

*-Research Article-*

## Search for Transcendent in Science Fiction and Apocalyptic Films

\* Osman Şahin

### Abstract

*Humanity gradually shifted away from religion and the sacred in the modern age, but in the postmodern age, people have discovered that science and reason alone cannot satisfy them. As a result, people returned in various ways to mythology, religion, and the mystical. Cinema, one of the most popular arts of the visual age, could not possibly ignore this move. Religious themes and elements are prevalent in films. Humanity has lost confidence in metanarratives thanks to postmodernism, and is shown to be on a different quest for meaning, particularly in science fiction and apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic films. In many films, this quest evolves into a quest for the transcendent. People contemplate the beginning and the end; they speculate about their origins and their future directions. Postmodern viewers are drawn to the holy, mystical, mythological, and transcendental quests offered in movie theaters. As a result, the film business, which is capitalist in nature, uses this tactic to produce stories that are transcendental, sacred, mythological, mystical, magical, supernatural, and, generally speaking, religious. This essay explores the attempt of postmodern man to use cinema to re-enchant the demystified universe. The postmodern man is tired of extreme rationalism and is on a philosophical quest.*

*The study analyzes five science fiction movies, which are also referred to as apocalyptic movies. These are Avatar (2009), Interstellar (2014), Prometheus (2012), War of the Worlds (2005), and I Am Legend (2007). The article argues that in these movies, post-modern man's quest for meaning is addressed with some sort of transcendence, his modern identity is developed into a postmodern one, or a postmodern identity is brought forth, and his worries about the end are mostly appeased with a postmodern uncertainty.*

**Key Words:** *Postmodern, Transcendent, Sacred, Science Fiction, Apocalyptic Movies.*

---

\*Dr. School of Foreign Languages, İnönü University, School of Foreign Languages, Malatya, Türkiye  
E-mail: osman.sahin@inonu.edu.tr  
ORCID : 0000-0003-2959-241X  
DOI: 10.31122/sinefilozofi.1231327

Şahin, O., (2023). Search for Transcendent in Science Fiction and Apocalyptic Films, SineFilozofi Dergisi. 8 (15).  
10.31122/sinefilozofi.1231327

Received: 09.01.2023  
Accepted: 26.04.2023

*-Araştırma Makalesi-*

## Bilim Kurgu ve Apokaliptik Filmlerde Aşkın Arayışı

\* Osman Şahin

### Özet

Modern çağda nispeten dinden ve kutsaldan uzaklaşan insanlık, postmodern dönemde bilim ve rasyonelliğin onu tatmin etmediğini görmüş ve biraz farklı bir şekilde olsa da yeniden dine, mite, gizeme yönelmiştir. Görsel çağın en yetkin sanatlarından biri olan sinema bu duruma ilgisiz kalmamıştır. Bugün sinema sanatı dini öğelerle doludur. Özellikle bilim kurgu ve apokaliptik/post-apokaliptik filmlerde postmodernizm ile birlikte üst anlatısız kalan insanlık, hayatı anlamlandırmakta başka arayışlar içinde gösterilmektedir. Bu arayış birçok filmde bir aşkın arayışına dönüşmektedir. İnsanlık başlangıç ve sonu sorgulamakta, nereden geldiğini ve nereye gideceğini merak etmektedir. Postmodern izleyiciler sinemada sunulan kutsala, gizeme, mitolojiye ve aşkın arayışlarına yönelmektedir. Kapitalist sinema endüstrisi de bu durumu değerlendirerek aşkın, kutsal, mitoloji, gizem, büyü, doğaüstü ve genel anlamda din ile ilgili anlatılar sunmaktadır. Bu çalışmada aşırı rasyonellikten bıkmış ve felsefi bir arayış içinde olan modern insanın, büyüüsü bozulan dünyada sinema ile dünyayı yeniden büyülendirme girişimi ele alınmıştır.

Çalışma kapsamında bilim kurgu ve apokaliptik alt türün beş popüler filmi incelenmiştir. Bunlar; Avatar (2009), Yıldızlararası (2014), Prometheus (2012), Dünyalar Savaşı (2005) ve Ben Efsaneyim (2007) filmleridir. Bu filmlerde modern insanın içinde bulunduğu anlam arayışının bir tür aşkınlık ile cevaplandırıldığı, modern kimliğin postmodern bir kimliğe devşirildiği veya postmodern karakterin öne çıkarıldığı ve son kaygısının çoğunlukla postmodern bir belirsizlik ile giderildiği görülmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Postmodern, Aşkın, Kutsal, Bilim Kurgu, Apokaliptik Filmler

---

\*Dr. Osman ŞAHİN, İnönü Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, Malatya, Türkiye  
E-mail: osman.sahin@inonu.edu.tr  
ORCID: 0000-0003-2959-241X  
DOI: 10.31122/sinefilozofi.1231327

Şahin, O., (2023). Search for Transcendent in Science Fiction and Apocalyptic Films, SineFilozofi Dergisi. 8 (15).  
10.31122/sinefilozofi.1231327

Geliş Tarihi: 09.01.2023

Kabul Tarihi: 26.04.2023

## Introduction

Cinema is a tremendously potent art form that engages societal values, wants, and ideologies albeit produced and consumed primarily for entertainment. In the framework of man's relationship with the transcendent, cinema clearly depicts the ambiguity and doubt particular to the postmodern age. During the modern age, humanity celebrated science and rationalism and distanced itself from religion, magic, and the sacred. However, with the advent of the postmodern age, people realized that science and rationalism do not satisfy them, and thus humanity left behind the scientific and rational grand narratives of modernity as it distanced itself from religious ones before.

Increasing dynamism in religions and new spiritualities, which are increasingly indicated in studies on secularization, have brought forth the "homo religious" nature of man. The re-sacralization phenomenon, which is named by sociologists of religion as "the big revival," "the oriental religious revival," "new religious consciousness," "the reestablishment of religion," "the contemporary religious crisis," etc., is among the main topics of modern sociology of religion (Arslan, 2010, p. 97). According to these assessments, since the 1960s, religious and spiritual themes have begun to appear in developed cultures in the forms of eastern religions, traditional religious doctrines, mystical and paranormal beliefs, and new pagan religious movements, etc. Cinema, the art form of the visual age, hasn't let this pass either. Religious elements are used increasingly frequently in modern cinema. This is not limited to films that tell the ethics and doctrines of a particular religion or historical films that tell religious stories to the audience. Films, which are mainly for entertainment and thus are carefully produced taking into consideration the desires, wills, needs, and tendencies of the viewers, are also replete with religious themes and elements.

Especially in sci-fi and apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic movies, humanity, left without a grand narrative thanks to postmodernism, is portrayed in various quests for meaning. This search turns into a quest for the transcendent in many films. People question the beginning and the end, wonder where they came from, and wonder where they are headed. Postmodern spectators in this age of blurred boundaries turn to the sacred, the mystical, the mythology, and the transcendental quest provided by the cinema. It goes without saying that the capitalist cinema industry seizes this chance and offers stories that are transcendental, sacred, mythological, mystical, magical, supernatural, and generally tied to religion.

### 1. The Postmodern Age and The Transcendent

#### 1.1. *Modern and Postmodern*

It is impossible to define postmodernism without mentioning modernism. Postmodernism is nearly universally used to refer to a variety of phenomena and situations that critique, advance, alter, or otherwise diverge from modernity, modern culture, modernization, and modernism in general. Postmodernism, which emerged as a result of

advanced modernity, is connected to post-industrial society and post-structuralism. It signifies the fragmentation of the West's institutionalization of meaning systems and unilinear history. The idea that history has a single direction, the grounding of all human experience in reason, and the endeavor to develop collective emancipation were among modernity's main criteria. But these all failed. Global risks, terrorism, threats, and contagious diseases were all introduced by modernity (Turner, 2006, p. 460). Thus, arose postmodernity as an antithesis to modernity.

Positivistic, technocratic, and rational modernity are associated with linear progress, the ultimate truth, and the standardization of knowledge and production. Postmodernism, on the other hand, favors cultural heterogeneity and differences as emancipating powers (Harvey, 1989:9). For the modern man, "truth" is still philosophically, scientifically, and aesthetically acquirable. For the postmodern, though, it is impossible for a single truth, a grand narrative, or the superrationalization of human subjects to provide a world of meaning for humanity that is not complicated (Fairbrain, 1995, pp. 40-41).

Social scientists felt such a need to ascribe several terms to the current scenario humanity – and particularly western society – finds itself in while highlighting various aspects of it. For example, Guy Debord uses "the society of the spectacle" (Debord, 2012); Henri Lefebvre uses "consumer society" or "bureaucratic society of controlled consumption" (Lefebvre, 1971); Daniel Bell defines it as "the post-industrial society" (Bell, 2020); some others call it the "late modern age" or the "late capitalist age" (Arslan, 2010, p. 196). As can be understood from the different names used by scientists, there is not a consensus about what the main parameters of this age are, but almost all scientists agree that the current situation edges on and exceeds modernity.

Three approaches stand out in studies on postmodernism theories. These theories are "the destruction of metanarratives" by Lyotard, "hyperreality and simulation" by Baudrillard, and "pastiche" by Fredric Jameson. Lyotard defines postmodernism simply as the destruction of metanarratives. In the 19th century, postmodernism changed the rules of the game in science, literature, and the arts. It is the name given to the state of our culture at the end of the changes that have occurred since the end of the century. Lyotard examines these transformations in the context of the crisis of metanarratives. People are now skeptical of a meta-narrative such as socialism, capitalism, universal peace, enlightenment, justice, freedom, and scientific progress. He summarizes the postmodern as "to be skeptical of metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984, pp. xxii-xxiv).

Baudrillard, on the other hand, expresses the postmodern as a new age in which mass communication and mass consumption spread, symbolic consumption increases, and time and space are compressed (Turner, 2006, p. 459). Again, according to him, postmodernism is ultra-technological images flowing through a media space to which we only passively surrender. These images are consumption-oriented and hyper-reality products (Powel, 1998,

p. 149). The prominence and activity that images have attained throughout the postmodern age are the reasons why it is referred to as the "visual age."

Similar to parody, pastiche is the imitation of an odd or distinctive style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, or the speaking of a dead language. However, it is a neutral practice of mimicry, lacking any of parody's ulterior objectives, amputated of the satirical drive, devoid of laughter, and devoid of any conviction that, in addition to the deviant tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Thus, pastiche is an empty parody, like a statue with missing eyes (Jameson, 1991, p. 17). Pastiche is the imitation of some features of earlier works, most notably in postmodern architecture and art. Postmodern art is a pastiche theory (McAwan, 2012, p. 17). In fact, things have gotten to the point where, in the words of Clifford Geertz, "the boundaries between genres are disappearing," especially in the realm of the arts (McCleary, 1999, pp. 56-57). For instance, multiple genre labels are used to describe a product's genre in music and film since the work incorporates characteristics of various genres.

### *The Postmodern Age and the Transcendent*

Secularism, which is a main characteristic of the modern age like "capitalism, industrialism, and the nation state," is explained with new paradigms thanks to the rapid changes and transformations in contemporary societies (Arslan, 2010, p. 196). The rise of religion and religious themes appearing in the political arena, activist movements, news, and cultural fields like literature and cinema is not ignorable. When evaluating this situation, studies in the social sciences express that "rationalization," which is the foundation of modernity, increases the spiritual needs of societies, and thus there is a "religious revival" (Arslan, 2010, p. 196). We are interested in mystical and supernatural explanations, even if they contradict scientific explanations, no matter how secular and modern we deem ourselves to be. If religion doesn't want to oppose science, fearing that it will be irrelevant and does not provide us with myth and the mystical, we search for these in different fields and try to enchant our world with secular cultural forms like literature, music, and cinema (Ostwalt, 2003, p. 26).

Postmodernism points to a culture where there are no truth standards and no objective truth (Storey, 2009, pp. 159-161). Postmodernism in this context is also a crisis of belief. This can be seen in "the end" arguments in the social sciences, such as the end of history, authorship, god, and theory (McAwan, 2012, p. 22). However, this crisis of belief is mostly about traditional religious doctrines. Modern society's disappointment with grand narratives and theories and its search for meaning have brought about a pathological situation. Along with that, superrationalization and widespread technology have led society into an existential search for meaning. There is no solution to the existing problems and distress in society because no satisfactory "theodicies" can be built. Thus, the tendency towards the sacred in advanced societies is clearly visible. This tendency reveals itself in a wide range of

manifestations, from mystical and paranormal tendencies to magical and even institutional religions.

### *Texts of the Postmodern Age: The Visual and Religion*

Contemporary culture is passed down through the so-called postmodern term "simulacra," and this is true not only for the profane but also for the sacred (McAvan, 2012, p. 3). In this postmodern age, imitations and simulations of the transcendent are appearing a lot in the arts and religious life. Ironically, however, the world is void of an almighty transcendent (Taylor, 2000, p. 52). The fact that there is a visible increase in interest in religion and the transcendent is undeniable, but this is not toward traditional religions. On the contrary, religion is immersed into current culture and life with pastiches, in a superficial manner, and without any depth. An argument that men would leave the profits of the modern age behind and turn back to the traditional would, at best, be too naïve. However, there is a strong desire towards the traditional.

There is a move from the written to the visual in the postmodern age. As previously noted, due to this turn, this age is called the media age or the visual age. When we look at television, film, and similar visual texts, we can see that there are a lot of references to many magical elements, such as Greek gods, mythological monsters, fairy tales, and pagan rituals. Postmodernism tries to ground all these with reason and science, which are also doubtful fields for it (McAvan, 2012, p. 23). Fairy tales and the like are as real to postmodern man as science and reason.

#### **1.2. *Contemporary Man's Search for Meaning***

When scientific advances shook the foundations of religion in Western civilization, religious institutions lost their authority over the truth, and humanity turned to the sciences for answers. However, the human-centered Enlightenment idea brought forth an existential problem. While men were imagining themselves as a superior creation of God, scientific explanations were saying that man is a coincidental being. This way of thinking made finding meaning in life impossible. Scientific findings pushed religion into a crisis by disproving its explanations, but they couldn't answer man's existential questions. So, scientific developments couldn't bring the end of religion (Strak, 1985, pp. 430-434).

The rapid changes brought by modernization, the mechanical functioning of the tech-savvy society, rationalization, and individualization have created a spiritual void in the lives of contemporary men. People who grew up in this super-rational world try to give meaning to life in a secular sense. Thus, they stay away from institutional religions but appeal to various salvation, cure, tranquility, and happiness proposals (Arslan, 2011, p. 123). This tendency is mirrored in the social and cultural spheres. Humanity's need and desire for transcendence manifests itself in a variety of cultural products. The term "transcendence" here is not limited to its traditional religious meaning but encompasses everything that transcends men,

including the supernatural, mystical, mythological, pagan, and magical. In the core of all these lies the phenomenon of man's existential questions, the beginning and the end of life, and the meaning of life's problems.

### *Cinema and Religion*

Cinema is one of the most important elements of the visual age, and it is an effective mass communication medium. Along with these, it "is also important for men and can intervene in social life." Cinema is a vibrant field in close interaction with society's social and cultural structures. Films "can affect people's daily lives and help shape their personal attitudes and behaviors." They can create agendas in culture, the arts, politics, entertainment, literature, religion, and socio-economic fields (Yenen, 2011, p. 2)

Cinema and television take it as their task to shape life and culture, to add something to the world, and to project and shape current agendas. Cinema and film act as meaning-making mediums like other arts and popular culture that transcend cultures (Blizek, p. 2009).

The return to the traditional with postmodernism and the re-popularization of the traditional, especially in the arts, have brought the religious, the mythological, and the sacred back to the forefront (Bell, 1977; Partridge, 2004). Religion and the arts have always been interactive cultural fields. In antiquity, all poetic and religious expressions were connected inseparably (Fairbrain, 1995, p. 169). Now, film has taken poetry's place. Although they are not as interwoven as poetry used to be in antiquity, film and religion – or the transcendent – intersect in many fields.

#### *1.3. The Similarities Between Movie Theatres and Temples*

Cinema is related to religion not only with films that deal with spiritual, mystical, and mysterious themes but also with the places and buildings it is presented in. Movie theaters have become rivals to religious places like churches and temples (Leonard, 2003, p. 9). Albert Valentin states, "If we reflect upon it, we feel similar things when we enter the cinema and the church" (Hammond, 2000, p. 95). When people go to the cinema, they enter a silent, dim, or even dark place, and throughout the movie, they distance themselves from the realities of the world, as in a temple.

Cinema is a large space, like most temples; people sit in silence and turn towards the same direction, just like in a church, and passively experience something that is mostly contradictory to social reality. There and then, they identify themselves with the characters and the narrative of the movie; they lose themselves in its story and distance themselves from their own realities. Cinema is mythological, metaphysical, spiritual, theological, and transcendent. Cinematic experience is the displaced expression of an interest that is mainly spiritual in character (Fairbrain, 1995, pp. 1-2). This spiritual interest was once met with

religion; however, with modernism, religion became irrelevant. Then it searched for a new expression in the secular field, and cinema has become a field where it is revealed abundantly.

The stories, myths, and legends told in cinemas divide the world into two categories: good and evil; light and darkness; sacred and profane. It is an important issue that cinema in secular culture is very much like religious thinking; it is almost like a semi-sacred ritual. The spirituality hidden and disguised in the secular cultural field is revealing itself in the mythological, fantastic world of the cinema (Fairbrain, 1995, p. 58).

### *Cinema as Religious Experience*

In the past, objects were sacralized, but in today's postmodern, visual age, images and symbols are sacralized (Fairbrain, 1995, p. 99). The cinema is the biggest intermediary of this sacralization. We wait anxiously in line in front of the cinema. This anxiety is the sign of an expectation because the experience we are about to have in the cinema hall is mostly contradictory to our secular worldview. This fantastic, mystical, or religious narrative functions as a means to ground and give meaning to our existence, just like religion did before. Religion and other traditional models like modern-age grand narratives lost their credibility to provide this grounding, and so the postmodern man is in search for it in different places. Thus, cinema is like a semi-religious ritual because it can fulfill the function of giving meaning to our lives without disturbing our secular standing in daily life (Fairbrain, 1995, pp. 220-223).

For the postmodern secular man, the sacred is "only hidden, camouflaged, and indistinguishable temporarily" (Eliade, 1973, p. 11), or it is submerged in our subconscious. Religion and the sacred, which we have collectively tucked away in our subconscious, are still important and creative resources, as evidenced by their influence in cinema. Cinema uses the rich reservoir in humanity's subconscious and provides sublime spiritualities for contemporary secular man's desire for the sacred and the transcendent (Fairbrain, 1995, pp. 224-226). Films, with their characters and myths, and with the values and worldviews experienced by the characters that we identify with, function religiously.

## **Science Fiction and Apocalyptic Films**

### *Science Fiction and the Transcendent*

Although not so clearly religious, there are clashes of dualities like light and darkness, good and bad, in popular movies featured in theaters. These dichotomies are most visible in science fiction and fantasy (Fairbrain, 1995, p. 212). With these gnostic dualities, we try to eliminate our existential worries that are often dealt with in science fiction movies, like finiteness and the end of the world and how it will happen.

Science fiction is more effective than other genres in providing answers to our existential questions that were traditionally answered by religion. Space and nature are important elements in religions. Since ancient times, people have raised their eyes to the heavens when inquiring about our place on earth (Harper, 2003, p. 1). Science fiction takes heaven and nature from traditional religions and works on them, making references to religions with sometimes



ironic and sometimes more moderate adaptations. While doing this, it also adds the zeitgeist and the effects of postmodernism to the narrative of the film.

Artificial intelligence and man-machine/man-technology duality are important themes science fiction uses as an alternative to religious narratives. These themes also intrinsically ask similar existential or religious questions. Artificial intelligence and machines sometimes become gods in the movies; sometimes they are the intermediaries between man and god, and man is face-to-face with these uncontrollable, bigger-than-himself powers. Salvation is usually indistinct, and befitting postmodernism, humanity can't find a satisfactory answer, so the search goes on. Contemporary cinema doesn't provide precise results and judgments like religion does. Instead, it provides temporary solutions or takes the search a step further, giving us short-term reassurances.

### ***Apocalyptic Films and the Transcendent***

When merged with science fiction, as they mostly are, apocalyptic films do not stick to religious narratives; however, since they affect our imagination about the end, they function religiously. These films prepare us for different endings, motivate us to think about our beliefs, try to eliminate our worries about the end, give us hope, and sometimes leave us hopeless. No matter how it is, an apocalyptic film draws us into the religious sphere and thus "functions religiously in our popular culture" (Ostwalt, 2009, p. 291).

Finiteness is humanity's biggest problem; man cannot accept any kind of finitude. The idea of non-existence and being nothing is an unacceptable worry. However, contemporary secular culture has left humanity without any grounding regarding this worry. That is how cinema functions almost religiously and eliminates man's worries to some extent with narratives taken from both religions and myths that are full of pastiches and references. The stories told in science fiction apocalyptic films are congruent with the zeitgeist, superficial, and lack any religious narrative. They also do not have scientific grounding. Yet, they help man deal with his basic existential worry about meaningless

#### **Films and Religion**

This article briefly evaluates five films. These are *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), *Interstellar* (Christopher Nolan, 2014), *Prometheus* (Ridley Scott, 2012), *War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005), and *I Am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007). It is clear from these films that modern man's quest for meaning is met with some form of transcendence, his modern identity is transformed into a postmodern one, or a postmodern identity is born, and his fears about the end are mostly alleviated by a postmodern uncertainty.

### ***The Search for Meaning and Answers***

In *Avatar*, Navi, the natives of Pandora, pursue a tribal life and believe in an ancestor cult. Humans have exhausted the energy sources of the planet Earth and are there to invade and rob Pandora's sources. Compared to our world, Pandora is quite religious. The film

presents us with a religion that has a more tangible system than our traditional religions. All the trees in Pandora are connected. The souls of the dead unite with Eywa, which is called the Home Tree. The tree is also called the "tree of souls," and it is the home of the Navi deity. Eywa is not just a tree; it is in the center of an energy system that is spread throughout the whole planet. Everything comes from Eywa and goes back to it. The Navi believe that the souls of the dead and game animals they kill unite with Eywa.

Against the greed of humanity, which has devoured the earth's wealth, the peace that the Navi people live in harmony with nature on the planet Pandora tells postmodern men that religion is actually a source of happiness. The moment in the movie when the main character of the movie is transferred into his *Avatar* body through a religious ritual is the finale of humanity's search for meaning

*Interstellar* is, at its core, a quest for meaning. The film ensures that spectators are totally focused on this quest for transcendence till the end. It is portrayed as if the team that is looking for a liveable planet is actually on a mission to prove God's existence and reach him. The word "them" is repeated throughout the movie, and by "them," they refer to the being or beings that send signs and messages to the world through some anomalies. At the end, we see that it is in fact a man who sends the signs. The messages he sends are about scientific theories, but we interpret them as divine grace at first.

The film tells a narrative in between religion and science; however, there is yet another element: love. Love is a mysterious and enigmatic phenomenon that is not yet fully understood, but this doesn't mean that it is less real than religion or science. And at the end of the movie, it is love, not science or religion, that takes one of the main characters to a liveable planet. Mankind is saved, but no god or transcendent being is discovered; however, the quest for transcendence hasn't ended yet. At the end of the film, the main character says, "We are back where we started, I want to know where we are, where we are going" and sets off into the depths of the galaxy in a spacecraft. His departure into space implies that although science can save us, it won't satisfy us completely, and there will always be a search. Yes, it was science and probably love that saved humanity, and no help came from God when humanity faced extinction, but despite this, we still require transcendence. So there will always be a journey, and this search will always go on.

*Prometheus* is yet another movie featuring a similar intergalactic journey. The movie makes us wonder if the aliens created mankind, and if so, wouldn't this mean that there is no god? Or did God create aliens first? Some archaeologists discover alien signs in caves, and they try to interpret them and find out mankind's place in the universe. This search is in itself a religious quest. The movie implies that aliens caused mankind's creation, but another power, a more transcendent being or beings, created them. Interestingly, a female scientist who carries a cross on her neck and a cyborg who is a wonder of technology and has a very powerful artificial intelligence set out together to find the creator. The movie ends when this duo sets off into the depths of space on a transcendent quest.

The archaeologist who discovers that alien engineers are not exactly the creators of mankind is the materialization of humanity's quest for transcendence. She is a scientist and the discoverer of the signs that started the mission. But she is also a religious person who carries a cross on her neck. She discovers that the aliens who left messages on Earth are not transcendent beings, but she doesn't return; instead, she continues her "quest for the transcendent" into the depths of space.

The *War of the Worlds* tells spectators that we are not alone in the universe; there are malevolent aliens and maybe some other beings, but the Earth belongs to humanity. The film doesn't refer to any traditional religion, but we get the impression that nature or the order of nature has some sort of transcendence, and this saves mankind from extinction. The apocalypse threat comes in a different manner than anticipated in traditional religions, and salvation is neither religious nor scientific. Completely natural processes, which can even be linked to evolution, bring about the salvation that eliminates our worries about finiteness, at least as a species, and nature presents some sort of transcendence as the savior. Thus, the movie provides us with an experience that eliminates our fear of the end, appeases our desire for infiniteness and transcendence without opposing science or referring to religion, and does so without destroying postmodern man's secular and rational status. It doesn't dogmatize anything but gives us the impression that the Earth belongs to us and nature will protect mankind, so it is transcendent. The answer to humanity's search for meaning is found in nature, which gains some transcendence in this context.

In the movie *I am Legend*, genetically modified viruses bring about the end of humanity. There is only one soldier-doctor in New York who has immunity to the viruses, and he continues to find a solution to the problem. He runs experiments to transfer his immunity to those who are affected by the virus and are no longer humans.

He doesn't have a religious profile. When his dog is killed, he loses all hope and commits a suicidal attack to get revenge. A woman saves him from the monsters, and when he wakes up, the first thing he sees is a cross hanging from her car. It is implied that his escape is the result of divine grace, and despite everything, God hasn't left humanity alone.

His savior tells him that people live in a colony, but he doesn't believe her and asks how she could know that. The woman answers, "I know it, God told me. He has a plan." Her faith in God is still strong, so she keeps her hope. The doctor doesn't have faith in God, though. He says that billions of people died, and most of the rest turned into monsters and started to eat those who were immune to the viruses, so God doesn't exist.

Towards the end of the film, the doctor says that he has begun to see the signs sent by God. He gives the cure he finds in his last experiment to the woman and sacrifices himself to protect her and the child with her. It is clear in the movie that the doctor is not just in a search for a cure but also for meaning. At the end, he finds the cure and the meaning – that is, God. Now that he believes in God, he doesn't hesitate to sacrifice himself.

### *Postmodern Identity*

At least one of the main characters in the movies evaluated here presents postmodern characteristics. The term “postmodern identity” here means an identity that incorporates and values the scientific with the traditional, religious, mythological, and mystical. First, we will look at Dr. Grace of Avatar. She presents a clear postmodern identity. She educates the Navi people to communicate with them and studies the fauna and flora of Pandora. Her aim and mission are to convince the Navi people to move away from the precious mineral beds. Her experiments, however, reveal that all beings in Pandora are interconnected and derive their energy from the same source. She also discovers that the Navi belief is a hard fact. This means a scientist is supporting a religion that can be classified as an “ancestor cult” with scientific data. Along with that, although she reasonably knows it is impossible to win, she sides with the Navi people in their war against her own kind. Towards the end of the movie, just before she dies, she says that she is with Eywa, the goddess of the Navi people. This end is the peak of her postmodern identity. In front of secular and rational moviegoers, a scientist declares that she is with God.

Unlike Avatar, *Interstellar* lacks a strong postmodern character, but many characters appear to believe in love, mystery, and - until the very end - divine revelation in addition to science and reason. The main character of the movie, Mr. Cooper (previously a NASA pilot), his daughter Murph, and other NASA scientists believe that a divine power is sending them signals to save humanity. It is as if scientists are waiting for revelation from God, just like a prophet. The main character, Cooper, presents a somewhat postmodern identity by believing not in religion or God but in love and mystery. Similarly, Dr. Brand, who previously in the movie goes after her love, presents a postmodern characteristic by listening to her heart instead of scientific theories. She says, “I am drawn across the universe to someone I haven’t seen in a decade. Who, I know, is probably dead. Love is the one thing we are capable of perceiving that transcends dimensions of time and space. Maybe we should trust that, even if we can’t understand it yet”.

The main character of Prometheus, the archaeologist Elizabeth is a scientist who carries a cross on her neck. She portrays a postmodern character throughout the movie. She doesn’t compromise her faith despite everything that happens during their voyage. At one point she finds and puts on her cross, which she had lost before, and continues her journey into the depths of space with David, the robot, to search for a god or gods. She is so devoted to science that instead of using what is probably her last chance to return back to the Earth, she heads towards the heavens to find an answer in an alien spacecraft. However, she doesn’t do that to prove a scientific theory but to search for God. She is at the last point where science can take her. She has seen how man came to earth and the end planned for earth. But she wants to ask god/s the meaning and the reason of all these. David, the exact opposite of her postmodern character, has an excellent memory and mind, so he is extremely rational. He tells her that the

answer she would get wouldn't mean anything, but still she is determined to confront the god/s. This is the most expressive exhibition of postmodern man's search for meaning.

Robert, the soldier-doctor of *I am Legend* also exhibits a postmodern identity. He actually portrays quite a rational and scientific character until the last moments of the movie. He is so lost in his experiments that he calmly hunts for subjects for the experiments, ignoring everything around him in the city, and systemically continues to record his experiments. He doesn't have the slightest idea that salvation can come from God. Although we see a butterfly figure in several scenes, it doesn't mean anything for him. Anna, the woman who saves him from monster people at the last minute, is his opposite. Her faith is still strong, and she still has hope. It can be said that Anna also portrays a postmodern character, but the most important thing here is Dr. Robert's development of a postmodern identity. At the end of the movie, he accepts the existence of divine signs and finds the cure, and thus he takes on a postmodern identity.

### *The Apocalypse Issue*

Most religions argue that life on Earth will someday come to an end. Although the end stories vary by religion, almost all – particularly the Judeo-Christian tradition and Islam – tell that the end will be at the hands of God. Films have also addressed this theme, and there is even a "sub-genre" called apocalyptic movies. Although all the movies addressed in this article are not necessarily apocalyptic, they deal with the theme or at least have a take on the end of the world issue. However, the ends in these movies are not at all like the ends in traditional religions. But still, it is an important issue that such a vital theme of the religious field as the end of the world or the apocalypse is intnsively addressed in a popular cultural field.

For starters, unlike traditional religions, there is no apocalypse or ending in the film *Avatar*. But the two planets, Earth and Pandora, are facing serious threats. The Earth can no longer meet the needs of humanity. Humans are excavating mines on alien planets. The sources of the planet Earth have finished, and so in a sense, life on Erath has already come to an end. But this hasn't happened as told in traditional religions. Humans appear to have depleted the world's resources, but this cannot be the end of humanity. With technology, they have overcome this problem and continue to live on Earth by finding and excavating energy sources from different planets. It is as if science and technology once again invalidated the religious narrative – at least from the viewpoint of Christianity – for a second time after the Enlightenment.

There is another apocalypse in this movie. It is the end the Navi people of Pandora are facing, thanks to the humans who have come to rob their energy sources. The ending here is also unlike the endings of any religious stories. Mankind is taking the apocalypse to another planet. But the planned destruction is stopped by the miraculous success of natural forces and Jake, the human savior from Earth. Thus, the planet Pandora also defies the apocalypse, and life continues on both planets. This ending eliminates postmodern man's fear of the end and

nonexistence, though in a different manner than traditional religions. It is actually what the postmodern moviegoer expects; he wants a presentation of infiniteness that doesn't destroy his secular and rational identity. This expectation is met satisfactorily in *Avatar* and other movies.

*Interstellar* also doesn't present an apocalypse that is similar to any religious portrayal. The Earth is coming to an end, and mankind is looking for a new home. Heavy pollution and dust storms, which are also mentioned in the Old Testament (Deut. 28:24), are about to make it impossible to produce crops to maintain life on Earth. Although the technology is quite advanced, there is no way to save the planet. The only solution is to find another inhabitable planet. The dust storms here are similar to the signs of doomsday mentioned in Judeo-Christian narratives, but here, although Earth is about to die, humanity is saved from this end. The salvation of humanity comes from scientific studies and technology, but there is another mysterious element in it; love. Yet again, the apocalypse is defied, and although Earth couldn't be saved, humanity is hopeful about finding a new Earth. Thus, postmodern man's desire for infiniteness is satisfied.

*Prometheus* is not an apocalyptic movie. Doomsday can only be a small detail in this film's narrative. Alien engineers, who accidentally caused life on Earth, plan to destroy it again. They load up a spacecraft full of deadly organisms to end life on Earth. Their plan is discovered in the last minute, and their spacecraft is destroyed by a great altruistic sacrifice of the Earth's space team. The space team crashes their spacecraft into the deadly alien spacecraft, and both explode. The only survivor of the team, the archaeologist, sends messages to Earth and says that there is only death on that planet and that they shouldn't go there. Thus, Earth is saved.

In the War of the Worlds, one of the modern man's biggest fears, the aliens, are bringing about the doomsday. It can't be said that the film has an exact apocalypse scenario, but it is clear that aliens, who appear with lightning storms, have long ago planned to invade Earth. Martians are here to attack and annihilate the human race. Interestingly, technology isn't useful against them. The end of the world is again not coming from God but from aliens who have highly sophisticated technology, and the technology of mankind is ineffective against them. Science is hopeless against this attack, which would bring about the end for man.

It is not just science that is hopeless, traditional, institutional religion is also powerless against Martians. Martian tripods demolish a church, demonstrating that God is unable to protect it. Nothing stops them until they suddenly drop dead because of some organisms to which mankind is immune. The narrator tells us that the right to live on Earth belongs to mankind, which has sacrificed billions of its kind and grown immunity to countless organisms. And so, the movie ends. It is understood that neither traditional religion nor science or technology have reliable powers. The laws of nature and life overcome them. The apocalypse has arrived in a way that traditional religions did not predict, and the salvation is not of science or religion. The salvation is brought about by completely natural processes,

which can even be linked to evolution. Such a salvation eliminates postmodern man's fear of the end and satisfies his desire for infiniteness without referring to religion or contradicting science. Thus, once again, a popular film does that without destroying postmodern spectators' secular and rational standing.

The apocalypse in *I Am Legend* is caused by viruses that have been genetically modified to fight a deadly disease of our age; cancer. Science, and from another perspective, mankind has caused it. There is only one soldier-doctor in New York who is immune to the virus, and he continues his experiments to find a solution. He runs experiments in his laboratory to transfer his immunity to those who are affected by the virus, and in the end, he manages that. So, science saves humanity. However, the movie is not devoid of transcendence, as mentioned before. Thanks to divine grace and savior's Jesus-like sacrifice, humanity is saved.

### **Conclusion**

Cinema, one of the most popular art forms of today, is a popular cultural field where postmodern man's quest for meaning is robustly presented. These themes are prevalent, especially in sci-fi and apocalyptic films. Many other sci-fi films like the ones mentioned here that have apocalyptic themes deal with mankind's worries about the end, his fear of finiteness, and his desire for infiniteness. They provide answers to humanity's existential search for meaning, and these answers usually have some transcendent elements in them. Films refer to religions and science while building up these answers; however, they are full of pastiches and simulacra. So, the solutions they provide are temporary and lack ontological grounding.

Sci-fi and apocalyptic movies naturally address man's existential questions and search for meaning. The secular and rational man of today is not satisfied with religion. Science alone is not enough for him, either, because he is also postmodern and has that postmodern doubt about grand narratives. He needs a transcendent, a mystery – something that is beyond his grasp. However, what he needs can't be found in the dogmatic narratives of traditional religions. The transcendence he wants must be in accordance with science and technology. So, the secular and rational man of the postmodern age goes into temple-like cinema halls, where he looks at the mysterious and the religious in the spotlight of science and tries to satisfy his thirst for transcendence. Sci-fi and apocalyptic films, in particular, are and will continue to be full of answers to the postmodern man's quest for meaning.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author of the article declared that there is no conflict of interest.

## Bibliography

- Arslan, Mustafa. (2010). Seküler toplumlarda kutsal arayışları: Geç modern dönemde büyü-din ilişkisinin sosyolojik analizi. *İ.Ü. İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, 1(1), pp. 195-210.
- Arslan, Mustafa. (2011). *Paranormalizm ve din*. İstanbul: Bilsam.
- Bell, Daniel. (1977). "Kutsalın dönüşü". Ali Köse (Ed.) *Laik ama kutsal*. İstanbul: Etkileşim Yayınları.
- Bell, Daniel. (2020). *Post-industrial Society, The Information Society Reader* (pp. 86-102). Routledge.
- Blizek, William. (2009). *The continuum companion to religion and film*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Cameron, James. (Producer & Director). (2009). *Avatar*. [Motion Picture]. USA: Fox.
- Debord, G. (2012). *Society of the Spectacle*. Bread and Circuses Publishing.
- Eliade, Mircea. (1973) "The sacred in the secular World". Rasmussen, D. M. (Ed.), *Cultural hermeneutics*. Boston: D. Rediel Pub. Co.
- Fairbrain, Marty. (1995). *Cinema as secular church: A phenomenological typology and hermeneutics*. (Doctoral Dissertation). Hamilton, Ontario: McMaster University.
- Hammond, Paul, (2000), *The shadow and its shadow: surrealist writings on the cinema*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books.
- Harper, John C. (2003). *Visions of a future god: religion in the science fiction film- Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey*. (Doctoral dissertation). California State University.
- Harvey, David. (1989). *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Heyman, D. (Producer), & Lawrance, F. (Director). (2007). *I am Legend* [Motion Picture]. USA: Warner Bros.
- Jameson, Fredric. (1991) *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Duke University Press.
- Kennedy, K. (Producer) & Spielberg, Steven. (Director). (2005). *War of the Worlds* [Motion Picture]. USA: Paramount Pictures.
- Lyotard, J. F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (Vol. 10). University of Minnesota Press.
- Lefebvre, Henri, (1971). *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. New York: Harper Torchbook.
- Leonard, Richard James, (2003) *The cinematic mystical gaze: the films of Peter Weir*. (Doctoral dissertation). Melbourne: The University of Melbourne.
- McAvan, E. (2012). *Postmodern sacred: popular culture spirituality in the science fiction, fantasy and urban fantasy genres*. Jefferson, NC, USA: McFarland & Company.
- Nolan, Christopher. (Producer & Director). (2014). *Interstellar* [Motion Picture]. USA: Paramount Pictures.
- Ostwalt, Conrad. (2003). *Secular steeples*. Harrisburg, PA, USA: Trinity Press International



- Ostwalt, Conrad. (2009). The end of days. William L. Blizek (Ed) *Religion and film*. New York: Continuum.
- Partridge, Christopher. (2004). *The re-enchantment of the west*, London: T&T Clark.
- Scott, Ridley. (Producer & Director). (2012). *Prometheus*. [Motion Picture]. USA: Fox.
- Stark, Rodney and William S. Bainbridge. (1985). *The future of religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Storey, John. (2009). *Cultural theory and popular culture: An introduction*. London: Pearson Education.
- Taylor, Victor E. (2000). *Para inquiry: postmodern religion and culture*. London: Routledge.
- Turner, Bryan S. (2006). *The Cambridge dictionary of sociology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Warner, Rob, (2010). *Secularisation and its discontents*. London: Continuum.
- Yenen, İbrahim. (2011). *Toplumsal tezahürleri bağlamında Türk sinemasında din dindarlık ve din adamı olgusu*. (Doctoral Dissertation). Ankara University.