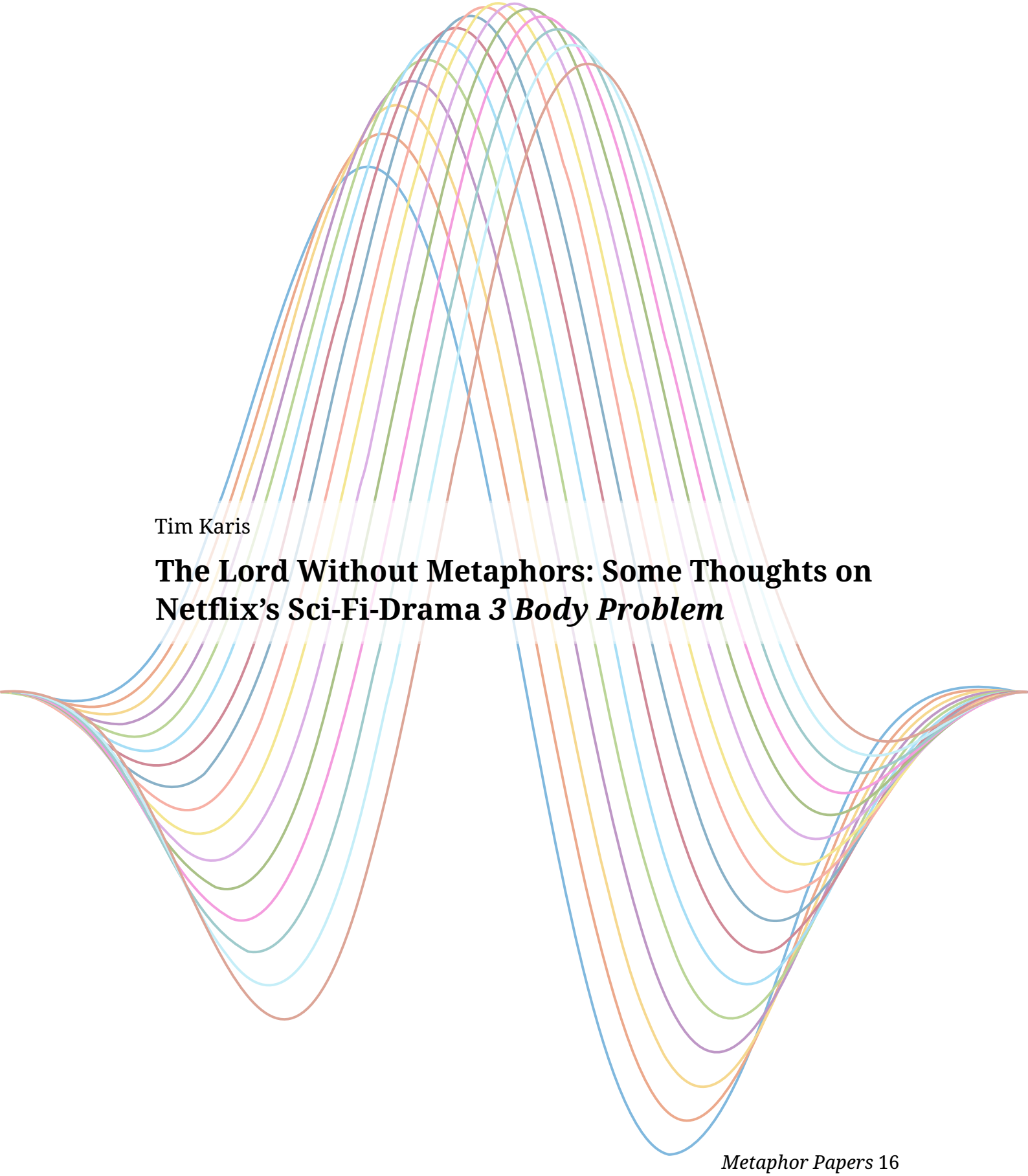

Tim Karis

The Lord Without Metaphors: Some Thoughts on Netflix's Sci-Fi-Drama *3 Body Problem*

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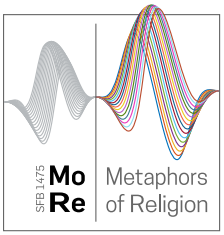

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Metaphor Papers 16 (2025)

The Lord Without Metaphors: Some Thoughts on Netflix's Sci-Fi-Drama *3 Body Problem*

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ABSTRACT This paper offers a preliminary discussion of Netflix's *3 Body Problem*, focusing on the series' exploration of metaphor and transcendent beings. The series juxtaposes humanity's reliance on metaphorical language with the alien San-Ti civilization's proclaimed rejection of figurative constructs. This contrast highlights a central paradox: while the San-Ti assert a disdain for metaphors, their actions and communication inevitably rely on figurative language. Ultimately, in the context of the Collaborative Research Center (CRC) "Metaphors of Religion," *3 Body Problem* can be read as an allegory for the history of religions and humanity's inescapable reliance on metaphor to articulate the transcendent.

KEYWORDS metaphor, science fiction, China, Netflix, history of religions

One of the most-watched series on Netflix in 2024 was the science fiction drama *3 Body Problem*. It was developed as a TV series in the U.S. but is based on a book series by Chinese author Liu Cixin. A lot can be said about this series, from Liu's position towards the Chinese government (which is pragmatic to the point of bigotry),[1] via Chinese criticism of Netflix' Westernization of the story (Davidson 2024), to high-profile fans of the series, ranging from Mark Zuckerberg to Barack Obama.[2] Even when only focusing on aspects that are relevant in a religious studies context, the series is so rich in associations, allusions, and references that not everything can be covered here—especially when it comes to the large repertoire of references related to Buddhism and the Chinese religious field more broadly. What I will focus on, naturally, is what the series has to offer for a discussion on religion and metaphor. [1]

What follows is not a comprehensive or methodologically rigorous analysis of the series. I have not conducted an in-depth content analysis nor engaged in interviews [2]

1 Most notably, in an interview with *The New Yorker*, Liu Cixin has shown support for Chinese mass internment of Muslim Uighurs and went on to state, "Here's the truth: if you were to become the President of China tomorrow, you would find that you had no other choice than to do exactly as he has done" (Fan 2019).

2 Obama's public praise for the book has prompted the series producers to invite him for a guest spot in the series, which he, sadly but probably wisely, refused (Reinelt 2024).

with the producers or audience members. While such an approach could yield deeper insights, the aim of this paper is to suggest potential avenues for further exploration. Most importantly, my objective is to use the series as a springboard to delve deeper into the central thesis of our CRC: the foundational role of metaphor in religious meaning-making.

The Premise

The series' premise is as easily explained as it is fantastic—this is a sci-fi series, after all. It begins, oddly enough, with the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The year is 1966. In a show trial, a Chinese physicist professor is forced to renounce his belief in Einstein's theory of relativity—nothing can be relative in Mao's China. When he refuses, he is beaten to death as the crowd cheers. Tragically, in the crowd, the physicist's daughter, Ye Wenjie, one of the series' main characters, witnesses her father's death. A physicist herself, she is then arrested and forced to work in a penal colony in Inner Mongolia. There, as soon she finds out, the Chinese government has set up a secret operation which is, as it happens, in need of a physicist. As the series progresses, we learn that the aim of this secret operation is to send out radio signals into outer space in search of extraterrestrial civilisations. Ye Wenjie, gifted as she is, manages to amplify the signal by a multitude, which should, as is the hope of the government, give the Chinese the upper hand in the race for alien contact (the Soviets and Americans have similar operations, to be sure). [3]

Of course, at long last, the signal is picked up. And the alien response, dramatically, presents Ye Wenjie with a choice: Rather than declaring interstellar war and asking for directions, the alien respondent introduces themselves as a pacifist. They declare that humanity was lucky that they, of all alien people, picked up the signal first. Since, as they explain, would anyone else hear of Earth's existence, the aliens would certainly be on their way to take it over. Hence, they say to the humans—and only Ye Wenjie can read this in her secret compound in Inner Mongolia—do not ever send a signal out again and do not respond to this message. Because then, someone else will see it, and humanity is doomed. This is probably one of the most "Wow" moments in sci-fi history since Darth Vader declared fatherhood to Luke Skywalker. And it becomes even more dramatic when Ye Wenjie, thinking back at the brutal murder of her father, makes the lone decision to respond. "Come," she writes, "We cannot save ourselves." [4]

A New Religious Movement

The religious overtones are easy to spot. Seeking contact with an invisible, transcendent entity, as if in prayer, reaching a good Samaritan ready to help only out of the pure goodness of their heart, but then rejecting this in the hope of some more radical form of salvation, even at the price of the apocalypse. [5]

In the series, the story of Ye Wenjie in the 1960s is constantly juxtaposed with another storyline set in the present day. Here, the events of the 1960s and their repercussions become known bit by bit. As we learn, Ye Wenjie has co-founded an organisation that very much resembles a New Religious Movement based on the expectation that salvation is soon to come and the small group of believers in said coming is sure to be rewarded. "Soon," however, is a relative term because, as we learn, the alien ship takes 400 years to travel to Earth. The movement's self-understanding, thus, is to prepare the welcome event, as it were, over generations. [6]

One prominent figure in this movement, Mike Evans, an American who first met Ye Wenjie in the 1960s and later fathered her daughter, has the special privilege of being able to communicate directly with the aliens (the physics of this are explained at one point, whether convincingly or not is beyond this author's expertise). Strikingly, when Evans addresses what we are apparently supposed to understand as an amalgamated presence of the alien civilisation, not as a single-person ambassador, he uses the term "My Lord." How this came to be, i.e., whether this was a form of address demanded by the aliens or tendered by the humans, is not revealed. In any case, against the backdrop of the religioid movement in existence, we are invited to read this as a form of religious devotion rather than a simple master-servant relationship. [7]

A lot could be said about these communications. For example, quite interestingly, speaking to the aliens (collectively known as the "San-Ti") works via an old microphone and loudspeaker that look like they came straight from a 1940s radio station. This is in line with a tendency in religion to attach special meaning to legacy media. In a catholic church service, e.g., it would probably be easier to read the gospel from an iPad rather than an old, heavy, and artfully crafted book, but this is not often done. Old media, it seems, have a large potential to be charged with religious meaning (Karis 2020, 24). Also, it is interesting to note that "the Lord" speaks with a female voice. This is not easy to interpret, but at least to some extent, it plays with viewer expectations that "the Lord," per the occidental tradition, ought to be male.[3] In addition, it is reminiscent of smart speaker devices equipped with the likes of Amazon's "Alexa" or Apple's "Siri" that come with female voices by default. In a way, this does help with giving the correspondence between human and alien an artificial flair, i.e., it helps with getting across that we are not witnessing a conversation between two persons but between a person and an abstract entity. [8]

Metaphors!

For our CRC, without a doubt, the series gets most interesting in episode 4. Here, we once again witness a conversation between Mike Evans and his "Lord." But rather than giving the San-Ti an update on the status of events (a special intelligence force has meanwhile gotten wind of the movement and is on Evans' heels), he reads to them from a book of [9]

3 Casting the Christian God as a female has of course been done before in US-filmmaking—and never more convincingly than in the 1999 fantasy comedy "Dogma," in which God is played by the singer/songwriter Alanis Morrisette.

fairy tales. It is Little Red Riding Hood. At one point, the "Lord" informs Evans that they do not understand the story and ask why the girl, in the story, remains in the house when the wolf intends to eat her. Evans explains that the wolf pretends to be the grandmother. This, now, is a concept entirely alien to the alien. As Evans finds out in this moment, deception, lying, communicating something that one knows to be false is unheard of in alien land. When the "Lord" goes on to demand to speak to the wolf, Evans further learns that storytelling does not exist for the San-Ti. After some confusion, the "Lord" finally states, as if in summary, "So the story," meaning Little Red Riding Hood, "it is a lie about a liar?" Evans smiles and confirms this. A moment earlier, he tried to explain to the aliens how deception is a common thing in the human world by talking about the intelligence force following them: "These pests who are tracking us," he says, "they're trying to hide their intentions, because, well, otherwise, they couldn't get to us." When the "Lord" declares in response that "pests" are destructive insects rather than human beings, Evans shakes his head in disbelief and says: "I was using a metaphor."

[10] It would be beside the point to question whether the series' portrayal of an alien civilization devoid of metaphors and stories is entirely convincing. While our own civilization's development is deeply entwined with storytelling and metaphor, this should not prevent us from accepting that, in this fictional world, the San-Ti have achieved near-light-speed travel without relying on narrative or metaphorical communication.

[11] However, quite interestingly, the San-Ti are not consistently presented as metaphor-free and storyless. Long before the conversation with Evans about Little Red Riding Hood, we learn that the aliens have themselves created a story-based computer game with the aim (among less friendly ones) to explain the reasons for leaving their home planet to Humanity.[4] Second, when the aliens turn against the humans (including the aliens' followers) because of their disgust with this metaphor-loving species,[5] they menacingly send a message to all TV screens, computers and smartphones on Earth. The message, paradoxically, is itself a metaphor: YOU ARE BUGS. Strikingly, thus, while the series suggests the existence of a civilisation without metaphors, it fails to imagine the actions of said civilisation without reverting to metaphors. As metaphor theory has claimed, at least since Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors are impossible to escape from.

4 This reason ties directly to the series' title: the three-body problem, a concept in classical mechanics, involves predicting the motion of three celestial bodies (such as stars, planets, or moons) under the influence of their mutual gravitational attraction—a prediction widely considered impossible. In the series, the San-Ti civilization inhabits a planet caught in the gravitational pull of three suns, resulting in unpredictable and chaotic events such as floods, droughts, and even civilizational collapse. While this scenario could be interpreted as a metaphor for our own climate crisis, it also powerfully reflects the concept of "ultimate contingency" as defined in the CRC: the condition that prompts the emergence of religion, which seeks to manage such contingency through the transcendence/immanence distinction (for more details, see Krech, Karis, and Elwert 2023, "Our Working Definition of Religion"). The San-Ti's answer to this contingency, however, is not to seek refuge in the transcendent realm, but in a different, altogether immanent world: Earth.

5 In one scene, this turn of events is represented in the series in the form a religious metaphor *par excellence*. When two of the main characters, physicist Augustina Salazar and intelligence officer Clarence Shi find out that the aliens have stopped working together with their human followers, Shi says, in a reversal of Psalm 23, "I think the Lord's stopped protecting his flock."

The Series and Our CRC

However, what is most important for our discussion on religion and metaphor is that, in the series, the alien, transcendent entity is imagined as metaphor-free whereas Humanity is presented as a civilisation of metaphors[6] and *that* is what the transcendent cannot accept. Humanity, once identified as metaphor lovers, shall, in the eyes of the aliens, be wiped out. [12]

It was probably not intended as such, but the series can, in a way, be read as an allegory to the history of religions. As we have explained in more detail elsewhere (cf. Krech, Karis, and Elwert 2023), religions depend on metaphors because they cannot talk directly about the transcendent. Hence, the ways in which humans talk about God are, by definition, inadequate. Human words about God—religious language—it may be apropos, it may be consensual, it may even itself be sanctified. But it can never actually describe the thing itself. For this reason, religious language is ultimately always controversial, always dynamic, and always evolving. To put it differently, at the heart of a religious conflict, i.e., a conflict not reformatted by other societal spheres, most notably politics, there is one party saying to the other, "God (or the heavens, the way, the ancestors etc.) does not like your metaphors." What God does not like, to be sure, humans cannot accept. And yet, however severe the conflict and radical the changes it may bring about, religious metaphors can only ever be replaced by other religious metaphors, creating the infinite continuum we call the history of religions. [13]

In the Netflix series, the San-Ti are coming to Earth to destroy Humanity and its metaphors. If we read this in light of the allegory just described, this is the same as God coming to Earth to end religion. Luckily, we do not have to wait 400 years to find out whether this will happen—season 2 of the series is expected to come in 2026. [14]

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6 This topos—metaphors are what makes us Human—seems to be a common trait in recent science fiction. For example, in the 2021 German film "Ich bin Dein Mensch" (the international title is "I'm Your Man," but it literally translates to "I am your Human"), a researcher in Ancient Near Eastern History analyses old Sumerian cuneiforms to see if such early examples of human writing already contain metaphors. This storyline is juxtaposed with another one in which the researcher agrees to take part in an experiment to live together with a humanoid robot. The question of what humans are in the age of AI is front and center in this film and metaphor, it seems, is one of the answers.

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