

n e w w o r l d o r d e r s

millennialism in the western hemisphere

Apocalypse and Saviour in the American Film of the Nineties

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As opposed to one century ago the approaching turn of the millenium and of the century is regarded rather relaxed and amused in Central Europe. What attracts attention nowadays is the question, whether the first baby of the Millenium will be born in London, Berlin or Paris. Or the dilemma of where to celebrate the occasion. But regrettably the situation is not all pure joy, considering the increasing problem with the new extreme Right, and an increasingly blunt and open hostility towards foreigners. However, only a tiny minority actually believes in the possibility of the world coming to an end. This is also not reflected in the popular media and is hardly perceived in the general public.

The situation is completely different when it comes to the film productions, but also the News coming from the USA to Europe. Reports of a mad gunman on a Sabbath or in schools; of a man who believes he is haunted by demons and shoots at young people in a Baptist church; the Oklahoma City bombing; attacks against doctors, the removal of Darwin's theory from the curriculum in biology in Texas. All these are reports, which arouse more than just astonishment. Some of the films that were produced during the past years in the USA are characterized by Christian motifs and deal with the powers of Good and Bad, the problem of chosenness together with the obligations that are inseparably connected to it and which must be fulfilled. The Apocalypse, or at least the threat of the world coming to an end and the necessity to save it, are the central themes in some of these films.

I would like to discuss a few sample films, in which parallels to the idea of the approaching end of the world or the extinction of a certain group of people, as well the hope for the unique saviour, who will save the world from the catastrophe, ideas, which were popular in Europe also at the turn of the last century, are recognizable. These concepts weren't new even in 1900. They were the reaction to social reality, falling back on parts of the past, which were then contemporarily interpreted and enriched. During the last turn of the century the main objective was to discover hidden elements of wisdom or secrets, like, for instance, in the theosophical or occult writings and experiments. Remembering "that apocalypse literally means >a revealing of that which is hidden<" (Aron Katz), one can also regard these theosophical and occult groups as following the tradition of apocalyptic ideas. Theories about the end of the world, such as Hans Hörbigers "Glacial Cosmogony" also existed, but people regarded them as less realistic than they

do today. Independent of the different concepts and interpretations of history it can be determined that then as well as today two points dominate those irrational concepts of the world:

1. The civilized, occidental society or even the entire world is being threatened with extinction by “subhumans”, or a foreign power, or a cosmic catastrophe.
2. Under certain circumstances this extinction can be averted by a Chosen One, if he is endowed with a special talent or calling which allows him access to or gives him the understanding of a specific knowledge or a supreme realization.

This concept is reflected mainly in literature and drama. One of the most distinctive motifs is the myth of the Holy Grail, which is also reflected in the film “The Fifth Element”. The myth of the grail is based on legends which sprang up in different places in Europe during the Crusades, and which to this day are the foundation of many knights’ tales, for instance the tale of King Arthur.

Common to all of them is the metaphor of the wounding of the king of the grail, or guardian of the grail, which in its wake causes the downfall of the land. With the injury of the king the grail, too, loses its power. Only a chosen young man can salvage the grail, its guardian and the land. This young man, named Parsifal or similar, must forget the teachings of his mother, he must acquire the code of the male world of the knights, he must relinquish his individuality, he may not ask questions and he must resist female temptation. Only then can he reconquer the lance, the most important element of the grail’s insignia, heal the king and the land, and cause the grail to glow. His reward will be the power over the world.

Besides the realm of literature, “Secret Sciences” that serve to avert the threat of the end of the world were published in books and magazines with high editions and circulation. Different pseudo-religious or occult societies, orders and associations, some with political intentions, were founded. Especially in Germany and Austria these writings and the orders which represented them aimed at averting the threat exerted by the rise of Modernism, which was perceived as equal to Judaism and the independent woman, against traditional bourgeois structures. The end of the 19th century in Europe was determined by economic and social upheaval, which brought about the elimination of reliable social and family structures and the loss of a long tradition of values amongst large parts of the population. Here Nationalism came as a side effect in the individual countries. Some of the orders with political intentions had some influence on the forming and the establishment of National Socialism. One example is the order of “Artamanes”, Himmler and Hess have been local leaders of this order in the twenties.

In times of problematic social situations, the reference to the past, not only the individual or that of the family, but a past, which can serve as orientation, is of utmost importance. The past, as Jan Assmann writes in his book “The Cultural Memory” (*Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen. München 1999*), does not enter the cultural memory of a society as a factual past, but as remembered past, congealing into symbolic figures, which the memory clings to. The present cannot be separated from the past, it is always influenced by it, even by those parts of history, which one might not like to remember. At present, the media and politics exert the greatest influence on the cultural memory, which represents the tradition of meaning, or sense, as Jan Assmann defines. This memory includes different meaning providing elements of the culture, and is thus to be regarded as an external clipboard of information. It feeds both tradition and communication but it is not completely dissolved in them,

and it is dependent on people who remember or carry on experiences and events, or publish the information and interpretations.

Transferring Jan Assmann's remarks on the culture of writing on to film - both feature and documentary - one can accordingly point to the problematics accompanying the externalisation of meaning. Opposite the positive forms of conservation and retrieval, which thus becomes possible, we have the negative forms of forgetting by externalisation, of suppression by manipulation, censorship, destruction, rewriting and replacement.

Movies and TV features nowadays are, as we all know, significant for the forming of a collective as well as an individual identity. Feature films such as "The Fifth Element" or "Stargate", but also "The Seventh Sign" and "Millennium" integrate the past directly into the story. The past and its consequences or its retarding element influence the narrated present. In these films both of the two central motifs of the threatened world and the chosen saviour can be found. Only that - at least in the movies, Millennium is different here - there is an actual threat of physical annihilation of the world and with it of the entire human race. Although "The Fifth Element" and "Stargate" are furnished with elements of science fiction, this aspect is less innovative. Instead, their orientation is much more towards the past.

The first example which I would like to present to you, is the film "The Fifth Element" by the French director Luc Besson, produced in 1996. It features many references to the European cultural history and memory, which, together with the excellent editing, carry the tension and the humor of the film. "The Fifth Element" takes place in the year 2259, and it tells the story of the threat of the destruction of the world by absolute Evil, clad in the form of a gigantic burning planet. This is to be averted, but we quickly learn, that weapons will not do the trick.

I would like to tell you about my European interpretation of the film. The exposition of the film is set in Egypt in the year 1914. In an intelligent manner its images and dialogues deliver all the information necessary to follow the events, but it also holds different references to a mythical-occult background, which turn the film into a modern tale of the grail, knotted with the ideas of Helena P. Blavatsky, that the secret to save the world is kept in the old temples of ancient Egypt.

This opening scene, which I would like to describe to you, unravels in an ancient Egyptian temple. An elderly professor is just about to finally decipher the inscription on the temple, telling of a threat that repeats itself every 5000 years, and of the ensuing battle of Good against Evil. The professor deciphers two more drawings which tell of the existence of a weapon against the Evil. This weapon consists of a combination of the four elements wind, water, fire and earth, and a "perfect" 5th element, represented by a human symbol, which connects between the four. But a priest, who had been friendly welcomed by the scientists, finds it necessary to poison the professor and his assistant, because they already know too much. But he doesn't succeed. At that precise moment a spaceship lands in front of the temple and creatures in sparkling golden space knights costumes (costumes: Jean-Paul Gaultier) enter the temple. The priest, who believes that he is no more trusted as the keeper of the secret, falls on his knees before of one of these golden knightly creatures and assures it, that he did succeed to save the secret. The answer he receives show that he would have continued to enjoy the trust, but that serious circumstances make it necessary to secure the holy objects. "You and your predecessors have always served us well, but soon there will be war, the stones are no more secure on earth." The knightly creatures open a concealed door to a holy room and carry five elements onto their spaceship. The door closes just as the last of the knightly creatures tries unsuccessfully to leave the room. He only succeeds to

hand the key to the priest. The priest promises to pass on the knowledge until they return, just as it had been passed on to him.

In the old legends of the grail there are also always a few chosen knights who, chosen to protect the holy object, must withdraw from all worldly matters. The grail in the French interpretation of the myths of the grail, which developed around the legends of the Catharians, also consists of one or more stones. The Tarot, which also feeds from the legend of the grail, has the four elements wind, water, fire and earth as Aces of the small Arcana. The fifth card in the French Tarot is the High Priestess, who represents the prototype of everything that is spiritual. She is the model who must be emulated in order to achieve highest bliss. She is the only one who knows the divine truth, she supports the roof of humanity. On the other hand, in the Egyptian cult, the number 5 represents the goddess Ishtar. Since the Renaissance, when the writings of the Corpus Hermeticum as well as texts from ancient Greece or the late ancient period, which describe Egypt in an unequivocally positive manner, were rediscovered, the Occident has begun to consider ancient Egypt as an exceptionally high culture, the secrets of which have not yet all been revealed. Up to this point the image of Egypt in the European cultural memory had mainly been formed in reference to the Bible, and, being the epitome of despotism, it was accordingly negative. In the course of the revolution of ideas during the Renaissance Egypt turned into a place of fascination. By now it had become the representative of the teaching of a divinely inspired world, a teaching that was carried by the “Magi”, who were doctor, healer, theologian, invocator, magician, astrologist, fortuneteller, philosopher and philologist in one person. These “Magi” were wise scholars and knew the secret of the connections in the world and its divine inspiration. Egypt was considered the home of magic. This concept of secret knowledge which was still used, kept and passed on in Egypt by initiated priests, has become a fundamental base for the different occult groups and secret societies, and it corresponds, in turn, with the legend of the grail.

The person, who made the concept of a yet unrevealed secret knowledge of old Egypt so popular was the mother of all esotericism, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in her book “Isis unveiled”, which has been printed in high editions and read in many languages.

But let’s go back to the film: On a radar computer screen we fade out from the ancient Egyptian drawing of the planetary constellation with its 5000 year cycle, the drawing, which hints to the terrible event. We now find ourselves 300 years later in the present time of the film. The compound Evil threatens to destroy the earth. Only with the help of the secret knowledge of the priest, who is presented as an “expert for astronomical phenomena”, can the world be saved. In the Tarot this priest would be equivalent to the Hermit, a seeker for truth, chosen to fulfill his mission. In the legend of the grail it is the hermit, who introduces Parsifal towards his mission to the basic teachings, so as to enable him to at least behave accordingly in the world of knights. In science fictitious New York we encounter Korben Dallas, who might be considered the knight Gawain (Bruce Willis), the proud, courageous and worldly knight from the myth of the grail, who isn’t missing in any legend of Parsifal or Arthur. An exception to the rule is Wagner, who cuts out all worldly matters. This former Army Major is now a taxi driver. He has turned away from women and is waiting for the special, perfect woman. He has no illusions and he tries to live his life without compromise.

Zorg, the representative of Evil upon earth, known as “Shadow”, limps, has a narrowed down Hitler beard on his chin and a stupid black sting of hair, which keeps falling into his face. This evil Satan-King orders to shoot at the spaceship which brings the saviours, and destroys it. Only a hand of one of the creatures can be saved. The attempt to recreate the creature succeeds,

and the result is the perfect woman. Amongst the Catharians, who according to the legend were the last guardians of the grail on Montsegur, women held the highest priesthood, they were the "Perfecti". This woman, Lilloo, the 5th element, must first learn the language and conventions of this earthly world in order to be able to fulfil her mission. At this point we again have a double reference. First, to the primal language, which was spoken by all humans before the construction of the tower of Babylon, and of which the early church fathers until Augustinus firmly believed that it was Hebrew (Umberto Eco: *The Search for the perfect Language*, page 85). Second, to the legend of the grail, according to which Parsifal was raised in the forest by his mother, far away from all worldly elements, and then also had to learn the language and conventions of the male world of the knights. The main part, which is the race for the Stones of the Sanctuary in order to either save or, depending on what side you're on, finally assure the destruction of the world, is filled with thrill, action and ironic references, which have been intelligently intertwined by the director and the editor.

Of course the Major saves the stones together with the wounded Lilloo and the priest. Not much time is left to save the world. They fly to the temple which we remember from the exposition and where the apprentice of the priest have already opened the door. But how to arrange the stones, so that the light weapon can be activated? The holy stones of the four elements must be arranged correctly, and their inherent power must be activated. After this is finally done, only the fifth element is missing. Lilloo, who, during the flight to the temple had pushed the word "war" on her teaching computer and then saw the images of it, has no more hope in her chosenness. The Major hesitates to admit his love to her. After the priest urges him, he kisses her intensely and she becomes the 5th element which, in the very second before the Evil force was to enter the atmosphere, emits a powerful ray of light, freezing and stopping the glowing planet.

In this final scene, just like in the exposition, we find analogies to the legend of the grail, which I would like to present in short.

In order for Parsifal to cause the grail to glow and thus redeem the king and the land, he must ask the question of compassion. Parsifal wasn't supposed to ask questions, but he was supposed to do and show Good, according to the code the hermit had given to him when he set out for his mission. Parsifal's hesitation to ask the question throws him into new adventures which he first has to accomplish, before he is given a second chance. Since the story of the film, as opposed to the Epic, must be told within ninety minutes and cannot begin all over again, the roles are distributed a bit differently. Thus Lilloo becomes both Parsifal and the High Priestess and in the end even also the wounded Amfortas, king of the grail. The Major, not a man of useless questions, is Gaiwan, the courageous earthly hero, who must, in this very final scene, reveal his innermost feelings, because the two of them can only save the world together. It is the combination of knowledge, courage and humanism which saves the world.

The same could be said for "Stargate". But in this film by Roland Emmerich, which was produced in 1994, although it deals with personified Evil, the threat to the world is triggered by a group of soldiers themselves, who pass through the stargate. Just like the journey through the stargate only became possible with the assistance of the young scientist. It is the young Egyptologist who in the end prevents the destruction of the earth by clever and courageous involvement. It is tempting to discuss the film with regard to the significance of the Cheops Pyramid, which strongly influenced British occultism in the 19th century (and which also is printed on the US-One-Dollar and so appears on the back of the invitation to this conference). But it

would also be interesting to discuss it in relation to Rudolf Steiner's affinity to Egypt and his theory, that a man, who has reached a supreme level of knowledge and consecration could be capable to transpose himself to different places and periods merely by using his mental powers. Considering the limited time and my topic I must abandon the idea at this point.

Instead I will now move from films produced by European directors and relating mainly to aspects of the history of European thought to the other group of films, which have been produced by American directors and which relate mainly to the Revelation of St. John the Divine, enriching them with elements of European history, like those incorporated in "The Fifth Element" or "Stargate". While "The Fifth Element" and "Stargate" definitely contain certain ironic elements and a critical distance to the theme, the films which I will discuss now are set up as serious appeals and moralistic exhortation, threatening punishment to those, who do not submit to the strict Christian rules of virtue.

Already in its title, the film "Armageddon", produced in 1998, refers to a place where, according to the Book of Revelation, the three spirits of the devil unite towards the day of the battle against God Almighty. The basic story of this film is quickly summarized. During the titles a melodramatic voice reminds the spectators that during the days of the Dinosaurs a great meteorite crashed into the earth and destroyed all living beings, and that this would happen again. Suddenly the world is threatened by a meteorite the size of the State of Texas, which is about to destroy the earth, unless it can be destroyed preemptively. Because of its size, the only possible chance would be for a group of men, equipped with special drilling tools, to fly to the asteroid, drill a very deep hole, place an explosive device into that hole and try to get away as quickly as possible. All of them, Harry (again Bruce Willis) upfront, agree to do it in order to save the world. These men do their utmost and it could have succeeded - but the remote detonator doesn't work. The only chance that is left is the self sacrifice of one of the men, who would blow himself up together with the meteorite.

Except for two or three scenes the film is mainly melodramatic, very trashy, and it emphasizes repeatedly, especially in the dialogues, the need to submit to the superior power and to serve it unconditionally. Only then would the salvation of the earth be possible.

Since the days of ancient history the principle of the conviction of one person of his own chosenness has produced obligations linked with highest commitments, i.e. strict rules which must be followed, if one wants to belong. It is mainly this exhortation which determines this movie. The film never became a great success in Germany despite Bruce Willis and massive advertisement.

Interestingly enough, a film produced in 1975, "Fire from Outer Space", also tells of an approaching meteorite. 20 years ago only Phoenix/Arizona was threatened, which at that time was bad enough. The scientist in "Fire from Outer Space", who was the first to realize the danger and who throughout the movie remained the one, who performed the decisive calculations and insisted on measures to be taken to avert the danger - he, too, sacrifices himself in the end.

The film "The Seventh Sign", directed by Carl Shults, was produced already in 1988, but only a few weeks ago it had a rerun on German television. This film, too, requires a self sacrifice in order to prevent the Apocalypse. The script consists of a mixture of real quotes and motifs from the Revelation of St. John the Divine, with signs and text pieces added on to it. In this film the Apocalypse is triggered by the resurrected Jewish Christ (Jürgen Prochnow), who is both the "wrath of God" and the "divine light". In a key scene this man is established as belonging to Judaism. The unraveling Apocalypse is observed with satisfaction by a priest of the Vatican. This man is actually the murderer of Jesus Christ, and, condemned to eternal life, has been roaming the

earth for 2000 years. Only the Apocalypse can redeem him. Humanity, in turn, can only be saved by a woman who's son would be the first child born without a soul - she decided to die for him, so she stopped the completion of the Apocalypse.

In this film all moments of action are presented as closely associated with the Revelation, like for instance, that the sixth sign is the death of a martyr of God.

It would be interesting to discuss these two aforementioned films in relation to the dualism of "Trash and Death". Friedländer's description of the hero, who is prepared to sacrifice himself, as being "surrounded by religious lustre, rooted in the realm of eternal values, and loyal until death" (page 28) is, in a certain way, true also for the main characters of these films.

All the different motifs presented here can be found in "Millenium". The main character is Frank Black, a singular exceptional man with a special capability and with access to a very certain knowledge. Frank Black is a visionary, but despite this he subordinates himself in a group, which sets out to save the world. The Millenium Group is a small group of consecrated people, who pass on their knowledge only conditionally, and who are united by a purpose, the achievement of which requires a "certain strength". The cases which the Millenium group, and with them Frank Black, are called to, are unusual cases. A large part is connected with apocalyptic fantasies: there are serial killers, who avenge violations of Christian commandments, thus believing to be able to turn back the danger of destruction of a city; there is the motif of the Anti Christ; but there are also episodes, in which crimes, highly stylized into irrational phenomena by members of the petit bourgeoisie, can be related to as perfectly rational and explainable events, like in the episode "Angel of Death". But the spectrum also includes references to European history. That is true for the episode "Alaska", which I would like to finally relate to, because it closes the circle to "The Fifth Element". In this episode there is a remark, that Frank Black is "carrying a great responsibility for all of us". In the center of this episode is a "reincarnated Petrarca", who realizes his identity at the age of 18, and whose parents neither assumed nor understood. We hear the reference to a planetary constellation, which returns every 500 years, and during which enormous spiritual and worldly powers confront each other, thus creating a new era. There are references to "the birth of Christ, the court of King Arthur, the Renaissance". Luckily this 500 year cycle is not as ultimate as that of 5000 years from "The Fifth Element". But it still lies ahead of us - at the Millenium - and it sends its harbingers in the form of a "space arch", which appears as a fluorescent light in the starry sky. It is under this light that Frank Black succeeds in finding the injured Petrarca boy and saves him.

In the narrative form of the film, Frank Black saved more than just one boy. By saving Petrarca he may have helped the world to enter a humanistic awakening like the Renaissance.

The question that arises is, why these motifs are almost never used in Europe, but are still so strong in the USA. A simple answer would be the reference to the turn of the Millenium, which lies ahead of us. Since I, as an Eastern European coming from Berlin, think, that I should be careful in trying to find an answer to this question, I would rather split it up and offer it for discourse: Do social parallels exist between the situation during the last turn of the century in Europe - i.e. intense industrialization, the downfall of many monarchies and with it the limitation of the power of the Church - and the situation in the USA nowadays? Is it, perhaps, a reaction to contradictions like the one, for instance, where in a country, whose most advanced scientific research is honored with the Nobel prize, biology lessons in school are adjusted according to the Bible?

Is the fear before the Apocalypse perhaps a transposed fear before social upheaval, the change in traditional life styles and traditional norms and values?

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