seem to create an excess of meaning that, from panel to panel and page to page, doesn't necessarily ever find resolution. The narrative moves, graphically and textually, in a cinematic jump-cut fashion from one unresolved excess of meaning to another. These excesses produce the aforementioned "zones where the story actually happens" thus leaving the reader-cum-daydreamer to resolve these surpluses in their own imagination, effectively turning each of us into another Jodorowsky dreaming up our very own epic adaptations of *Dune*.

In this light, it might not be unjust to say that *L'Incal* is something of a mess. But even here, if one interprets the fact of resistance to interpretation as itself an active agent, in the nature of the text's untidy complexities, we find a potential challenge to the seemingly well-ordered nature of anthropocentric subject-object binaries and the human-perception bias in the recognition of agency. And why shouldn't such an agent be seen here? A great deal of cultural influence is attributed to interpretation, and thus a kind of transformative power that implicitly sees in cultural criticism a form of agency. It's only right, then, that one should also recognize at least that same degree of agency in the source text itself and in its characteristics, including its messy refusals and ornery rejections.[113] Agency, with its untidy pageantry, seems to be one of the subjects of this narrative. And not unlike the very notion of agency, *L'Incal* is an elusive text, hard to define – it might be fitting to say that agency is somehow even a protagonist here,

[113] Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 20-21. I invoke here the notion of the "mess" as offered by Bogost: "A mess is not a pile, which is neatly organized even if situated in an inconvenient place underfoot. A mess is not an elegant thing of higher order. It is not an intellectual project to be evaluated and risk-managed by waistcoat-clad underwriters. A mess is a strew of inconvenient and sometimes repellent things. A mess is an accident. A mess is a thing that you find where you don't want it. We recoil at it, yet there it is, and we must deal with it." It is this fact of having to "deal with it", in particular, that has me considering the agential potence of the mess. The Incal is a nonhuman object that, like the mess in Bogost's conception, lays itself in DiFool's path and then refuses to be ignored. A non-agent can make no such insistences. We encounter this same characteristic in nonhuman phenomena everyday.

although never named as such. The text insists that we question what agency is, or who/what gets to be an agent. It confronts our Anthropocene insistence on the binary notion of the human subject-with-agency and the nonhuman object that is granted none (other than, at most, a kind of deterministic agency).

As mentioned above, the text is highly ambiguous – generically, spiritually, agentially, existentially, subjectively, graphically. Jodorowsky and Mœbius equivocate in the text's every aspect. Any attempt to analyze the text in light of the narrative's fundamental confounding intricacies, necessitates a complex network of interpretive frameworks that (attempt to) embrace the text's contradictions and dwell in its ambiguities right along with it. Tragically, for the purposes of the critical work at hand, it is necessary to attempt to impose some order on this *dis*ordered work of art, to place it within the confines of a critical framework, while somehow respecting its narrative agency and its many refusals, resplendent as they are in graphically expressing the desire for subjective self-determination. *L'Incal* is a text that I will interpret in this chapter as ontologically subversive and anti-anthropocentric in its insistence on the nonhuman subject. My analysis of this weird text that opposes post-Enlightenment ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of existence and the linearity of time is influenced by Stacy Alaimo's exploration of material agency and trans-corporeality, by Chris Salter's study of agency in the context of experimental artworks, and by Federico Campagna's inquiry into "the implicit metaphysical assumptions that define the architecture of our reality, and that structure our contemporary existential experience."[114] We will see some of the ways in which *L'Incal* jacks into the "dematerializing networks" in Alaimo's formulation, a growing matrix of artworks, academic theories, and everyday practices that explore "the possibilities for

[114] Federico Campagna, *Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 4.

more robust and complex conceptions of the materiality of human bodies and the more-than-human world," refusing to play along with "the popular disregard for nonhuman nature."[115] *L'Incal* may count itself, as Jodorowsky would have it, among those science fictions that Alaimo credits with "the potential to perform potent cultural work" and to "recast our most basic understandings of self and world as separate entities."[116] I will suggest in this chapter that the complex level of interpretation *L'Incal* engages in the imagination of its reader is an important aspect of this "potent cultural work" and constitutes an act of, as Salter puts it, "wrestling with the agency of media," and in so doing "derail[s] anthropocentric worldviews." *L'Incal*, coupled with the interpretive processes it activates, expresses a radical allowance for existence in its many forms. In its embrace of an ontology that extends beyond the human without destroying the human, *L'Incal* places its reader in a position akin to Salter's "experimenter" who finds herself "in the presence of some new phenomenon never before seen or imagined."[117]

With those ideas as guiding inspiration, along with an analysis of historical, cultural intertextuality, and counter-cultural occultisms – namely the Tarot – I will propose that *L'Incal* is an early example of a text that practices what Richard Grusin and others in twenty-first century studies have dubbed "the nonhuman turn," the practitioners of which:

> find problematic the emphasis of constructivism on the social or cultural constructions of the human subject because, taken to its logical extreme, it strips the world of any ontological or agential status. The epistemological focus that informed much of the work of constructivism actively discouraged any discussion

[115] Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2-3.
[116] Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.
[117] Chris Salter, Alien Agency: Experimental Encounters with Art in the Making (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), xii.

> of ontology, by refusing to grant agency to nonhuman nature, organisms, or technologies.[118]

Jodorowsky and Mœbius refuse this constructivist refusal. In *L'Incal* agency abounds – human and nonhuman alike. In light of the "key assumptions of social constructivism" that the nonhuman turn rejects, DiFool's cyclical journey in the narrative may be interpreted as a nod to the "vicious circle" that social constructivism results in when it "reduce[s] the constitution of the human plane to the question of the human subject."[119]

In *L'Incal* "[p]otent ethical and political possibilities emerge from the literal [and graphic] contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature."[120] In the process, the text builds a narrative, a world replete with paradoxical worldviews – at once banishing the occult, while simultaneously placing it center stage, and in the process presenting insurmountable ontological and temporal contradictions.[121] And thus the narrative also presents challenges to interpretation that bring to light some perhaps unexpected likenesses between fiction and the esoteric, occult practices of divination. With its roots in the Tarot, *L'Incal* (along with other science fiction texts, across media) – a French-language text in its original version – participates in a tradition of occultism well-established in English-language comics, and forges a direct line of descent from magic to science fiction to the construction of the material world all

[118] Richard Grusin, "Introduction," in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xii.
[119] Grusin, "Introduction," xi.
[120] Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.
[121] Brian Baker, "The Occult and Science Fiction/Fantasy," in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (London: Routledge, 2015), 478.

around us, but also to and from that tenebrous, speculative/speculating world that resides deep within the reader's imaginative self.[122]

Along with a short précis of the narrative, many interesting details of which will be skipped owing to its complexity, the tale of the processes that gave birth to *L'Incal* will be included in the following section of this chapter. All of which is part of a larger, ongoing project, insisting that through science fiction we forge necessary, face-to-face encounters with the nonhuman who refuses to be ignored. Through these encounters we see that there can be nonhuman agency without annihilation and that we can embrace difference without destruction, thereby attaining a much-needed reorientation of perspective, and perhaps gaining crucial insight into the many urgent quandaries of the moment, those messes that refuse to be ignored, try as we may. While an anti-anthropocentric nonhumanism is crucially at play in *L'Incal*, it is certainly not the only "subtle cog" that demands to be interrogated here. The goal of this chapter is in no way to present an exhaustive account of the literature on non-human agency, nor of the theories on the location and formation of subjectivity. This is, instead, meant to be a close analysis of a francophone text that situates access to a non-anthropocentric worldview – one in which the non-human is taken as co-agent – at the convergence of de-anthropocentric, nonhuman philosophies, occult practices of divination (namely, the Tarot), and the future-oriented world building and aesthetic inherent to the science-fiction genre.

[122] Kennet Granholm, "The Occult and Comics," in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (London: Routledge, 2015), 499-508. Granholm, scholar of occultism and popular culture, noted that the influence of the occult on non-English-language comics has not yet been established by scholars. He then specifically called out *L'Incal* as a non-English-language comic that exhibits such occult influence, and does indeed offer the connective tissue between traditions.

L'Incal

> It began as the adventures of a jackass named John DiFool, and then it became something else … something that has transformed everything it's ever touched and continues to do so.
> - Fabrice Giger, CEO of Les Humanoïdes

> Dude, imagine if a generation of kids had grown up on Jodorowsky's *Dune* instead of fucking *Star Wars*.
> - Soban Saqib, Founder of TheSpiceDao, a now defunct cryptocurrency collective

L'Incal is at once two different texts. One of them is a science fiction narrative, the story of a dystopian humanoid universe, part mythical allegory and part speculation – akin in ways to what we have come to know as space opera.[123] The other is a kind of initiatic ritual, a roadmap of sorts to spiritual enlightenment. Jodorowsky describes not only *L'Incal*, but his entire comics oeuvre, as "a sacred manifestation to further the development of human consciousness."[124] He claims that the word "incal" came to him in a dream. That the narrative should be, at least to some degree, influenced by the dream world of an artist whose work is well-known to be full of surreal imagery and dreamlike narrative structures comes as no surprise.[125] "I don't work with

[123] "Le Zombie," midamerican.org, accessed July 5, 2023, http://www.midamericon.org/tucker/lez36i.htm. In the January 1941 edition of the science fiction fanzine *Le Zombie*, the writer Wilson Tucker is credited with having provided the first definition of "space opera." He calls the science fiction subgenre "hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn space-ship yarn." Although his intention may well have been pejorative, his cheeky definition does kind of work in the context of *L'Incal*; "Space opera," Wikipedia, accessed July 5, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Space_opera. Wikipedia provides us with a more contemporary definition that is both more informative than Tucker's while also being not at all sassy and therefore far less interesting: "Space opera is a subgenre of science fiction that emphasizes space warfare, melodramatic adventure, interplanetary battles, chivalric romance, and risk-taking. Set mainly or entirely in outer space, it usually involves conflict between opponents possessing advanced abilities, futuristic weapons, and other sophisticated technology."

[124] Adrien Clerc, "Narrative Threads and *Métal Hurlant*," in *The Seven Lives of Alejandro Jodorowsky,* ed. Vincent Bernière and Nicolas Tellop (Los Angeles: Humanoids, Inc., 2020), 75.

[125] Nicols Tellop, "The Offering of *The Panic Fables*," in *The Seven Lives of Alejandro Jodorowsky* (Los Angeles: Humanoids, Inc., 2020), 30. In this biography of Jodorowsky, Tellop writes that with his art

consciousness," Jodorowsky says, "I work with my dreams."[126] In much the same way that discontinuity and ambiguity characterize what takes place in a dream, *L'Incal*'s narrative is easily obscured from the memory of those who read it and then attempt a summary. As with a dream, the specific characteristics and temporal structure of which are often difficult to recount upon waking, those who choose to immerse themselves in the world of *L'Incal* will struggle to recount it logically, even after multiple successive readings and repeated attempts at synopsis.[127] It is evident from the very first pages of text that this will be a very complicated narrative. Events and characters are introduced rapid fire, flashbacks and spatial dislocations are frequent, and Mœbius' imagery is often chaotic, with rapid line work that matches and propels the frantic pace of the complex narrative. The world he builds "writhe[s] with vitality. Faces, hands, bodies in motion, even buildings and machines, seem to be possessed of some weird, baroque life force, which animates and unifies his pages into a riot of information."[128] In a somewhat stiff and often awkward prose style coupled with dynamic graphic imagery, Jodorowsky and Mœbius detail, panel by vibrant panel, the epic journey of the aforementioned class-R private detective, John DiFool.[129] Our unlikely hero is tasked with saving the entire universe from "le plus monstrueux complot jamais tramé contre l'humanité."[130] Total destruction is imminent. Annihilation of existence looms over the human galaxy in the form of a metaphysical

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Jodorowsky strives "to teach us to see without eyes." The visual nature of dream imagery, given that it happens when one is sleeping, could be characterized as seeing without eyes.

[126] McMillan, "Jodorowsky Reflects."

[127] This dreamlike aspect links *L'Incal* with my analysis of Claire Denis' film *High Life* in the preceding chapter.

[128] Clark, "Space-Time," 155.

[129] Like many aspects of the narrative, much of which takes place only in the mind of the reader, what this detailed designation is supposed to signify is only ever implied. As DiFool's character is (somewhat vaguely) developed, the reader will begin to draw a mental image of what a "class-R private detective" is supposed to be – self-centered, lecherous, boozy, and frankly, not very smart. And single, of course.

[130] Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 126.

phenomenon known as The Great Darkness. DiFool embarks on this treacherous undertaking with a great deal of resistance – at a number of crucial moments DiFool makes it known that he would much rather pop some SPV (an early text bubble explains that this is a "hallucinogène léger") and then hit up his favorite brothel where he can select the built-on-demand cyborg prostitute, "homéopute", that suits his current mood.[131] DiFool just wants to get high and have a little fun. He has no desire whatsoever to be the Savior of the universe.

The stakes are high, not just for the human galaxy in *L'Incal*, but for all of existence. It is made clear that DiFool is a horny, drunk, bumbling, unsuccessful, and unmotivated private detective who just isn't up to the task of playing David to this particular Goliath – not alone, at least. Enter Jodorowsky's oneiric neologism and the text's namesake – the Incal.[132] *L'Incal* is not only the title of the text, but also a character, or even a protagonist that first presents itself as an artifact of some kind. Though it appears to be an object – a small, palm-sized *pyramidoide* device of sorts – it is more than just a *thing*.[133] The Incal is at once a machinic entity, apparently a piece of technology, while it is also an event, as well as a self-declared being. It transports itself interdimensionally and transcorporeally, infusing other beings with itself and then exerting its will over theirs. It's interventions in and with other bodies results in death-birth cycles of

[131] Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 14.
[132] The Incal is not DiFool's only companion. There are five other key characters who, given the aforementioned narrative complexity, will not be detailed here. Knowing the names of these characters and how they are involved isn't necessary for the task at hand.
[133] Although perhaps unintentional, the formal qualities of the Incal, its initial shape and size, will be mimicked by a device seen momentarily in the streaming series *Mission*, analyzed in the following chapter. Like the Incal, the small pyramidoide artifact found in *Missions* is more than just a *thing*.

Figure 11. DiFool meets the Incal. Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 31.

individual transformation, of self and other. Early in the text, when John DiFool first encounters the Incal, he confuses it for an artificial intelligence when it seems to activate and addresses him directly, announcing its own name. DiFool then erroneously refers to it as a "ordinateur photonique miniaturisé."[134] But the Incal immediately sets him to rights. "Tu te trompes John DiFool!" the Incal defiantly asserts, "Je ne suis pas un ordinateur, je suis vivant! Tout comme toi!"[135] (see fig. 11). In this moment of radical self-definition, what had seemed to be merely another inanimate device, lacking sentience or self-awareness, expresses itself as an active agent, laying claim to its own subjectivity. In so doing, the Incal and the genre-defying *L'Incal*, together, collapse ontological boundaries. In tandem, the Incal and *L'Incal* exist beyond

[134] Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 31.
[135] Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 31.

categories. They have a name/title, one that is self-declared. The Incal belongs to no overt ontological category, neither person nor thing nor animal. It is perhaps this declaration of nonhuman subjectivity and agency that will, shortly after DiFool's encounter with the Incal, bring about a series of subsequent calamitous events, unspooling the dramatic and violent conflicts that set DiFool's journey in motion.

The first three books in *L'Incal's* six-book series – comprised of *L'Incal Noir*, *L'Incal lumière*, *Ce qui est en bas*, *Ce qui est en haut*, *Le cinquième essence, première partie: galaxie qui songe*, and *Le cinquième essence, deuxième partie: la planète difool* – take place mostly on DiFool's home planet, Earth, which as one of the many inhabited planets in the human galaxy of *L'Incal,* is known intermittently throughout the narrative as both Earth and as Ter21. Humans live in highly-technologized environments alongside other humanoid species, as well as sentient, non-human objects. Society on this planet, and throughout much of the human galaxy, is highly stratified by class – there's even a chapter in the second book titled "Neuraztenik Class Struggle."[136] Technically, the narrative begins with DiFool being thrown from a bridge, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. But the intrigue doesn't really start there. The ball truly gets rolling with an uprising.

The hierarchy of the planet's inhabitants is reflected in the structure of their environment – physically organized from top to bottom. All but the President, addressed as "son ophidité majeure,"[137] a nonbinary clone, and the members of their court who inhabit a palace that floats

[136] Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 75. "Neuraztenik" is just one example of the playful use of language seen throughout the textual narrative, which reflects and augments the ludic, jocular aspects of Mœbius' visual narrative. In much the same way that *L'Incal* rejects an anthropocentric status quo, Jodorowsky's descriptive language (as opposed to prescriptive, in the linguistic sense) emphasizes the ironic and humorous nature of the narrative and augments the author's transgressive ambitions for the text.
[137] Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 24.

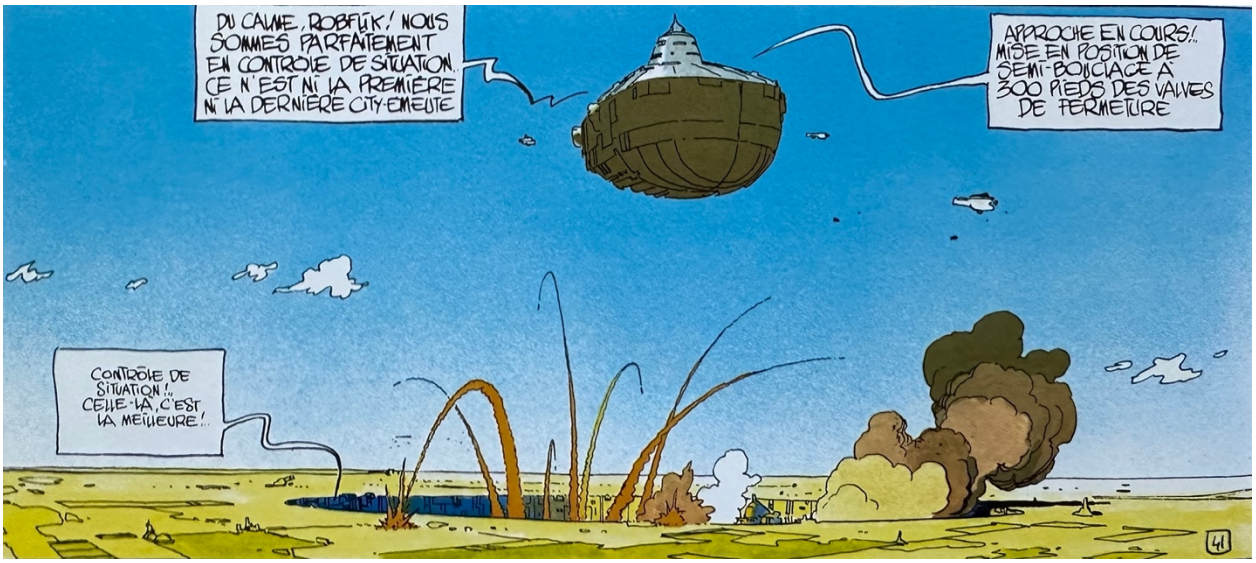

Figure 12. The Floating Palace. Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 46.

above the surface of the planet (see fig. 12), live in the underground city shaft (the vertical, subterranean metropolis seen in the images on the first two pages of this chapter). The metropolis plunges deep beneath the shadow of the palace that hovers over the city's entrance, ready at any moment to descend, plugging the entrance to the city and imprisoning all of its inhabitants at the President's whim. The entire city shaft is constructed in such a way as to make all areas visible from a *Videodrome*-like central panopticon (see fig. 13), where giant screens broadcast nonstop content featuring violent gameshows and debauched reality programming, meant to entertain as much as to distract and propagandize. The city shaft on Ter21 is a representation of a fully-entrenched attention-based economy – a perhaps not-too-unreasonable extension of today's increasing orientation towards a global economy that harvests and monetizes human focus. In this fictionalized future society, constructed from the artifacts still-in-the-making of our own non-fictional past and present, the attention economy has, so to speak,

Figure 13. Non-stop distraction and the ever-watchful eye. Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 19.

gone plaid.[138] Human culture in the world of Jodorowsky and Mœbius' creation is characterized by technology-driven distraction, ignorance, and despair. In this, the two artists are far ahead of their time. It is precisely this attention, directed at and by the spectacular panopticon, that must be redirected in order for DiFool and the Incal to defeat The Great Darkness.[139] The planet's poorest laborers, those most in view of the panopticon, live at the deepest level of the city shaft, nearest the lake of acid waste that pools at the bottom, while the aristocrats – the Aristos as they're called here, identified by the glowing halos that float above their heads – live nearest the surface. These first three books build up a world that becomes something of a political allegory of the twentieth century, one that still applies today in the early decades of the twenty-first. The

[138] For more on what it means to "go plaid" see Mel Brooks' 1987 classic science fiction parody, *Spaceballs*. This is a shameless reference to what, in my opinion, is one of the better science-fiction films that have been influenced, narratively and/or aesthetically, by *L'Incal*.
[139] David Landes, "Marshall McLuhan's Theory of Attention: How to Become a Media Psychonaut," *Explorations in Media* 19, no. 4 (December 2020), 2. What I say here is reflective of Marshall McLuhan's notion that attention must be liberated in order for humans to begin "exercising agency against pervasive socio-technical forces."

zeitgeist that Jodorowsky and Mœbius have captured in *L'Incal* resonates strongly with that of the 2020s, perhaps even more so than it does with that of the 1970s and 1980s. Things have certainly changed since the series was first published, but the conflicts that characterized the period haven't gone away. If anything, they've been exacerbated.[140]

The events that lead up to the violent uprising on Ter21 are too complex to detail here. Adrien LeClerc, one of Jodorowsky's biographers, writes that these first installments of *L'Incal* "feature a dizzying number of references" to concepts and imagery that are both idiosyncratic and mundane.[141] It suffices to say that as the Incal engages with DiFool, it makes itself known to the planet's inhabitants, and thus also to the media as well as the factions and forces that are hunting it. Early in the narrative, the Incal, controlling the body and mind of DiFool's sidekick, Deepo, begins proselytizing doom – among the Incal's non-human powers, including self-propelled interdimensional travel, mindreading, transmogrification, and clairvoyance, is also the ability to enter the body of another being, conferring, at will, its own abilities onto the host. Deepo, the talking concrete seagull, suddenly seen by many in the city shaft as a prophet, quickly attracts an unruly crowd, inevitably drawing the attention of the authorities, whose efforts to disperse the melee set off a violent riot. The police unleash a military combat robot that begins slaughtering the masses, igniting a rebellion that was, we learn, already in the making. The poverty, the class divide on Ter21, is already so bad – with the Aristos living in luxury at the top levels and everyone else living in distracted misery below – that minor, opposition factions begin

[140] McMillan, "Jodorowsky Reflects." Perhaps it is *L'Incal*'s continuing relevance that, in part, has made it so influential, to the comics medium as well as to the science fiction genre, and popular enough to remain in print. Jodorowsky believes that *L'Incal* is currently enjoying a resurgence in popularity because the audience of the twenty-first century "understands it now. The good stories," Jodorowsky says, "are always in advance of the audience." The implication being that it took forty years of cultural evolution for the world he and Mœbius constructed and for the conflicts their characters encounter to resemble reality sufficiently enough for audiences to truly "get it".

[141] Clerc, "Narrative Threads," 78.

Figure 14. DiFool meets the Berg. Jodorowsky & Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 17.

to coalesce. The events instigated by the arrival of the Incal first set off a localized rebellion that quickly spreads, becoming an intergalactic war and coup d'état, which we learn, as with what happens on Ter21, was also already well underway. The powerful human galaxy's main rival in this outer-worldly conflict is the other primary superpower in the universe, a species of bird-like quadrupeds known as the Bergs (see fig. 14), who reside in the Berg galaxy. Here, *L'Incal* is decisively influenced by the geopolitics of the Cold War, with the West (in the guise of the human galaxy) in opposition to the communist Eastern Bloc (played in this narrative by the Berg galaxy). The two superpowers vie to possess the Incal and thereby control the powers that it promises to bring to whomever can capture it (the Incal performing here as a stand-in for the nuclear-arms race, which is, tragically, in the process of staging quite the comeback show). Or so they believe. For, as it is revealed throughout the narrative, the Incal is not controlled by its possessor. Nor can it truly even be possessed. Its power cannot be directed at the will of anyone other than itself. Even DiFool – the one chosen by the Incal itself – must ask it just the right

questions at just the right time in order for the Incal to deem his inquiries worthy of response. If anything, the Incal chooses who it believes is best fit to embody its strength and wisdom.

The Great Darkness, the entity that DiFool and his team must defeat, is conjured into the world by one particular class of humans – the Technopères and their Technopape (see fig. 15), all of whom are sadistic, maniacal members of a pseudo-technological occult religious order known, the Technopères.[142] For these cultists, technology and science, "technique techno" as it is referred to in *L'Incal*, are a religion, an extractive one that harvests organs from human bodies to assemble the many cyborgs that populate the world of the narrative. The Techno-fraternité enjoys an elite status in the rigidly stratified class structure of this dystopian future Earth.[143] The cult leader of the Technopères, the Technopape[144], dubs the semi-sentient vessel the Ove

[142] Annestay, *Deconstructing*, 26. The order of the Techno-priests brings to mind the Dark Side of *Star Wars* fame. The idea that George Lucas had seen the illustrated screenplay for Jodorowsky and Mœbius' aborted *Dune* project before he started work on *Star Wars* is openly recognized. Jodorowsky has made no secret of his belief that his version of *Dune* never got made because "it was French after all, not American" and that numerous filmmakers blatantly stole his narrative and his aesthetics. "[T]here was certainly some stealing of ideas," Jodorowsky claims, and "when *Star Wars* came out, the look of the film bore a strange resemblance to our own visual style." Jodorowsky goes on from there to take credit for the invention of the American blockbuster science fiction film. Brian Michael Bendis – the comic book author who wrote the foreword to the 2018 English translation of the series – certainly agrees with Jodorowsky when it comes to the impact that *L'Incal* has had on sci-fi: "Mœbius and his peers heavily influenced much of modern science fiction […] there is (sic) literally whole sections of this work that have been lifted whole cloth and put into major motion pictures where neither the writer nor the artist has been credited. Not just little bits here and there. Whole sections!" All throughout *L'Incal*'s 291 panels one can see what appears to be entire scenes that have been copied in some of the most financially successful and culturally influential science fiction of the last forty years. The creative team that Jodorowsky brought together – comprised of Mœbius, the Swiss artist H.R. Giger, the British artist Chris Foss, and Dan O'Bannon, an American special effects artist – took their contributions to the aborted Dune project with them to Hollywood and applied them to their future film projects. Some of the more notable examples, just to name a few: *Alien* (1979), *Tron* (1982), *Superman* (1978), *The Abyss* (1989), *The Fifth Element* (1997).

[143] Apt metaphors for the technologized society of the early twenty-first century come hard and fast in *L'Incal*. While technology for us is not officially recognized as a religion, per se, it certainly has made devotees of us all, some among us more willing converts than others. While the technologies and tech billionaires to which and to whom we pledge our faith, even if only tacitly, do not literally harvest our organs, the corporations that produce our tech and the algorithms that are deployed are most certainly extractive. The harvesting of our attention, our time, and our intellects makes us not so different from the cyborgs that Jodorowsky and Mœbius create from human building blocks.

[144] Another comparison to *Star Wars* is unavoidable here, this time it's Darth Vader that springs to mind.

Figure 15. Le Techno-Pape invokes the Ove Tenebrae.
Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 53.

Tenebrae (see fig. 16) – the Dark Egg constructed in the form of a colossal arachnid, a moon-sized Black Widow spider whose shape is reflected in the futuristic, floating papal tiara worn by the Techno-Pape, as well as the egg in the *Alien* franchise from which H.R. Giger's infamous monster is born – and launches it into space to devour suns, endeavoring to materially hasten the obliteration of the universe already in-progress in the path of The Great Darkness.[145]

Before DiFool can be charged with defeating the very entity that the Techno-technos seek to manifest, he must first be made ready. Contradicting Jodorowsky's claims about DiFool being the perfect vessel for this particular enlightenment quest precisely because of what he lacks, in DiFool's ego-driven dearth of self-awareness, the Incal sees a critical weakness. Perhaps in this

[145] Let the anti-Catholic sentiment seen in the representation of the Techno-technos not go unmentioned here. Their pope, who wears purple robes and has an oval crown not unlike the Pope's mitre, is portrayed as a sociopathic lunatic hellbent on the destruction of all things in existence, including the universe itself. The priests are all sycophants, militant disciples of the Great Darkness. The general aesthetics of the sect and the fact that its members are the sole inhabitants of TechnoCity – an elevated site set apart from the rest of society, not at all unlike Vatican City, down to the shape of the city itself – clearly likens the religion, in a not-so-positive light, to Catholicism.

Figure 16. The Ove Tenebrae. Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 56.

contradiction can be read an insistence on nonhuman agency – even the product of Jodorowsky's own imagination refuses to do as he insists. From the Incal's perspective, even if not from Jodorowsky's, DiFool's spiritual, intellectual, and physical shortcomings must be remedied before he can access the state of being that is required in order for the Incal to activate DiFool's potential and then be engaged in the grander processes involved in saving the world. Jodorowsky himself described DiFool as a "miserable guy" with "all the defects of the ego."[146] DiFool must let himself be transformed by the great power of the Incal itself. He must be materially deconstructed so that he may be spiritually reconstructed. In this narrative, the nonhuman agent alone knows the pathway to transcendence, which is found, Jodorowsky suggests, through the deconstruction of the self and the liberation from the human ego. Here that

[146] McMillan, "Jodorowsky Reflects."

process is represented as a literal one – the Incal tears DiFool into his four elemental, constituent parts, each of which finds form in small goblin-like creatures, each little monster representative in appearance and character, of a particular aspect of DiFool's personality.[147] In this particular instance, DiFool literally becomes nonhuman, each of his constituent, dividuated parts now asserting agency over the individual human subject. Here is just one example of the ways in which the text gives narrative and graphic form to Grusin's assertion that "the nonhuman turn must be understood as an embodied turn toward the nonhuman world, including the nonhumanness that is in all of us."[148]

In the context of access, invoked in the previous paragraph, it's possible to interpret DiFool's consumption of the "mild hallucinogen" at the beginning of the text as a necessary part of that process. The SPV may enable DiFool to access the mindset that is necessary to facilitate a journey of transcendence. I'm referring here to the notion of "set and setting" that is discussed in the context of scholarship on the use and effects of hallucinogens. Hearkening back to Timothy Leary, Erik Davis, the noted scholar of *High Weirdness*, explains "set and setting" as crucial components in preparing for a psychedelic trip, akin to the way that world-building and aesthetics are crucial aspects of science fiction: "They [psychedelic trips] depend … on the user's conscious intention and unconscious beliefs (set) in synergy with the material, social, and aesthetic conditions of the environment (setting)."[149] For DiFool, it may be that the SPV provides the *set*, while the Incal provides the *setting*. For the reader, *L'Incal* provides both the set and the

[147] McMillan, "Jodorowsky Reflects." Jodorowsky explains this separation further: "The four characters he becomes are the Minor Arcana [of the Tarot]: the sword, the wands, the cups, and the money. The four symbols. This money is a symbol of the body. Wand is the symbol of desire or sex. The cup is a symbol of emotionality, and the sword is a symbol of … mental searching. Intellect, emotion, creative sex, and the body who tries to find his freedom." The influence of the Tarot will be discussed later in this chapter.
[148] Grusin, "Introduction," xx.
[149] Erik Davis, High Weirdness: Drugs, Esoterica, and Visionary Experience in the Seventies (London: Strange Attractor Press, 2019), 32.

setting. The complexity of the narrative structure, rooted as it is in Jodorowsky's dreams, coupled with Mœbius' often tumultuous graphics, may well be a component of this process meant to result in access. For DiFool, that has to do with having the ability to confront and defeat an existential threat. For the reader (from Jodorowsky's perspective, at least), the process is about accessing a state of enlightenment that involves recognizing the co-agential status of the nonhuman. Unlike DiFool, the reader may well not be high while experiencing the Incal and tripping with the characters as they set out on their quest (that is to say, participating in a process of co-creation that the text's ambiguities demands). To some extent, the disorientation produced by the fragmented, disrupted textual and graphic narrative could be meant to induce a mindset in the reader not wholly unlike that generated by SPV – DiFool's hallucinogen of choice. All of which is to say: *L'Incal* is best read when high. Or, at least, Jodorowsky's desire to inspire enlightenment is more likely to be fulfilled if the reader is in an altered state. It isn't a stretch to posit that part of this enlightenment process, leading to the nonhuman, is the inducement of a state of temporal and cognitive dysphoria. Perhaps we must muddle our perception, blur our perspective a little, so as to *unfocus* the rigid lines that anthropocentrism draws around agency. And while consuming *L'Incal* won't get the reader high, the bewilderment that the text engenders might just be a close-enough second in the hierarchy of altered states.

Once "the real John DiFool"[150] is identified, the Incal reconstructs him anew, merging with him and thereby granting him access to the Incal's extra-human wisdom and ability. Now sufficiently spiritually oriented to know what must be known so as to do what must be done in the fight against the universe's ultimate foe – The Great Darkness – DiFool seeks out those who have tapped into the conditions that make The Great Darkness possible and have manipulated

[150] Alejandro Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *The Incal*, trans. Justin Kelly and Sasha Watson (Los Angeles: Humanoids, Inc., 2018), 37.

those conditions so as to coerce them out of the realm of the psyche and into the desert of the real. He enters the technobrotherhood's TechnoCity and there he discovers that within the walls of the great city-state the priests are busy at the controls of a factory where they assemble all of the technology that is so fundamental to the functioning of society on Ter21. The tech they construct in their automated factory isn't, unlike the technology in our real-world present, made entirely of rare earth minerals, precious metals, and toxic petroleum byproducts. Nor is it, also unlike the technology in our real-world present, assembled at the hands of slave laborers and their children, chained to their workbenches and forced into lifelong indentured servitude by we the rich and rapacious consumers of the Global North. But what DiFool discovers is no less horrifying. Within the confines of their holy city, the Techno-technos oversee a vast system of conveyor belts where the dead bodies of Ter21's citizens are torn apart in assembly-line fashion (see fig. 17). (Henry Ford would be proud to see what could become of his revolutionary manufacturing technique.) Their organs and limbs are harvested and then combined with inorganic matter to construct all of the machines and devices at use on Ter21 – from the robotic police officers and the video screens to the androids and the artificially-intelligent machines that manufacture all of the other tech, including the manufacturing droids themselves. Here the divide between biology and technology is erased. The machine is literally deconstructing the human and then re-building a non-binary, humanoid cyborg, effectively creating a liminal ontological category. The Techno-technos and the Aristos have invented a way to optimize the human as resource. While Jodorowsky and Mœbius have imagined, in a not altogether-illogical extension of the real-world notion of the human as capital, an ultimate method by which humans can be made useful, even in death.

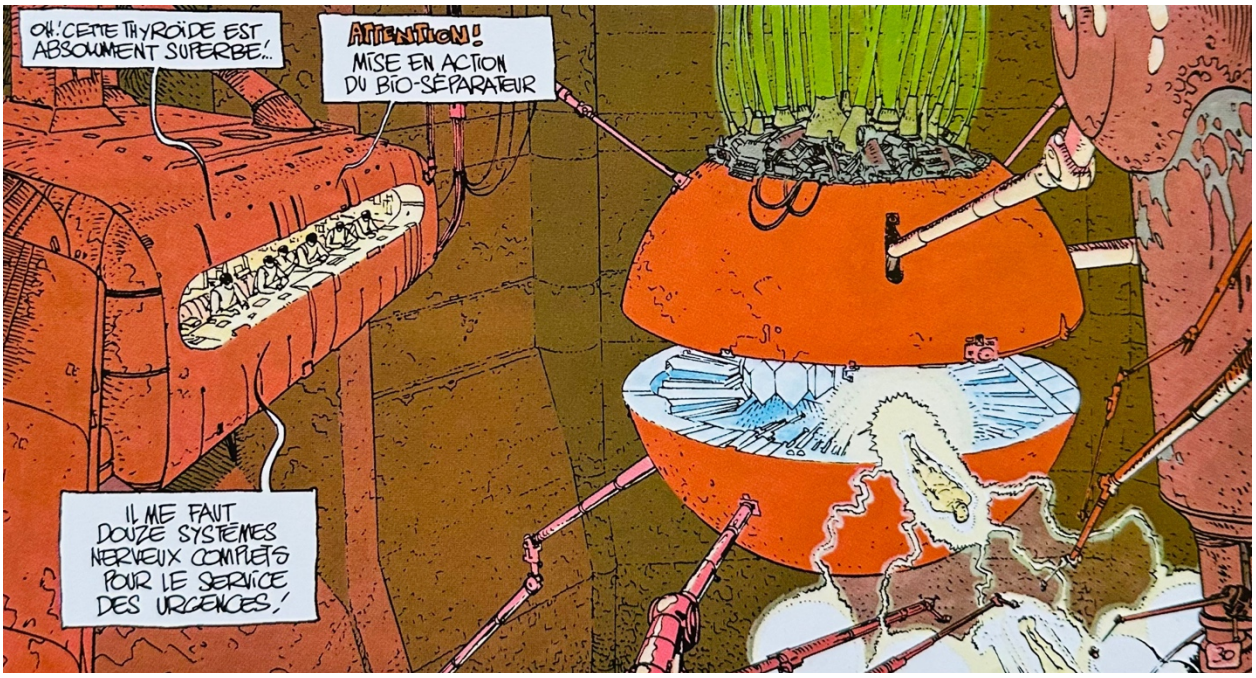

Figure 17. The Technopriests' fleshbot assembly line. Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 35.

Though coaxed into the world by the Techno-priests, The Great Darkness, a vast metaphysical yet sentient nothingness, is also born of human nihilism, made possible, on one hand, by the constitutive cultural politics of a future world built on a foundation of greed, hubris, and despair – a dystopian science-fictional future divined from our very own material reality. At the very end of the text, just before DiFool returns to his starting point – free-falling towards the lake of acid waste that accumulates at the bottom of Ter21's CityShaft – he encounters Orh (see fig. 18), a golden, godlike entity, the creator of time and space. Orh explains that The Great Darkness is the manifestation of "la force négative, accumulée dans le cœur humain."[151] On the other hand, and particularly considering the present framework, The Great Darkness is also a metaphor for the existential void that anthropocentrism creates when it strips all nonhuman entities of agency. Existence is indeed a great darkness, a barren, lonely, and monstrous place to be for the Human who has laid waste to all other companions in agency, making of himself a

[151] Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 304.

Figure 18. The golden god Orh, "la lumière ancienne!" Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 302-303.

destitute wanderer on a lifeless plain of his own creation. It is what happens when we get caught up in the aforementioned "vicious circle" that results from the anthropocentric reduction of relations solely to the human subject.[152] In the narrative context, The Great Darkness brings to the universe of *L'Incal* the threat of something far worse than mere destruction – once something has been destroyed it can be rebuilt, but once something has been sufficiently erased it's gone forever. This is what The Great Darkness manifests – more like an erasure than a destruction. Though summoned by the Techno-brotherhood and fueled by the aforementioned anthropocentric reductionism, The Great Darkness seems to be an auto-emergent phenomenon. Its existence precedes any causal determination. Like the shadows in our dreams, absent a material source, The Great Darkness, too, casts itself. A chthonic, Lovecraftian entity, The Great Darkness emerges from "l'absence de connaissance du temps et de l'espace"[153] into the real and where it arrives it replaces existence with negation. The Great Darkness isn't a violent disruption; it's a wholesale annihilation. It turns *something* – the universe and everything that exists within and throughout it – into *nothing*.[154] The only way for this destructive force to be banished is through the enactment of a universal, simultaneous meditative sleep – referred to in

[152] If one takes the visual representation of The Great Darkness to be an aesthetic abstraction of a phenomenon – that being the anthropocentric denuding of nonhuman agency – that points to no original referent in the real, it might be possible to think of this concept as a kind of alternative formulation of Baudrillard's "desert of the real."

[153] Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 288.

[154] I cannot help but mention the likeness of The Great Darkness to the Nothing, a similar phenomenon that menaces all of existence in the 1979 German novel *Die unendliche Geschichte* (*The Neverending Story*) and the 1984 film adaptation of the same name. The description of the Nothing from the film's FanWiki rings all too true in the context of *L'Incal*'s Great Darkness: "The Nothing is a force of absolute oblivion, erasing things and people from existence, as if they never were there to begin with. [It is] a formless, featureless negation of existence … an abstract oxymoron that cannot and should not exist, for it does not, and yet it is." The timing of the release of the novel (as well as the film) and the release of *L'Incal*, with its well-known and oft-mythologized provenance, call into question issues of influence. Which came first: the Nothing or the Darkness?

L'Incal as "le plan du rêve téta."[155] All life in the universe must enter a state of suspended awareness, where the myriad subjective concepts that inform the self are wholly silenced by a uniform state of unconsciousness that must take place at the very same moment.[156] It's as though only when conscious awareness is put to rest can a weird, universal agency be summoned to restructure the world that will afterwards again be accessible to conscious awareness.

By the end of *L'Incal*'s third book, two parallel conflicts have been established – a material conflict, the war between the Berg and human galaxies, and a metaphysical one, the whole of the universe, all the way down to the level of individual consciousness, against The Great Darkness. The material conflict is a recursive one. It is part of an all-too-familiar cycle of violence. The very same fundamental struggles, upheavals, and disruptions that DiFool and his fellow inhabitants on Ter21 experience are nothing new to human history. Ultimately, the Incal arrives to show John DiFool how to stop this cycle of violence, to instruct him on what has to happen to truly reform the galaxy. And it chooses him as the vessel through which to materialize that radical change. The Incal knows that both the material and the metaphysical conflicts can be resolved only when the metaphysical foe has been vanquished. The causes of the material conflict couple with the results of that very conflict to recreate the conditions that give birth to it over and over again. These conditions are the defining characteristics of the entirety of human history. The violence and misery that result from those conditions, in *L'Incal*, accumulate and

[155] Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 288. In the English version, this is translated as "the theta dream," even though "theta" in English translates as "thêta" in French, rather than "téta" as it appears in the original; Joshua Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 4. This "theta dream" may well be a reference to the notion of astral projection, which Eliphas Lévi – the nineteenth-century French philosopher and magus – describes as "the detachment of the astral body, achieved dramatically by commanding the material body to 'Sleep!' and … the sidereal body [to] 'Dream!'", thereby inducing "hashish-visions."
[156] Grant Morrison, "Pop Magic!" in *Book of Lies: The Disinformation Guide to Magick and the Occult*, ed. Richard Metzger (San Francisco: Disinformation Books, 2003), 24.

emerge into the world in the form of The Great Darkness. In the narrative context, Jodorowsky and Mœbius offer up the Incal as a kind of occult key or cypher, the incantating of which unlocks a reality wherein lies the ability inherent in society to transcend the historical cycle of struggle and war, genocide and terror, insurrection and overthrow. In our real-world context, they present *L'Incal* as that key. In this aspect, *L'Incal* parallels aspects of the Kabbalah, whose practitioners believe that "by working through one's mental, representational, or mimetic capacities (the microcosm), one can comprehend the whole of nature (the macrocosm) and thus know its secrets."[157] In interviews and in his own writing Jodorowsky insists that *L'Incal* is an instruction manual for the spiritual enlightenment that he believes is fundamental to the resolution of the misery that results from this historical cycle. For him, *L'Incal* is the existential seed at the heart of the subject from which grows the transformation of the self.[158] Paradoxically, as evidenced by the end of the narrative, which repeats itself at the beginning, Jodorowsky also implies that even after the kind of radical spiritual revolution that will take place by the end of DiFool's quest, it is ultimately not possible to transcend this cycle. DiFool is going to repeat this odyssey over and over again, with degrees of variance because he simply must – evidence of this repetition with variance can be found in the sequel to this text, *Final Incal*, in which a very similar journey takes place, but takes place differently enough as to not be identical.

Yes, there are two conflicts here. But the true pursuit in this narrative is the metaphysical quest for enlightenment. In *L'Incal* the suggestion is that even the material conflicts can only be resolved metaphysically. Material modes of conflict resolution, which in *L'Incal,* as well as in our meat-space reality, take the form of industrial machinic technologies, are not able to confront

[157] Gunn, Modern Occult Rhetoric, 12.
[158] Davis, *High Weirdness*, 138.

a metaphysical foe like The Great Darkness. But the metaphysical is absolutely able to confront the material conflict, given a set of material practices and aesthetics by which the metaphysical can be accessed and performed. Those practices are found in the occult, the enactment of which, coupled with the aesthetics of science fiction, offers access to the nonhuman agent, to the life of the object *outside*, *out there*, rather than just *in here*. We can think, as in conceptualize within the intellectual apparatus, the life of the object, but we need a way to access that phenomenon outside of mentation. The thinking of the object is not material (except in the ways that it absolutely is material, but that's a line of inquiry for another day), and yet the suggestion in *L'Incal* is that that very thing – the life/agency/subjectivity of the nonhuman object/phenomenon – is indeed material. The assumption of nonhuman agency is a priori in occult practices, such as the Tarot, and so the occult opens us to encounters with the nonhuman agent that resides in the material world, beyond even our ability to intellectualize it, restricted as that ability is by our dominant, scientifically logic-oriented ontological and epistemological frameworks. *L'Incal* and the Incal are both occult objects doing that work of access and recognition.

The ability, power, agency of nonhuman objects is demonstrated time and time again in *L'Incal*. My suggestion in this chapter is that a non-dualist, nonhuman agency is not only represented in *L'Incal* – in the form of an abundance of fictional nonhuman agents – but that the comic itself is an embodied, nonhuman agent. I argue that when Jodorowsky insists that *L'Incal* is the pathway to spiritual enlightenment and "the thing we're all looking for," he's insisting on the nonhuman in the material world. We cannot save ourselves from The Great Darkness that we coaxed into existence when we wrested agency away from all phenomena on the nonhuman plane if we don't reassert that nonhuman agency. It's as if this metaphysical enlightenment Jodorowsky seeks to let loose is simply the recognition that everything humans need to resolve

the aforementioned seemingly unending historical cycle of violence and despair that the Human brings upon itself, has been right here alongside us the whole time. It doesn't need to be invented into existence. Machine technology will not save us. In *L'Incal* quite the opposite is true. Technology literally and graphically devours humans and enables destruction. Machine technology is an existential threat in *L'Incal*. In some respect, it could be seen as a neo-Luddite text, despite its science-fiction roots.

The Tarot and Historical Citation: Material and Aesthetic Access to the Nonhuman Agent

> When you start trying to treat phenomena as if they were human you learn many things. One of them is how better to treat your fellow humans as if they too were human.
> - Ramsey Dukes, *Uncle Ramsey's Little Book of Demons*

> Hence proceed wonders, which means are here.
> - Hermes Trismegistus, *The Emerald Table*

It is precisely the aesthetic world building of the science fiction genre that provides the means through which to engage and explore Jodorowsky's insistence on metaphysical solutions to the aforementioned material conflicts, and facilitates access to the nonhuman agent. The raw materials out of which the world of *L'Incal* is built are sourced from two contradictory worlds. The first of those is the universe as we conceive of it, our "reality" in which existence and time – both elements of a unified whole – comprise a closed system. This is the world of *L'Incal*'s material conflict, drawing as it does from extradiegetic realities of conflict and material strife. In the other, far weirder world, time is a much more complex entity – it is both a linear progression and a flat circle, an endless series of self-same repetitions. Stated otherwise, the universe is conceptualized as both, paradoxically, a closed system and an open, living entity with which we can engage in reciprocal relation. Jodorowsky attempts to synthesize these two opposing views.

L'Incal does not shy away or try to avoid the conflicts that arise when the world is represented as both a closed system where attempts at transcendence are futile – hence DiFool's cyclical journey – and also a kind of open stage where the drama of transcendence can be acted out – exemplified by the Theta Dream process that leads to DiFool's encounter with the golden god Orh, who makes of DiFool a never-ending expression of perpetual transcendence, "le témoin éternel! La goutte qui ne se fond jamais dans l'océan!"[159]

There is an inescapable contradiction in this notion of a closed system that defines the fundamental materiality of the universe. The science from which this knowledge is born tells us that time is a linear progression that only goes in one direction. Yet, in this closed system of matter and energy, time could just as well be a cycle of repetitious events, something more like a flat circle than a straight arrow that only points to the future.[160] And so Jodorowsky's recourse to this kind of closed system is punctured throughout with open doors. The entity that names itself the Incal functions as something like a wedge in the flat circle of time. It holds the doors open just wide enough for DiFool to travel through dimensions of time and space. This reconciliation and interplay of spatiotemporalities, graphically "fractured and compartmentalized into frames that are themselves part of a static spatial continuum"[161] provides the stage on which plays the drama of Jodorowsky's de-anthropocentric conception of agency. A world is built in which

[159] Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'incal*, 305; Phil Ford and J.F. Martel, "On the Tower, the Sixteenth Card of the Tarot," August 4, 2021, in *Weird Studies*, podcast, streaming audio, Spotify. My "open stage" formulation here is influenced by the conversation between Ford and Martel in this episode.
[160] It is worth mentioning, here, a notable pop-culture reference to this temporal flat circle. In the first season of the neo-noir, Southern Gothic crime-drama series *True Detective* ("The Secret Fate of All Life"), Rust Cohle, a nihilistic police detective livens up the scene with a little Nietzschean wisdom: "Why should I live in history? Fuck, I don't want to know anything anymore. This is a world where nothing is solved. You know, someone once told me time is a flat circle. Everything we've ever done, or will do, we're gonna do over and over and over again." This might be closer to Jodorowsky's concept of the eternal return, although Cohle's framing of it lacks any of the playfulness found in *L'Incal*.
[161] Clark, "Space-time," 151.

forms and motifs culled from our own history and from the Tarot are reclaimed and reinterpreted, activating their dormant potential and directing it towards the realization of a) DiFool's triumph over The Great Darkness, in the narrative context, and, b) in the extradiegetic context, the initiatic ritual that Jodorowsky believes *L'Incal* to be. Nothing here is perceived of unilaterally. Time is just one phenomenon amongst infinite phenomena that are each, individually, a mass of entangled agents, every one acting in reciprocal relation to all others and to the broader, galactic unity comprised as it is of those complexified agents. I argue that the aforementioned "unactivated potential" is the recognition of those nonhuman agents, with the access point(s) to that consciousness found in the science fiction aesthetic. Nonhuman agency in this formulation does not need a human benefactor. It is, rather, a matter of the human agent recognizing what is already there. Jodorowsky suggests that nonhuman agency resides at a level of being whose meaning and vibrations are too fine for us to recognize without a set of material practices through which to overcome the narrowness of our conscious awareness.[162] This is where the Tarot and the self-actuated journey of spiritual enlightenment come into play. The occult, more specifically the Tarot, provides the necessary material processes, and science fiction provides the aesthetic representation that, together, enable access to the nonhuman agent.

Jodorowsky is widely known to be something of an occultist. The Tarot, in particular, greatly influences his body of work. *L'Incal's* narrative and its aesthetic presentation are anchored in an amorphous, slurried foundation that blends aspects of the occult, alchemical practices, and of mystical esotericism. In *The Devil's Picturebook*, something of a how-to guide for burgeoning cartomancers, the Tarot is described as having "no absolutely fixed meaning.

[162] Colin Wilson, *The Occult: A History* (New York: Random House, 1971), 31.

Each reader will form his own interpretation based upon intuition."[163] This description could well have been written to describe *L'Incal* rather than a practice of divination. Divinatory practices, like the Tarot, are ways of seeking order out of chaos. Divination offers a way of synthesizing what is otherwise incommensurable, like the past and the future, the already lived and the yet-to-be lived, the conflict and its resolution.[164] Occult and spiritual practices offer a kind of unification of binary modes, as does the machine in *L'Incal* that tears human bodies apart, combines them with machinery, and reanimates them as cyborgs. I propose here a likeness between divination and story-telling – in *L'Incal*, certainly, but also in a broader, general sense. In its speculative capacity science fiction functions as a form of divination. If we think broadly of narrative, but in particular, science fiction in this occult way, as a divinatory practice, science fiction thus becomes magic, in the Aleister Crowley sense. "Magick," he affirms in *The Book of Thoth*, is "the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with the Will."[165] Arguably, given *L'Incal*'s influence on the science fiction genre across media and the prevalence of the genre in popular cultural forms and technologies, the text has caused change to occur in our material reality. Jodorowsky's will (and Mœbius' to a different extent) plays out at the level of the extradiegetic after first necessarily taking on a formal, aesthetic representative in and on the pages of the comic itself. At first, Jodorowsky and Mœbius are the agents who realize

[163] Paul Huson, The Devil's Picturebook: The Compleat Guide to Tarot Cards: Their Origin and Their Usage (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc., 2003), 20.
[164] This likening of esoteric practices to sense-making efforts and the association, in what follows, of science fiction (storytelling) and divination, forges a link between this chapter and the following one on *Missions*, in which I make a similar association between conspiracy theories, science-fictional storytelling, and sense-making practices, particularly in times of heightened distress.
[165] "The Book of Thoth (Egyptian Tarot) by Aleister Crowley," Google Books, accessed July 5, 2023, https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Book_of_Thoth_Egyptian_Tarot/hgmODwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1.

change in the form of the very first, original version of the material text. But *L'Incal* is the agent who operationalizes the change that ripples out from itself beyond that initial formation.

The invocation of science and technology, of the "real world" and its logic-based premises, gives the art of narrative, as well as the art of magic, credibility. It legitimizes by positioning art-magic in a framework of logic and reason, aligning it or neighboring it with so-called rational wisdom. By positioning *L'Incal* as a science fiction text, Jodorowsky takes advantage of science's legitimating capacity while simultaneously mocking that very notion. Even though he does so in a fictional context, by placing magic and science in such close, intimate quarters, he reminds us, ironically, of the alchemical roots of science, insisting even on the primacy of magic by making it, in *L'Incal*, integral to the science of the future – not a wholly unreasonable speculation given that, not so long ago, alchemy with its magical processes of transformation, was not so distinguishable from science – bringing magic round full circle from and to its historical starting point. Science could be thought of, like narrative and the Tarot, as divining practices that seek to produce order out of chaos. A scientific hypothesis is, after all, something akin to a magic spell. Believe it or not, magic spells don't always work, now and then fortune tellers turn out to be wrong, and the Tarot cards will sometimes tell you lies. Likewise, scientific hypotheses do not always produce the hypothesized results, and the results of experiments often can't be uniformly replicated. The disparate treatment of these failures mirrors our anthropocentric-agency bias and reinforces the rigid boundaries between human and nonhuman – when a scientific hypothesis or theory is proven to be wrong or doesn't work out as expected, we don't use that outcome as evidence demonstrating that science isn't real. And yet with magic we use any lack of desired results and predictions that don't come true as common-sense proof that magic was never real to begin with. One might say that, in this same vein, we

interpret our inability to perceive nonhuman agency with our senses or to detect it with our machines as proof that it does not exist, without any acknowledgement that our inability to apprehend the nonhuman agent could just as well be evidence of the opposite proposition – perhaps the evasion of human apprehension is evidence of the ability of the nonhuman, proof that it is indeed an agent, one that chooses to remain unseen. What if the nonhuman agent simply does not want to be known? Jodorowsky's treatment of the uncomfortable relationship between magic/alchemy, science, and narrative in *L'Incal* draws attention to the unspoken fallacies in the Anthropocene scientism that undergirds our insistence on the primacy of the human as the sole proprietor of agency. In this way, *L'Incal* refuses what Donna Haraway refers to as "the traditions of Western binary oppositions" that result in "gross error and false knowledge"[166] in our efforts to produce science-based truth claims in the construction of the opposition between subject and object.

And so the Tarot, with Jodorowsky's urging, of course, steps in to mediate our fallacious binaries, to aid us in establishing what the occult researcher Colin Wilson called "a link between the conscious and subconscious mind."[167] Alan Moore, the well-known occultist and prolific comic book writer, points out that a comic book that becomes a film is a magic spell – it realizes an ephemeral, yet tangible *something* from *nothing*. For him, the film adaptation of a comic is the realization of the unactivated potential residing in the original.[168] In a similar fashion, the characters in *L'Incal*, in their status as aesthetic, representative adaptations of specific cards, operationalize the Tarot. The purpose of these graphic versions of the cards is, for Jodorowsky,

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[166] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 592-593, JSTOR.
[167] Wilson, *The Occult*, 116.
[168] In this respect, one might similarly consider – in the context of the following chapter on *Missions* – the televisual adaptation of a so-called pseudoscientific hypothesis or a conspiracy theory to be the aesthetic realization of the unactivated potential that lies dormant in such heterodoxies.

to "stimulate the subconscious" as part of the process of enlightenment he openly advocates. As noted earlier, owing in no small part to the text's ambiguities, to read *L'Incal* is to engage in an active process of interpretation that mimics the reading of the cards in the Tarot, which are themselves a set of symbols accompanied by no concrete translations. It's as if the goal – of the Tarot as well as *L'Incal* – is not to arrive at an interpretation pre-determined by the artists, but rather, it is the act of interpretation itself and the subconscious mechanisms engaged by that process that are the desired outcomes. In *L'Incal*, decidedly more so than the Tarot, Jodorowsky, via Mœbius, uses the aesthetic of science fiction vaguely coupled with minimal textual narrative to direct the reader's subconscious process towards the recognition of the nonhuman agent.

Just as the reader of the Tarot will divine meaning from the cards as a result of the play between the metaphorical images on the cards and the intuitive level of sense-making that lies beneath the surface of the conscious mind, so too does the reader of *L'Incal* engage with individual interpretation. It is as though the text itself only presents one fraction of the whole story, the remainder of which is written in the subconscious mind of the reader. The nature of reality for an occultist, as we know not only Jodorowsky to be, but also many writers and artists in the graphic medium, "presupposes the notion of planes or 'layers' of significance and possible awareness.[169] The higher or farther you get from the everyday here-and-now layer, the less

[169] Granholm, "Comics," 499-502. Granholm, scholar of contemporary esotericism, has written that "comic books are perhaps the popular cultural products where the occult is most prominent." Particularly apropos in the context of the current work at hand, he also explains that comics are "one of the few remaining popular cultural arenas where creators are still relatively free to experiment with unorthodox subject matters." *Unorthodox*. Perhaps a perfect word to describe what I am doing, or at least attempting to do, with this chapter. It is true that Granholm is, for the most part, specifically working with superhero comics, in which superheroes are "portrayed as perfected human beings, representing the next evolutionary steps of humanity." This trait, "combined with the superheroes often gaining their powers from advanced scientific experimentation, introduces an important occult dimension, and is why the superhero comic can itself be regarded as a form of occult fiction, preceded by the occult novels of the late 1800s and the UFO magazines of the 1950s." I am extending his statements on the occult here to *L'Incal*. Which, although it is not, strictly speaking, a superhero comic, does share themes and tropes

meaning concepts such as 'time and space' or 'you and me' begin to have."[170] Here, in this speculative domain conjured by engagement between text, image, and the subconscious, the reader gains access to conceptions or modes of reality, of existence where the divisions between human and nonhuman and all of the boundaries placed on the location of subjectivity and of agency begin to dissolve. Jodorowsky's employment of the trumps from the Tarot as guides in the manifestation of the characters in the narrative makes of the Tarot cards, themselves, co-creators, and thus recognizes them as thinking agents. Jodorowsky (with Mœbius' graphic talent, of course) activates what he interprets as the meaning long-since hidden in the cards and attempts to realize their potential as agents through the science-fiction aesthetic. Each of the trumps with which the text engages is meant to inform and guide an individual aspect of the narrative and also to participate in the spiritual enlightenment of the reader, thus literally activating previously untapped potential – from the archetype represented on the Tarot cards, through the text coupled with the science-fiction aesthetic, and finally to the reader's imagination.

There are seventy-eight cards in a full Tarot deck. Many, if not all, of the characters, events, phenomena in *L'Incal* are influenced by or are intended to be Jodorowsky's own versions of the trumps in the major arcana of the Tarot. A book could be written focusing entirely on a comparison of the agents in the narrative with those on the cards. And so here I will narrow the focus to three of the trumps from the major arcana, as they are represented on Jodorowsky's own publication of the Marseilles deck – The Fool, The Emperor, and The Empress – coupled with three characters – DiFool and the Impéroratriz (Emperoress, in the English translation).

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with the superhero genre. In addition, Mœbius also wrote and illustrated many superhero comics, bringing that aesthetic to bear on *L'Incal*.

[170] Huson, The Devil's Picturebook, 20.

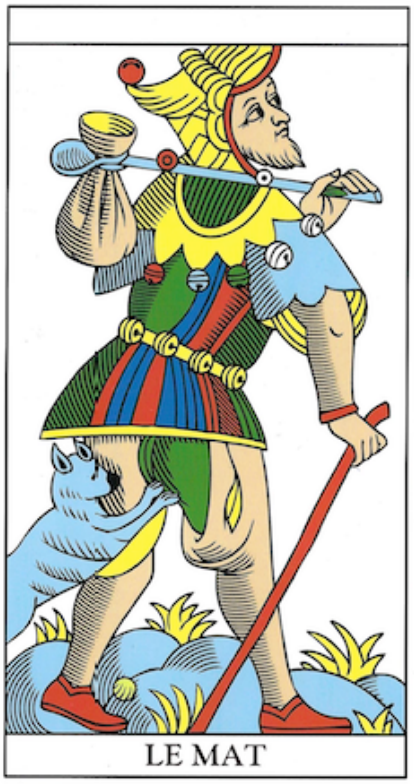

Figure 19. The Fool from the *Marseille Tarot, Professional Edition* illustrated by Anna Maria Morsucci (Torino: Lo Scarabeo, 2019).

John DiFool, by virtue of his name but also by that of his character, is a representation of the fool from the Tarot (see fig. 19), a subject on which Jodorowsky has authored an entire book.[171] The Fool card in the Tarot deck

> traditionally represents the irrational, the undetermined – the somehow mysteriously structured chaos which seems to lie at the root of all existence. To the dyed-in-the-wool materialist he will represent a total breakdown in order, absolute entropy, on the one hand, and maybe that 'creeping sludge of occultism' which masks the face of madness for him, on the other … He is the cosmic

[171] One cannot underestimate the influence that Jodorowsky's biography has on his entire œuvre. DiFool is undoubtedly an adaptation of The Fool, but he may also be a portrait of Jodorowsky's grandfather, who he describes in *The Way of the Tarot* as "a Russian ballet dancer who was over six feet tall and had a leonine mane of blond hair" (3). He credits his grandfather, who died by accidentally setting himself on fire, with bringing the Tarot into his life, and goes on to talk about his grandfather as if he, himself, had been a fool. He was "clumsy … in everything concerning the details of everyday life."

> cypher, the unmarshalable, archetypal square peg, the existential everyman, nonpartisan, non-aligned and 'wild', [he is] all over the place, at home everywhere and nowhere. The divine bum.[172]

Huson's description of DiFool, though less biting, mirrors Jodorowsky's description of DiFool as, "an idiot, a stupid, worthless nothing – a total zero"[173]

Figure 20. DiFool and Deepo. Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 265.

The differences between The Fool as seen in the Marseilles deck and DiFool's likeness are really only matters of degree – one more caricaturesque than the other depending on Mœbius' varied renderings (see fig. 20). While the fool in the Tarot is typically accompanied by a dog, as seen on the card in Jodorowsky's deck, DiFool's sidekick Deepo is identified as a *mouette à béton*, a form of animate, sentient statuary who, despite not being "man's best friend" nor even of fleshly constitution, exhibits the same canine-like loyalty that we anthropomorphically (and so also anthropocentrically) associate with dogs. How an object made of concrete comes to be alive and self-conscious, which Deepo seems to be even before the Incal comes around, receives no exposition in the narrative. Deepo flies and speaks despite his

[172] Huson, The Devil's Picturebook, 121.
[173] Annestay, *Deconstructing*, 32.

seeming compositional incongruities. Here, as is the case for all objects and phenomena in the narrative, agency is assumed, and so does not have to be explained or justified. In any number of the sentient nonhuman objects throughout the text, is seen evidence of the "nonhuman turn" referred to in this chapter's title. Deepo's sentience is a spurning of anthropocentrism, an insistence that "thought is neither merely epiphenomenal nor something that exists in a separate realm from the material world. This means that thinking happens everywhere,"[174] even within the being of a seagull made of concrete.

Figure 21. L'Impéroratriz (The Emperoress). Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 123.

L'Impéroratriz (see fig. 21) is not only the sovereign of the Human galaxy, in the narrative context, but also a reference to The Empress and The Emperor trumps in the major arcana (see fig. 22). In Jodorowsky's philosophy of the Tarot, The Empress brings to *L'Incal* an influence on the notion of "cyclical reawakening"[175] – reminiscent of the recursive historical cycles demonstrated in the narrative and discussed earlier in this chapter. The Emperor is "the

[174] Steven Shaviro, "The Consequences of Panpsychism," *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 20.
[175] Alejandro Jodorowsky and Marianne Costa, *The Way of Tarot: The Spiritual Teacher in the Cards* trans. Jon E. Graham (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 2009), 79.

personification of force."[176] The conjoining of these two archetypes, back-to-back in the form of The Emperoress – awakening coupled with force – informs the aforementioned notion that despite the processes of spiritual enlightenment, the likes of which Jodorowsky believes he can induce in the reader via the text itself, any awakening in the face of material conflict, of class warfare and uprising will always be met with oppressive force.

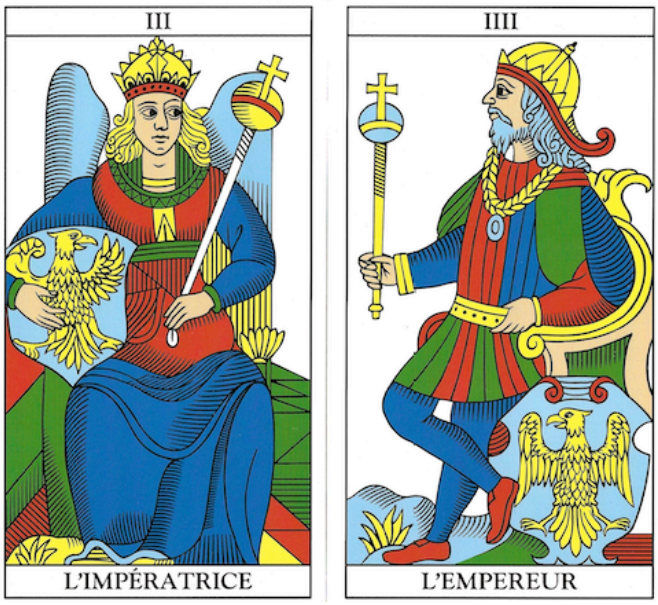

Figure 22. The Emperor and Empress. *Marseille Tarot, Professional Edition* illustrated by Anna Maria Morsucci (Torino: Lo Scarabeo, 2019).

The seventy-eight cards in the Tarot deck correspond with the seventy-eight-billion clone-like children that DiFool fathers in the narrative. This numeric invocation of the Tarot also introduces a material, historical citation. On his journey to defeat The Great Darkness, DiFool travels to the Berg home planet, where he will participate in a contest known as the Great Five Thousand Year Nuptial Games. Warriors from the planets of the Human empire battle for the honor of impregnating the Berg's Protoqueen, the leader of the Berg Galaxy, and populating that

[176] Jodorowsky and Costa, *Tarot*, 148.

galaxy anew.[177] Owing to the power of the Incal, DiFool unexpectedly wins the contest and mates with the Protoqueen, an entity who is, in its original form, a nonhuman one, a gelatinous mass – something akin to the blob[178] – that seduces DiFool by taking the form of a human woman.

To call what takes place between DiFool and this gooey mass a "mating" only works because it does result in offspring – seventy-eight billion of them to be exact, each one a near-clone of DiFool himself. And yet, what I propose in this chapter leads to a bizarre but important question that problematizes the sexual act assumed here: Would a blob of goo necessarily have sex and reproduce like humans do? Or, is the assumption that nonhuman agents do it human-style an example of the difficulty encountered, even when we try with thoughtful intent, to avoid our narcissistic anthropocentrism? Does language even permit Human to decenter itself? A non-anthropocentric perspective seems to be, so far anyways, one of those things that Federico Campagna says will always "remain immune from language."[179] And so our words do often get in the way of our intentions – a fact that illuminates the importance of the excess of meaning (explored earlier in this chapter) produced by the disorienting fragmentations that erupt into the spaces between what meaning Jodorowsky's text conveys and that which Mœbius' graphics reveal. Whatever the right term is to describe DiFool's engagement with the Protoqueen, owing to the circumstances, this act of procreation could be interpreted as rape – DiFool first rejects the blob entity's advances before being deceived and goaded into the act. What might be the rape of John DiFool is not the only troubling aspect of this plotline. DiFool, a white European, fathers a

[177] Here again, the complexity of this event in the narrative's broader context makes it too much to go into in detail.
[178] That shapeless mass of goo made famous in the 1958 science fiction-horror film *The Blob* is the blob I reference here.
[179] Campagna, Technic and Magic, 4.

race of descendants who then literally replace the Bergs, murdering them all in a "cauchemar de haine,"[180] and dumping their bodies in a massive open-pit grave. When DiFool encounters the last of the Bergs he is accused of being responsible for their genocide. "Je vois vraiment pas en quoi je suis responsable," he argues. "Je suis vraiment désolé! Mais comment aurais-je pu prévoir ce …"[181] As I mentioned earlier, Jodorowsky does not shy away from contradictions. I see in this representation of xenophobia and genocide – a clear reference not only to the Holocaust,[182] but also to the notion that these devastating events are essential components of the cycle of historical and material conflicts that Jodorowsky wishes to ameliorate, to bring to an end through processes of individual and, eventually, collective spiritual enlightenment, the impossibility of which he also, contradictorily, acknowledges and embraces.

The nonhuman object, in the form of the Protoqueen, robs DiFool of his agency. It is the primacy of the nonhuman over the human that is on display here, a direct rejection of the anthropocentric hierarchy in subject-object relations that pits the human subject against the nonhuman object, and another de-emphasis of the human as the sole-proprietor of agency. In *L'Incal*, the universe is alive, charged throughout with consciousness and with subjective experience. The non-binary, the I-thou, the enchantment, the networked tentacularity of existence is assumed.[183] An example of historical citation comes into view when, in the process

[180] Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 271.
[181] Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 272.
[182] Even if this reference to the Holocaust is unintentional on the part of the authors, the fact that such an allusion can be read into the text at all signals a liaison between *L'Incal* and my mapping of the concentrationary onto Denis' *High Life*. It also makes *L'Incal* another example illustrating just how profoundly the concentrationary has been embedded in our cultural forms.
[183] *L'Incal* is not the only example of a francophone comic that addresses these issues and themes. Aside from Jodorowsky's other comics, all of which participate in the same discourses, Nicole Claveloux's stunning comic, *La Main Verte* (1978), is another exemplar. It is less influential, and certainly less well-known. This is owing largely to the fact that, unlike *L'Incal*, which was translated into English soon after its initial publication, Claveloux's work was not released in English translation until 2022.

Figure 23. La Protoreine in the process of transformation.
Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 198.

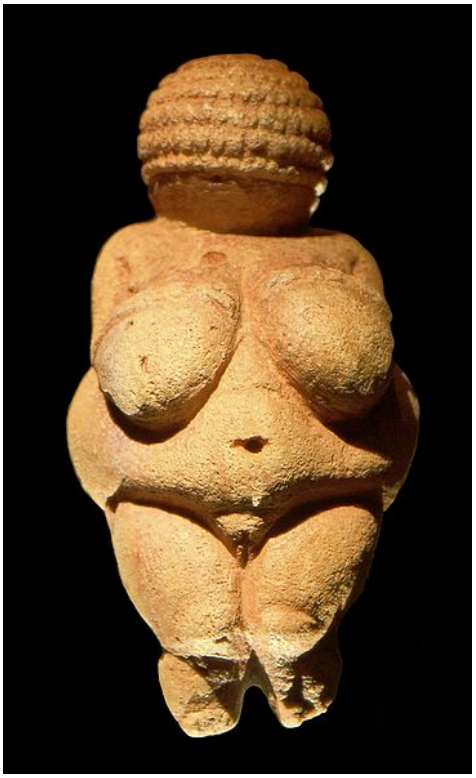

Figure 24. The Venus of Willendorf. Wikimedia Commons, GNU Free Documentation License, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Venus_of_Willendorf_frontview_retouched_2.jpg.

of transformation, the Protoreine (see fig. 23) goes through a stage that, in Mœbius' representation, resembles the fertility figurines of the Paleolithic era – the Venus of Willendorf is a prime example (see fig. 24). In the same way that Jodorowsky calls into use the archetypes depicted on the Tarot cards, the reference to this particular historical form attempts to bring to the narrative some aspect of the meaning associated with, or embedded in, the archetype that the Venus figure represents – the eternal mother goddess who gives birth to the world. In *L'Incal*, the nonhuman, blob-like entity that transforms itself, in a series of panels, through this Venus-like form into that of a human woman, is an example of Jodorowsky and Mœbius appealing to what the early twentieth-century metaphysical philosopher René Guénon refers to, in *Symbols of Sacred Science* (cited by Jodorowsky in his book *The Way of Tarot*), as "the debris of ancient traditions … reaching back to a past too remote to be determined." The nonhuman entity – the Protoqueen – who stands in for everything ancient that the Venus figurine embodies, graphically manifests the Paleolithic form's "subconscious collective memory," and thus "contain[s] in a more or less veiled form a considerable body of esoteric data."[184]

Ancient traditions from the detritus of that too-remote past appear throughout the narrative in the form of structures that resemble the temples and forums of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian antiquity as well as in characters and events. Each of them "la trace de cet âge d'or … de cet antique état, de ce passé lointain dans lequel la Terre était un paradis avant que les hommes aient dégradé la planète, avant Détritus-vallée, en ce temps où le Cœur-soleil n'était pas enfoui et où l'on vivait le Mythe."[185] The Emperoress is doubly-loaded with meaning from the Tarot, as just discussed, as well as from ancient Roman religion and myth. As a two-faced, two-bodied humanoid creature, conjoined back-to-back – female on one side and male on the other –

[184] Jodorowsky and Costas, *Tarot*, 11.
[185] Annestay, *Les Mystères*, 32.

The Emperoress brings to mind the figure of the Janus, the Roman god of duality and doorways. Janus rules over beginnings and thus also are they the god of endings who presides over transitions, in history – from one era to another, through conflict and resolution – and at the level of the self – from one stage of personal and spiritual growth to the next. All of this makes Janus the perfect god for Jodorowsky to invoke in *L'Incal*, replete as it is with dualities, with patterns of conflict and resolution, with death-birth-rebirth cycles, and with recursive historical and material motifs. The Emperoress is one example of the way in which Jodorowsky and Mœbius excavate the past, digging two-thousand years down in the case of the Janus, to build the science-fictional world that takes shape in *L'Incal*. By constructing his narrative out of the forms of the past he creates a kind of conduit for the exercise of the nonhuman agency buried in those artefacts and mythologies, infusing the text with the past's dormant potential.

There are many such references to the aesthetic and ideological remains of the human past throughout the narrative, not all of which reach back thousands of years. In another series of panels, DiFool presents the Incal to a character named Animah (see fig. 25). The image, which bears a remarkable resemblance to William Blake's 1794 painting *The Ancient of Days (Setting a Compass to Earth)* (see fig. 26), is rendered in first-person point-of-view perspective. Animah's outstretched hand occupies the foreground of the frame, and thus becomes the hand of the reader, who reaches out from the third-dimensional space into the two-dimensional diegetic space, becoming an active participant in the narrative – the reader is now the recipient of the Incal, the beneficiary of its alchemical, transformative powers and, immersed in the narrative via the panel's use of perspective, of the wisdom it provides (not least of which is the knowledge required to understand the rules of the world in which the narrative takes place) just as man receives the compass set by God in the Blake painting.

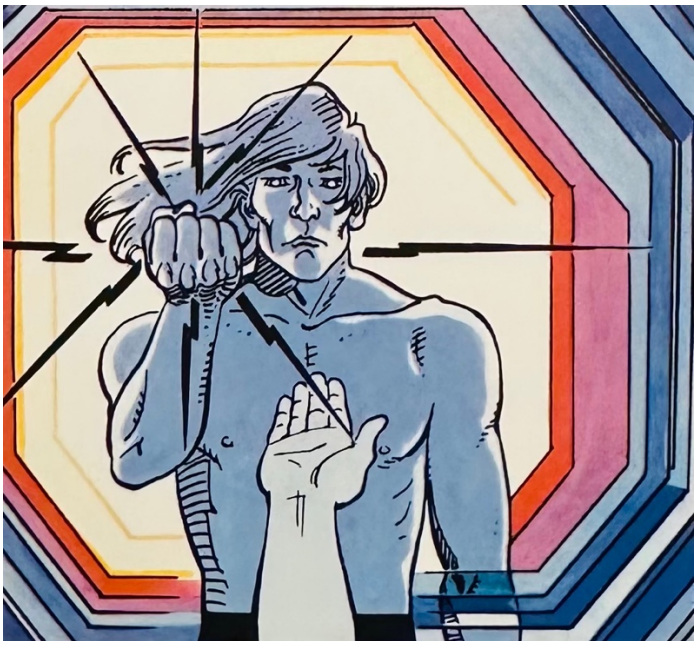

Figure 25. DiFool presents the Incal. Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 72.

Figure 26. William Blake, *The Ancient of Days (Setting a Compass to Earth)*, 1794.

This is a mythological as well as an alchemical reference. The subject of Blake's work is God's creation of the Earth, but more importantly, of its separation from the heavens. The title of the work is a paraphrase of a passage from the Christian bible's book of Proverbs (King James Version, chapter 8, verse 27) which reads, "When He prepared the heavens, I [Wisdom] was there: when He set a compass upon the face of the depth." Blake's painting depicts God, not only creating the realm of man, but also separating it from that of the divine. God is seen setting a "compass," wisdom, by which man may know the distinction between the spiritual and earthly realms – the above and the below, creating an implicit hierarchical relationship – but also by which man may recognize the same disparate spiritual and earthly realms as the essential constituent parts of his own being. Which is to say that God gives man wisdom to know duality – to discern it in the physical world but also to then orient that concept inward and see himself as a being who is not only separate *from* the divine but also separated *by* the divine. *L'Incal* is something like that compass. The Incal sends DiFool, and thus the humanoid world of which he becomes a representative, on an odyssey, at the end of which DiFool meets a golden god and asks simply, "Qui est-tu?" To which the god responds, "Je suis Orh! La lumière ancienne! L'entité qui a été envoyée pour créer ce temps et cette espace!"[186] Orh further explains his creation, "Toi, Incal, mon fils bien-aimé, tu es porteur maintenat de la somme des rêves humains! Toi, tu es le germe de la nouvelle creation!"[187] In *L'Incal*, the Incal is "conscience pure."[188] It is not merely an object or a phenomenon. For Jodorowsky, the text at the narrative level along with the material text itself are, together, the key to unlocking the previously

[186] Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 303.
[187] Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 304.
[188] Jodorowsky and Mœbius, *L'Incal*, 170.

referenced "secret" that he believes we're all looking for, a transcendent level of consciousness. He and Mœbius purposefully seek to operationalize both occult practices and the aesthetics of the science fiction genre to guide the reader along the pathway to that transcendence. *L'Incal* does what occult-influenced, English-language science fiction comics do when it "portrays the transfiguration, and indeed transmutation, of beings to a higher evolutionary state through technological means."[189]

References to historical aesthetic modes bring the concrete (the already-lived past) into the abstract (the imagined future), thereby giving abstract, future world-building a tactile realism, lending a kind of realistic credibility to a fictional construct that is actually implausible, not commensurate with what we think we know about reality. They create new meaning in the present out of the remnants of the past. *L'Incal* draws on the unactivated potential of past forms and in a "vast system of intricate associations" activates them by means of "an accumulation of successive images in what we call sequential art."[190] Much like the cards in the Tarot, these past forms are symbols, like those of the mythologies they conjure, "symbols expressing correspondences between archetypes in the past and their manifestations in the present."[191] They offer access to a certain kind of liminality where past latencies lie hidden, waiting to be awakened. By its nature, the speculative, science fiction genre does similar work – it attempts to mine the unactivated potential of the past that is often also our real-world present, and like the Tarot, to order the chaos of the given moment, in an effort to structure a future world that sees the realization of that potential.

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[189] Granholm, "Comics," 503.
[190] Annestay, *Deconstructing*, 6.
[191] Anonymous, *Meditations on The Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism*, trans. Robert Powell (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2002), 13.

In *L'Incal*, indeed throughout the whole of Jodorowsky's œuvre, we can read an agreement with Haraway when she says "we are not in charge of the world."[192] Thinking through things as agents in their own right, *L'Incal* rejects modern science's claims about the nature of reality and subverts scientism's position as the sole authority in the determination of what counts as real and what doesn't, of who gets to declare selfhood and who doesn't, of what/who is able to exert agency.[193] Via *L'Incal*, the text itself as much as the mysterious nonhuman phenomenon within the narrative from which the title is derived, Jodorowsky and Mœbius insist that there are "other ways of knowing and being in the world – assemblages that sidestep the tired dichotomies between subjects and objects, human and nonhuman, mind and body, knowing and experiencing."[194] The boundaries that modern humans presuppose between subject and object simply do not exist in the world that Jodorowsky and Mœbius have built – or perhaps it's better to call it the world that they have *manifested* into the real. There are endless transformative possibilities at all levels of existence in *L'Incal*. The text fashions its underlying epistemology from the contradictory mingling of divination and an idealist metaphysics with graphic references to concrete historical forms, indicative of our lived reality. In the same way that René Guénon sees these kinds of symbols of ancient folklore as repositories of collective memory and knowledge, so too does Jodorowsky see a repository of unactivated knowledge in the Tarot, preserved and concealed in the cards "so that it could travel through the darkness of history," Jodorowsky claims, "until it reached a remote future where individuals of a higher level of consciousness would decipher its wonderful message."[195] Jodorowsky has taken this belief that a future people will possess some ability to see in ancient and historical motifs a knowledge

[192] Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 199.
[193] Aren Roukema, "Early Science Fiction and Occultism" (PhD diss., University of London, 2020), 66.
[194] Salter, *Alien Agency*, xi.
[195] Jodorowsky and Costas, *Tarot*, 11.

previously indecipherable, and written it into *L'Incal* where Mœbius picks it up and graphically renders it in aesthetic form. In Jodorowsky's imagining, the historical forms that litter the visual narrative link directly to the occult knowledge lurking in the cards of the Tarot. Which is to say that the characterizations of the trumps from the major arcana of the Tarot bring to *L'Incal* degrees of meaning that, like the agency of the nonhuman, are obscured at levels of vibration we are unable to engage without a material process enabling us to access it.

The manner in which real-world material conflict along with the existential catastrophes, the many crises of meaning, and the cataclysmic environmental harm that anthropocentrism wreaks on the world is captured and narrativized in this text suggests that a whole-cloth reformation of the frameworks of existence is necessary. Human is very much a problematic concept here. The occult nature of the methodologies that are proposed to finally bring an (impossible) end to those conflicts insinuates that the work that must be done cannot be accomplished within the confines of anthropocentric subject-object hierarchies. The urgent inquiries that this text participates in cannot be fully enacted at all within the bounds of our current economic, cultural, and political models. Jodorowsky and Mœbius attempt to initiate a kind of psychedelic trip that graphically and textually represents while it performs the "immense richness of human imagination and experience intertwine[d] with the dazzling material effects and performances of the world without *us* (italics are mine),"[196] or at least, without the notion of an "us" that is opposed to an objectified object, stripped of its agency.

When you read *L'Incal*, you're not just consuming a narrative, you're participating in a kind of ritual that finds its roots in ancient, yet persistent beliefs and practices. You become a participant in a complex, heterodox strategy, the desired end result of which is a subversive

[196] Salter, *Alien Agency*, xii.

method of reframing subject-object relations via individual and collective enlightenment, an emancipation from the increasingly destructive, annihilationist nature of the way humans interact with and conceptualize objects and their relations. That is, of course, if you're doing it right. In Jodorowsky's formulation, to read *L'Incal* the right way is not merely to passively read the words printed on its pages nor to let your eyes casually follow the lines drawn in its panels. But rather, to read *L'Incal* is to perform it in much the same way that one "does" a Tarot card reading. "You start with a pack of cards," Jodorowsky instructs in *The Way of the Tarot*, "you mix up the Arcana and display them flat … You interpret them and put them back together in sentences. In a sacred quest the initiate reader … puts the pieces back together."[197] He goes on to explain interpretation as "initiatory work" that manifests not in "an immaterial dimension, but in the material world."[198] And so a Tarot reading is not really a reading at all. It's a ritual, a performance of interpretation that requires a recognition of the cards as co-agents in divining and then subsequently acting materially on the guidance offered by the interpretation of the images on the cards. In this way, whether one believes in practices of divination or not, the very fact that there are those who act in the real world based on that cartomancy, indicates that our reality is in no small part constructed using what we dismissively call magic. In this respect magic is not at all unlike science fiction, a genre whose relationship to the construction of the world all around us is well-explored. I suggest that Jodorowsky and Mœbius intentionally made *L'Incal* so convoluted and tangential so that the reader who truly wishes to understand the narrative would have no choice but to perform the text by doing the act of interpretation, much as one does a Tarot card reading. To read *L'Incal* in this way is to necessarily recognize an agency in the text itself. At the very least, the fact that the text approaches material agency at all places it in a

[197] Jodorowsky and Costas, *Tarot*, 21.
[198] Jodorowsky and Costas, *Tarot*, 21.

category of important science fictions that refuse what Haraway terms the "appropriationist logic of domination built into the nature/culture binarism" that has the world "objectified as thing not agent."[199]

[199] Donna Haraway, Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science (New York: Routledge, 1989), 13.

"Maybe This Whole Thing is a Conspiracy":
Mars Origin Theory and the Aesthetics of Paranoia in the French Science Fiction Streaming Series *Missions*

Out there, there has to be something better than man. Has to be.
- Colonel George Taylor (Charlton Heston), *Planet of the Apes*

Our current orthodoxies won't last. They're brain dead.
Nobody actually believes them anymore.
- Tucker Carlson, *Twitter*

Civilization is a conspiracy theory against reality.
- Jonathan Vankin, *Conspiracies, Cover-Ups, and Crimes*

Human actions are based on imagination, belief,
and faith, not on objective observation.
And to control human imagination is to
shape mankind's collective destiny,
provided the source of this control
is not identifiable by the public.
- Jacques Vallée, *Passport to Magonia*

The citation in the first line of this chapter's title is taken directly from the dialogue in an episode of the third and final season of the French science fiction streaming series *Missions* (2017-2020), the primary text for analysis in this chapter.[200] In a tense moment between two characters, both of whom are attempting to make sense of a happenstance that is, according to the known laws of the universe, impossible, the only conclusion that makes any sense at all to them is the one that denies the very reality at hand – as if to say, what we are experiencing isn't really *real* because it's *just a conspiracy*. The denial of reality in the narrative by invoking conspiracy demonstrates two aspects of conspiracy theorizing that will be explored throughout this chapter – both the ways that conspiracy theories, when advanced by certain groups, can be

[200] *Missions*, dir. Julien Lacombe (Paris: OCS, 2017), season 3, episode 1, *AppleTV* streaming download.

Figure 27. The series' opening sequence along with its promotional materials gives a sense of its sleek, science-fictional aesthetic. *Missions*, directed by Julien Lacombe (2017, OCS), AppleTV streaming.

Figure 28. "Ils pensent être les premiers." Missions, directed by Julien Lacombe.

tools for sense-making, and the way that, when proposed by others, conspiracy theories become accusations that function to deny a material reality.

Missions, a "mélange de science fiction, d'aventure, et de mysticisme,"[201] was created by Ami Cohen, Henri Debeurme, and Julien Lacombe (with all episodes directed by the latter) and was first released in France in 2017 on the streaming network OCS City (a subsidiary of the French telecommunications corporation Orange). Despite a reportedly low budget – somewhere in the neighborhood of one-million Euro per episode[202] – the show's slick, space-travel production values (see figs. 27 and 28) and a compelling narrative made it popular enough to get picked up for a second and third season and to be subsequently released on the American streaming network Shudder. As entertaining as *Missions* definitely is, it is also, as far as its dominant theme is concerned, not incredibly original. After all, it takes on the same basic concern that many science fiction narratives before it – the films *Interstellar* (2014), *Contact* (1997), *Prometheus* (2012), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), to name just a few – have already done and it does so in a context that we have also seen before – a mission to Mars.[203] The show's director and co-creator, Julien Lacombe, has himself compared the series to these well-regarded films in his explanation of the show's thematic content:

> Les thèmes abordés sont de l'ordre de la quête et de la métaphysique … En gros, c'est une série à message et on prend le risque de parler de choses qui peuvent être pompeuses en les verbalisant. Mais au moins, on fait quelque chose d'un tout

[201] Clio Weickert, "MipDrama: 'Missions', une série SF française à la conquête de Mars et des spectateurs Terriens," *20 minutes*, April 2, 2017, https://www.20minutes.fr/medias/2042107-20170402-mipdrama-missions-serie-sf-francaise-conquete-mars-spectateurs-terriens.
[202] Rita Carla Francesca Monticelli, "Missions: a bet won for European science fiction," *Anakina.eu*, July 2, 2020, https://ladyanakina.blogspot.com/2020/07/missions-french-tv-series-mars.html.
[203] A quick Google search for "science fiction films about missions to Mars" comes up with, in a glance, around fifty films. A few recent examples include: *Red Planet* (2000), *Mission to Mars* (2000), *The Last Days on Mars* (2013), and *The Martian* (2015).

> petit peu différent. J'ai beaucoup aimé en première saison que les critiques anglais … nous comparent à Andreï Tarkovski, à *Solaris*… et c'est vrai qu'il y a une forme de filiation. *Missions*, c'est de la fiction un peu métaphysique mais aussi rythmée. […] Les grands films de science-fiction sont *2001: l'odyssée de l'espace*, *Interstellar*, *Abyss* où tu interroges l'espèce, le futur, la destinée. Et nous, on est plutôt dans cette filiation-là.[204]

Like these critically and financially successful films, the narrative in *Missions* is primarily concerned with an exploration of the origins of the human species. Aside from the fact that *Missions* is a television series with a narrative that centers a mission to Mars and is not a film, which in itself is a significant difference[205], what sets it apart from other moving-image science fiction narratives that have engaged with the possibility that human life and society may not have begun on Earth as the byproduct of the spontaneous and chance processes of evolution, is for one, that the series is French[206] – a fact that makes it particularly unique in the canon of science fictions that explore alternate human origin theories. Secondly, *Missions* stands out in that its key plot elements, and even some of its characters, are taken directly from real contemporary events and people. The primary intrigue in the series – the discovery that human life originated

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[204] Julien Lacombe, "Critique & Interviews / 'Missions' saison 1: episode par episode," interview by Jean-Christophe Nurbel, *Bulles de culture*, December 23, 2021. https://bullesdeculture.com/missions-saison-1-television-avis-critique-serie-top-bdc/.

[205] In my research (as well as in my lifelong avid consumption of science fiction films and television series) I have yet to find any other television or streaming series about a mission to Mars that appeared before *Missions*. In 2020, three years after the release of the first season of *Missions*, Netflix debuted the one-season series *Away*, that is as much a family drama as it is a science fiction show about travel to Mars. In 2016 there was a National Geographic series titled *Mars* that was certainly about a mission to Mars, but I don't include it because it wasn't entirely narrative fiction but was rather a kind of docudrama that combined documentary footage with fictional elements. As far as I can tell, *Missions* is, as of this writing, the only series of its kind.

[206] What exactly this designation signifies will be addressed as this chapter unfolds – in the context of today's globalized culture and economy, what exactly makes something like an internationally-distributed streaming series "French"?

on Mars – is centered around a space race between two narcissistic billionaires each competing to be the first human to set foot on Mars. These characters are, of course, two middle-aged white men – note the obvious resemblance to our very own real-world billionaire hustlers Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Richard Branson. A third, more overt reference to real-world history and events, is embodied by the character named Vladimir Komarov. One of the first men to travel in space, Komarov was a real-world Soviet cosmonaut who is most well known as the first human to die in space flight when, in 1967, his capsule, the Soyuz I, crash landed after re-entering Earth's atmosphere.[207] Finally, what most significantly sets *Missions* apart from the aforementioned cinematic narratives is that it engages with a specific account of human origins that presents something of an attack on historical orthodoxy and that has, perhaps for that very reason, decidedly been relegated to the domain of pseudoscience and unhinged conspiracy theory – specifically, the theory that humans originated on Mars; aka Mars Origin Theory.

The first season of *Missions* introduces the series' engagement with alternative human origin theory when the crew of a billionaire-funded mission to Mars discovers artifacts of an ancient, technologically-advanced human civilization, including the remains of an electrified underground city, buried beneath the planet's surface. While the city's human founders have been dead for millennia – many thousands of those final, living residents are found to be entombed forever in sabotaged stasis chambers within the city – the planet has all the while been home to an advanced artificial intelligence that the human civilization brought to life, having designed it to function as a kind of self-evolving, immortal caretaker. This human-A.I. cyborg of sorts chooses the cloned body of Vladimir Komarov as its/his human interface. The second season of the series centers around another billionaire-funded mission to Mars. This time

[207] Komarov's re-appearance in *Missions* will be discussed later in this chapter.

around, the series advances beyond merely the discovery that we earthly humans are descended from Martian ancestors, to include a portal, a worm hole of sorts, found among the remains of the ancient subterranean city. The portal functions as a passageway to a distant Earth-like planet where the artificial intelligence left on Mars has seeded an experimental human civilization. The show's themes of paranoia and suspicion are triggered in this instance by the fact that the humans who populate the cyborg's experiments do not know that they are test subjects, cloned from the DNA of the machine's creators, now living life as pawns to be manipulated at the will of the cyborgian artificially-intelligent being who oversees these humans in what is a very distinctly cult-like community of his own creation. The narrative in this second season intensifies the paranoiac and conspiratorial overtones that are pervasive throughout the show's three-season run as it engages further in these episodes with very of-the-moment real-world concerns. Not only is the series aesthetically representing a theory that challenges historical orthodoxy, introduced in the first season, but now moves to engage more profoundly with specific fears by televisually rendering a model of our deepening anxieties about the future, particularly when it comes to the rapid rise of artificial intelligence in our daily lives and the unknown yet oft-discussed future for our world, populated as it may likely (soon) be by both humans and intelligent machines (à la the experimental world at the opposite end of the Martian portal in *Missions*). The third season further complicates the series' already fraught narrative arch when it introduces interdimensional travel, sending a member of the second season's crew back to an Earth on which no missions to Mars have ever taken place.[208] In this third and final

[208] It is when this crew member, named Samuel Becker, is questioned by the American authorities on this version of Earth and is brought face-to-face with the Becker who exists in this dimension and who has never been to Mars, that they come to the conclusion cited in this chapter's title. From the perspective of the authorities, these men are twins who are engaged in a mysterious conspiracy, while from the perspective of the two Beckers, those who hold the power are the ones conspiring to hide the truth. All parties involved make recourse to accusations of conspiracy as a means of sense-making in the face of a

rendition of *Missions*, the showrunners expand, yet again, their engagement with paranoia, anxiety, manipulation, and conspiratorial pseudoscience to include the notion that another Earth exists alongside our own in a parallel dimension where people and events are similar, but not identical.[209] As the series progresses, each season adds an element that directly reflects an aspect of our contemporary zeitgeist taken directly from the shady realms of what are broadly dismissed as conspiracy theories and highly fictional, often dramatized pseudoscientific hypotheses.

In this chapter I will show how *Missions*, in its engagement with what is now considered to be conspiratorial pseudoscience coupled with its status as a descendant of the body of work by the nineteenth-century French scientist and storyteller Camille Flammarion – whose publications on the subject of the planet Mars, in both science and fiction, are recognized for their importance in the rise of popular interest in the red planet, but also as crucial texts in the history of astronomy – demonstrates the tense relationship between science, fiction, and conspiracy theories as interrelated forms of storytelling and mythmaking that arise, in particular, during times of widespread anxiety and in enduring moments of upheaval and crisis. In this chapter I will present *Missions* as a recent example of the kind of paranoiac, anxious televisual narrative that, much like a number of other speculative and science fiction television series – *Lost* and *The X-Files*, both descendants of the original paranoiac series *The Twilight Zone*, are two comparable

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seemingly impossible occurrence, while also using conspiracy as an allegation lobbed at one another, each of them a supposed conspirator who accuses the others of denying material reality. This exchange illustrates the confusing mish-mash of competing realities in this third and final season.

[209] Here, in my interpretation, the series is narrativizing at least some aspects of what has come to be known as the Mandela effect. In general terms, "the Mandela effect" is a term used to describe any phenomenon of widespread, so-called "false memories". The initial phenomenon, from which the effect takes its name, was the claim made by thousands of people all over the world (including me for whatever it's worth) who say that they remember news reports in the 1980s declaring the death of Nelson Mandela while he was a prisoner in apartheid South Africa, when "in fact" Mandela didn't die until 2013. There is a grab basket of other phenomena, largely concerning claims to do with pop culture factoids, that the Mandela effect is often invoked to explain. There are those who theorize (again, including me, to a limited extent) that these phenomena are, or at least could be, "evidence" of parallel realities that some among us humans are able to traverse, even if unknowingly.

examples – is born from and reflective of a cultural politics that has, since the final decades of the twentieth century, been shaped by misleading institutional narratives (and by "institutional" I mean the sum total of our political, economic, and cultural institutions, from government to finance, advertising, education, media and beyond) that have been openly, knowingly designed expressly to manipulate our collective perception of reality.[210] Within the frameworks of manipulation, deceit, and institutional corruption, our sense-making mechanisms begin to falter. When the long-held status quo is no longer sufficient to address the realities – material and otherwise – of the present, a desperate search for ways to understand, to find meaning is unleashed. As the writer Dougald Hine notes in his text *At Work in the Ruins: Finding our Place in the Time of Science, Climate Change, Pandemics, and all the Other Emergencies*, art and artists respond to the aforementioned calls for new ways of seeing in times of distress and uncertainty. I see *Missions* as one such responsive work that does what Hine says of art. Citing the Swedish playwright Anders Duus, Hine writes that the job of art "is to complicate matters" and to engage, in particular with "whatever seems to be getting taken for granted."[211] The issue of human origins has been, we believe, long since settled – science tells us that we are the

[210] Richard Wolff, "Prof. Richard Wolff on The Phony Fiscal Crisis," interview by RJ Eskow, *The Zero Hour with RJ Eskow*, YouTube, May 4, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXvlFPA7zlQ&t=684s. That we are the subjects of willful manipulation is not merely my opinion. Many scholars, journalists, philosophers, etc. have demonstrated this. For one particular example, see the work of the American economist and professor emeritus of economics at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Richard Wolff, whose entire body of work is punctuated throughout with the notion that our markets and institutions are, as he says, "systematically misleading."

[211] Dougald Hine, *At Work in the Ruins: Finding our Place in the Time of Science, Climate Change, Pandemics, and all of the Other Emergencies* (London: White River Publishing, 2023), 93-94; "Glassäpplen," Swedish Performing Arts Coalition, accessed June 26, 2023, https://scensverige.se/en/glasapplen/. In the context of this chapter, the theme of one of Anders Duus' award-winning plays, Glasäpplen, is of interest. The Swedish Performing Arts Coalition describes it as "a dramatical observation of our merciless attitude toward the deviant, the values that our children inherit from us," and of particular interest when considering conspiracy theories and their representation, "our yearning for life to transcend into something more than what it actually is."

product of millions of years of evolution and so that's all there is to it.[212] One could certainly say that we now take the issue of our species' origins for granted. If that is true, then *Missions* is doing much the same thing that art, in general, can often do, but the series is also doing much the same thing that a conspiracy theory wants to do – it is bringing our attention to an issue that is taken for granted and "suggesting the possibility of other framings."[213] Broadly speaking, this is also the work of science fiction. What Hine says about art, that "[i]n its attention to whatever is missing or taken for granted, art can lead us upstream,"[214] can also, mutatis mutandis, be applied to both science fiction and conspiracy theory – specifically, in the context of this chapter, to *Missions*. Despite the fact that Mars Origin Theory dwells in the paranoiac realms of conspiracy theorists and iconoclastic popular philosophy, it is, like all conspiracy theories, an act of resistance. The theory is the recognition that *something just isn't right with the world*, a recognition that subsequently manifests in necessary attempts to narrativize the hope, albeit perhaps so often misdirected, that *things don't have to be this way*.[215] At the very least, *Missions* operationalizes a theory that is also a framework for thinking about alternate histories so as to also imagine and to actualize the manifestation of possibilities for a better future that do not merely repeat or reinforce the catastrophic orthodoxies of the past which have proved themselves time and time again to be insufficient to address the vast complexities of the present.

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[212] In 2014 the popular scientist Bill Nye – aka *The Science Guy*, a mechanical engineer by education and "science communicator" by trade – wrote a book, the title of which attests to our convictions where evolution is concerned: *Undeniable: Evolution and the Science of Creation*.
[213] Hine, *At Work*, 94.
[214] Hine, *At Work*, 94.
[215] *Trepalium*, DVD, dir. Vincent Lannoo (East Melbourne: Madman Entertainment, 2016), episode 6. *Missions* is not the only French science fiction series to imagine a near future that is a response to this unease about the present (and thus the future, as well). In the limited series *Trepalium*, the characters, who live under a kind of dystopian corporate authoritarianism, frequently express "this obsession with the idea that the world could be different."

What is considered in this chapter, in part, is the question of how and why the series operationalizes this particular kind of alternative history, this *uchronie*. While the series does not take place in an alternate history, nor does it change or rewrite past events, it does declare an alternative human-origin story, which then necessarily implies that all that we think we know to be true of human history is, in fact, predicated on what amounts to a series of lies. Whether one believes in the theory of evolution or in a religion-based creationism, in *Missions*, both turn out to be untrue. When the truth of long-established human history is found to be a lie, the past is, in some sense, evacuated of the foundational knowledge on which all of the histories to come were built.[216] The radical absence that then replaces that history – a black hole now where once there was meaning – is then filled with chaos and uncertainty. A desperate search for renewed meaning is sparked in this chaotic void. Since the truthtellers of the past are now shown to be liars, gate keepers of an oppressive and nefarious status quo, they can no longer be counted upon to provide sense-making frameworks nor can they be trusted to define the boundaries of morality and knowledge, resulting in a cultural environment loaded with paranoia and suspicion. Even a publication as vaunted as *The New York Times* recognizes the widespread distrust of the gatekeepers of traditional knowledge making. In a 2018 piece on that year's meeting of AlienCon,[217] style writer Steven Kurutz noted that:

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[216] I'm riffing a little bit here on the 1967 hit song, *Somebody to Love*, by the psychedelic rock band Jefferson Airplane. In this ode to the importance of love in times of chaos and meaninglessness, the lead singer, Grace Slick, cries out: "When the truth is found to be lies, And all the joy within you dies, Don't you want somebody to love, Don't you need somebody to love, Wouldn't you love somebody to love, You better find somebody to love, love, love…"

[217] "About AlienCon," AlienCon, accessed June 16, 2023, https://www.thealiencon.com/about-us/. AlienCon is, as described on the website thealiencon.com, "an exploration into the unexplained mysteries that exist between science fact and science fiction. Our exciting events … have enabled thousands of truth-seekers from across the globe to theorize, debate, and celebrate the impact that extraterrestrials may have had on science, culture, and our everyday lives. Featuring thought-provoking panel discussions and presentations, autograph and photograph sessions, exclusive merchandise, screenings, and more, AlienCon has become the ultimate otherworldly experience here on Earth! Our past star-studded line-ups have included celebrity guests from iconic alien-centric television shows and films, including *Ancient*

> [M]any Americans in the internet age have been in a mood to challenge established ideas. There has been a resurgence of the flat-earth theory. More than a few believe that global warming is a hoax, that survivors of mass shootings are crisis actors. Yet for many … this is not simply a political divide. We now know that the history that had been taught for years excluded the experiences of so many (African-Americans, women, the working poor). What else had been left out? Trust in the government and leaders who could set it all straight is historically low.[218]

What else had been left out? This is one of the key questions to which *Missions* and other paranoiac, anxious science fictions respond. As do conspiracists and so-called *pseudoscientists*, who, like artists and storytellers – including those who create and direct television series – step into the turmoil that this mistrust provokes, and in their efforts to divine order from chaos and uncertainty – whether such conditions be real or merely perceived – they come to replace the now dethroned oracles of history, knowledge, meaning, and truth.[219] In addition to the arguments outlined above, I will also, after a brief synopsis of the narrative in *Missions*, present the series as an example of the crucial and overlooked way that French science fictions do indeed play an important role, right alongside Anglo-American science fiction

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Aliens, *Project Blue Book*, *The UnXplained*, *Star Trek*, *The X-Files*, *Stranger Things*, and *Doctor Who* …"; Anissa Rivera, "AlienCon is spotted in Pasadena," *Pasadena Star-News*, March 4, 2023, https://www.pasadenastarnews.com/2023/03/04/aliencon-is-spotted-in-pasadena-and-it-brings-out-the-believers/. According to Rivera, more than three-thousand people were in attendance on the first day of AlienCon's 2023 event. The existence and increasing popularity of events such as this attest to the aforementioned "desperate search for renewed meaning."

[218] Steven Kurutz, "Suspicious Minds: Mingling with wariness and wonder at a conference devoted to 'Ancient Aliens'," *The New York Times*, July 21, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/21/style/ancient-aliens.html?searchResultPosition=1.

[219] In this respect, a paranoid conspiracy theorist with a following who looks to the face on Mars, for example, or to any other "evidence" of humanity's Martian origins, is no different than a cartomancer who looks to a Tarot spread to make meaning out of senseless chaos and overwhelming complexity – a notion that links this chapter with the previous one on *L'Incal*.

narratives, in humanity's struggle to grapple with the paranoia and anxiety that characterize so much of the zeitgeist of the twenty-first century (thus far, at least).[220] In this anxious, paranoid context, television – science fiction television, in particular – plays a crucial role. In an interview with the American entertainment publication *Variety*, Lacombe speaks to this very role: "I think science fiction is a genre where you can speak in metaphors about the state of the world. With natural resource depletion, overpopulation, global warming, I guess science fiction currently tries to warn people of what's ahead of us, how sad that can be. Our approach on space exploration is no longer naïve, and science fiction just reflects that."[221] Lacombe's comments accord well with scholarship on science fiction television. As the film and media scholar J.P. Telotte observes in his text *The Essential Science Fiction Television Reader*, science fiction television is "well positioned to become the most influential mode" of the science fiction genre, which he goes further to single out as "one of the key mirrors of the contemporary cultural climate."[222] Telotte's contemporary M. Keith Booker, in *Science Fiction Television*, further elaborates on the function and importance of science fiction on television:

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[220] Julien Lacombe, "MipTV: Creator Director Julien Lacombe on France's Newest Sci-Fi Series 'Missions'," interview by Jamie Lang, *Variety*, April 2, 2017, https://variety.com/2017/digital/festivals/creator-director-julien-lacombe-french-scifi-series-missions-1202021162/. The notion that French science fiction is, as I say, overlooked, is reflected in a statement made by the showrunner himself: "In France, science fiction is considered an American genre and I don't see a tradition or a trend from the French authors in that genre unfortunately."; Julien Lacombe, Henri Debeurme, Raphaël Rocher, and Ami Cohen, "Missions on OCS pre-premiere speech," interviewed by audience members, *Avant Strangel*, YouTube, March 2, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1AGsemi. During comments made at a pre-release screening event for the first season of the series, all three creators of the show agreed that *Missions*, "filmé comme une série américaine, comme un film américain," is an attempt to "se projeter dans ce genre [science fiction]." While it may well be true that the French generally consider science fiction to be an American genre, I strongly disagree with Lacombe's assertion that France has no science fiction tradition of its own. And I think one could argue, depending on how far back into the history of literature one goes, that science fiction's roots are in French literature.

[221] Lacombe, "MipTV"

[222] J.P. Telotte, *The Essential Science Fiction Television Reader* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 2.

> SFTV, by its very nature, explores thought-provoking concepts and alternative perspectives that can challenge its audience to rethink long-cherished ideas. In short, science fiction is, as a genre, particularly well suited to the kind of thoughtful and imaginative visions that demonstrate the positive potential of television as a medium … [S]cience fiction, no matter how distant its setting in space and time, generally comments first and foremost on the here and now, using imaginative settings and scenarios as means of gaining new perspectives on contemporary problems.[223]

If contemporary science fiction narratives, particularly those in the form of serial television, have indeed become spaces of cultural reflection, then what are we to make of the culture, of the here and now that is reflected back at us when we watch the French science fiction streaming series *Missions*?

Missions – "Mars est au rendez-vous."[224]

When we land on Mars with the international crew in *Missions* aboard the Ulysses 1, in what the crew believes to be the first manned mission of its kind, we journey to a near-future reality that is much like our present. Like us, the characters that populate this science-fictional

[223] M. Keith Booker, *Science Fiction Television* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 9. It wouldn't be much of a stretch to imagine a conspiracy theorist defining conspiracy theory in much the same way as Booker defines science fiction television. With only minor modifications, such a definition does indeed work well, and would go something like this: *A conspiracy theory* by its very nature, explores thought provoking concepts and alternative perspectives that can challenge its audience to rethink long-cherished ideas. In short, *a conspiracy theory* is particularly well suited to the kind of thoughtful and imaginative visions that demonstrate the positive potential of *challenging orthodoxies with alternative knowledge. A conspiracy theory* generally comments first and foremost on the here and now, using imaginative settings and scenarios as means of gaining new perspectives on contemporary problems.

[224] This phrase is repeated by different characters several times throughout the series. It can be interpreted in different ways, each possibility having a distinct connotation: *Mars is not lacking. Mars is always there. Mars is there for the taking. Mars is within our grasp.* The last two seem particularly fitting in the context of this series.

world live in the early twenty-first century. This contemporary reality is, like ours, shot through with uncertainty and distress in myriad forms. Unlike so many Anglo-American science fiction films and series, which tend to give us rather direct, easily legible depictions of our many contemporary challenges – climate catastrophe, economic inequality, war, pandemics, the increasing prevalence of modern slavery, etc. – the uncertainty and distress here is represented metaphorically in the form of interpersonal conflict and psychological turmoil. Via a series of discontinuous flashbacks, the viewer is presented with glimpses of the personal tragedies endured by individual crew members prior to their mission to Mars. These interior conflicts, coupled with violent events and the discovery of the destroyed remnants of an ancient, technologically-advanced human civilization on Mars, creates an atmosphere in which the crew members are haunted by the traumas of their individual pasts and fearful of the future that their mission's discoveries have troubled. But they are also deeply disturbed by the implications of what are now only the remains of that once-flourishing human civilization, a thriving culture that in its scientific and technological pursuits brought about its own annihilation.

The aforementioned formal discontinuity, coupled with a complex narrative that, over the course of three seasons, develops multiple intertwining plot lines across space, time, and interdimensional realities – much like the series *Lost*, which, in interviews, Lacombe often cites as an influence – makes *Missions* a rather difficult series to synopsize (not unlike both of the other primary texts that are the subjects of this dissertation, *High Life* and *L'Incal*, which share with *Missions* the characteristics of narrative and formal complexity). The following subsection will be comprised of a breakdown of the series' main characters preceding a résumé of the events in the series that have led to this chapter's thesis.

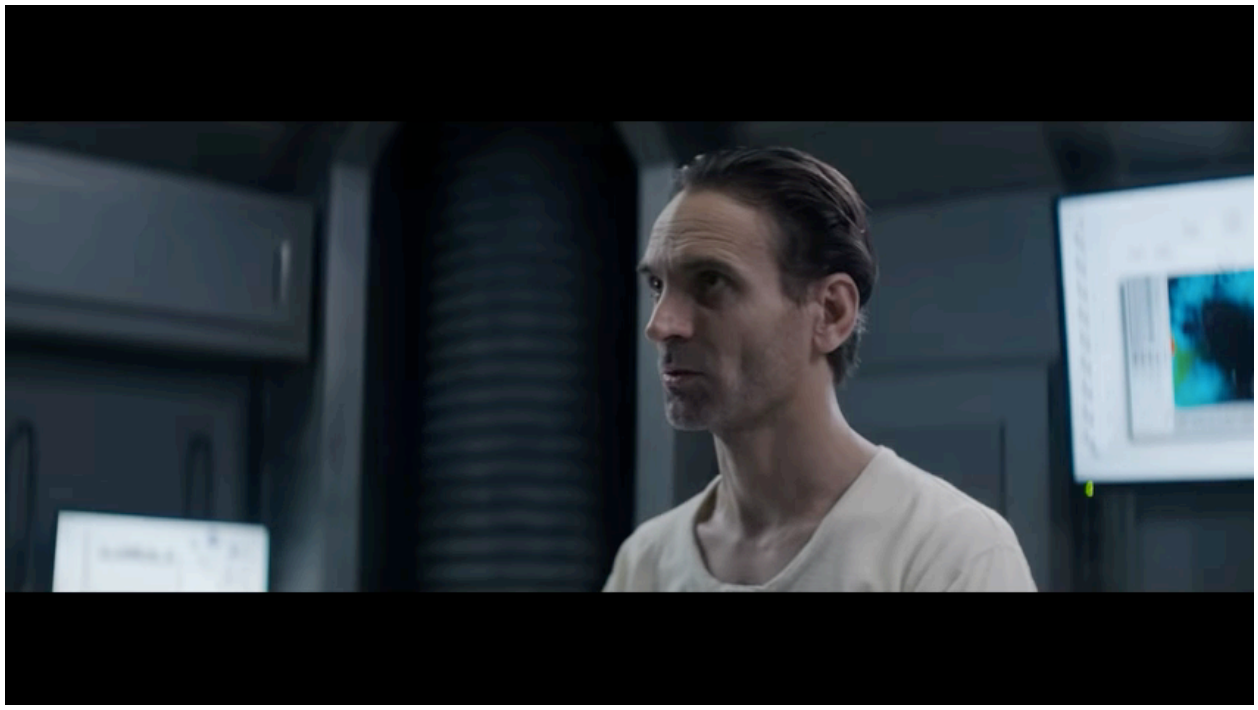

Figure 29. The Interrogation of Komarov. *Missions*, directed by Julien Lacombe.

Mars, a.k.a. Vladimir Komarov (see fig. 29) – Over the course of the eons that have passed since the demise of the human population on Mars, the artificial intelligence they left behind has continued to evolve. Komarov is a cloned version of the Russian cosmonaut by the same name whom that highly-advanced artificial intelligence has chosen as its human embodiment. This artificial intelligence, initially constructed by the original human inhabitants of Mars and designed to self-perpetuate and self-evolve over time, has developed the means to combine human DNA with Martian surface material, effectively giving sentience to Mars itself – this explains Komarov's puzzling assertion that he is not merely a human-made artificially-intelligent Martian, but that he himself *is* Mars. Komarov seems to see no distinction between his selfhood and that of Mars. In addition to being the embodiment of the human-artificial intelligence singularity – an eventuality that has gotten a great deal of media attention, as of late, particularly in the context of the increasing prevalence of A.I. chatbots – Komarov appears to

represent a furthering of that notion to include nonhuman objects other than and in addition to those that are made by humans. He considers himself to be superior to humans, and as the self-appointed representative of all existence, has anointed himself as the sole being who will decide the ultimate fate of humanity. Effectively, Komarov/Mars is the showrunners' representation of our fears that artificial intelligence will decide, in its own best self-interests and in the interests of the planet, that humans are a scourge on the face of existence and that as soon as our cyborg offspring realize this, they will choose to annihilate us.

Jeanne Renoir (see fig. 30) – Jeanne is a psychologist who is only tapped to become a member of the Mars mission's crew when the person who was initially selected dies mysteriously just days before takeoff. Based on a few brief scenes in the very first episode of the series in which she is shown conducting behavioral experiments in a lab, we can assume that Jeanne's field of specialization has something to do with temptation and willpower – a fitting field of interest considering the temptations that the potential colonization of Mars represents for the billionaires and governments that fund extraterrestrial imperialism. Once Vladimir Komarov's true identity is revealed, he informs Jeanne that he is responsible for the death of the mission's first psychologist and for the selection of Jeanne to take that person's place (although exactly how he orchestrated this turn of events is never disclosed). The reason for this, according to Komarov, is that Jeanne is evolutionarily more advanced than other humans. She is, he says, "halfway between humanity and me."[225] He believes that Jeanne represents, somehow, the evolutionary advancement necessary in order for humans to move beyond their current limitations, which he believes do not permit them to learn from past mistakes, nor to

[225] *Missions*, season 2, episode 1.

Figure 30. Jeanne and crewmate discover a subterranean wall of human skeletal remains on Mars. *Missions*, directed by Julien Lacombe.

consider the future when acting in the present. When explaining the important step in human evolution that he believes she represents, Komarov tells Jeanne, "Vous pensez que la terre a un avenir? Vous devez vous rappeler de votre passé pour pouvoir réfléchir à l'avenir."[226] As the series progresses, Jeanne slowly learns, as does the viewer, that she and Komarov both possess some of the same abilities to manipulate space and time. Komarov claims to have selected Jeanne specifically to see if she can somehow help him make decisions regarding the fate of humanity and tells Jeanne that she alone can save humankind from their own instincts – if and only if she can demonstrate for him that we are worthy. Once Jeanne is left alone with him on the planet, he uses her to conduct experiments, along with a group of humans he has cloned from the DNA of those who once lived on Mars, that he believes will enable him to decide if humans are capable of building a society that can exist in harmony with the environment or if we truly are a selfish species who cannot help but destroy ourselves and our surroundings no matter the circumstances in which we are placed. The assumption is that if humans prove themselves

[226] *Missions*, season 1, episode 8.

worthy, Komarov will give them his technology, and thus endow them with the same powers to manipulate material reality that he himself possesses. And if they do not prove themselves worthy he will withhold his knowledge and allow them to destroy Earth and themselves in the same way that his creators destroyed Mars. In my interpretation, Jeanne stands in for *us*, the viewer. With the seemingly relentless evolution of technology – the development of which we effectively treat as if it were a predetermined fact, written into the fabric of the universe, rather than a choice we are all making together – we are passive, much like Jeanne, as we are being manipulated by those in power at all levels of society. This includes the technologies and artificial intelligences that already undergird nearly every aspect of quotidian life.

William Meyer and Ivan Goldstein[227] (see fig. 31) – Meyer is a billionaire Swiss philanthropist who funded the Mars mission in partnership with the European Space Agency and who travels with the crew. Although there is a military hierarchy amongst the crew that Meyer is not a part of, it is explicitly stated that, owing to the fact that he is footing the bill for the mission, he is ultimately the person who makes all of the decisions. Goldstein is an American billionaire tech tycoon and the CEO of the company Zillion (a not-so-veiled reference to Google) who suffers from an undisclosed but fatal disease for which there is no cure or treatment. Goldstein funds and participates in a rival mission to Mars that overtakes Meyer's vessel, making the Americans the first to land on Mars. Meyer, in cahoots with Goldstein, withholds knowledge about the mission's true purpose and what awaits them on Mars from the rest of the crew. It

[227] Although neither their religious affiliations nor their ethnic backgrounds are ever discussed in the series, it is interesting to note, in the context of a discussion on conspiracy theories and paranoia, that these names – Meyer and Goldstein – code the billionaires in *Missions* as Jewish. In his text on conspiracy, the historian Daniel Pipes notes that, going back as far as the Crusades, and certainly since the French Revolution, all conspiracy theories are anti-semitic at some level. Fore more on this notion see Pipes' book *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where it Comes From* (London: The Free Press, 1997), particularly chapters five and seven.

Figure 31. Meyer pretending altruism before the crew. *Missions*, directed by Julien Lacombe.

seems that both somehow have prior knowledge of the technology that has been developed on Mars, each intending to use it for their own competing, ego-maniacally driven purposes. While both of these billionaires, the richest men on Earth, outwardly claim that their sole motivations for going to Mars are existential and solely have to do with the value of what lies on Mars for the betterment and salvation of the whole of humanity, the crew members are rightly and justifiably suspicious of their true motivations.[228] Meyer would like everyone to believe that his impetus for going to Mars has to do with a collective and individual search for meaning, expressed when he

[228] Mike Trombetta, "Elon Musk Is Not An Entrepreneur – He's A Rich, Deceitful Hack," *The Acronym*, March 4, 2021, https://sites.imsa.edu/acronym/2021/03/04/elon-musk-is-not-an-entrepreneur-hes-a-rich-deceitful-hack/. As this cultural commentator has astutely remarked, "Every billionaire makes their money by lying, cheating, stealing, and exploiting every step of the way." For more on billionaires and their deceptive practices see the writing of the former Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich. Robert Reich, "The Truth Behind 'Self-Made' Billionaires," robertreich.org, September 20, 2022, https://robertreich.org/post/695958318007664640.

says, “Je voulais découvrir un nouveau monde … et donner un sens à ma vie.”[229] Goldstein tells audiences about the profound opportunities for humanity that Mars represents but is truly motivated by his belief that if he can possess the Martian technology he will be able to use it to upload his consciousness into a cloned body, ridding himself of the disease while also making himself immortal.

“Oubliez ce que vous connaissez déjà.”[230]

Like the crew in *Missions*, we are also fearful of a troubled future and are perpetually occupied, as are they, by the suspicion that someone, most notably the perpetual, omniscient “they”, are lying to us, hiding from us essential facts about the fundamental constitution of the reality in which we believe to be living. In the context of the series, the lies that “they” have propagated are quickly revealed. There is no conspiracy theory about a mysterious cabal of powerful liars here – yes, there is a conspiracy to cover the truth, and yes, those conspirators are in fact something of a cabal of the powerful, but the conspiracy in *Missions* is not a theoretical one. The “they” in *Missions* are embodied by the billionaires Meyer and Goldstein who are both vying to be the first to set foot on Mars and thus lay claim to its resources, a literal representation of not only the openly-stated goals of our real-world space-faring billionaires but also a televisual depiction of modernity’s ongoing colonial project. The first trigger of paranoia and suspicion in the series hits almost immediately in the first episode. As the crew is making preparations for landing, Meyer abruptly informs them that they are not to be the first on Mars

[229] *Missions*, season 1, episode 1.
[230] Komarov says these words to Jeanne in the fourth episode of the first season as he begins to lead the crew to the eventual discovery of his true nature and of humanity’s true origins. *Forget everything you thought you knew* is a common refrain heard/seen in the context of conspiracy theories and pseudoscientific findings.

Figure 32. The crew discover a ziggurat-like structure on Mars, proof that the planet was once inhabited. *Missions*, directed by Julien Lacombe.

after all, because a competing American mission has overtaken them with a faster, more technologically-advanced ship, and has already been on Mars for two weeks. Since its landing, nothing has been heard from the American mission with the exception of one video transmission in which a crewmember issues a frightful and ominous warning: "Don't come here. Don't try and save us. It's too dangerous."[231] The crew then becomes aware that Meyer has known for weeks of the American mission's landing and the sinister warning that they issued, but rather than give them the truth in a timely manner that would permit them to redirect the ship back to Earth, he chooses to hide the reality of the situation from them until it's too late to do anything other than proceed with the landing on Mars. "He's tricked us all," Jeanne remarks in the fifth episode of the first season, "We've been his puppets from the start."[232] The crew, now aware that

[231] *Missions*, season 1, episode 1.
[232] *Missions*, season 1, episode 5.

Meyer has been lying to them, begins to question other aspects of their mission – after all, if something as serious as this was being kept from them, *what else had been left out?* As the season progresses, the crew's suspicions are heightened when Meyer is forced to reveal that he and his competitor, Goldstein, have known for years about the artifacts and technology that exist on Mars (see fig. 32). They knew well in advance of the mission what awaits them upon arrival, but they chose to conspire to hide the truth, not only from their crew members, who are also their employees, but also from everyone back on Earth. Given that the crew is on a planet that does not have an atmosphere supportive of human life and that they are fifty-seven million miles from home, they are not just employees. Effectively, they are also prisoners who, like the crew of the vessel in the film *High Life*, as discussed in Chapter 1, are entirely at the mercy of the technology that provides them life support and the lying billionaire who controls it. This makes of the crew in *Missions* a fitting metaphor for the material realities, the lived experience of being what Mark Fisher calls a "worker-prisoner" in today's late-capitalist economy.[233]

Meyer and Goldstein understand well the significance, not just for themselves, but for the whole of humanity, of what is on Mars to be had and they are determined to be the only ones to get it. Once their lies are revealed, cohesion among the crew members, now on Mars and fifty-seven million miles from home, quickly erodes as they begin to question the veracity of everything they have been told about their mission and its purpose. As the crew members confront the truths that have been revealed, some among them spiral into paranoia – suspicious of the motives and actions of their fellow crew members, even refusing at some points to believe that what they are seeing and experiencing is real, insisting that they are all experiencing a collective delusion. As their paranoia mounts and their delusions become the frameworks for

[233] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books), 25.

reality, violence breaks out, hostages are taken, and insurmountable conflict replaces rational debate. Effectively, the crew members lose their ability to make sense of the world around them. The contemporary, early twenty-first century moment is, in no small part, likewise defined by our inability to make sense of the situation in which we find ourselves – whether that be in the context of the smallest banal, quotidian issues or the most profound, existential dilemmas – and powerless to do anything about any of it.

Cumulatively, the events that occur in the first season – the revelation of the billionaires' deceptions, the shocking discovery of ancient artifacts and structures that aesthetically resemble archaeological discoveries on Earth leading to the unavoidable truth of humanity's origins, and the discovery of Komarov's cyborg composition and super-human abilities – all of it functions to establish the paranoiac, suspicious tone on which the subsequent two seasons will build and which establish *Missions* as a mirror of our own real-world conspiracy theories and pseudoscientific findings, rooted as they are in the anxieties and concerns of our twenty-first century reality. The pervasive paranoia and the conspiratorial suspicions that drive the narrative, in not just this French science fiction series, but in so much of contemporary television, are those in which we toil every day. Across all of television's genres, whether it be the "news", drama, documentary, "reality" programming, science fiction, or even comedy, paranoia and conspiracy abound. When we watch these shows, when we see pieces of ourselves in their fictional, yet all-too-realistic worlds, embodied by the characters on the screen, we experience a *shock of recognition that never ends*[234] as our fears and paranoia stare back at us through unfamiliar eyes, our thoughts spoken back to us in alien voices from the black mirror's fictive but parallel dimensions. In these popular narratives, like the one in *Missions*, the distinctions between fact

[234] This concept, taken from the architect Rem Koolhaas' writing on Salvador Dali's paranoid-critical method, will be explored further in later sections of this chapter.

and fiction are blurred, just as that precious borderline between reality and delusion are blurred in the mind's eye of the paranoid conspiracy theorist. And to some extent, today that conspiracist is us all – television is, after all, giving us these narratives not because we *don't* want to see them, but precisely because we so badly do. These narratives, rooted in widespread paranoia and conspiratorial thinking, fueled by mass currents of helplessness and despair, are telling us a horrifying truth – there is no dystopian nightmare waiting for us in the future: *we are already living it.* The dystopia is already here. No, it isn't killer robots bent on purging the planet of us human scum or a zombie plague caused by a government lab leak. Our dystopia is, rather, one of manipulation and persuasion. The discovery in *Missions* – that humanity originated on Mars – sends a shock wave through the crew members' collective and individual sense of what is real and what is not. The discovery necessitates confrontations with their fundamental belief systems, rapidly dismantling everything they were certain they knew about reality. An example of this kind of confrontation can be seen in *Missions* when the crew performs a mineral and chemical analysis of one of the artifacts they find during an expedition. The object – a small, palm-sized, pyramidoid object, identical to the Incal – is found to be composed of orichalcum, the mythical substance mentioned in Plato's story of the lost city of Atlantis.[235] Now the crew knows that not only is all of our knowledge of humanity's origins untrue, but also that a city that some – who we call unhinged conspiracist dupes – claim to be real did in fact exist. Time and time again in the series, long-settled knowledge, all of which is taken directly from the reality of the viewer, is proven to be untrue. Here again, *Missions* mines

[235] References to Atlantis appear in two of Plato's fourth-century BC dialogues, Timaeus and Critias. Orichalcum is described in Critias as "dug out of the earth in many parts of the island [of Atlantis]" and "more precious in those days than anything except gold" (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1571/1571-h/1571-h.htm).

the shadowy, pseudoscientific elements of our contemporary discourse on historical facts versus historical fictions in its televisual, science fictional confrontation with historical orthodoxy.

Even beyond the show's diegesis, in our real world, if the long-settled knowledge about the very origins of humanity were proven to be untrue, then all other facts about human history – the existence or non-existence of Atlantis, for example – even what we think we know about the construction of the material world, would become subject to a then legitimized inquiry. Science itself, which as the source of knowledge about those very origins, would have to be called in for questioning, opening up the whole of human history to a kind of scrutinous autopsy. In *Missions*, when one of the basic building blocks of knowledge evaporates, the whole framework for reality begins to shift. The characters subsequently find themselves in a reality in which all of the reliable touchstones have evaporated. As the viewer watches this happen it becomes increasingly difficult to determine if what we're seeing onscreen is in fact the character's reality or merely reality as they now perceive it – is what happens after they discover not only that humans originated on Mars, but also that Mars itself has developed an artificially intelligent sentience, "real" or is it all just a conspiratorial delusion?

Today, we also find ourselves in the midst of the same erosion of touchstones. Through visual culture – specifically in the form of television shows like *Missions*, in the context of this chapter – we deal with this dystopian world we all now inhabit. *Missions* provides a kind of framework, an aesthetic platform from which to imagine alternatives for the future as we traverse the uncertainties and myriad collapses of the present. The suggestion in this chapter is that paranoia and conspiratorial thinking are particularly prevalent in tumultuous times and are, in some way, a part of how we deal with such turmoil and that television, science-fiction television in particular, is an accessible aesthetic mode for the imaginative exploration of contemporary

paranoia and conspiracy.[236] In *Missions*, we see that the science fiction aesthetic has now become the aesthetic of paranoia and conspiracy, the aesthetic of our fantasies as we watch and feel our worlds slowly collapsing all around us.

Not only is the series questioning human origins, but it is also suggesting, as part of the events in the narrative that accompany the realization of this "truth", a way of living that would not precipitate collapse. In the series' second season, after Jeanne has been left alone with Komarov on Mars and he has placed her in an experimental human society, Komarov explains to Jeanne that she's been placed in what is seemingly a premodern community as an experiment to see if a group of humans could, with her paranormal abilities and assistance, live in harmony with nature rather than exploiting nature as merely a resource. Eventually, this staged human civilization erupts in violence and chaos, proving to Komarov that without a super-human, paranormal, or technological intervention, humans will inevitably give into self-interest and resort to the extractive, exploitative, and destructive behaviors that resulted in the devastation of the Martian environment to begin with. It would seem, from Komarov's perspective (and perhaps, by proxy, that of the showrunners, as well), that without a technological intervention humans will indeed resort to destruction. Ultimately, the show seems to suggest that we are doomed to repeat our mistakes in endless cycles without some kind of techno-authoritarian oversight.

[236] Aaron John Gulyas, *The Paranormal and the Paranoid* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), xii.

"C'est pas nous qui avons colonisé Mars. C'est eux qui ont colonisé la terre."[237]

A distinction must be made here between two very different kinds of theories related to humanity's potential Martian origins. The first is a class of theories referred to as *panspermia theories*. These theories suggest, based on the study of planetary impact processes – asteroid and comet strikes, for example, that have occurred on Earth periodically over the course of the planet's 4.5 billion year lifespan – that life on Earth, or the building blocks that made life on Earth possible, were randomly brought here from somewhere else. This, coupled with the recent discovery of hydrated minerals on Mars that could provide the proper environment for the development of life, has led a minority of astronomers and astrobiologists to theorize that a meteor shower, sometime in the distant past, may have struck Mars and subsequently jettisoned Martian surface material to impact on Earth, thereby inadvertently planting the seeds of what may have become human life. Another far-less supported theory of panspermia suggests that intelligent beings from another planet, perhaps Mars, but perhaps a planet in a galaxy *far far away*, may have intentionally spread life throughout space. These panspermia theories are indeed Mars origin theories, all of which are, to greater or lesser extent depending on the specifics of the theory, based on scientific findings. But these theories do not attempt to disrupt or disprove in any way the standard Oparin-Haldane theory of life on Earth, which "posits the production of organic molecules on the early Earth followed by chemical reactions that produced increased organic complexity leading eventually to organic life capable of reproduction, mutation, and selection using organic material as nutrients."[238] This class of Mars origin theories is, however, not what lies behind the narrative in *Missions*. The Mars Origin Theory (I use the

[237] Jeanne makes this observation in the first season upon the crew's discovery of the ancient, underground city.
[238] Wanda L. Davis and Christopher P. McKay, "Origins of Life: A Comparison of Theories and Application to Mars," *Origins of Life and Evolution of the Biosphere* 26 (1996): 61-73.

capital O and T to distinguish this origin theory from those backed by scientific findings) at play in this series is, like all conspiracy theories, built on kernels of truth – the presence of Komarov, the references to Plato and to the image of the face on Mars taken by the Viking mission in the 1970s, are just a few examples of this "kernel of truth" at the heart of the fiction. The very same scientific and technologically-mediated observations that lead astronomers and astrobiologists to theories of panspermia, also lead certain others who are likewise engaged in theorizing about human origins to elucidate what they claim to be the *real* truth about where we came from. This particular strain of Mars Origin Theory is based on their own interpretations of scientific observations, data, and statements (often removed from their initial sense-making contexts) such as the one made by the Arizona State University astrobiologist, Professor Paul Davis, who, in a highly-edited interview on an episode of the popular "docutainment" series *Ancient Aliens* makes a rather unequivocal statement: "Life on Earth started on Mars."[239]

Statements like this can and do lead to conclusions, particularly in popular forums (although not exclusively), such as that expressed in 2015, by the reddit.com user swegling, who made the following position statement in a post on the reddit subforum r/FanTheories:

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[239] *Ancient Aliens*, season 11, episode 2, "Destination Mars," created by Kevin Burns, aired May 16, 2013, History Channel; Graham Hancock, *The Mars Mystery: The Secret Connection Between Earth and the Red Planet* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1996), 8. For a notable example of the way that non-scientists can and do re-interpret scientific findings in the formation of their own theories, see Hancock's *Mars Mystery*. Although Hancock, a journalist, frequent guest on *Ancient Aliens*, and writer of popular texts on unorthodox archaeological and historical theories, is considered by many to be a "pseudoscientist" whose writings have been called, by the Egyptologist Sarah Parcak, for example, "a dumpster fire of pseudogarbage," he is correct when he points out that, "[a]lthough separated by millions of miles Mars and Earth participate in a mysterious communion. Repeated exchanges of materials have taken place between the two planets – the most recent involving spacecraft from Earth that have landed on Mars. Likewise we now know that chunks of rock thrown off from the surface of Mars periodically crash into Earth. By 1997 a dozen meteorites had been firmly identified as having originated in Mars … According to calculations by Dr. Colin Pillinger of the U.K. Planetary Sciences Research Institute, '100 tons of Martian material arrives on Earth each year,'" at least one example of which, NASA has found to contain, Hancock declares, "possible microscopic fossils of bacteria-like organisms that may have lived on Mars 3.6 billion years ago [and in a second example] organisms that could have existed on Mars as recently as 600,000 years ago."

> Humans originated from Mars. They destroyed the ozone layer with global warming. The planet became unlivable. A team of scientists manage [sic] to send one man to the Earth, the rest of the population died. Because human pollution destroyed Mars, the scientist [sic] didn't use another human being to mate with, but rather, made a new human male out of dust with old and lost mars [sic] technology and made him behave like an animal. He used the DNA from this male to create a female. I'm gonna stop here, but there is much to be said! Everything ties up.[240]

Swegling ended their inarguably logical theory on the origins of humanity (well, Earth-bound humanity, at least), with a simple, yet provocative question for other inquiring minds: "What do *you* think?" (emphasis added). Perhaps not surprisingly, a number of this would-be philosopher's comrade redditors were not so kind in response to the query – brolaire69, for example, flatly stated, "litteraly [sic] nothing ties up,"[241] while RoosterStats countered swegling's question with one of their own, asking pointedly, "How high are you?"[242] AliceHouse likened the idea that humans came from Mars to those "hack pulp fiction stories that plague sci-fi for decades."[243] While in this particular instance the majority of respondents to swegling's alternate human origins theory were not, it would seem, in agreement, swegling would have no doubt found a more amenable audience among the preeminent American astronomers of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. For were they alive today they might not all have

[240] u/swegling, "[Real Life] Humans originated on Mars," Reddit post, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/FanTheories/comments/2ygvjx/real_life_humans_originated_from_mars/.
[241] u/brolaire69, "[Real Life] Humans originated on Mars," Reddit post, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/FanTheories/comments/2ygvjx/real_life_humans_originated_from_mars/.
[242] u/RoosterStats, "[Real Life] Humans originated on Mars," Reddit post, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/FanTheories/comments/2ygvjx/real_life_humans_originated_from_mars/.
[243] u/AliceHouse, "[Real Life] Humans originated on Mars," Reddit post, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/FanTheories/comments/2ygvjx/real_life_humans_originated_from_mars/.

agreed with the theory that human life originated on Mars, but they would have certainly, according to their own very public statements, granted that their was, at some point in the past if not in the present, intelligent life on Mars.

On October 27, 1907, *The New York Times* ran a story in which Amherst professor David P. Todd announced that "there is life approximating in its evolution something akin to human intelligence on the planet Mars."[244] In the October 9, 1921 issue of the same newspaper, Professor William H. Pickering of Harvard – who was, according to the *Times*, "one of the greatest living astronomers" of the early-twentieth century – declared that the theory of the existence of life on Mars had by then been "generally conceded."[245] Even detractors who disagreed with the findings of Pickering and Todd, only disagreed when it came to the notion that Mars was *currently* inhabited by intelligent beings. The possibility that Mars had been, at some point in the past, host to sentient lifeforms was not so much the issue. A.S. Eddington, England's Chief Assistant Astronomer Royal, explained the opposition's assertions. "[I]n England," he argued, "we are inclined to believe that Mars is played out, that its career is finished. There may have been intelligent life on the planet many millions of years ago, but this is mere speculation. I can't quite follow […] that the planet is at present the abode of constructive life."[246] Todd and Pickering, two inarguably well-credentialed professors, were, of course, not the first men of science and letters to make such declarations about the red planet. In 1892 the early French science fiction writer and astronomer Camille Flammarion published a provocative multi-volume text in which he not only gave a detailed survey of what was,

[244] "Something Like Human Intelligence on Mars," *The New York Times*, October 27, 1907.
[245] "Says 2 Crops a Day Grow on the Moon," *The New York Times*, October 9, 1921.
[246] "Is not Convinced of Life on Mars," *The New York Times*, August 31, 1907.

supposedly, everything then known about the planet Mars going back as far as 1636,[247] but also, as indicated by the title – *La Planète Mars et ses conditions d'habitabilité* – made his own declaration that Mars was inhabited by an intelligent human-like lifeform. Still in reference today, Flammarion's text was a hit in the nineteenth century and is credited with being the influence for Percival Lowell's construction of the still-in-use Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona, the site of a number of significant astronomical observations, including the discovery of the planet Pluto in 1930. Lowell himself made observations of Mars that disproved what were, until then, believed to be facts about the planet as outlined in Flammarion's 1892 opus, in which he makes the following unequivocal statements about the existence of humanoid life on Mars:

> Both planets [Mars and Earth] are inhabited by beings whose organization is of similar character.[248]
>
> [T]he actual conditions on Mars are such that it would be wrong to deny that it could be inhabited by human species whose intelligence and methods of action could be far superior to ours.[249]
>
> [C]osmological theory indicates that Mars is older than the Earth. It is therefore natural to conclude that it was inhabited sooner than Earth, and that its humanity, whatever it may be, is more advanced than ours.[250]
>
> [T]he habitation of Mars by a race superior to ours seems to me to be very probable.[251]

[247] Camille Flammarion, *Camille Flammarion's The Planet Mars*, trans. Patrick Moore (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2015), x. As of this writing, I am unable to access Flammarion's text in its original French and so must rely on Moore's translation.
[248] Flammarion, *The Planet Mars*, 124.
[249] Flammarion, *The Planet Mars*, 506.
[250] Flammarion, *The Planet Mars*, 506.
[251] Flammarion, *The Planet Mars*, 512.

Although they appear more than a century apart, both *Missions* and Flammarion's texts are narratives that make the same central assertions relating to life on Mars. Given that both are products of French culture and that Flammarion has been established as a key author of not only astronomical texts but also of early science fiction, it is reasonable to assert that *Missions* is a direct descendant of *La planète Mars* and establishes itself as a recent example in the rich but highly overlooked French science fiction tradition. The relationship between these two texts exemplifies the well-established loop that exists between the stories told (the knowledge produced) by science in any given period and those told by narrative fiction. There are two distinct ways to think about this relationship between science and fiction, and I mean to invoke them both here. Firstly, there is the sense in which, as Bruno Latour observes in *Science in Action*, the knowledge produced by science is not solely a reportage of "objective" observations of the world, but is also a kind of story-telling, or a fiction, that is written by scientists as they do science in partnership with their readers, who decide for themselves whether or not to accept the science's findings as fact or to "reach different conclusions."[252] Secondly, I am also referring to the way in which scientists make use of and take inspiration from literature. As John Canaday points out in his text *The Nuclear Muse*, literature is a powerful medium for scientists in its ability to disperse science "into the structures of individual, institutional, and international relations"[253] but also a resource that can help scientists grapple with the potential consequences

[252] Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 56. In the context of the topic at hand in this chapter, it's interesting to point out the way that the French ufologist, Jacques Vallée, takes Latour's views on the narrative aspect of science a bit further when he opines, "Even science, which claims its methods and theories are rationally developed, is really shaped by emotion and fancy, or by fear" (Vallée, *Passport*, 153).

[253] John Canaday, *The Nuclear Muse: Literature, Physics, and the First Atomic Bombs* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 20. Canaday was writing specifically about the relationship between literature and science in the context of the development of the atomic bomb at Los Alamos. I'm

of their work, both moral and material.[254] In this respect, science fiction can do for scientists what it also does for the genre's wider audience, while being akin, additionally, to the function of a conspiracy theory for the conspiracist who, likewise, is attempting to grapple with a broad range of moral and material issues. Both of these views of the relationship between science and fictional narrative suggest, as Canaday observes, that the boundaries "between literary discourse and other, more 'realistic' forms of discourse, such as science, are not as hard and fast as we generally assume."[255]

Additionally, propaganda could be placed among these inter-related discourses. Jacques Vallée highlights a notable example of government using science fiction to propagandize, thus mingling political and literary discourse, when he points out, "the Soviets skillfully employed the services of science fiction writers to supply emotional support of their space effort among the young people."[256] The transition of the Mars Origin Theory at play in *Missions* from science to science-fictional televisual representation, from what once was taken as fact (or, at the very least, was widely accepted as all but certain to be true) but is now wholly considered to be nonsensical pseudoscience demonstrates a sometimes uncomfortable and widely unrecognized tension within science – a field which is by now, in the twenty-first century, regarded as the principal source of knowledge about the universe and about our place in it, knowledge that with the passage of time science itself so often negates. This is the tension, alluded to by Canaday, Latour, and even Vallée, between science and fact, and what exactly counts as fiction, story telling, myth making,

taking a more expansive view of his observations here, but the same relationship between science and narrative fiction applies.

[254] Canaday, *Muse*, 4.

[255] Canaday, *Muse*, 5.

[256] Jacques Vallée, *Passport to Magonia: from Folklore to Flying Saucers* (Brisbane: Daily Grail Publishing, 2014), 153.

and propaganda. Lacombe himself confirmed the show's engagement with blurred lines of this discourse in an interview when he said that the series explores:

> un thème récurrent dans la science-fiction, la culture originelle. Et nous, on a relié ça avec l'Atlantide. On s'est dit que s'il y a une civilisation originelle, elle a inspiré tout le monde. (…) C'est une sorte de fond de commerce de la science-fiction : la civilisation originelle qui a inspiré les Mayas, les Grecs … et [le film] *Stargate*. Nous, on a pioché là-dedans …[257]

What Lacombe says here is strikingly reminiscent of the details provided in an episode – entitled "Destination Mars" – of the popular American docutainment series *Ancient Aliens*[258] – a show that one critic referred to as "philosophy's mediated corpse … an attack on logic, rationality, and the nature of evidence" that appears in popular cultural forms as the result of philosophy's failure "[i]n the wake of the Apollo program and the Hubble Space Telescope … to generate a popular cosmic narrative that integrates the origins and destinies of the human species into the vast and wondrous cosmos."[259] The details of the discovery, in *Missions*, of humanity's

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[257]Julien Lacombe, "Critique & Interviews / 'Missions' saison 1: episode par episode," interview by Jean-Christophe Nurbel, *Bulles de culture*, December 23, 2021. https://bullesdeculture.com/missions-saison-1-television-avis-critique-serie-top-bdc/.

[258] *Ancient Aliens*, season 11, episode 2, "Destination Mars," created by Ken Burns, aired May 16, 2013, History Channel. This series also airs in France with the title *Alien Theory* on RMC Découverte and in Québec with the much more provocative title *Nos ancêtres les extraterrestres* on the Historia channel.

[259] Barry Vacker, "Ancient Aliens: Evidence of Stephen Hawking's Claim that 'Philosophy is Dead'," *Theory/On/Conspiracy*, February 26, 2017, https://medium.com/theory-on-conspiracy/ancient-aliens-evidence-of-stephen-hawkings-claim-that-philosophy-is-dead-7a06e4a28fbe. Vacker moves on to a question in his critique of the "docuseries" that fits well in the context of a discussion of the narrativization of conspiracy theories: "Does *Ancient Aliens* support Hawking's claim that 'philosophy is dead.' In my view, yes. *Ancient Aliens* illustrates the absence of a cosmic/space philosophy that situates the origins and destiny of the human universe as revealed by contemporary cosmology. Why else is paranormalism proliferating in pop culture, TV shows, and Hollywood movies?" I would argue that Vacker's critique is overly dismissive and doesn't reflect an understanding of the crucial role that television and film, as well as other art forms in general, play in the formation of the very philosophies that he's referring to. Science fiction is in fact doing the thing he seems to believe it isn't doing – the genre is responding *directly* to Vacker's spot-on assertion that "the human species is desperately in need of a new philosophy that provides meaning and hope in a vast universe of which we are not central and

Mars origins are in fact so identical to suggestions made in this one episode of *Ancient Aliens* that one would not be out of bounds for suggesting that the popular "docuseries" is where Lacombe got the whole idea for *Missions*.[260] With its roots in Flammarion's Mars theories, which were once, even if only briefly, considered scientific fact, and in a host of science fictions as well as, potentially, in the show *Ancient Aliens* with its very liberal blend of myth and conspiracy with science and pseudoscience, *Missions* becomes a text that is representative of the aforementioned tensions in the domains and processes of knowledge making.

Ultimately, the evolution of knowledge concerning Mars – something of a confused, recursive cycle of influence – from science to myth to fiction and televisual aesthetic representation shows that *Missions* is participating in a kind of twenty-first century confrontation with science, questioning our non-negotiable faith in science as the primary sense-making apparatus of modernity.

Conclusion

Paranoia is a shock of recognition that never ends.
- The architect Rem Koolhaas on Dali's paranoid-critical method

Conspiracy and paranoia, alternative histories and realities – arguably all of which are attempts at sense-making in an effort "to provide coherence and legibility in answer to the

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not significant." Just because many science fictions, including those he name checks (which also happen to be some of the most influential science fictions ever created), as well as easily-digestible pop-culture fare like *Ancient Aliens*, are reflective of "paranormalism" or conspiratorial imaginings doesn't mean that they aren't doing very important work.

[260] Given that the series does air in France and, according to the Wikipedia site for the channel it airs on, RMC Découverte is quite popular, supposedly being one of the country's most widely-watched television series on Saturday nights, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that Lacombe saw the "Destination Mars" episode before creating *Missions*.

distressing perception of a chaotic contemporary reality"[261] – are all among the primary themes explored in contemporary science fiction narratives across media. This chapter demonstrates that French science fiction television does indeed participate in this fictive, artistic discourse. The particular "frenchness" of science-fiction television, *Missions* in the current context, produced primarily (though not entirely) for French-speaking audiences exempts neither the medium, the genre, nor any individual text from these broader trends. This is particularly true in our twenty-first century context, where streaming technologies and other economic and geopolitical factors continue to blur the boundaries that were once more steadfast and plainly identifiable between national, cultural, and media traditions and where film and television become increasingly globalized media. This is exemplified by the fact that so many new science fiction films and streaming television series are not produced in a language that conforms to the nationality of the director or showrunners, nor to that of the production companies that provide funding. *Missions*, for example, is a multilingual series with dialogue almost entirely in French, but with brief exchanges in English and in Russian, and by the end of the series' three-season run is financed and distributed by a complex network of international entertainment and communications corporations. Lacombe addressed this issue in his interview with *Variety* when he said that it would be "absolutely unrealistic" to have a Mars-mission crew composed only of French members. "We created the dialogue and situation to be believable," Lacombe commented in the English-language interview, "So, yes, in a sense *Missions* is a bilingual program, even though French remains the main language."[262]

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[261] Loïse Lelevé, "Conspiracy Theories, Storytelling and Forgers: Towards a Paradoxical Ethics of Truth in Contemporary European Fiction," *Lincoln Humanities Journal*, HAL open science (September 4, 2018): 1.

[262] Julien Lacombe, "MipTV: Creator Director Julien Lacombe on France's Newest Sci-Fi Series 'Missions'," interview by Jamie Lang, *Variety*, April 2, 2017, https://variety.com/2017/digital/festivals/creator-director-julien-lacombe-french-scifi-series-missions-

A perhaps tertiary question posed obliquely in this chapter scrutinizes the value, going forward, of continuing to identify media forms – in particular film and streaming television – according to what are, at this point in the evolution of our globalized and very online culture, perhaps outdated boundaries separating national, cultural, and language traditions. More than these traditional factors, what has without question become the determining factor in media trends, across genres and modes of distribution, are the brutish, visceral demands of capital, making revenue streams and market capitalizations more influential than the cultural identities and traditions that were once associated with language and nationality.[263] Twenty-first century late-stage capitalism recognizes no such distinctions at all. It is by now a global, omnipresent, and seemingly omnipotent phenomenon rooted so deeply in our collective humanity that, as Mark Fisher points out in *Capitalist Realism*, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it

1202021162/; Claire Denis and Robert Pattinson, "Claire Denis explains why High Life is an English language film," interview by David Fear, *BAMorg*, YouTube, April 10, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjUEcS6B1OQ. Denis expressed similar sentiments about the use of English in contemporary French science fictions in an interview she gave, in English, during the press tour for her 2018 film *High Life* (which is the subject of the first chapter of this dissertation): "For me there are only two languages in space – Russian and English. Nobody speaks German or French in space, you know? I think soon they will speak Chinese, but for the time being, it's only Russian and English. I mean, French would be ridiculous, you know?"

[263] Not to mention the challenges that artificial intelligence and quantum computing will bring to these traditions. By way of proposing a hypothetical example: If I, an American, were to use the A.I. chatbot chatGPT to generate a screenplay with dialogue entirely in French, which is a task one can indeed already perform with the right prompts, and I were then to turn that screenplay into a film, would it be a "French" film? What if I hired a cast comprised of some native French speakers and some non-native speakers and filmed the whole thing on-location in France? What if I were to prompt chatGPT to generate that same screenplay but did it sitting in front of my computer in Paris rather than in California? What if a native French speaker used chatGPT to generate a screenplay in French, or any other language at all? Who would be the author? Would it matter that chatGPT is not a technology developed in France? These are just a few examples of the countless questions that emerging technologies are and will continue to force us to address, none of which are we prepared to answer. Given what people have already done with chatGPT in the arts and entertainment, the scenario I propose here becomes less and less hypothetical every day.

is to imagine the end of capitalism."[264] The ever-increasing popularity of apocalyptic and paranoiac science fiction narratives – fueled, of course, by the increasing investment of capital, and created and distributed in its interests under the guise of entertainment and the assertion that investment is merely responding to demand – testifies to the fact that we are indeed collectively spending a great deal of time and effort imagining the end of the world. Even Fisher himself uses the post-apocalyptic film *Children of Men* (2006) – a film which he says "connects with the suspicion that the end has already come"[265] (in the context of what is being explored in this chapter, his use of the word "suspicion" makes his analysis of the film particularly relevant) – to illustrate his concept of capitalist realism. It is not hard to see that these narratives operate as the result of the anxiety produced by these end-times imaginings while they also reflexively participate in the ongoing processes that push us towards peak anxiety. This mirrors Fisher's observation that "capitalism has created a pervasive sense of paranoia and anxiety in modern society. Overall, Fisher sees paranoia as a symptom of the larger cultural and economic conditions created by capitalism, and argues that it is a key factor in the maintenance of the capitalist system."[266]

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[264] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books), 2. Though this quotation is often attributed to Fisher, he himself notes that it was said before him, by both Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek.

[265] Fisher, Capitalist Realism, 3.

[266] Text generated by ChatGPT, May 1, 2023, https://chat.openai.com. It's important to note that ChatGPT doesn't give sources for its information, and so this claim about what Fisher said can only be speculative. But the sort of "truthiness" of ChatGPT's claim about Fisher's argument and the fact that it's generated by an artificial intelligence, dovetails nicely with what is at issue in this chapter. ChaptGPT is, as of this writing, one of the many factors driving the conversation about the veracity of truth claims in popular discourse – i.e. notions such as "fake news" and "alternative facts." The increasing presence of artificial intelligence in daily life, exemplified by chat bots like ChatGPT, is inarguably one of the key drivers of contemporary anxiety in the context of capital and its effects on the human psyche, as well as in contemplations of the human future – or rather, contemplations on whether or not we will even be part of the future at all. A brief survey of the many recent headlines about ChatGPT and anxiety in various news sources attests to this fact. Here are just a few examples: "People Fear Being Replaced by AI and ChatGPT3" (Forbes, May 5, 2003), "ChatGPT, Strollers, and the Anxiety of Automation" (Wired, February 28, 2003), "How ChatGPT Will Destabilize White-Collar Work" (The Atlantic, January 20,

There is a moment in *Missions* when we see an example of the kind of maintenance, or continuation, of this extractive, colonial, capitalism that Fisher is referring to. In a brief, deep-focus wide shot of the crew exploring the surface of Mars we see storm clouds on the distant horizon. The attentive viewer, who knows there are no storm clouds on Mars because there is no water vapor in the planet's atmosphere, is abruptly removed from narrative immersion, realizing suddenly that these are not astronauts exploring another planet but are rather actors, walking around somewhere on Earth – to be specific, they're in Morocco, where the outdoor Mars scenes were filmed. In this unintentionally revealing shot, we suddenly glimpse the residue of France's colonial history. Even in a narrative that engages with a larger project in French science fiction of interrogating or exploring possible post-colonial futures, the showrunner's decision to use Morocco, a former French colony, for location shooting seems to be telegraphing something about the current realities of supposedly "post-colonial" relations, as if to say that, from an on-the-ground material perspective, France's colonial project is still well underway, maintained in this instance by the entertainment industry. *Missions* shows us the reality of France's colonial project – it must go on at all costs. It is integral to the existence of what it means to be French, what it is to be the French Republic. In the chapter on *L'Incal* I suggested that we see, in that text, the suggestion that when there is nowhere left "out there" to colonize, the colonial project does not just willingly come to an end. It turns inward, it goes deep into the body, fracturing the self into new territories for exploration, effectively perpetuating a colonization of the self.[267] In

2023), and one of the most disturbing *Terminator*-esque examples so far, "Man ends his life after an AI chatbot 'encouraged' him to sacrifice himself to stop climate change" (Euronews, March 31, 2023).

[267] J.F. Martel, *Reclaiming Art in the Age of Artifice: A Treatise, Critique, and Call to Action* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015), 146. It's interesting to note the way that this "inward turn" in the continuation of colonialism's extractive expansion might relate to the Heideggerian notion of "standing reserve." As Martel writes, "The downside of seeing the earth as standing reserve is that sooner or later humans too become standing reserve, that is, raw material to be transformed, exploited, and finally trashed."

this moment in *Missions*, two illusions are shattered – the first is the televisual illusion that these French astronauts are on Mars, and the second is the myth that France tells itself about its current and future stake in colonialism as a project that is "post" or "neo" rather than a truly ongoing project that was and is never, effectively, going to come to an end. Because it can't – the end of extractive colonial expansion would mean the end of capitalism, and, again recalling Mark Fisher, we simply cannot imagine that. I see a question being asked in *Missions* to do with what the "post" in "post-colonial" (and "postcolonial") *truly* means. In proposing alternate futures – whether that be an annihilationist future in *High Life,* the technologized metaphysical future in *L'Incal*, or the Martian future (which is also a deep Martian past) in *Missions* – the French expose their own mythologies. The concentrationary elements in *High Life* put it in this same conundrum – it's as if French science fiction has difficulty imagining futures that don't repeat these past constructions.[268] In *High Life* the concentrationary is exposed as an element of modernity that cannot be escaped. And in *Missions*, even in only momentarily-glimpsed elements of its formal structure (in this case, location shooting), France's ongoing imperialist, colonial project, inseparable as it is from capitalism, is exposed as one such element.

There is without doubt a strong paranoiac element in *Missions*. The characters in the series seem to be seeking a reason, a tangible explanation for the discoveries that they make on Mars that might allow their newly acquired knowledge to accord with the orthodox existential and historical frameworks they (and we) have come to rely on, despite the preponderance of evidence against that orthodoxy. It's as if they seek to identify an explanation for *all of this chaos and uncertainty* that will not challenge preconceived frameworks. The show seems to seek to identify that explanation. There is precedent in science fiction television for this

[268] I will argue, in the conclusion that follows this chapter, that Luc Besson's 1984 film *Le dernier combat* is an exception to this.

paranoia, which is a characteristic of, as Telotte describes it, postmodern science fiction – shows like *The X-Files*,[269] *Lost* (and by extension, *The Twilight Zone*), and other much more contemporary examples.[270] The showrunners themselves, via a moment of dialogue in the first season, directly link the series with a particularly paranoid, conspiracist episode of the widely popular television show *Lost*, which is itself notoriously responsible for spawning a host of "conspiracy theories" and for prompting many of its viewers to seriously and vocally ponder the very nature of reality. References to *Lost*, some more overt than others, recur throughout *Missions'* three-season run. The basic theme in *Missions* – the re-assessment of the origins of the human presence on Earth, which was, in the narrative, the result of Martian colonization – also links the series with *The X-Files*, in which humankind is said to have been "seeded on Earth by an alien race."[271] In addition to numerous television references, the list of films to which *Missions'* showrunners are paying homage – via not only dialogue, but also cinematography, set-design, plot, and soundtrack – is lengthy. As the online French television critic, Marion Olité, puts it in her review of the series' second season, "C'est cool de voir apparaître dans une série française des références pêle-mêle à Isaac Asimov, *Alien, 2001 l'Odyssée de l'espace, Lost, Stargate la porte des étoiles, Interstellar, Battlestar Galactica* (on ne vous en dit pas plus, c'est une des intrigues intéressantes de cette saison) et certaines de ces œuvres recyclaient déjà des thèmes existants."[272] There is, I would argue, so much reliance on reference in this series, that it

[269] Booker says that "*The X-Files* reached levels of violence, paranoia, and abjection (all tempered by self-conscious postmodern irony) never before attained by science fiction television" (17).
[270] To name just a few of those examples: *Outer Range* (Amazon Prime Video), all of the new *Star Trek* franchises (Paramount Plus), *Severance* (AppleTV+), *See* (AppleTV+), *For All Mankind* (AppleTV+), *The Expanse* (Amazon Prime Video), *Westworld* (HBO), *Black Mirror* (Netflix), *The Last of Us* (HBO), *Extrapolations* (AppleTV+), and the list could go on.
[271] Gulyas, The Paranormal and The Paranoid, 71.
[272] Marion Olité, "La saison 2 de Missions est belle, mais trop référencée pour son bien," *Konbini*, September 9, 2019, https://www.konbini.com/biiinge/saison-2-missions-critique/.

never picks up quite enough steam to truly develop a stand-out identity among the giants that it wants to emulate. By linking the narrative with *Lost* the showrunners put *Missions* squarely in this paranoiac, conspiratorial context. In addition to the diegetic reference to *Lost*, the show's writer and director, Julien Lacombe has himself stated that he wanted *Missions* to be "[as] mysterious and catchy as *Lost* was in its time. Our Mars explorers will find something that is absolutely not supposed to be there," much like a conspiracist purports to have discovered the "truth" buried in the lies "and that will change their vision of mankind."[273] A changed vision of mankind – this is what is at stake in *Missions*, and not just for the characters, but also for the viewer.

In addition to the narrative allusions to paranoia and conspiracy, there is also the fact, beyond the narrative, that we're just living in exceedingly paranoiac times. And as Telotte says, science fiction today corresponds closely with the conditions in which we live. Science fiction is "a tool of cultural deliberation and ideological exploration."[274] Perhaps we're re-examining, or nuancing, the human timeline because, as Tellote notes, "we confront an age in which history seems to have lost much of its relevance, the future is mysterious, and our humanity is often perceived as just a construct of various forces beyond our full understanding and control."[275] In this environment we begin to ask questions about the consequences of the long-standing projects and metanarratives of modernity.[276] These inquiries, unwelcome to the many who would benefit from the status-quo continuation of those modern projects and cultural narratives, cause these gatekeepers of doctrine to push back, accusing anyone who attempts to even skeptically consider alternatives to orthodoxy of engaging in conspiratorial nonsense. Which is not to say that

[273] Lacombe, "MipTV."
[274] Telotte, Essential Science Fiction, 4-5.
[275] Telotte, Essential Science Fiction, 26.
[276] Hine, *At Work*, 101.

pushing back isn't without merit. After all, there is a way in which the same conspiracy theories and pseudoscientific claims that want to counter oppression can, contradictorily, function at cross purposes, obscuring the verifiable, well-documented, and directly-experienced forms of oppression and violence that are truly the direct results of modern "progress" and "development". Exceedingly dubious and seemingly outlandish claims, in particular, risk drawing attention away from the culpability of those "gatekeepers of the status quo," in my own words, who are truly responsible for the conditions that lead to claims of conspiracy and to the proliferation of "pseudoscience" to begin with – thus, in an odd twist of affairs, turning those who wish to oppose the oppression of orthodoxy into useful tools for its preservation.

The discovery in *Missions* that everything we thought we knew for certain about the human timeline is a mere fiction coerces the viewer into confronting that same possibility in the world beyond the narrative. However, in reality, for the viewer, this kind of thinking elicits notions of paranoia and conspiratorial delusion. As mentioned in previous sections of this chapter, a conspiracy theory is something of an attempt at sense making, a delusional interpretive framework concocted in response to a widespread sense of chaos and heightened uncertainty. *Missions* aesthetically renders what is effectively a conspiratorial interpretive framework that is, as the architect Rem Koolhaas says of paranoia in his writing on Salvador Dali's paranoid-critical method, "a delirium of interpretation." Koolhaas defines Dali's method as "the spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the critical and systematic objectifications of delirious associations and interpretations[.]"[277] In this regard, Dali's conception of the paranoiac's interpretation of reality also applies to the conspiracy theorist, and by extension, to *Missions*. For the conspiracy theorist, as much as for Dali's paranoiac:

[277] Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: The Monacelli press, 1994), 237.

> Each fact, event, force, observation is caught in one system of speculation and 'understood' by the afflicted individual in such a way that it absolutely confirms and reinforces his thesis – that is, the initial delusion that is his point of departure. *The paranoiac always hits the nail on the head, no matter where the hammer blow falls*. Just as in a magnetic field metal molecules align themselves to exert a collective, cumulative pull, so, through unstable, systematic and *in themselves strictly rational* associations, the paranoic turns the whole world into a magnetic field of facts, all pointing in the same direction: the one he is going in. The essence of paranoia is this intense – if distorted – relationship with the real world: 'The reality of the external world is used for illustration and proof … to serve the reality of our mind …' Paranoia is a shock of recognition that never ends.[278]

In *Missions* the framework, the very foundations upon which human society is built, are proven to be the fabrication of a collective, millennia-long misinterpretation of our own history and origins. Our long-proven origin theory is just that – a theory that serves as the "illustration and proof" in service of the realities constructed in our minds. In this way, there is a surrealist element in conspiracy theories, as they are based on delirious associations and interpretations. In much the same way that Dali's paranoid-critical method infuses "sanity into the realm of paranoia"[279] in his art, a conspiracy theory is validated by an infusion of verifiable truth. The conspiracy then becomes less a surreal, paranoid distortion of a truth and more a paranoid theory made realistic by the kernel of truth at its core – in *Missions*, the presence of Vladimir Komarov and the fact that he is a real-world historical figure function as that "kernel of truth" that makes

[278] Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 238. The Dali citation that Koolhaas gives is from Dali's *La femme visible*.
[279] Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 235.

the theory believable. A conspiracy theory is as equally a "delirium of interpretation" as paranoia itself is. According to Koolhaas, in his own time Dali believed that "the moment is at hand when by a paranoid and active advance of the mind, it will be possible to systematize confusion and thus help to discredit completely the world of reality."[280] His observations are even more resonant today than they were when he made them one-hundred years ago. Dali believed his paranoid-critical method to be "the conquest of the irrational."[281] In the same way that Dali applied this method to his painting, challenging our observations of reality, I propose that *Missions* does this same kind of work with human origin theory. The series does what the cultural critic Rob Horning says of Dali's method when it "[fabricates] evidence for unprovable speculations … grafting this evidence on the world, so that a 'false' fact takes its unlawful place among the 'real' facts."[282] By aesthetically rendering, in such a popular and accessible medium, what are effectively "gaseous speculations" on the origins of Earth-bound humanity, *Missions* may not quite give Mars Origin Theory the "density of fact," but when it gives the theory a legible form, it presents that theory, in the imagination of the viewer, as a culturally-animated means – at least, psychologically, intellectually, perhaps emotionally – of resisting a prevailing orthodoxy that may have never been quite sufficient. This is the kind of work that science and philosophy can't do, but for which science fiction is perfectly positioned. In visually and narratively staging heterodox theories, anti-establishment practices, and philosophies that cut against the grain, *Missions* and the other science fictions at issue in the previous chapters do this kind of important work, making crucial concepts and imaginative futures aesthetically accessible in a way that science and philosophy simply cannot.

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[280] Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 235.
[281] Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 237.
[282] Rob Horning, "The Paranoid-Critical Method," *The New Inquiry*, August 3, 2012, https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/the-paranoid-critical-method/.

Conclusion:
Et après que tout s'est effondré?

Throughout my analyses of the primary texts in the preceding three chapters, I have tried to demonstrate some of the ways in which French science fictions across media do indeed participate – although they may do so contrary to "popular" sentiment (and even in the eyes of their creators) – right alongside more widely consumed and more commonly studied Anglo-American science fictions, in a variety of discourses on the urgent, existential issues that permeate the zeitgeist of our current era, the early twenty-first century, late-capitalist Anthropocene.[283] I argue that each of the texts that anchors this work – *High Life*, *L'Incal*, and *Missions* – confronts, via fictional narrativization and aesthetic representation, the ultimately nefarious nature of the post-industrial systems we have created (and that we continue to create anew, time and time again) and that provide the foundational structures, the ontological and epistemological frameworks within which all aspects of quotidian existence function. In my reading, the texts at issue in this study present these nefarious qualities as insidious, seeping into the very fabric of reality – at least, that is, to the limited extent that we are able to perceive reality at all. These qualities become, effectively, a part of our DNA. They appear to become immutable, as does the harm they do, rendering us incapable of making a reconceptualization of those systems a reality.[284] In the final tally, we are incapable, insofar as each of these three science fictions proposes, of moving beyond the harm we do to ourselves and to the world. In

[283] In a particularly apocalyptic turn, the term "pyrocene" has, as of late, been used by some to describe the current stage of anthropogenic climate change, which has, in just a few short decades, advanced the Anthropocene into what may already be its late stages. For more on this see Stephen Pyne's 2021 text *The Pyrocene: How We Created an Age of Fire, and What Happens Next*. Given the context of this study, *What happens next?* is a fitting question.

[284] See my references to Mark Fisher's notion of capitalist realism in chapter three for more specifics on this.

their attempts to aestheticize this nefarious immutability, each text necessarily finds itself in a conundrum, facing the insufficiency that any attempt to represent or encapsulate the totality of the complexities that define the current moment must eventually encounter. In their confrontations with what I refer to in the first chapter as "a malignant political and cultural status quo," these narratives function, not only as efforts to aesthetically render the many traumas and paradoxes that result from that malignancy, but also attempts to process the broader historical ruptures and disruptions in the social order, in the "fabric of society" so to speak, that occur when it becomes evident that all possibilities for a future that do not merely replicate the devastating, eternally repetitive historical cycles of crisis that have led to the traumatic present are foreclosed.

As I indicate in the introduction to this dissertation, that foreclosure of the future is enacted by collapse. I have presented the texts in each chapter, essentially, as narratives of collapse – a combination of both exterior and interior collapses – that also gesture towards a kind of transcendence that is ultimately shown to be impossible. In mapping Max Silverman and Griselda Pollock's notion of the concentrationary – inspired by David Rousset's post-Holocaust invocation of the concept of *le concentrationnaire* – onto Claire Denis' film *High Life* in the first chapter, coupled with my brief formulation of what I refer to as *the black hole sublime*, I have tried to show the ways in which Denis' representations of the black hole phenomenon aesthetically render an attempt to transcend the oppression and despair of a now permanently concentrationary society. Being that the only possibility for transcendence offered by venturing into a black hole would be existential annihilation, I have argued that *High Life* visualizes a notion of transcendence that does indeed transcend despair, but only by foreclosing any possibilities for existence beyond the aforementioned malignancies of the present and past. In

High Life, the only possibility for any kind of salvation is annihilation. Which is to say, effectively, that death is the only way out. The black hole here becomes a metaphor for a sublime transcendence that is one of collapse *into* rather than elevation *beyond*. In the second chapter on *L'Incal*, I focus on a notion of transcendence mediated by shamanic and esoteric practices. Here, Jodorowsky and Mœbius insist on a transcendent level of consciousness that we must reach, according to my interpretation of the text, in order to save ourselves from the endless cycles of violence and despair that characterize post-industrial society. In *L'Incal*, the unavoidable future collapse of society is ushered in and accompanied by a collapse into the self. This is the external, technologically-driven collapse of our extractive, colonial society, but also a collapse that, as I say in chapter two, turns inward, going deep into the self in an effort at transcendence that, by virtue of John DiFool's return to his point of origin, is ultimately shown to be impossible. In the third and final chapter on *Missions*, I have interpreted the series as one that likewise represents the impossibility of transcendence. The show televisually renders what amounts to so-called pseudoscience, the kind of conspiratorial theorizing that I argue is the result of a widespread failure of historical orthodoxies to account for the increasing complexities of the present. Essentially, the failure of the traditional sense-making frameworks that we have come to rely on amounts to a kind of epistemological collapse. Heterodox theories, like the Mars Origin Theory narrativized in *Missions*, spring up as attempts, in such times of crisis in the production and stability of knowledge and sense-making, not only to challenge the perceived failures of orthodoxy, but also in an effort transcend that collapse. In *Missions*, it is the transcendence of a history that the revelation of the truth about human origins has "proven" to be fallacious that supposes to break the destructive cycles of the past. Here again, however, that transcendence is shown to be impossible. This failure is demonstrated, firstly, by the fact that

human civilization on Earth (a mirror image of our real-world civilization), has already committed itself to the same catastrophic patterns of extraction, industrialization, and technologically-driven anthropogenic climate spoliation that led to the collapse, millions of years ago, of the thriving human civilization that once existed on Mars. Secondly, the collapse of the experimental civilization seeded by the human-made artificial intelligence that the characters in the series encounter on Mars gives further proof to the notion that any kind of true transcendence will be forever out of reach.

The analyses I have just summarized could understandably lead one, with little to no prior knowledge of French science fictions, to the conclusion that all texts in the genre that are identified as "French" tend to paint portraits of the future that one cannot but interpret as apocalyptic and hopeless. However, it seems important for me to point out some alternate possibilities. Not all French science fictions that present narratives of collapse present collapse in a way that need be read as pessimistically as the three primary texts presented in this dissertation. While each text gestures at transcendence, each in its own way, all three of these narratives ultimately foreclose the possibility of transcendence when they insist on inescapable, repetitive cycles of growth followed by destruction. There's a skewed sort of Faustian bargain at play in each of these narratives, as if each implies that, yes, you can have transcendence, but only in the form of repetition – you can transcend the current paradigm, but only by going back to the original starting point and re-commencing the same destructive cycle that brought you to seek transcendence in the first place. Which is also to say that there is no redemption in the transcendence offered in any of these three narratives. I will take this opportunity in my concluding remarks to respond to the provocative question posed in this section's title: *Et après que tout s'est effondré?* This response will also be an effort to, rather uncharacteristically, end

on a high note, so to speak, to focus, for just a few moments, on a perspective that I have not touched on yet in my dissertation and to suggest what might be included were I to take this project further. Here, I will attempt to look away, if only briefly, from the devastating dystopian futures sketched out by the narratives in this dissertation, and look towards the (scant) possibility for even just a little bit of redemption in our post-collapse future – a rapidly-approaching, seemingly inevitable eventuality, depending on where you look and who you ask. I will do so by highlighting and briefly exploring a French science fiction that is, without question, an obvious narrative of collapse (even more so than the three already discussed). But rather than read that collapse as a foreclosure of the possibility of transcendence and an indication of a kind of eternal return, I will instead highlight a few of the ways in which this narrative turns collapse into an opportunity for renewal. I will do so by reading this narrative through the theoretical lens offered by the emergent school of thought, popularized in France, known as *Collapsologie*, and in so doing will frame the narrative as one that presents collapse as a set of circumstances that offers a chance for true, meaningful transcendence, even if it only does so with a wink and a nod. The work to which I am referring is Luc Besson's 1983 science fiction film *Le dernier combat*.

Collapsologie is a neologism coined in the 2015 text *Comment tout peut s'effondrer* by the French ecologists Pablo Servigne and Raphaël Stevens, both of whom have become minor celebrities in the ranks of public intellectuals in France. Servigne and Stevens define collapsologie as "l'exercice transdisciplinaire d'étude de l'effondrement de notre civilisation industrielle, et de ce qui pourrait lui succéder, en s'appuyant sur les deux modes cognitifs que sont la raison et l'intuition, et sur des travaux scientifiques reconnus."[285] They go on to say: "Il s'agit de regarder droit dans les yeux la catastrophe pour pouvoir en atténuer les conséquences,

[285] Pablo Servigne and Raphaël Stevens, Comment tout peut s'effondrer: Petit manuel de Collapsologie à l'usage des générations présentes (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2015), 253.

voire l'éviter. […] Les fenêtres d'opportunités sont en train de se refermer et on vit, aujourd'hui, des catastrophes."[286] *Le dernier combat* along with specific aspects of collapsologie related to the importance of science fiction narratives in discourses of collapse will comprise the rough framework here for a brief discussion of the ways in which apocalyptic science fiction films can potentially provide us with an aesthetic platform from which to engage with *the end of the world*, with collapse – the kinds of collapses discussed throughout this dissertation, of human societies, of species, of environments, and of territories, but also, just as importantly, if not more so, the collapse of *inner* worlds – in ways that are different than in the narratives previously discussed.

In *Comment tout peut s'effondrer* Servigne and Stevens convey the insidiousness of the processes of complex, systemic collapse: "Crises, catastrophes, effondrements, déclin … L'apocalypse se lit en filigrane des nouvelles quotidiennes du monde." In *Le dernier combat* however, one need not read between the lines – the desertified future in this narrative is overtly apocalyptic. However, in my interpretation of this film – Besson's feature-film debut and something of an adaptation of his own 1981 experimental short *L'avant dernier* – what's unclear is whether or not the collapse that created the environment in this film is truly meant to be a bad thing or not, an ambiguity that significantly differentiates this collapse from those in *High Life*, *L'Incal*, and *Missions*. After all, as Servigne writes, "some collapses are desirable and others are not,"[287] an idea that is reflected in this film – insofar as, in my interpretation, the collapse that precipitated the world depicted in the narrative made way for the possibility of a future that does not merely replicate the oppressive social structures that came before. In the processes of

[286] Pablo Servigne, "Crise climatique: 'Même après la catastrophe, il y aura toujours des sceptiques' assure le collapsologue Pablo Servigne," interview by Emilie Petit, *20 minutes*, September 16, 2022, https://www.20minutes.fr/planete/3350019-20220916-crise-climatique-apres-catastrophe-toujours-sceptiques-assure-collapsologue-pablo-servigne.
[287] Pablo Servigne, Raphaël Stevens, and Gauthier Chappelle, *Another End of the World is Possible: Living the Collapse (and not merely surviving it)* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2021), 121.

ongoing catastrophe, the aesthetic presentation of the desert future in this narrative puts its characters (and us) face-to-face with what they have lost as they struggle to adapt to emerging realities. Besson's film takes place in what is probably a near future – I say probably because there is no dialogue in this film, so determining precisely *when* and *where* is open to interpretation – but it's likely a near future in which an unspecified global catastrophe of some sort has caused the wholesale collapse of human civilization, rendering the very few humans who do survive, mostly men for a reason that is never revealed, mysteriously unable to speak. Their inability to speak, to communicate about what has and is happening represents a devastating disruption to the necessary human faculty and tradition of story telling – a notion touched on throughout this dissertation – and prompts us to address the increasing difficulty we have in telling stories that can adequately encompass and help us come to terms with the many collapses that we now confront. The scholar Eugene Thacker talks about this as "the furtive, always looming threat of extinction." Thinking such unthinkables, coming face-to-face with the horrifying surreality of collapse and experimenting – through storytelling – with new ways of thinking about the world, about existence, and finding ways to make the radical changes in our cultural politics that we have to make so as to mitigate tragedy is in no small part the task of collapsologie, and also even of science fiction, or at least some science fictions – one of which, I argue, is *Le dernier combat*.

The narrative in Besson's film centers around a nameless man who finds himself one among only a few survivors of an unspecified global catastrophe. For a world that is presented as a desertified wasteland, the film's opening sequence sets a rather intriguing, and unexpected tone. We begin in what looks to be a non-descript, any-place corporate office space. Initially, nothing distinguishes this place from any other. Only as the narrative progresses do we see

evidence, in the form, mostly, of signage and architectural forms, that we are in what was once a French city. The sound of heavy breathing mingles with the wind as the camera pans from left to right, revealing a deep layer of sand covering the floor, grime on tables, chairs, and old-school 1980s desktop ring tone telephones, the kind that people of a certain generation might not now even recognize, hang from their toneless bases. This is the sort of brutalist institutional, corporate space that was lifeless even long before whatever event or series of events have taken place that ushered in the sanitizing sands of desertification. The camera comes to rest and lingers, voyeuristically, revealing a man, the films protagonist, lying in a makeshift bed, in plain coitus, his labored breathing increasing in intensity, a demonstration of his earnest efforts as he enthusiastically fucks a plastic blow-up sex doll, grinding and grunting until his orgasm is met by a sudden squealing whoosh of air, his lifeless partner's rather *unenthusiastic* deflation – one starts out feeling sort of sorry for this poor guy, the film's unlikely hero, who just can't seem to cut a break, not even from a "partner" that was designed expressly for this purpose. And yet, he doesn't seem to despair. Rather, his response is one of resignation, acceptance, kind of a "of course that just happened, I would expect nothing less" response rather than sadness, anger, or even just annoyance at having been insulted by his plastic partner. This is the first instance, of many throughout the film, where we begin to see that not very much about his apocalyptic circumstances really seems to bother this guy. In the context of my assertion that this particular apocalyptic narrative need not be read as a dystopian one that forecloses possibilities for a future renaissance of sorts, this is an awfully funny movie (in its own awkward, endearing way) for a science-fictional post-apocalyptic disaster. Much of what we have come to think of as typical dystopian characteristics in film are wholly absent here. When I first watched it, I kept waiting

for the zombies to show up. Where are the violently anarchic roving hoards of cannibalistic marauders? Where's the plague?

The point is that *Le dernier combat* is not a typical post-apocalyptic narrative. Unlike *High Life*, *L'Incal*, and *Missions*, the tone here is not one of utter despair and annihilation, but one of a kind of optimistic nonchalance. This is reflected in the film by the fact that, despite the devastation they have endured and the horrifying events they have no doubt witnessed, those who remain in this narrative persist in constructive endeavors. They don't give up. They don't collapse into black holes of grief and despair. They don't fall into reliance on a mythological or technological savior of any kind (after all, is there really a difference between the two?), nor do they, in the absence of such salvation set out to dominate each other in acts of violence and rage, as is the case in the texts discussed in the previous chapters of this work. But rather, the characters in Besson's collapse narrative seek meaning in the rubble that for them is now reality. Yes, there are clearly struggles, as the film's title indicates, but *Le dernier combat* is no *Walking Dead*. Besson's survivors don't necessarily go all *Mad Max* on each other. There are those few who act with aggression, but the sole hyper-masculine "warrior" character that populates Besson's narrative and who is so often central to the typical dystopian science fiction narrative has no place here. In *Le dernier combat* the take-charge savior, rugged individual fighting to preserve the now-defunct status quo is exactly the kind of character who *cannot* triumph because he *cannot* adapt to the paradigm of a new reality. Whereas the proposition in so many science fiction films is that *only* such a hyper-masculine fetish of a character can do the violent dirty work that must be done to save the world and reassert the patriarchal, global hegemonic order. In Besson's version of a post-collapse world that man doesn't have a place in the emerging adaptive order. There truly isn't and can't be a lone hero who saves us all. And likewise, in

Servigne's formulation of Collapsologie, the appeal is specifically to science fiction narratives that don't merely replicate the dystopian formulations of the past, that don't tell the kind of apocalypse story we've come to expect, those narratives in which any future that is not an extension of the extractive, colonial, hyper-capitalist present cannot exist at all. In *Le dernier combat*, the survivor, embodied by Besson's protagonist, responds to his circumstances in a manner quite unlike those typical narratives. He is hopeful. He seeks companionship. And when he finds it he and his new-found friend dine together and drink wine with dinner. They create art, painting Lascaux Cave-like portraits of each other on walls. The protagonist flirts with the image of a woman drawn on a wall by his companion. The same kind of flirtation happens again with two real flesh-and-blood women whose bodies we never see in full. The implication to be read in the protagonist's reactions to his encounters, not really with whole embodied women but rather with portions of the female form, is that despite the tragedy he has lived through, he still imagines that he'll meet someone and fall in love – *love*, a distinctly absent characteristic in so many dystopian science fictions, meaningless even when it is present. And despite having lost the ability to speak, with the exception of one word partially-uttered twice in the film – *Bonjour* – people keep trying.

The point in all of this is that in *Le dernier combat*, post-collapse reality is not truly presented as hopeless. It is rather the opposite. It's a place of a certain kind of abundance, where nourishment falls from the sky, where art is a precious mode of communication and expression, where survivors seek bonds in community, where they drink wine and dine together. They engage in acts of mutual aid in the furtherance of resilience and adaptation, and in so doing they deepen their connection. Throughout the film, as the protagonist encounters extreme adversity in his struggle for survival, he does not – in our technoscientific fashion – try to

identify, quantify, and categorize problems that he can solve. There's no solving this world. But he does find himself in insurmountable predicaments to which he can only adapt. Themes of adaptation and of thriving rather than merely surviving the catastrophes that we ourselves encounter – this is where collapsologie and *Le dernier combat* are in parallel.

In these concluding remarks, I suggest that post-apocalyptic science fiction narratives – films, in particular – coupled with the transdisciplinary discourse of collapsologie, can perform a vital function, making of the post-apocalypse, the world after collapse, an aesthetic mode that enables us to indirectly approach the freedom of imagination, the liberation from the colonized imaginary, and from the restraints of the myth of infinite growth that undergirds our entire concept of modern "civilization" that adapting to collapse demands. Ultimately, I see in Besson's film – but also, although differently formulated, in *High Life*, *The Incal*, and *Missions* – the kind of narrative that can help us work, in the collective imagination, towards formulating responses to the radical question posed by collapsologie, at the heart of collapsologie, even, which is also the question, broadly speaking, that I have sought to confront in this dissertation – it is an easy question to ask but not at all an easy one to answer, nor even to imagine: How will we live in the ruins of capitalism?[288]

[288] Pablo Servigne, "Pablo Servigne, ministre du chaos," interview by Guillaume Meurice, *Meurice Recrute*, Spotify, November 9, 2022, podcast.

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