



WUHAN JOURNAL OF CULTIC STUDIES



Volume 2, Issue 1

SEPTEMBER 30, 2022

PUBLISHED BY ACADEMIC PUBLISHING FOR WUHAN UNIVERSITY

2040 S. Alma School Rd. Suite 1-182, Chandler AZ 85286

‘You people don’t know what the truth is... Truth is obsolete’: New Religious Movements and Possible Future Scenarios

Raymond Walter Radford
University of Sydney

Abstract

Transmetropolitan, a long form graphic novel series (1997-2002), is the story of Gonzo journalist Spider Jerusalem, seeking to expose the truth amongst a futuristic world of lies. The first six issues, collected in a trade edition entitled *Back on the Street*, introduce readers both to the state of the world in an uncertain future, but also to new religious movements (NRMs) of the future. In issue six, Spider and his assistant Channon attend a NRM convention, which is held due to a new religion emerging every six minutes within the city. These religions are created in a time and place in which technological marvels allow its denizens to be constantly connected or constantly distracted. Houses and apartments have mechanical ‘makers’ to reconstitute matter, creating new from old. The city’s citizens can do and be what they wish, allowing seekers to join or start an NRM; that these religions are still created and are popular in a society that seemingly has it all, permits the exploration the role of NRMs in society. This article investigates *Transmetropolitan*’s author Warren Ellis’ statement that “Science fiction is social fiction” to anchor the future NRMs in the series to ideas he found in his own world. This article attempts to understand how twenty-first century NRMs emerged in answer to societal ills or injustices that required solutions. *Transmetropolitan* is set in an unknown future, but the society it portrays can be utilized to explore twenty-first century first world culture. NRMs were seen as a problem in the 1960s when first studied by sociologists, but are now regarded as a normal part of human social interaction, and have been facilitated by advances in Internet and communications technologies. Using *Transmetropolitan* as a guide for how we could view NRMs in the future also allows for exploration into the way that NRMs are designed to solve the ills of modernity (what was modern for Jim Jones in 1979, for example, reflects the fears and anxieties of specific times and places), which in turn reflects thoughts, attitudes and beliefs that become inherent in new religious movements. These movements are then explored through the concepts of seekers: if given a world in which anything is permissible, why do people continue to search and seek out new forms of belief and belonging?

Keywords

Warren Ellis, New Religious Movements, Futurism, Modernity, future of religions, Jim Jones, Peoples Temple, Shoko Asahara, Aum Shinrikyo.

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

This article focuses on the prevalence of New Religious Movements (NRMs), and the ways that they are created within contemporary society. These NRMs shall be framed within *Transmetropolitan*, a long form comic series written by Warren Ellis and illustrated by Darick Robertson. With over sixty issues published between 1997 to 2002, *Transmetropolitan* told the story of gonzo journalist Spider Jerusalem as he seeks to spread the truth in a world of lies.¹ *Transmetropolitan* opens with Spider returning to an east coast American megacity, resuming his career as a journalist, and becoming embroiled in a political plot by a presidential candidate. This article focuses on the first six issues, collected in a trade edition titled *Back on the Street*, which highlights the ideas of the future city and of NRMs both present and future.² *Transmetropolitan* is set in an unknown year, in an unnamed city full of technological marvels, allowing its denizens to be constantly connected or to be constantly distracted. Machines in houses and apartments, called “makers”, have the ability to reconstitute matter, creating new from old. The city’s citizens can do as they wish and be what they wish. This permits seekers to join or start one of the burgeoning new religions, as according to one character within the title, “one new religion is invested every hour in the city”.³ This article aims to understand how NRMs originate, based on the societal issues and problems that society pins to their ills. While *Transmetropolitan* may be set in an unknown future, the society it portrays can be utilized to explore twenty-first century first world culture. NRMs were seen as a problem in the 1960s when they were first studied by sociologists, but are now regarded as a normal part of human social interaction, and have been facilitated by advances in Internet and communications technologies.⁴ This article uses *Transmetropolitan* as a guide to what the future might say about the present, with a focus on NRMs.

I will first sketch a methodological lens through which these new NRMs can be viewed as existing and operating within society. Secondly, it will provide a discussion about Warren Ellis and his work, explore the dialectical lens through which he operates. This will be followed by a consideration of magic and technology as an avenue to how society views and participates with technology. A discussion on Ellis’ use of magic and folklore, rather than religious themes, will also be explored here. Following this, this article will reflect upon NRMs past, present and future, and the seekers that join such groups. This section will then explore NRMs within a society that has everything provided in a technologically advanced world, and within our own world. Ultimately these groups will be explored within the societal fears and pressures of the era that they were created within. These future NRMs will be considered and compared with the real-world examples of Jim Jones’ Peoples Temple (United States and Guyana) and Shoko Asahara’s Aum Shinrikyo (Japan). By utilizing *Transmetropolitan* as a lens for exploring NRMs, the role of religion will be explored within a world that is ultimately distracted by technology and entertainment that allows for new priorities.

Methodology

¹ Steen Christiansen, ‘The Truth of the Word, the Falsity of the Image: *Transmetropolitan*’s Critique of the Society of the Spectacle’, *Word & Image Interactions* 6, no. 1 (2009):147.

² Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson, *Transmetropolitan: Back on the Street* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2012).

³ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 126.

⁴ J. Gordon Melton, ‘Perspective: New New Religions: Revisiting a Concept’, *Nova Religio* 10, no. 4 (2007): 104.

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark's work on cult formation will be used to investigate the necessary conditions (both in the present and the fictional future) for NRMs to emerge and to flourish.⁵ Bainbridge and Stark argue that three models of cult formation can be identified: the psychopathological; the entrepreneurial; and the subculture-evolution model.⁶ Ellis may be considered a science fiction author or a futurist, but he states that "science fiction is always about the time it's written in... science fiction is social fiction".⁷ When viewed through Bainbridge and Stark's models, *Transmetropolitan* highlights ways in which contemporary individuals can choose from a staggering multitude of options that are created when support for organized religions fade, illustrating the psychopathological and entrepreneurial models.⁸ Historical and socio-economic factors, entwined with personal choice and consumerism, permit near-limitless exploration by seekers, illustrating the subcultural evolution model.⁹

Warren Ellis: Super Powers, Mythology and Religion

Warren Ellis (b. 1968) first found his ground within the graphic novel world through the British institution of *2000AD*, the long running serial that brought to the world characters such as Judge Dredd. In the mid 1990s, Ellis begun working for Marvel, contributing to titles such as *Doom 2099*, a series set in a dystopic cyberpunk future focusing on futuristic variations of established Marvel properties. Ellis, however, has long been vocal in his dislike for the superhero comics, once stating in a blog post entitled "the Old Bastard Manifesto",¹⁰ "Fuck superheroes, frankly. The notion that these things dominate an entire genre is absurd."¹¹ While Ellis may feel annoyance at the prevalence of superhero comics, and ultimately their place within the wider landscape of comic books, he maintains a sense of humor when it comes to the absurdity of the world of superheroes. One notable example is *Nextwave* (2006-2007). Not only did Ellis introduce the world to a character who once went by the name "Captain **** [indicating an unknown expletive]", who Captain America beat seven shades of it out of and then put in the rubbish with a bar of soap in his mouth, Ellis and illustrator Stuart Immonen also take a thinly veiled swipe at the comic book publisher's insistence on variant covers and their reliance on obsessive collectors.¹² The duo created six individual double spreads that would require someone to buy six different copies just for the full joke; this is highlighted by the final panel stating "Nextwave: Blatantly wasting your money since 2006".¹³

⁵ William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark, 'Cult Formation: Three Compatible Models', *Sociological Analysis* 40, no. 4 (1979): 283–295.

⁶ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 283.

⁷ Warren Ellis, *Cunning Plans: Talks by Warren Ellis* (SUMMON Books, 2015), 124.

⁸ Roger Finke and Laurence R. Iannaccone, 'Supply-Side Explanations for Religious Change', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 527, no. 1 (1993): 39.

⁹ William James Allred, 'Sublime Beauty & Horrible Fucking Things - The Finer Worlds of Warren Ellis' (Doctor of Philosophy, University of Arkansas, 2011), 89.

¹⁰ Ellis was 32 when he wrote this essay.

¹¹ Warren Ellis, 'Issue #18 | The Old Bastard's Manifesto', *Comic Book Resources*, published 31 March 2000, <https://www.cbr.com/issue-18-10/>.

¹² Warren Ellis and Stuart Immonen, *Nextwave: Agents of H.A.T.E.* (New York: Marvel, 2010).

¹³ Ellis and Immonen: *Nextwave*.

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

Ellis, while occasionally touching on religious ideas, can be considered more of a folklorist, or a purveyor of English mythology. Whereas contemporaries such as Irish writer Garth Ennis write explicitly anti-religious themes in his work in titles such as *Preacher* (1994-2000), *Chronicles of Wormwood* (2006-2007), and *Hellblazer* (periodically between 1991 and 1998), Ellis surveys more about the nature of humanity than he does about religion. This exploration of humanity can be seen within the much talked about issue number 141 of *Hellblazer*, entitled “Shoot”. This issue explores on the theme of school shootings, specifically how and why they occur. This issue is of particular note in part due to it being responsible for Ellis quitting the series rather than fulfil his multi-year contract, but mostly due to the dark and topical nature of the subject. “Shoot” was due to be published mere weeks after the Columbine shootings, which forced the editors of Vertigo comics (the publishers of *Hellblazer*) to mandate that that Ellis was to edit it, or they would do it for him. Ellis subsequently asked them not to publish it and quit rather than have such a story sanitized.¹⁴ Ellis touched briefly on the occult during his run on *Hellblazer*, with issues 134-139 contained and collected in an edition entitled ‘Haunted’.¹⁵ This arc sees John Constantine endeavoring to solve the murder of an ex-girlfriend, murdered by a magician who was attempting to emulate Aleister Crowley and create his own version of Crowley’s Scarlet Woman.

Ellis once stated “magic clings to the digital world, as if the digital world were actually the other world”, which sees Ellis attempting a form of digital alchemy, combining technology with magic in much of his work.¹⁶ Ellis’s newest long form work *Injection* (2015-) is based on elements that exist within English folklore, such as character Dr. Robin Morel, whose family is connected to a long line of cunning folk, English wise-people, and folk healers, of which he is the last one. Hallvard Haug posits that this surname is an allusion to Cunning Murrell, considered to be the last of the cunning folk.¹⁷ *Injection* is based around the concept of merging technology and magic together, ultimately creating an Artificial Intelligence that is a combination of the past and the future. As Haug states, this “questions the boundary between magic and technology by equating our technological fears with stories from mythology and folklore”.¹⁸ Ellis once stated that the iPod was essentially a magic mirror, and that using it was akin to being a wizard, pointing at something with your finger, as if a wand, and thus causing something to happen; this blend of technology and folklore is prevalent within his works.¹⁹ Even Ellis’s most explicitly “religious” title, 2011’s *Supergod*, is a blend of technology and mythology, with humanity creating gods in the form of superhuman weapons in an arms race that ultimately destroys all of humanity. Ellis once described the cunning folk as “hackers in league with the fantastic:” a combination of technology and magic allowing for the world to be seen, viewed, and explored within a myriad of avenues for a number of differing seekers.²⁰

¹⁴ Adam X. Smith, ‘Vertigo Resurrected #1: Shoot - A Retrospective on Hard Truths’, *Bleeding Cool News and Rumors*, published 31 July 2014, <https://www.bleedingcool.com/2014/07/31/vertigo-resurrected-1-shoot-a-retrospective-on-hard-truths/>.

¹⁵ Warren Ellis, *Hellblazer: Haunted* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2003).

¹⁶ Ellis, *Cunning Plans*.

¹⁷ Hallvard Haug, ‘The Alchemical Singularity: Magic and Technology in Warren Ellis’s *Injection*’, *Foundation* 48, no. 132 (2019): 23.

¹⁸ Haug, ‘The Alchemical Singularity’, 22.

¹⁹ Ellis, *Cunning Plans*, 32.

²⁰ Ellis, *Cunning Plans*.

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

This attachment to humanity and exploration of their ideals makes Ellis' work the perfect example to explore the attraction of NRMs. Rather than focusing on the spectacular exploits of a superpowered few, Ellis focuses on what makes humanity function. He explores what it is that drives people, what leads them to not only form an attachment, but to also continue that attachment even to the detriment of their own existence and the existence of others. Ellis seeks a world in which attachments to things and places can still be considered magical, as he states, "it's one of those popular tropes of fantastic fiction ... The magic goes away, crushed out by the grim mechanical march of Reason and Science".²¹ By exploring the concept of NRMs within a futuristic setting, Ellis dissects the anxieties of our times by positing them within a future scenario. He tries to keep magic alive by reminding the reader that even in a future where everything is possible and accessible, society still seeks that attachment not only with each other, but with something greater.

Ellis and Robertson's world of *Transmetropolitan* is one in which anything is permissible. Over the first collected edition, Spider destroys a bar with a rocket launcher and causes the President of the United States to defecate in his pants, yet is only punished when he covers a series of riots organized by the current administration. As a writer, Spider believes images can lie, but words cannot.²² Drugs and media are utilized to distract the populace in a digital bliss; however, these distractions do not stop society from endeavoring to find a place to belong. Through exploring the concept of religion through a fictitious lens, Ellis permits the exploration of the important social themes such as politics and religion to become part of the commentary surrounding it.²³ This article will now turn to exploring NRMs within society both present, and the future.

New Religious Movements, and Society

The term "New Religious Movement" is not commonly used outside of the academy and can be misinterpreted. It has been developed as a term largely to avoid use of the word "cult" due to its negative connotations in the media and society.²⁴ Richardson also argues that usage of "cult" should "be severely limited in scholarly and other writings... to do otherwise promotes the agenda of those deliberately using the term as a social weapon against new and exotic religious groups".²⁵ That being said, the groups examined in this article would be categorized as "cults" in popular discourse. Bainbridge and Stark's first model of cult formation is the psychopathological, formed around a charismatic leader, who often creates new compensators due to mental illness.²⁶ Second is the entrepreneurial, in which the leader devises new

²¹ Ellis, *Cunning Plans*.

²² Christiansen, 'The Truth of the Word, the Falsity of the Image', 151.

²³ Mark Knight, *An Introduction to Religion and Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009); S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

²⁴ James T. Richardson, 'Definitions of Cult: From Sociological-Technical to Popular-Negative', *Review of Religious Research* 34, no. 4 (1993): 352; James R. Lewis, 'Seekers and Subcultures', in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements: Volume II*. (ed. by James R. Lewis and Inga B. Tøllefsen, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016), 64.

²⁵ Richard, 'Definitions of Cult', 355.

²⁶ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 285; Bainbridge and Stark utilized the existing academic language at the time of writing.

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

compensators that are then sold to believers in order to fill a gap in a market.²⁷ The subculture-evolution model differs from the other two models, as there is no singular creator or leader; instead, the NRM emerges from group action and small steps that lead to something much bigger.²⁸

Bainbridge and Stark insist that it is important to identify how individuals discover new religious ideas.²⁹ They posit that at a fundamental level, humans seek rewards and as rewards are often scarce, compensators are put in place of rewards.³⁰ These compensators, for both traditional religions and NRMs, are treated by believers as a form of supernatural IOU, in that believing something now will garner a reward in the future. For example, the idea of heaven is a compensator for a lifetime of piety, chastity, and belief in Christian doctrine.³¹ Bainbridge and Stark also define that the difference between religion and NRMs is that while both are social enterprises, religion seeks to *maintain* and exchange compensators based on supernatural origins, while NRMs seek to *produce* and exchange novel and exotic compensators.³² NRMs tend to be loosely organized, have small numbers, and may have a history that is able to be traced back to established religions and sites that help to solidify their existence.³³

In Spider's future, as previously mentioned, there are a multitude of distractions available to the populace of the city to keep them distracted from the world around them. As Spider traverses the city, he narrates sights that are out of frame, and Robertson's imagery provides a richer visual context for how the city operates. The compensators posited by Bainbridge and Stark are identifiable in two characters who interact with Spider: leader of the Transient movement "Alien Love Messiah" Fred Christ, and transhumanist Ziang. Fred leads the Transients, who so disaffected that they willingly undergo genetic changes in order to become an entirely new species; in this case, they are attempting to transform themselves into 'extraterrestrials', despite negative side-effects, such as radical changes in diet. For the Transients, their compensator comes about as being recognized as legitimate, rather than as just as genetically modified humans. They follow Fred as he promises that they will be able to be who they are, rather than downtrodden, scared, second-class citizens.³⁴

Jiang belongs to an NRM called "Gaian-Bias Buddhism", a group that teaches that "all is one," and one that Spider describes as "A west-side sect tailored for people who want to feel environmentally sound about filling their bodies with non-biodegradable machinery".³⁵ Spider also considers Jiang deranged for opting to voluntarily have "ten pounds of wiring in your back."³⁶ In later issues Ziang take this "all is one" philosophy further, joining yet another NRM community known as "Foglets", a community whose price of joining is the total destruction of your physical body, through which a swarm of millions of nanoparticles are created which are

²⁷ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 287.

²⁸ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 291.

²⁹ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 283.

³⁰ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 284.

³¹ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 284.

³² Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 284.

³³ David G. Bromley, 'Categorizing Religious Organizations: In Search of a Theoretically Meaningful Strategy', in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements: Volume II* (ed by James R. Lewis and Inga B. Tøllefsen, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016), 20-21.

³⁴ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 289.

³⁵ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 129.

³⁶ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 102.

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

now representative of the seeker.³⁷ The Foglet community and the Transient movement are groups that, despite a world full of wonder, possibilities, and endless distractions, seek to uncover higher meaning. These NRMs offer a view of the subculture-evolution model as posited by Bainbridge and Stark, in that the Transients, the Gaian-Bias, and the Foglet groups are focused on multiple unusual processes and ideas that make up the entirety of their individual NRM movements.³⁸

Spider's search for the truth, and (despite his bravado and apparent lack of punishment for wrongdoing) his need to stand up and protect the vulnerable, are an entry point for the exploration of contemporary NRMs. *Transmetropolitan* also reveals the ways that consumer culture, secularism, and freedom of choice permit the formation of NRMs. Some are harmless, and others are barely visible in the world, but still there are NRMs that use their position and power to hurt, mislead, and even destroy the lives of those who choose to follow these beliefs. In issue six, Spider and Channon decide to attend the New Religious Movement convention, with Spider (dressed as Jesus in a stolen hotel bedsheet) mentioning to Channon that his costume is deliberate and chosen to "Bring out the criminal religious element I seek. Messianic fuckheads are a superstitious lot, and I must strike fear into their hearts".³⁹ Like some contemporary NRMs, Spider is ever cognizant of the harm that can befall people who are simply seeking a place to belong. The New Religious Movements Convention is well-attended, with an overhead announcement telling patrons that "the conception of Hercules is being re-enacted by the one true church of Zeus," and that free shotgun pendants are being given away by "the Church of Cobain".⁴⁰ This bewildering variety of eccentric religions, drawing upon both traditional religion and popular culture, is present in the contemporary world, to which our attention now shifts.

Within both the contemporary world and that set out within the pages of *Transmetropolitan*, humanity focuses on self-determination for multitudes of individuals. Our own world has changed quickly and dramatically over the last century, with institutional religion no longer having the hold it once held over the lives of so many. Notably, churches as spaces of communal gatherings and hubs of socializing have been replaced with secular sites that achieve the same desired outcome; sports fields, shopping malls, cinemas, and so on. While our own society may not be as technologically advanced as Spider's, it still maintains the ability to choose a beneficial path that they themselves wish to take, at least in terms of affluent nations. Modernity allows for humanity to exist in a world in which institutional religion can either play a formative part, or absolutely no part whatsoever, thus allowing individual seekers to craft something that fits within the schema of what they wish to believe in.⁴¹ Seekers such as these have a void within them that they seek to be filled with something, be it answers, a newfound connection with a goddess, or the physical closeness of a charismatic prophet; thus we as scholars cannot only question as to why adherents join NRMS, but also how NRMs differ from established religious ideologies.

³⁷ Allred, 'Sublime Beauty & Horrible Fucking Things', 89.

³⁸ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 291.

³⁹ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 127.

⁴⁰ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 135.

⁴¹ Lewis, 'Seekers and Subcultures', 64.

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

In this futuristic world, traditional religions have been usurped and surpassed by new religions that utilize updated terminologies of present-day religions. One such NRM in Spider's world is "the Official Serbian Church of Tesla", in which members of this new church go door to door to proselytize in the name of Nikola Tesla. These members state that only Tesla "can save your polyphase intrinsic electric field, known to non-engineers as the soul".⁴² In this group Tesla is equated with Jesus, in that only he can save someone through accepting them. In a fictitious world, this church is evidence that organized religions have been surpassed, and that NRMs based on technology (and thus social issues) are legitimated amongst a populace. This example calls to mind the short-lived Japanese NRM dedicated to Tesla's rival Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931), Denshinkyo ("Religion of the Electricity God").⁴³ However, Denshinkyo as a minor (and short-lived) NRM is overshadowed by the dramatic narratives of Jim Jones' Peoples Temple and Shoko Asahara's Aum Shinrikyo.

Both of these groups started as an answer to the social anxieties of their times, but the message of both the Peoples Temple and Aum shifted, changed, and ultimately became malevolent towards to the end of their existences. Jim Jones (1931-1978) started the Peoples Temple in 1950s North America, mixing a blend of Methodist teachings with his own Communist and anti-racist worldview, before a shift in his views lead to him preaching messianic evangelism.⁴⁴ What started as an inclusive and socially progressive church quickly turned into apocalyptic chaos as Jones started preaching about the end of the world, and his fears over nuclear annihilation as his grip on his followers tightened.⁴⁵ Devastatingly things reached a dramatic conclusion in 1974. After relocating to a rural property in Guyana, over nine hundred followers died on the orders of Jones. This became one of the largest mass suicides (and in some cases, murders) in modern history, under the direction of a charismatic leader who had ostensibly begun with the goal to form a community.⁴⁶

Nearly twenty years later in Japan, a charismatic and prophetic figure Shoko Asahara (1955-2018) introduced members of Japanese society to his new religion, which he based on traditional Buddhist scriptures while also incorporating Hindu and Christian ideology into what eventually became a messianic "doomsday cult".⁴⁷ Emerging in the 1980s, Aum as a group was first associated with Asahara during his teachings of meditation. Unlike the Peoples Temple's inclusivity and allowance of anyone to join, Aum was highly exclusive, and quickly became synonymous with the elite. As Aum grew, Asahara began reporting messianic and apocalyptic dreams, coming to (at least claiming to) believe he was the reincarnation of both

⁴² Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 122.

⁴³ H. Neill McFarland, *The Rush Hour of the Gods: A Study of New Religious Movements in Japan* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 65.

⁴⁴ John R. Hall, Philip Daniel Schuyler and Sylvaine Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements, and Violence in North America, Europe, and Japan* (London: Routledge, 2000), 17-18.

⁴⁵ Rebecca Moore, 'Narratives of Persecution, Suffering, and Martyrdom: Violence in Peoples Temple and Jonestown', in *Violence and New Religious Movements*, ed. by James R. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 17-18; Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 293.

⁴⁶ Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Faith: Why the World Is More Religious than Ever* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2015), 98.

⁴⁷ Ian Reader, *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan: The Case of Aum Shinrikyō* (London: Curzon, 2000), 53; Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 18.

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

Jesus Christ and Buddha, and that it was his destiny to lead the survivors of a nuclear holocaust.⁴⁸ Asahara and his followers felt that doomsday was not approaching fast enough, and participated in acts of aggression that were designed to help bring about the apocalypse on the unaware, ultimately culminating on the twentieth of March, 1995 when Aum members set off Sarin gas bombs on the Tokyo subway system, killing thirteen members of the public and injuring hundreds more.⁴⁹

Both Aum and Peoples Temple are practical examples of Bainbridge and Stark's psychopathological model of NRMs: groups that are organized through the visions and ideas of charismatic leaders, ultimately not selling anything other than a cure of the ills of society itself.⁵⁰ Both NRMs seemingly formed with good intentions of helping society; Jones through his inclusive and welcoming socialist church, and Asahara through his meditation. Yet both groups ultimately damaged and destroyed more lives and families than they helped and are therefore the examples held up within the media and academia as NRMs that have done inordinate amounts of harm.⁵¹ In Spider's world, groups that seek to do harm to possible adherents continue, with "The Church of Release" being one of the many NRMs within the convention. The Church of Release practice sacred trepanation, and Spider stops a new adherent from receiving the release (which is performed through an ice pick to the skull), with the adherent acknowledging that he is simply seeking something to believe in. Spider considers this abhorrent, stating that the man he saved must need medical help if he cannot go through life without some invisible force to believe in. This ultimately ends with Spider and the priest exchanging blows.⁵² Ultimately the issue ends with Spider aghast at the lies, trickery, and subterfuge that is levelled at people who simply want a place to belong and whose "only crimes were to be frightened and tired".⁵³ In Spider's world, digital distractions, drugs, and the ability to do anything you set your mind to has distracted the populace from these NRMs with Spider stating that they are able to get away with such things as they are "getting away with it in a place so noisy that no one could hear the truth if it were ever told".⁵⁴ The young man that Spider saves from The Church of Release states that he is tempted to join because he feels that he is seeking "... something. I just can't get through my life without some help".⁵⁵

The term "seekers" refers to those people who are participate in an ongoing, highly personal search for answers to the questions they have in regard to their existence. Some will often be seeking and searching for their entire lives, never fully able to gather the answers they seek. Seekers move within groups, taking parts that they feel are useful from each group they pass through in order to help fill in the answers, adapting these parts in order to fit within the schema of their own lives.⁵⁶ Spider Jerusalem is unattached to the ills of the city and to the society in which he exists, yet he seeks the answers to the world around him. Spider, within the

⁴⁸ Reader, *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan*, 55.

⁴⁹ Reader, *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan*, 215; Haruki Murakami, Alfred Birnbaum and J. Philip Gabriel, *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche* (New York: Vintage, 2003).

⁵⁰ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 286.

⁵¹ Hall, Schuyler and Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed*, 15.

⁵² Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 140-141.

⁵³ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 142.

⁵⁴ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 143.

⁵⁵ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 139.

⁵⁶ Lewis, 'Seekers and Subcultures', 63-64.

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

religious framing, could be considered that of a “messiah”, as he literally comes down from on high (his mountain home) bringing with him truth and revelation.⁵⁷ Through his actions and use of the truth, Spider manages to mobilize large swathes of the community to help shut down riots and police brutality against the Transient community. Spider successfully transforms his truth into mass news when he decides to spend a day calling into television shows as his knowledge about the world and the power of his voice creates disruptions within local talk shows shutting many of them down.⁵⁸ Of course, Spider, with his aggression and need to find the truth, would be a terrible messiah, constantly searching for that truth somewhere in the world, because nobody else is looking for it. Spider proclaims “You people don’t know what the truth is! It’s there just under their bullshit, but you never look!... Lies are news and truth is obsolete”.⁵⁹

Spider himself falls within the category of seeker, as he seeks the truth to the world around him. His strong moral code and his views on the needy being just as important and equal with those in power make him a dangerous subversive character, lashing out at the status quo and rising the masses against the powers that be. The truth is all-encompassing for Spider, and this informs how he interacts with the NRM convention. The convention is full of people seeking to mislead and lie to those in attendance to boost their own following, and yet the attendees are simply people who wish to have something to believe in; anything that distracts them from the perpetual self-indulgence that is ready made for them outside of the convention. The seekers attending the convention are yearning for something that can solidify their existence, facilitate a connection with other people, qualities that are lacking in a society in which technology has subsumed the need to venture outside your front door. In the twenty-first century, we have a greater choice of options for how we live our lives than any other generation that paved the way for us to reach this point. We build on these bones of the past in order to create and adapt to our societal needs. Perhaps when Ellis states “science fiction is social fiction”, he is looking at the state of technology today, how it fulfils societal needs yet ultimately distracts society from each other.

Conclusion

Transmetropolitan is a work of speculative fiction that considers the future of religion, belief, and NRMs. As stated by Ellis, when writing about the future, we are simply discussing our present. NRMs in our contemporary world are flourishing, with their appeal laying largely in their facilitation of the ability to travel, learn, and adapt existing ideas and structures to the creation of new thoughts. When Ellis envisions the future, he simply writes he sees today, adding only more technology and distractions. NRMs that exist in Spider Jerusalem’s beloved unnamed city exist for the same reason they exist in our society: because they are needed. They fill voids that seekers yearn to fill, and they allow people to find communities and connections that they might not find in a secular society. In the city we have actors like Ziang and the

⁵⁷ Christiansen, ‘The Truth of the Word, the Falsity of the Image’, 147.

⁵⁸ This also leads to a tormented television host having to be talked down from the roof after Spider criticizes her recipes.

⁵⁹ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 113.

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

Transients, who physically change themselves to have that connection with others. It is a cold and lonely society, but can we say that ours is any different?

NRMs including Peoples Temple and Aum Shinrikyo existed because adherents believe in the message being communicated to the world from the spiritual heart of the group, but also because they seek belonging to something greater. If some of the NRMs that seekers find end in violence and tragedy, that is not the fault of the seekers. Characters like Ziang, or the man interested in sacred trepanning, are looking for ideas to fulfill them or ideologies that will double as the answers that they are seeking. Seekers have been and will continue to be a constant fixture in the religious world, and, through their searching, so too will NRMs. All it takes is one person to be like Spider and search for truth, and through that truth help those seekers that are hurting or attracted to a movement that might do them harm. Using a futuristic text such as *Transmetropolitan* does not so much give us exact knowledge of the future, but it most definitely allows society to take stock of what exists around them, and just possibly effect change for the future.

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

References

- Allred, William James. 'Sublime Beauty & Horrible Fucking Things - The Finer Worlds of Warren Ellis'. Dissertation, Doctor of Philosophy, University of Arkansas, 2011.
- Bainbridge, William Sims and Rodney Stark. 'Cult Formation: Three Compatible Models'. *Sociological Analysis* 40, no. 4 (1979): 283–95.
- Barkun, Michael. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006.
- Bromley, David G. 'Categorizing Religious Organizations: In Search of a Theoretically Meaningful Strategy'. In *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements: Volume II*, edited by James R. Lewis and Inga Tøllefsen, 17-24. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Christiansen, Steen. 'The Truth of the Word, the Falsity of the Image: Transmetropolitan's Critique of the Society of the Spectacle'. *Word & Image Interactions* 6, no. 1 (1009):147–58.
- Ellis, Warren. 'Issue #18 | The Old Bastard's Manifesto'. *Comic Book Resources*. Published 31 March 2000. <https://www.cbr.com/issue-18-10/>.
- _____. *Hellblazer: Haunted*. Burbank: DC Comics, 2003.
- _____. *Supergod*. Rantoul: Avatar, 2011.
- _____. *Cunning Plans: Talks by Warren Ellis*. SUMMON Books, 2015.
- Ellis, Warren and Stuart Immonen. *Nextwave, Agents of H.A.T.E.: Ultimate Collection*. New York: Marvel, 2010.
- Ellis, Warren and Darick Robertson. *Transmetropolitan: Back on the Street*. Burbank: DC Comics, 2012.
- Finke, Roger and Laurence R. Iannaccone. 'Supply-Side Explanations for Religious Change'. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 527, no. 1 (1993): 27–30.
- Hall, John R., Philip Daniel Schuyler and Sylvaine Trinh. *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements, and Violence in North America, Europe, and Japan*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Haug, Hallvard. 'The Alchemical Singularity: Magic and Technology in Warren Ellis's Injection'. *Foundation* 48, no. 132 (2019): 22–36.
- Knight, Mark. *An Introduction to Religion and Literature*. London: Bloomsbury, 2009.
- Lewis, James R. 'Seekers and Subcultures'. In *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements: Volume II*, edited by James R. Lewis and Inga Tøllefsen, 60-71. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- McFarland, H. Neill. *The Rush Hour of the Gods: A Study of New Religious Movements in Japan*. New York: Macmillan, 1967.
- Melton, J. Gordon. 'Perspective: New New Religions: Revisiting a Concept'. *Nova Religio* 10, no. 4 (2007): 103–12.
- Moore, Rebecca. 'Narratives of Persecution, Suffering, and Martyrdom: Violence in Peoples Temple and Jonestown'. In *Violence and New Religious Movements*, edited by James R. Lewis, 95-112. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Murakami, Haruki, Alfred Birnbaum and J. Philip Gabriel. *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche*. New York: Vintage, 2003.
- Plate, S. Brent. *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2017.
- Reader, Ian. 2000. *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan: The Case of Aum Shinrikyō*. London: Curzon, 2000.

Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

- Richardson, James T. 'Definitions of Cult: From Sociological-Technical to Popular-Negative'. *Review of Religious Research* 34, no. 4 (1993): 348–59.
- Smith, Adam X. 'Vertigo Resurrected #1: Shoot - A Retrospective On Hard Truths'. *Bleeding Cool News and Rumors*, published 31 July 2014. <https://www.bleedingcool.com/2014/07/31/vertigo-resurrected-1-shoot-a-retrospective-on-hard-truths/>.
- Stark, Rodney. *The Triumph of Faith: Why the World Is More Religious than Ever*. Wilmington: ISI Books, 2015.