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Aliens as Manifestations of Altered Humanity: An Alternate Ideological Interpretation

Abstract: The starting point and case study of this paper is the attempt to explain the role of the alien species in the movie *Arrival*. Using the Marxist concept of *alienation* as the basis of the formation of ideological imagination in science fiction movies, the purpose of this investigation is to show how the "works of alienation" operate in multiple ways in cinema. The author considers science fiction cinematic representations as forms of *extreme alienation*, allowed not only by the mechanism of *alienation* in late capitalism, but also the *alienation of representations*.
Keywords: Cinema; Denegation; Alienation; Defamiliarization; Alterity; *Ostranenie*; *Arrival*; Myths; Ideological Interpretation; Marx; Lacan; Althusser.

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When watching science fiction movies, we are abstracted from reality. The first impression is most often that the visual and narrative experience we are sharing with other viewers disconnects us from anything we know in society, that it alienates us from any experience we can have as human beings. Clearly, science fiction literature, films and more recently video-games take us to outer-worlds that appear to be unlike Earth. We travel to planets populated with creatures that seem to have qualities that are external to humanity, we encounter strange species that are completely non-human, sometimes even inorganic or robotic. Hundreds or even thousands of years in the future, the behavior of aliens are contradictions of human evolution and understanding. A quick and superficial evaluation might even convince the viewers that sci-fi narratives and visuals are about something else than "real world" problems, describing social systems that do not exist, modes of interaction that are outside our realm of senses and, most commonly, representations we cannot recognize or relate with. This sensation is

accentuated by the technologies of digital cinema, where computer generated images promoted by the contemporary film industry have resulted with some of the most spectacular manifestation of alien worlds and beings.

The cinematic experience provided by science fiction narratives is fundamentally based on these uncanny encounters. As aliens are unnatural biologically, culturally or visually, their lack of familiarity is attractive. A recent remarkable example is *Arrival* (2016), Denis Villeneuve's movie about a strange species of aliens, with an unknown behavior, technology and biology, who interact with a stupefied humanity. These new lifeforms, identified as heptapods, initially appear as seven-limbed creatures, looking at first as if they were a human hand combined with a jellyfish. Using a writing that nobody understands, they communicate by emitting sounds that humans cannot replicate, and their habitat breaks with all the laws of known physics. These elongated oval alien spacecrafts, defying the laws of physics, are negations of our basic understanding of gravity. There is no up or down and nothing appears to function normally, starting with the material of the vessel which remains unknown to the interior atmosphere which is never explained. Villeneuve's cinematic vision, based on Ted Chiang's novella, further elaborates on the central premise proposed by "Story of Your Life". The alien encounters, which requires humans to learn a new language, leads to the transformation of humanity, indicating that the explorations of our own limitations can generate an alteration of our nature. While the heptapods do not share our linear temporality, neither do they communicate in

our familiar chains of significations. By learning the complex language of these seven-limbed creatures, living in a gaseous atmosphere and predisposed to play global guessing games, the essence of the human mind and of human society changed. Notwithstanding the primitive application of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, by learning a new way to communicate, acquiring a language that is nothing like anything we know, one simultaneously written and acoustic, both graphic and non-linear, the qualities of humanity are improved. These prescient beings, traveling to Earth in order to provide humanity with a "gift", are also foreseeing that 3000 years from now human-kind will provide them with help, so that they could survive a future cataclysm. During this process, human relationships are disclosed to be unstable, parallel to the fluidity of visual storytelling. With the movie questioning the nature of humanity, of who we are and what the nature of our reality is, the director is playing with some of the most important cinematic devices, like the rules of causality, temporal continuity and character identity. Just as nothing is familiar about this alien civilization, the movie provides a pleasurable non-familiar experience.

This is an uncanny displacement which exceeds the expectations of the spectators. Explained by many critics as an example of denaturalization and even of "cognitive defamiliarization", the procedure used by Villeneuve is in fact a fundamental device of many science fiction narratives[1]. As our understanding of time and space is contradicted, and by the dissolution of formal narrative structures, coupled with the contradiction of visual presuppositions, the spectators are fascinated and

their experience is pleasurable. This would explain why many sci-fi universes are populated with aliens who are simultaneously utterly strange and perfectly rational, manifestations of irrational fears and yet scientifically reasonable. While the neoformalist film theory explains defamiliarization only as a cinematic device, claiming that uncommon representations are appealing because they are in contrast with our familiar experience provided by other similar stories and forms of expression[2], further clarifications are needed. Basically, the unfamiliar, which produces a predictable attraction by transforming the otherwise unremarkable visuals (for example the heptapods in *Arrival* are an overgrown version of the facehuggers from *Alien*), is not automatically interesting and nor does any startling new representation from any science fiction movies provide a completely displaced experience.

In fact, at a closer look, almost all aliens are manifestations of everything that is wrong with humanity, illustrations of what happens when we lose contact with our human nature. Ultimately, any human alienated from humanity becomes the most perfect alien.

The Alienation Effect and the *Unheimlich*

Many art forms have explored the principle of alienation, which produces amazing results. Best known from *theater practice* as the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* (or V-effect)[3], dramaturgically it can be connected to the notion of making the familiar strange in order to generate a better social understanding. The German playwright and director found

the resources of this effect in many ancient practices, from the masks used in primitive rituals to the Greek chorus. More importantly, acknowledging the influence of dialectical materialism in developing his own perspective about the role of alienation in art, Brecht described the appearance of the unexpected in representations as the main source of insights for the spectator. Surprising manifestations are in fact making visible the "imperfections of society": that which seems unfamiliar, while remaining recognizable, allows the spectator to escape from the grip of society rules, and it becomes a form of liberation.

The groundwork for defining this concept was previously put together by Viktor Shklovsky, who coined the term "ostranenie" as a basic artistic device used in literature[4]. The term proposed by the founder of Russian formalism in "Art as Device", his classical work explaining Tolstoy's literary devices, was translated in many versions: as *estrangement*, *defamiliarization* or simply "making strange". In fact, "ostranenie" literally means alienation, it is a method, a technique or a device that the Soviet formalist considered to be generally applicable to any work of art. Basically when that which we have previously experienced, which we know and recognize, becomes unrecognizable as form and as content[5], it generates aesthetic pleasure.

As noted before, the neoformalist film theory approach embraced the concept as "defamiliarization", transforming it into a feature of artistic differentiation, where originality is generated by the unfamiliar[6]. This definition, however, empties the notion of alienation of all its ideological functions. When used to explain the poetics of cinema, defamiliarization functional and

relevant, but also removed from the political consequences of estrangement. Identifying "defamiliarization" as just a figure of style, a procedure that can make a movie more attractive, deprives this function of any external relevance, one that could open significations beyond the contradiction of conventional norms. It would be too simplistic to understand the effect of "making something strange" as eliciting an immediate and mechanical reaction. In that case any aspiring artist could readily use this easy instrument to simply "estrange" any contents and to generate formal "complications" that would then produce masterful aesthetic products.

Returning to our initial science fiction narrative example, in *Arrival* there are several elements illustrating how an estranged and defamiliarized cinematic experience can become appealing. The presence of *ostranenie* as a device, one that induces a functional transformation of usual storytelling, is explicit with the flashbacks "disguised" as part of the natural and linear development of the plot. Then we have the "defamiliarizing" of the narration from the formal structures, as Villeneuve's movie appears to be innovative when it comes to the structured order in cinematic discourse. Another level of estrangement is displayed by the transformations in visual representations and imaginary formations, since the presence of the unnatural goes beyond the basic storytelling functions and formal devices.

As explained by Sigmund Freud in his classical introduction to the notion of "Unheimlich"[7], unnatural images are often indicative for the presence of deeper meanings. In the functions of our subconscious mind there is a complex process in which the unnatural presents itself as if it was withdrawn from any possible explanation. The appearance of bizarre manifestations and of any strange images becomes an indication for the presence of concealed meanings. And, just as in our subconscious brain the uncanny makes the familiar (*heimlich*) appear to be unfamiliar (*Unheimlich*) in order to dissimulate a painful or traumatic reality, in cinema the "defamiliarized" representations are displaying similar qualities. In fact, Freud identifies an even deeper function of the "Unheimlich", suggesting that it is a manifestation of the "omnipotence of thoughts", a mechanism based on strange linkages which allow our mental activities to re-activate old significations. As Freud notes, the uncanny is "nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old"[8], resulted from the same process of estrangement which we discuss here.

When it comes to analyzing science fiction narrations, the traditional approach is frequently based on the identification of alien creatures with social issues. Considering that any extraterrestrial life form can be an allegory pertaining to particular political issues, such connections lead to easily demonstrated "defamiliarizations". Some of them are present in *Arrival*, for example the heptapods, which are a trans-spatial species, driven by the political goal to unite humanity and to end national divisions and even ethnic discord between humans, are conveyors of the values of globalization. The political myth behind the story can be interpreted as an expansion of the "United Nations" political project, with all the countries of our planet joined together in a single body in order to solve the problems of humanity after WWII. The "mystery" of

these alien messages, when linked to such political allegories, is no longer complex, its transparent functions are easily uncovered.

Alienated Methodological Approaches

In the evolution of the sci–fi genre we can find many similar illustrations, one of the best being provided by the recurrent trope of the alien invasion, whether by extraterrestrial parasite infection, eating the brains of middle-class Americans, or the physical onslaught of any foreign looking species. Extensively analyzed, a movie like Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), which was an adaptation of Jack Finney' novel, can be decoded as subtextual reference to the contagious nature of global communism. In this production of the 50s, as an expression of the political tensions of the Cold War period, we can interpret the substitution of the viral infection by extraterrestrial seeds, which can transform a "normal" human and replace it with a hidden duplicate, with its obvious political reference. Thus, an association between the alien viral invasion and the threat of communist ideas is both possible and justifiable. The social and political anxieties of that time, as pointed out by authors like Bernice Murphy[9], account for the transformation of the specter of Communism into narrative materials. Such renditions of social anxiety minimize the ideological dimensions as a result. In the age of McCarthyism, when the idea that Communists were "hiding" among regular Americans, taking jobs in important positions only to spread the noxious values of the radical Left and spying on behalf of the Soviet Union, such cinematic representations

were almost "natural". With the Red Scare and the fear of anti-American propaganda allowing undemocratic behaviors, the creation of un-natural alien creatures which were "spreading" disease in society shows on only part of the mechanism.

Another subset of interpretations avoids any political explanations altogether, considering that such creatures as limited to social realities. Presented as threats to the "American way of life", the alien creatures are no longer carriers of ideological significations. A classic example is provided by productions like *ET: The Extraterrestrial* (1982), which Douglas Kellner[10] and other critics describe as expressions of social tensions, forms of criticism against middle-class conformity, suburban life and its insecurities. Once again, *Arrival* also displays the traits of such social instabilities. While global cooperation is orchestrated by the presence of the prescient heptapods, the marital status of the two main characters is far from successful. The main hero of the movie is a linguist who is a single mother, raising a child by herself and having a career. Although she already knows that her unborn child will die, she takes a hard decision to keep the baby. Yet because she tells the father about this, he abandons them. We can read into this the paradoxes of precognition, but we cannot avoid decoding the representation of frail masculinity. The fact that the global consensus is mirrored negatively in the lack of harmony within the American family – which seems to be an acceptable price to pay for universal consonance – is also relevant. Another possible interpretation is to see the alien visitors as parables[11], extrapolations of real situations. More than that, they can function as "parabolas" for

social division[12], that is meaningful formulations with unexpected trajectories, often separated from the specific issues they are recounting. Thus, the aliens are again "displaced" figures, manifestations of "alienness" in the context of human inabilities.

Another set of methodological presuppositions that need to be addressed now are interpreting the genre-specific creatures as subtextual references, which results in the ideological neutrality of aliens. As many authors have claimed before, science fiction narratives are simply expressions of the world-views of each individual author. Science fiction directors and writers are obviously infusing their narratives with their own predispositions, thus making the characters in the respective movies manifestations of particular political options, such as conservatism or liberalism. Robert Heinlein's works are often presented as an illustration for how the political realities are reprocessed through the vision of the author, who is coding into the storytelling his own vision about social policies[13], which makes them less ideological and more related to political ideas.

In an even broader neutralization of ideological meanings, the discourse of science fiction narrations is sometimes described as an unavoidable bi-product of modernity. The narratives and characters are directly linked with the discoveries of industrial society; thus, the science fiction style or literary devices are simply integrating scientific discourses into a unifying "science imagination", consequently having no particular ideological purpose. The logical result is that the sci-fi genre has generated an "ideology" of its own, one that opened the way to the "postmodern fantastic"[14]. Providing the grand examples of the works of Verne or Wells, with their sensationalist "scientification" of literature and glorification of the outcomes of the Industrial Revolution, the entire literary genre (which grew into a fully-fledged cinematic genre) is understood to be an expression of a "realistic ireality"[15], one shaped mainly by practical conditions. The poetics of science fiction is thus just a result of a cognitive estrangement, an aesthetic paradigm producing an "alternative" (and imaginative) universe, simply divergent from the empirical reality of the authors[16].

My suggestion is that all these perspectives, which are either using the notion of alienation as a formal device, or a neutralized social or political parable, are hideaways for the primal ideological meaning of representing aliens.

Alienation versus Alien Nation

Analyzing ideological meanings is often confused by many film researchers as a compulsory application of Marxist terminology, where the evaluation must be performed through various basic concepts borrowed from Marx. This is a form of criticism that can be called "limited" Marxist interpretation. This approach is illustrated by Daniel Conway's use of the concept of alienation by expanding some Marxist notions on particular cinematic manifestations[17]. Using extremely relevant examples from the *Alien* franchise, the author properly connects alienation and the representations of capitalism. Capitalist society, where the workers are constrained into "alienated labor", cultivates radical forms of alien behavior. As a basic function, alienation can be explored at the level of economic and production relationships,

since the "state of alienation" takes shape in any capitalist exploitation. Capitalism, as argued by Marxist theory, allows human beings to become *something else* when we are removed from the value created through our work. This is a correct understanding of Marxist theory, and many cinematic examples, including the Weyland-Yutani Corporation in the Alien franchise, can be used as an illustration for capitalist alienation. Competition is alienating us from other human beings, greed alienates us from our humanity, and estranged labor relations are alienating us from the objects we produce and consume. However, this form of criticism ignores that such movies also reinforce the idea that capitalism will still be the dominant economic force even in the distant future, thus undermining the outcome of the theory advanced by Marx.

While our lives are alienated at the economic level, in our social interactions, we are also estranged from our nature. This is why a more important force of alienation must be discussed, one which resides in the very illusions that are alienating us from our conscience, our understanding of past, present and future humanity. As explained by Marx himself, when showing that Hegel's use of alienation (as *Entäußerung*) is synonymous with estrangement (*Entfremdung*), our ideas about reality are forms of alienated thinking[18]. In terms of science fiction representations, this makes relevant the question if alien worlds and creatures can be interpreted only as externalized manifestations of capitalist alienation or they are profound expressions of capitalist illusionistic abilities.

In order to better understand the link between ideological fantasies and the process of creating alien worlds, we must return to the classical Marxist definitions of alienation. The basic understanding that Marx evoked when elaborating the concept of alienation was construed upon his definition of the specificity of the human species, the need to understand the "essence" of mankind (*Gattungswesen*) in relationship with other animals (and now including aliens). While accepting the explanations provided by István Mészáros[19], who incontestably argued that alienation is a polymorphous concept in Marxist theory, the key assumption for my current reasoning is that alienation is first and foremost based on the notion of human nature (*das Menschliche Wessen*). While the Hungarian disciple of Georg Lukács provides a wider map of the evolution of this concept, since alienation was a key question for modern philosophical debates, deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian mind-frame[20], we must narrow the usage of the term. In as much as Marxist political-economic thinking focuses mostly on the alienability in the production processes, its fundamental meaning resides in the conceptualization of a broader *alienability*, one that pervades every aspect of our existence. And, although alienation takes shape in many forms, it is rooted in the fictitious self-image we construct about ourselves and in the fake projections and false representations about the world that we are enjoying – sometimes overlapping with ideology. Even more important for Marx was a more pernicious form of alienation, related to the loss of self-consciousnesses.

At a first level any alienation is linked with the primordial alteration produced by the removal of man from nature. This process ends with the more complex forms of estrangement, taking place in an

accelerated way in contemporary society, which are ultimate alienations, separating us from our appurtenance to the human species. Inside this process, several "alienations" take shape – they are economic, made possible by labor activities, social estrangements, generating emotional alienations from other human beings in society. Looking back in time, Marx observed that the "essence" of humanity was changed by our social determinations, which shows that we are not defined by the individualistic accumulation of wealth, specific to contemporary society, nor are we motivated by greed, as capitalism tries to convince us. We are not altruistic creatures, nor is our nature a sort of primitive paradise desiring to return to nature. We are not competitive creatures, as we are compelled to believe by contemporary values, nor can we say that a communal existence based on magical psychic connections is normal. All these traits are results of an ideological construction, generated by the specific activities made possible by the environments we live in. All these specificities (egoism, exploitation) are consequences of the material conditions of life; as expounded in *The German Ideology*, there is a profound alienation of human beings in capitalist society, which results in an alteration of mankind, but it must be underlined that these logical connections took the German philosopher to another fundamental conclusion, now central to Marxist theory. The false conscience which governs our existence is the ultimate form of captivity.

In the "Preface" to *The German Ideology*, Marx points out that we are dominated by "phantoms in our brains", and these "chimeras" that control our minds are accumulating into a false consciousness, which

produces an alienated identity of humans in society, one that is induced by ideology and begins with self-estrangement[21]. The dialectical relationship functions as follows – if man is different from animals because of his conscience, then a mankind without conscience, a humanity alienated from the faculties of understanding its own essence, is radically disconnected from his own nature, that is, it becomes an alien. Next, these alienated individuals create forms of alienation in art and culture, with cinema being today the most important dimension of this process. Our problem is how can we make use of the material forms displayed by movies, with a particular interest for the representation of aliens and other science fiction elements which make visible in cinematic representations signification that are otherwise unaccounted or explained? One interpretative approach, practiced in the investigations of John Reider, is based on the practical notion that science fiction productions transpose and revivify particular ideologies, in this case colonialism and imperialism[22]. The invention of other worlds, as is the case with *Alien*, where colonial exploitation of space is presented as an inherent future of humanity, very often originates in an impulse to re-code human realities with alien signifiers. This can be done in a satirical way, by turning things upside down (as in the Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers*), or inside out (in the television series like *Alien Nation* or *Earth: Final Conflict*). The consequences of racism and colonial exploitation, racist oppression and segregation are transformed by these sci-fi narratives into estranged representations.

The 1988 *Alien Nation* movie, directed by Graham Baker, followed by the

homonymous TV series (together with several comic books and novelizations), presents a revelatory context. In a future Los Angeles humanity is compelled to accommodate an alien species, an enslaved race called The Newcomers. These alien refugees are not integrated into society, they are segregated and constrained to remain a classless minority in their new human world. As properly noted by Thomas Disch[23], it becomes obvious that the Newcomers share many characteristics of the migrant populations arriving in the United States and in other European countries from their former colonies. Similar narratives are re-currently used by Hollywood cinema, with one of the most recent examples provided by *Bright* (2017), a fantasy buddy cop film directed by David Ayer. In *Bright* humans co-exist in an alternate society with orcs, elves, and even fairies, which makes a parabolic reference to racial coexistence in the United States. At the formal level both of these movies use the familiar trope of the cop-buddy genre, where the ethnic couples from productions like *48 Hours* (1982) and *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), to *Lethal Weapon* (1987) or *Men in Black* (1997). Yet the fact that they use are extraterrestrials or fantasy orcs instead of one particular race makes the estrangement mechanism readily observable, and allows an examination from an ideological perspective.

Alienability here is extremely relevant because it makes clear its multiple functions. First there is the social allegory, where we can directly connect the transfer between African-Americans (or Latinos) and the Newcomers. These particular movies are addressing the issues of discrimination and other forms of contemporary

racial divisions. The second available connection is offered by the political connotations, that is, they project a desirable image of the United States as a melting pot of identities. This is true for the critical exposure of the defects of American society; for example, in *Alien Nation: Dark Horizon* there is a group of human "Purists" who want to annihilate the alien species, but eventually fail. Cultural theory criticism and other similar interpretations of alien films provide many examples for how the relationship between movie narratives and social contexts, between societal conflicts and cultural clashes is turned into cinematic contents[24].

But they also display the functioning of such contents which are very similar to what Marx called ideological "phantoms", representations that are clear consequences of material conditioning, resulting from identifiable social and political contexts, yet which are re-worked into alienated forms that are unrecognizable. The alien immigrants are manifest negations of alienation because they are projected as if they were transparent references, apparently having nothing to hide. The Tenctonese, named after their home planet Tencton (a direct metaphorical reference to tectonic rifts), are not merely a slave race. When we get more detailed information about their society, we discover that they are artificially designed to self-manage their slavery. Their society has multiple levels of self-control, from the lowest social group of the "Eenos", to the Overseers and the military commanders, as they are enslaved by their own kind. While some allusions are simplistic, as is the case of the wrist tattoos on their arms, an overt reference to Nazi practices in the slave camps, or their

control by means of a hallucinogenic nerve gas, similar to alcohol induced submission of the Native Americans, there are unexpected incongruities in the story which are not easily accounted for. First of all, these aliens are physiological impossibilities. While looking extremely human, they are genetically engineered beings, sharing insect-like characteristics. The fetuses of these extraterrestrials, when inside their pods, possess several incongruous traits, including a claw and an exoskeleton, suggesting that the Tenctonese evolved from an ancestor possessing these characteristics. They also display an apparently alienated sexuality, with the males being pregnant, and in order to produce offspring the species requires a reproductive triad. Also, while they eat raw animal flesh and have two hearts, they can be poisoned with milk, salt and even chocolate, all the foods that human medicine warns us about their harmful potential.

Under the disguise of the "alien" attributes, well hidden behind the strange transference, there is a "species-ness" that cannot be unavoidably human. As Marx criticized Hegel for his use of objectification and subjectification in a cultural way, here the estrangement of human beings from their natural state is a pure substitution. The quality of the alien species is that they are alienated representations, they operate as chimeras disconnected from their real significations.

The Monstrosity in Ideology as Myth-making

We are, as Althusser pointed out, "ideological animals"[25], it comes natural to us to guide our lives with the help of imaginary ideas, as they give us a sense of identity and belonging. Cinema only nurtures this ideological inference, gives materiality to this mental process by feeding us representations. While such predispositions have been developing for millennia, and it would be an exhaustive effort to trace the propagation of ideological illusions in Western myth-making, the proposition that the mechanisms previously used in myths and fairytales we have been transferring into various forms of media storytelling today is relevant. Science fiction cinema goes through the effort of obtaining the same outcomes as mythological representations, and just like ancient myths or folktales before, movies are illustrative for the propagation of inexistent realities, which are nonetheless carriers of the meanings created by a dominant system of thinking.

Ultimately this is why any ideological interpretation presents us with such difficult methodological problems. The imagination used to create the material manifestations of ideologies is always firmly enclosed in our mental predisposition for fabulatory explanations. This is why we must go beyond the simplistic definitions of ideology, understood as the universalization of the particular interests of a class (as is the case with capitalist ideology and the values of bourgeoisie like individualism or greed), or presented as a particular form of political thinking. While every myth or story-tale has an explicit ideological function, when it comes to their manifest meanings, they are also subjected to ideological illusionistic manifestations, always working at the latent level.

I find relevant the presupposition advanced by Marcel Detienne[26] when

discussing the "illusory nature" of myths linked to deceptive narrative techniques. Contesting the traditional perspective embraced by most myth historians, who saw myths as forms of disclosing original meanings, Detienne pointed to their function as "delusional tales of seduction"[27]. When understood as forms of deceptive instruments, myths can be then re-interpreted as carriers of ideological meanings. Their illusionistic ability to deceitfully reconstruct reality is not revealing, instead their deceitfulness is a path to meaning formations. Thus, if the fabrication of myths cannot be connected to any truthful recount of the past, we must ask what they are hiding within these faked narratives.

The argument here is that all myths are ideological constructions based on the mechanisms of chimeric image formation, which I described in a previous work[28]. Describing the chimerical functions of ideologies allows us to overcome the simple definition of ideology as a manifestation of the social and the political, and to connect it to the ideological formation of chimaeras in our subconscious. In classical Freudian psychoanalytic terminology, any form of polymorphous perversity is a chimera, that is a manifestation of the infantile inability to fixate on a particular pleasure stage, thus finding gratification in multiple forms, as they are immediately available. The infant, unable to understand the nature of his pleasure, gets emotional and even sexual reward from coalescing the oral, the anal and the sexual[29]. More relevantly, this heterogeneity of representations, as is the case with monstrous creatures, operates as a *signifying cloak*, a device that blurs the lack of qualities, to a level where it is no longer recognizable as infantile.

Some of the best illustrations for the contemporary use of chimeras are the trans-species monsters populating global cinema. A remarkable manifestation is Godzilla, with one of the most recent versions in the kaiju film *Godzilla: The Planet Eater* (2018), directed by Kōbun Shizuno and Hiroyuki Seshit. Now the monster is awakened by the inability of humanity to protect the planetary environment; thus, its rage is once more liberated to ravage Earth. The hero of the movie, Haruo Sakaki, is trying to bring back harmony between humanity and nature with humankind changing its behavior according to the rules of a future race, called the Hotua. The similarity with the story from *Arrival* is explicit – future creatures (the heptapods) show human-kind a better way of living which would then prevent their species from going extinct. The heptapods are chimeric creations not only because they combine the traits of multiple creatures and abilities, but also because they are acting like *ideological mutagens*, that is incongruous representations with polymorphous meanings.

Decoding Our Dreams of Ideological Beasts

In order to move further, another general misconception about ideology needs to be refuted. A broad definition states that ideological representations contain our "conceptions" about the world; this definition is based on the assumption that ideological meanings are constructed upon "real ideas". Once again, following Althusser's distinctions, we must reconsider the twofold nature of ideology. At the level of explicit functioning, ideology is definitely

representing the dominant system of ideas, generating representations that are accepted by a social group as their own. From a strictly positivist perspective, all societies have their own ideological set of manifestations that can be easily recognizable.

The simplest reading of such representations in cinema was provided by Stephen Heath's interpretation of *Jaws* (1975). Steven Spielberg's creature was decoded as a direct political reference to a particular context in U.S. history, which allows us to read *Jaws* as a "Watergate film". Film critics performing a semiotic analysis decipher what Heath called the "ideological operations" in cinema[30]. They are easily identifiable simply by connecting reality with cinema representations. Fredric Jameson also used *Jaws* as a proper cinematic example for explaining how political messages are transferred into symbolical meanings through monstrous representations[31]. The man-eating creature is for Jameson a *mythologem*, one as old as our culture, embodied in contemporary imagination by a white shark attacking innocent sunbathers in New England. Clearly the appearance of the beast threatening social harmony and quiet American existence is functioning as a metaphorical substitute for any and all alien presences.

Thus, the immediate menace of the mega-shark is considered a substitute for almost all cultural menaces against American society. Any historic anxieties about the Others that threaten the American way of life – whether it is the Communist conspiracy or the Third World invasion. These alien threats are transformed in the "American mythology" machine of Hollywood into allegorical substitutes. As pointed out by Jameson, each of the protagonists in the film are symbolical manifestations of American political ideas and social status – for example, illustrated by the class conflict between Brody, Hooper and Quint. In fact, the "polysemous function" of the shark is deeply ideological; according to Jameson, the beast is the ultimate Other, a representation of all the enemies of America because it can take either the meanings of war conflicts in the Pacific, or of the more pressing dangers represented by the Cuban Revolution[32].

This ideological reading of movies can lead to easily identifiable replacements. This is the case of the more radical feminist interpretations, as performed by Jane Caputi, who reads into the symbol of the great shark a projection of the "primordial female" danger[33]. The beast lurking beneath the waves can be Great Mother nature devouring her children, or a disguise for the dangerous nature of female sexuality. The fear of women, typical for patriarchal societies, is simply projected into the devouring mouth of the shark as a substitute for the *vagina dentata*. Of course, for other critics, the same animal is a representation of a totally different allegorical displacement, shifting from the dangerousness of "Puerto Rican muggers", to the less obvious threats of the sea creature as a sign of social paranoia. Peter Biskind[34] remarks a symbolical connotation between the representation of male genitalia and the shark, proving a negative argument to the feminist version and noting that the victims of the shark are oftentimes punished for their sexual liberty.

In each of these interpretations, the cinematic representation of the beast becomes a carrier of political or ideological meanings. Any monster in cinema can be

decoded as a semiotic carrier of the values dominant in capitalist society. The fluidity of meanings, on the other hand, is limiting the understanding of the formation of ideological meanings, restricted to particular encoding practices. The mechanism of transference is important, yet simplistic and it hides the more profound signifying mechanisms. While the political engagement of such meanings is explicit and direct, with the connection between the shark and capitalism making an obvious connection in language, where there is an inherent association with words like "loan shark", attributing the characteristics of a social class is insufficient.

This type of symptomatic sub-coding functions with every science fiction example. In *Arrival* we can describe the presence of a super-race that transcends space, time and nationalism as an embodiment of globalization. Teaching humanity a new form of communication, the heptapods are encouraging a connectivity that transcends ethnic boundaries and petty political divisions. Yet we must take into consideration another dimension, which is even more relevant for the mechanism of substitutions in ideological representations. Althusser, when trying to clarify the famous formula in *The German Ideology* which states that "*ideology has no history*", *observes that ideology is linked to nothingness. The French Marxist* makes an important leap and elaborates a negative formulation of ideology[35], working with the residues of reality and other nugatory manifestations. More importantly, because they are empty, ideological representations are often exactly the opposite of what they appear to represent. Not only must we treat them as basic illusions, lacking any consistency of their own, but we

must perform an interpretation showing how they are hiding meanings, not only how they reveal an immediate connection with political significations. In order to further explain this process, the French philosopher has connected ideology formation with the mechanisms of dreaming, claiming that ideologies are behaving like dreams. All ideological meanings are empty vessels, fabrications resulting from an "imaginary bricolage", accumulations comparable with dream formation.

Without going into all the details of psychoanalytical theories, the connection with ideological content formation is relevant, as is the distinction between conscious and unconscious ideological meanings. The connection between "ideological thinking" and dreams can be found in Freud's classical work *Die Traumdeutung*, first published in 1899. The dream-work is based on "representability", it is a process in which the materials of reality are arbitrarily connected, then transformed into images that appear to be coherent in our minds. While we are in a state of sleep, we cannot distinguish their illusory nature from reality. Only when we awake is the illusion dispelled, but then the problem is that when we awake, we also loose the full meaning of the dream content. When working with dreams we are always dealing with illusory components. This is why the material memory of a dream requires a specialized interpretative effort to make sense. More importantly, as Freud appropriately observed, there are two categories of dreams: manifest and latent. While some oneiric activities convey easily explainable meanings, others are coalescing into unintelligible contents, which Freud described as "latent content". So, on one hand, dreams

are mechanisms of understandable transformation, and also disguised and derivative projections, produced by the return of repressed representations. As Freud practiced his interpretation of dreams, through a complex process of transferences, the residues of daily activities (thoughts, images, ideas) are mutated into the dramatized content of dream-life, then they are decoded be re-establishing the absent relations[36]. Just like dreams, ideologies have a manifest (or explicit) form of representation, where we can clearly identify the real objects. On the other hand, dreams (and ideologies) are also illusions, with latent meanings extremely difficult to interpret. We must also describe the relationship dream-ideology beyond this dichotomy between the latent and the manifest.

Here understanding the issues of representability becomes essential, since the question of how the real is transformed into the symbolical remains problematic. When describing the process of unconscious formations, Freud considered that it functioned as *Vorstellung and Repräsentanz*, a representation of something else (which later Lacan united as *Vorstellung Repräsentanz*). The operation takes place in the scene of the mind and goes through a double transformation: idealization and repression. In his study on r*epression[37],* the father of psychoanalysis talks about a *primal repression*, which is relatively easily accessible, and another one that comes at a second stage, where the derivative materials are transformed by a deep repulsion, they result from a radical censorship of the conscious. This could be summed up in the classical psychoanalytical notion of displacement – the repressed returns in the form of representations that we understand

and also in forms that we cannot grasp. Similarly, in cinematic representations the links with real events, real people, authentic political situations are only the *primal* part of the ideological work. There is a secondary elaboration that prevents us from understanding the true meanings.

As explained by Lacan in his further elaboration of the Freudian concepts of representation and the represented, the unconscious is *marked by* the broken relationship between the desired object and the subjective projection, between sublimation and repression[38]. This was decoded by Lacan in an ample discussion on the Freudian "das Ding". Analyzing the relationship between appearance (the primal level of representation, dominated by the law of condensation) and dissimulation (or the deception created by the law of displacement) Lacan considered that we must add a third level, the point where the unconscious becomes a domain of Emptiness, a field where representations are generated out of nothing. This is the scene of "The Essential Other", where alterity is coalesced into a coherent discourse precisely because it is a state of absence. The Absent Other, abandoned through aversion and repulsion, is never effectively gone, as strangeness is simultaneously the identical, and the opposed, and the inverse. The Lacanian interpretation details how the desired "Thing" (*Das Ding*) is transformed into the *a-thing* (*la chose*), the "no-thing" as a manifestation of nothingness. This movement of the alteration by absence is simultaneously not there, while present in the epicenter of the unconscious, where the interdicted (*l'interdit*) becomes the inter-said (*entredit*), that which is between the represented and the representation[39].

This is a part of the signifier which always tries to escape representation and, as Althusser pointed out, when we deal with the issues of the ideological unconscious, there is a dimension that cannot be dealt with, a location of heterogeneity that wants to evade our understanding. We only know about the manifestations of the unconscious, we never have access to its "real" dimensions and in the same way we understand ideology, only by its symptomatic appearances. Otherwise they both remain hidden, well disguised into illusory symbols and allusive representations.

This is where the connection with the Marxist philosophy can re-opened, since this provides the necessary reframing for understanding the connection between ideology and the reversal of meanings. When Lacan[40] claimed that Marx was a "precursor of the mirror stage" by this the French psychoanalyst ascertained the predisposition of Marxist thinking to explain ideological meanings as non-meanings (in economy, politics or aesthetics). This effort to look beyond the identifiable significations does not mean that we are trying to make sense of any nonsense; in fact. Lacan redefines nonsense as the "pas-de-sens", a necessary step ("pas") in the process of discovering what is relevant even when meanings take an apparent nonsensical direction. The nonsense is ultimately the expression of truth. The more truthful the representations, the stranger and falser they appear to us[41].

If in dreams the expressions of absence, the appearances of the meaningless, the unintelligible allusions or the metaphors used to hide reality can be interpreted, what do we make of the nonsensical representations of "the Real" as other content formations? How do we resolve this apparent contradiction between the first Althusserian thesis, underlining that we must understand ideology as "a representation of the imaginary relationship of subjects to their real conditions of existence",[42] and the "negative thesis", disconnecting ideological allusions from their historical specificity? As formulated in another Althusserian interpretation[43], when ideology is manifested as non-sense, the proper methodological approach is to reconsider these ideological forms re-articulated into negative expressions, by adding a negative determination. The French philosopher reinterprets the Marxist definition of ideology as inverted representations of real social relations.

In my view this approach could provide what David Rodowick[44] suggested a couple of decades ago when he identified the "impasse" of film theory. While Rodowick describes the history of decoding ideological representations in cinema as dependent on the traditions of political modernism, he also draws a coherent map of film studies approaches. The practices of ideology critique and the reading of political ideas in movies[45] remain trapped in the opposition between formalist interpretations and content-based film analysis. When searching for meanings in cinematic representation film theorists either criticize the "politics of representation" and the illusionistic dimension of commercial cinema, with its fake transparency, or they are limited to the political discourses.

Without questioning this interpretative scheme, it does not give credit to the perspective proposed by Althusser and the power of negation. Following the suggestions put forward by Fredric Jameson, who also approached ideology from an

Althusserian point of view, we must observe that while some ideological representations are obvious (visible in cinematic contents as conscious representations of a major set of ideas) and others are formal, there are more complex representations, which are extremely well dissimulated in films. Jameson observed that the allegorical or symbolic manifestations of ideology are not simply visible in form or content. Meanings are coalescing into what can be described as the political unconscious[46]. Although Jameson was dealing with literary texts, this capacity of ideology to be buried deep into the narratives is relevant also for cinema. The minimal units of narrative condensation in which the narrative forms give shape to more elusive ideological meanings (like class conflict) are described by Jameson as ideologems[47]. The American philosopher suggests that these basic units are either manifested as protonarratives (libidinal fantasies), or pseudo-ideas (opinions, belief systems or prejudices). These forms of alteration work like *repressed* signifiers, which in dreams always return as repressed mental *representations. When ideologies become* pseudo-ideas, they are manifestations of ideological displacements. This process can take place either at a large scale (when entire belief systems are morphing into something else), but it can be easily identifiable at the level of individual opinions, such as the values of society becoming prejudices.

In the case of aliens, we can trace this movement of representations from explicit manifestations of political conditions, to their detachment from their original ideological purpose (as pseudonarratives), and then to their repression into the depths of political unconscious.

Denegation and the Functions of Concealment in Ideological Representations

One classical approach for explaining how ideology is articulated in media representations was developed by the French critic Roland Barthes. His understanding of how ideology is diffused in contemporary society through media mythologies was based on a structuralist interpretation. Using a paradigmatic description of myth-making and a semiotic terminology for decoding the meaning formations in cultural myths leads, as illustrated in the famous interpretation of the Paris-Match cover, to "deciphered" myths that take cultural and political significations. The values of imperialism, cultural hegemony or consumerist capitalism are projected "upside down" in media representations. The French critic claims that myths "hide nothing", they are only distorting contents without make the significations disappear[48]. Following this perspective, every representation (in a visual or textual form) has a myth content, and each signifier always expresses the signified[49], thus making ideological interpretations always readily available. That which appears to be neutral ideologically will reveal its political meanings when screened through a structural analysis. Even if we encounter myths that are empty of immediate political significations, for example those designed to hide the political contradictions of the petty-bourgeoisie, they can be exposed by the structuralist interpretation.

At the first level these presuppositions are converging with the conclusions Althusser drew when discussing the role of Ideological State Apparatuses. Any

cultural-ideological mechanism has one final outcome, the reproduction of capitalist exploitation. Thus, ideological coding happens in various media representations and the critical theorist can decode its presence. Nonetheless, this is only one possible reading of ideological meanings. Ideologies are not only disguised in the imaginary, they are repressed into the unconscious and, more importantly, they are operationalized as forms of absurdity. Going through a series of alterations and alienations, designed to make acceptable that which is unacceptable (class exploitation for example), they gradually become unexplainable themselves. Attempting to explain this process, Althusser reuses the remarkable concept of *dénégation*, as proposed by Sigmund Freud and then recuperated by Lacan.

In his classic work entitled "Negation"[50] the creator of psychoanalysis uses *Die Verneinung* to describe how the content of a repressed image makes its way into the consciousness through the process of negation. The delusion helps the mind on the pathway of resolving the conflicts between what is true and what is false, to erase the separation between desire and the forbidden object of desire. Only when disconnected from its real content does the denied representation overcome repression and enter the Ego. This concealed presence is never completely detached from the real object, which makes possible the analytical process. The same goes for the "not ideological" in cinematic political meanings. In my analysis, just as the subconscious falsely claims: "This is not my mother", when Oedipal desire is manifested in a dream, cinematic projections claim that: "This is not ideological", when we see its political content expressed in visual or narrative forms.

We know that we are in the presence of the markers of ideology when discourse mimics ideological remoteness. This apparent emptiness becomes, in turn, relevant. In this sense we should not simply perceive movies as contributing to our understanding or criticism of reality; instead, when cinema representations are building a profound misunderstanding of politics (or society and culture), then the undisclosed connections can become manifest.

Tracing the leftover signs of the presence of the ideological, as they appear in film forms, is the material support of my ideological interpretation. Oftentimes narratives foreground the ideological – they are pseudonarratives, as in *Arrival* the unexplainable presence and disappearance of spaceships that travel not only in space, but in time. Another level of disclosure comprises the conventions used by storytelling, which are then directly linked to the disguised presence of the dominant discourses, manifested as pseudo-ideas. The ideological camouflages in science fiction narratives are always self-effacing their ideological tracks, as is the wondrous psychic abilities of aliens, who foresee the distant future, but are unable to anticipate the terrorist act orchestrated by humans against their presence. And another ideal environment for disguising ideology is provided by alien spaces and places, where no real trace of ideological relevance can be projected: this provides the best cover, and also indicates the presence of the most profound significations. In Marxist terms, these are the utmost abstractions, they are completely abstracted from their source, appearing to be meaningless and empty of any dialectical tension. The source of *denegation* is when ideology never recognizes

that it is "ideological", when the only evidence we have is the vestigial evidence of an internal ideological transformation.

Denegation is best explained by the allegorical note that Marx uses in *Das Kapital*[51], when he recounts the story of Cacus, an ancient character who took the oxen of Geryon backwards in order to mislead Hercules. By leaving traces that were going back to the den instead of outside he used a deceiving device, a negative indicator. When looking at the immediate manifestations of ideology we only perceive the footsteps going in an apparent natural order and we are fooled by their apparent insignificance. This is why any interpretative effort in film analysis must first establish the inverse correlations, between the fading tracks of ideology, their fake movement and the final destination of the deception. Science fiction movies are more than anything capable of such abstractions, or ab-straction in the sense that they are practicing a self-effacing mechanism. Always removed from the objective problems of society, then projected into of a false set of representations located in the future, they are not abstract, but ab-stracted. Abstraction here is fundamentally a lack of recognition, a representation which is being disguised into a no-thing. The ideological discourse fades into the political unconscious, helped by the fact that visual representations are expressed by alienated signs, or alienated actions. The strange architectures (like the heptapod spaceships), their unexplainable societies (like the heptapod culture) and the fascinating creatures themselves are diverting our attention from their deep content.

Any critical reading of contemporary science fiction storytelling should follow the apparent outcome of cinema narratives when they display any *ideological absence*. In particular those movies seem to be innocuous, for, just like in fairytales, their narratives are hiding ideological control. Science fiction productions, with their simplistic story-lines and their ability to remove us from reality can camouflage meanings. For example the heptapods in Arrival, who communicate by projecting black ink into a strangely gaseous atmosphere (having a physiology very similar to cephalopods ejecting pigments in order to escape their predators), who can fly and also can walk on their giant hand-like limbs, are called by the humans Abbott and Costello, like the comedic couple (or they are Flapper and Raspberry in the short story). All the spectacular instruments, the computer-generated artistry developed specially to generate amazing representations, are abruptly thrown into derision. And it is precisely here, in the harmless substitutions, that ideology is hiding, cloaked into insignificance and faked irrelevance. Of course, when following this trail, it could open a criticism of the analysis itself; some might regard with discontent the validity of this kind of ideological interpretation, since the connections are easily downgraded and then labeled as lacking justification. This approach is not the result of a deficiency in critical discourse, it is the outcome of the hiding mechanisms of ideology.

Returning to *Arrival*, the pseudonarratives are disguising several political issues, from the threat of global war, to the menace of internal terrorism, and even the of control the civil society by the military and the secret services. Also, the communication barriers between different political systems and the implicit absence of any

class conflicts in the alien society (and the human world) are also well hidden behind the illusionistic manifestations of remarkable, computer generated, creatures. Finally, the most important process is the reversal of dialectical tensions from politics into fictionalized melodrama. Louise Banks, the linguist who decodes the complex heptapod language, is also able to connect with the Chinese General Shang and manages to appease a global confrontation. This mechanism is integral to the process of concealment and, just as in the Freudian tradition[52] of attributing meanings to the symptomatic manifestation of verbal and behavioral slippage, the contradictions within the formation of imaginary structures become revealing. Why would an advanced species, capable of communicating in a complex language that conveys simultaneously multiple meanings make a confusion between gift, tool and weapon, which then makes the different factions of humanity stop collaborating and prepare for war? This glitch of translation is a feature of subconscious association, generated by the repression of real representations, and the reality of global politics contradicts such wondrous sharing of technological advances among the competing nations of our planet. Also, why would an advanced alien species need the help of an irrelevant civilization like our own, if not for hiding the ancient mytheme of the demigods actively involved in the battles of their divine parents?

Alienation and the Processes of Abstraction and Denegation

Furthermore, in order to decode the complex functions played by the strange species of heptapods in *Arrival*, it is necessary to analyze one of the most important categories of extraterrestrial cinematic representations, insect-like aliens. There are innumerable monstrous bugs and ant-like creatures populating contemporary fantasy cinema, as the traits of insects offer an enormous potential for allegorical, symbolical or metaphorical connotations. From cockroaches to ants, from parasitical bugs feeding on our bodies to flies and mosquitoes, the class of insects has morphed into almost all cinematic forms. They are now a class of their own, with the so called "bug horror films" or "insect horror films" exploiting the unnatural attraction of such alien creatures – there are specialized festivals and audiences for this genre. Yet insect-like aliens cannot be simply understood as substitutes for strangers or foreign invaders; they provide a perfect disguise for ideas about ourselves, about our society and about what makes us human.

This is why, in the overall process of abstraction, we must distinguish between simple derivative displacements and radical denegation. The difference is made explicit when we compare any insect-like creature with other "alien" beings that are very similar to humans – like apes or robots. As indicated by the etymology of the word robot (from the Slavic rabota, meaning work), there is a direct identification between the workers toiling in the capitalist factories and artificial beings. This is the easiest form of displacement in cinematic representations and it offers the simplest access to political interpretations. Also, as in the directly the case with the first movie of The Planet of the Apes franchise, produced in 1968 and coinciding with the civil rights movement in the US, the sub-coding for segregation and its consequences is transparent.

With insects there is an added lack of representability, which induces an apparent absence of any dialectical tensions. This is why insect-like alien creatures, having no connections to humanity, provide the best disguise for ideological discourses. Strangeness is natural with insects, as they are one of the most primitive creatures on Earth. They emerged about 350 million years ago, which makes them older even than dinosaurs (another favorite hideaway for political meanings). In addition, the unusual physiology and physical diversity of the largest species on Earth – some estimates indicate that insects are more than half of all living beings on Earth, making 90% of all the living beings on this planet, part of the million species already identified – supplies infinite forms to morph into. And, while most of the insects are social animals, they are also displaying unusual behaviors, with their vast numbers and ability to live in hives and move in swarms contrasting the individualistic (read capitalist-driven) human values.

There are multiple phobias linked to our fears about the contact with insects – from arachnophobia (the fear of spiders) to general insectophobia as aversion towards any insect-like creature. Some authors have explained our irrational anxieties concerning these creatures as having evolutionary roots. Without the revulsion generated by the presence of insects carrying disease we would have been less able to survive in naturally dangerous environments. The fear of insects (particularly entomophobia) can also be understood as an anxiety towards anything unfamiliar. The fact that they have no phylogenetic relationships with humans, as their anatomy is completely different from ours, with multiple sub-sets

of characteristics making insects "creepy", places our brain into automatic defense. We have all the reasons in the world to be defensive, because for every human there are 1.4 billion insects living on Earth. These creatures have more than the numbers advantage, they have an evolutionary ascendance on us. Not only were they populating the world long before human kind even existed, but they have a strange anatomy that might provide them with better survival skills; thus, they are a reminder of the fact that in the natural world man is not "at the center of creation".

In psychoanalytical terms, their presence in our imagination was linked early on with the manifestations of our unconscious mind, either as subconscious anxiety (cultivated by bed songs about biting bugs) or expressions of our dark sexual desires (as explained in the classical Freudian interpretation of dreams)[53], or even as the control of the superego (as in the animated movie *Pinocchio*, where a cricket is the voice of conscience). Some authors, like Carl Gustav Jung, even expressed their admiration for the instincts of insect, suggesting that humans would be more intelligent if they could share some of the traits of these creatures, if we could improve our subconscious connections[54]. This fascination for the almost paranormal abilities of swarms to communicate remains a recurrent trope in science fiction cinema.

Throughout our cultural history insects and insect-like creatures have become a repository for some of the darkest dimensions of our unconscious, from expressions of the underworld (like the scarabs in Egyptian myths), to projections of our ideas about religion (Beelzebub is described as the Lord of the Flies), or to

contemporary political and social failures. This last dimension is best illustrated by "The Metamorphosis", the classical story by Franz Kafka. In that particular story, Gregor Samsa is a petty bourgeois transformed into a monstrous bug, which is an overt allegory about the dehumanization of people in an estranged society. The gradual morphing into "insectness" marks the most radical manifestation of the non-human, representing a complete negative mirroring of the attributes of humanity. This type of representability was inherited by science fiction cinema, continuously exploiting the binary opposition between human and non-human. This is also the case with *Arrival*, the French director Denis Villeneuve constantly exploiting this visual divide between the heptapods and the frail humans.

One of the most controversial examples for how insect characteristics can be a pathway to abstraction is David Cronenberg's "reconceptualization" of the 1958 horror classic, *The Fly* (1986). Like in Kafka's story, we witness a perverse mutation when an eccentric scientist, played by Jeff Goldblum, is experimenting with teleportation and suffers an accidental DNA mixing with that of a common fly. The movie reverses the childish cliché, that of the human bitten by an insect only to be transformed into a superhero (like Spiderman). Now the change takes a darker turn. If at first Seth Brundle benefits from various "qualities" of the fly (exaggerated appetite and strength), this genetic mix-up gradually disconnects him from humanity. Here the intertextual reference is more than evident and the estrangement process functions as a criticism of society.

A second movement happens as the spectator is alienated from any logical or familiar processing ability, as there is no reasonable explanation for transforming a man into a fly. Although drosophila melanogaster is often used in lab experiments to substitute humans, the fruit fly is by no means compatible with us. The biological differences between our species are so radical that a human organism cannot be transformed into an insect. As demonstrated by a study published in 2017 by biochemist Colin Sharpe and his colleagues at the University of Portsmouth[55], even if humans have approximately 24,000 genes and the fruit flies have a close 14,000 genes, the huge difference between us is the way in which we process protein. Even if the regular fly and the human body are incompatible (and our transformation into a fungus is as plausible, since we share DNA with almost all living organisms), the logic of the movie makes this transformation a veridic action. Our minds accept the film premise as if it were sound and reasonable, and this where the abstraction becomes indicative for the first phase of denegation.

While some critics interpreted the story as a critical allegory, a reaction against the medical experiments of the 80s, or the overall anxiety towards technological progress, this transformation is semiotically indicative of the emptying of ideological functions allowed. Colin McGinn[56] noted that the human turned into a fly becomes a direct allusion to everything that is disagreeable about our bestiality. Our disgust towards insect behavior is in fact a mirror for our disgust for human physiology. Turning a man into a fly is the simplest form of alteration, not only by the transformation of our bodies into utter alterity, but also as an expression of ab-stracting humanity from our nature (from the creepy

sexual instincts or even our gross eating habits). This makes the fly an expression of the Thing (das Ding), still connected to the order of signification.

A second important transformation of aliens as "the Thing" is ideological. In the analysis performed by Scott Willson, who also provides an insightful understanding for the ability of Cronenbergian cinema to explore transgressive meanings, the ideological content is the overall perversion of late capitalism[57]. The movie is a parabolic denouncement of the emptiness of life in a society based on mindless consumption, which makes *The Fly* an expression of the altered Thing, articulated as a negation of the existing social order. Here film interpretation can use either classical Marxist concepts or Freudian terminology, like social alienation or as sexual repression, to explain the allegory of insect transformation. Or it can be approached from a feminist perspective, denouncing the male-centered nature of the story[58], which enables a reading of the concealed patriarchal ideology.

These readings do not account for a more insidious contradiction, related to how we define human nature. Using the Lacanian conceptual framework, when Seth Brundle is transformed into a fly, he becomes more than a disgusting negative mirror of himself, he is turned into a no-thing, a manifestation of the unconscious as a condensation of emptiness. The symbolic "no-Other" is not the Another, engendered by fake meanings. The No-Thing hides in its own absence, it is an unrecoverable loss of identity that refuses identification. Even the fascination for the strangeness of the fly represents the masking of that which cannot be expressed, the secret of "The Thing", suggesting that

unconsciously we are driven by the desire to become non-human. Just as "The Fly" is the Other of the Other, a result of denegation, a representation beyond analogy or allegory, the heptapods in *Arrival* articulate a similar nonsensical representation of what is profoundly meaningful – the non-humanity of humans.

Another suggestive example in this coagulation is discernible in the cinematic adaptation of Robert A. Heinlein's classic saga "Starship Troopers". In the first movie of the cinema trilogy, directed by Paul Verhoeven, we see mankind expanding throughout the galaxy, in an explicit glorification of imperialist conquest. Humans then encounter the Arachnid Empire, a society composed of various insects, which is also expansionist. The resulting clash leads to a cosmic conflict, easily identifiable as an allegory of the Cold War[59]. The symbolic surrogates are everywhere in Heinlein's story, which in turn allows Verhoeven to elaborate his own ironic parable about the notions of militarism and colonialism. The human mobile infantry, called the Roughnecks, are the macho-military arm of the galactic expansion of the Terran Federation. Negatively turned upside down in the image of the armies of the mindless "Bugs", their political atrocity is masked by their fascinating alterity. In the war between humans and insects, the society of masculinized citizen-soldiers is mirrored by the arachnoid swarm-like behavior. Here the mechanisms of analogical representation are historically explicit, requiring a contextualized interpretation. The dialectical tension is identical to other movies created during the nuclear scare, illustrated by the war between humans and the giant mutant ants in *Them!* (1954), where

arachnids are generated by an irradiation in the New Mexico desert. This clash is an expression of manifest events in human society at a given time. The repressed social traumas of the Cold War, the anxieties towards the menace of the Communist "others", visible in the movie directed by Gordon Douglas and in the story elaborated by Heinlein, can be interpreted as direct result of the "Atomic age anxieties". The parabolic reference to historical events is even more explicit in Heinlein's case, as the author himself recounted that the first novel was the stimulated by his discontent towards Eisenhower's decision to suspend nuclear tests. His unambiguous support of militarism makes the Federal Service of the future a transparent substitute for the US military during the 50s, with the monstrous insects an allusion to the Soviet and Chinese enemies of America. The same correlation occurs in *Arrival*, where the story about the "gift" of the heptapods is connected with the political issues of our post-911 world.

The second level of interpretation opens when we observe that Starship Troopers cultivates a more dangerous "fascist fantasia" of humanity, as indicated among others by Leighton Grist[60]. Under the guise of the galactic insect wars there is a hyperbolic exaltation of militarism and authoritarianism, one that Heinlein pursues with political intent. Moving beyond the explicit oppositions between the Arachnids, as the absolute Other of humanity, and the Federation, we can observe several incongruities. For example, there is another latent opposition, more explicit in Verhoeven's version, where Juan "Johnny" Rico, the main character of the story, is not only in conflict with the bugs, but also with his pacifist parents. As several critics previously noted, the whitewashing of Rico (who in the film is a young Caucasian, instead of a Filipino in the book), with the overt popularizing of machoism and the explicit use of "quasi-fascist" imagination, are carriers of ideological significations surpassing the obvious political references[61].

When taking a closer look at the finality of Heinlein's story (which is similar to Orson Scott Card's portrayal in *Ender's Game*), there is a hidden dimensions of the narrative, pointing to the inhumanity of the human species. Fighting the Formics or destroying the Arachnids disguises what is even more terrifying, a justification of an absence, that of human empathy which is the essence of humanity. Enslavement, torture, brutal experiments and other inhuman actions that result from the refusal of any subjectivity for the alien insects make permissible incredibly bestial behaviors. The lack of the moral consciousness of the bugs, who are having specialized functions for different members of their social group, is apparently consistent with what we know about ants or bees. Arachnid societies are functioning as a universe-size hive, with violent behaviors and cosmic infestations as a consequence of inhumanity. Without insisting on the fact that "the Bugs" are organized in caste systems, based on species separation, basically following racist hierarchies (at the base of society there are the Arkellians, the warrior bugs, then the complex Plasma bugs, overseen by a Brain bug and the engendering Queen Bug), humans feel entitled to exterminate these creatures and, in the process, we eliminate our own human characteristics. Here another trope, which also appears in *Arrival*,

becomes relevant – confronted with "the Bugs", who are possessing pan-cosmic psychic abilities, humanity develops its own paranormal capacities. The ultimate alienation is our estrangement from our natural human qualities.

A third and most important function of denegation is showcased by the *Alien* franchise, a story indicative of how insect characteristics can be used in science fiction cinema to conceal meanings. Extensively commented and interpreted, these popular films are describing the strange encounter between human-kind, represented by the woman officer Ripley (played by Sigourney Weaver) and a foreign insectoid species, engendered by an egg-laying Mother Queen (physically present in *Aliens* 1986). Initially entitled *Star Beast,* the first *Alien* movie directed by Ridley Scott, benefitting from the imagination of H. R. Giger, renewed the interest of the public for classical science fiction horrors.

Once more we can identify the two major approaches in analyzing movies, widely practiced in film studies and applicable in science fiction narratives. The first level of interpretations, which traces the manifest meanings, and the second, which focuses discussions on latent significations, was applied to all the movies and their subsequent expansion into novelizations, graphic novels and video-games. The first installment, *Alien* (1986), is an expression of the conflicts accumulated in the American society at that time. With the Watergate scandal exposing political corruption, the Vietnam war going terribly wrong, and economic recession accentuating the social divide, the content of the film carries many of these issues. As noted early on by Harvey Greenberg[62], Ridley Scott's creatures are clearly interpretable as allegorical references to real social problems. In fact, Greenberg classifies this story as part of a larger category, that of "cruel cinema", a type of movie making that radically breaks with all the "sacrosanct American values" based on family life, who transform the fundamental "cell of society" into a monstrous family.

The cult movie directed by Scott is projecting more than the degradation of social stability at a particular moment in time. As Greenberg observed, the "omnipotent beast" devouring the working class crew on the spaceship Nostromo is really a substitute for the institutions of late capitalism and of the predatory predispositions manifest in "savage" capitalism. The "corporate predators" in the movie are in fact the true alien monsters[63]. This kind of ideological reading, based on allegorical interpretations, sees the aliens as expressions of the alienated nature of human activities in capitalism. The cruelty and lack of empathy, which for Marx were expressions of the avarice of the capitalists, are easily morphed into the traits of the mindless aliens. Without showing any emotion or empathy, the aliens interact with the working-class environment on Nostromo (which is, as the opening credits indicate, a mineral refinery, a massive allegory of the factories in the capitalist society) as indexes for the exploitative interaction of capitalists with their laborers. The machinery of galactic exploitation, in turn, becomes a parabolic and indirect reference of the exploitation taking place on Earth. This reading is offering many suggestive insights, as illustrated by the interpretation elaborated by Alejandro Bárcenas[64], who works out the parabolic references presented by the Weyland-Yutani Corporation,

describing it as an expression of all the evils of the capitalist mode of production, which is one of the most relevant premises in the *Alien* imaginary. Such connections are explicit, with the bad practices in cosmic mining and exploration overt criticisms of the mischievous nature of similar operations on Earth. They make The Company in *Alien* an overgrown trans-spatial multinational corporation, and by denouncing it as an "oppressive institution",[65] the movie allows an unconcealed criticism of a particular moment in the global expansion of American corporations.

Other, less visible components in the *Alien* narratives, are connected with latent political implications. Some critics have shifted attention towards a less explicit component, claiming that the aliens are expressions of the "Euro-masculine science and Americanized technocracy".[66] Or, as several feminist critics have cautioned, there is an overbearing monstrosity in the way femininity and maternity are represented in *Alien*. Judith Newton indicates that the movie displays a disdainful projection of patriarchal thinking, which makes the body of "the Other" symbolically connected to women's genitalia[67]. Barbara Creed also describes *Alien* in terms of the "primal scene", or the primal fantasy about the copulation between the parents, thus within the framework of the Oedipus complex. Together with the abject representations of the maternal womb, all the latent significations are manifestations of "patriarchal ideology"[68]. At the other end of the interpretative spectrum, some critics contest these claims and consider that the "ideological semes" in *Alien* cannot be attributed to sexist or reactionary thinking, proposing instead a post-feminist reading, in which the gender order of patriarchal society is destabilized[69].

All these political and ideological interpretations, connected with social criticism, or uncovering the gender bias of the movies, their class orientation or labor alienation, block our access to a more profound level, where these creatures are exhibiting the traits of *totally alienated significations.* In fact, the Xenomorph species in the entire franchise are absolute *chimeric beings*, contradicting every rule of nature, combining multiple traits from all the possible animal species and classes, mixing even the mineral and chemical, with the final result of a total no-Thing. While the Xenomorphs in *Alien* are a reptile-mammal-amphibian-bird creature which, when multiplying, goes through all the stages of development of several living organisms, its parasitical nature discloses the emptiness of this representation. Looking like an invertebrate arthropod, belonging to the Limulidae family (the facehuggers are very much similar horseshoe crabs), having sponge-like features and snail saliva, then growing like a cancerous tumor inside the body of their host only to then evolve into a creature similar a killer ants, while at the "Queen" stage they share common elements with Mantises (Mantodea) and have the ovipository features specific for birds, the monstrosity of representations is an accumulation of alienations. Having an external shell which makes them look like lobsters, they also have an inner attack tongue; acting like a crazed piranha, they keep their prey in a cocoon, very much like an arachnid, and their childbirth is a horrific chest-busting atrocity.

To conclude, we can observe that these are negative monstrosities indicative

for the complex diversion of alien representations. They function like an absolute chimera, their explicit components are only diversions that should direct us to look beyond their exploitative or gender bias connections. We have to understand that these insect aliens are a primordial abstracted nonsense. As perfect members of a hive, they behave like humans completely lacking any form of conscience, who have no desire for any understanding of their role in society. Fueled by their impossible acidic blood, these hybrid creatures are noxious chimeras, actually burning our capacity to grasp their meaning and by this they are ultimate impossibilities. Ultimately alien insects are not only allegories of the inhuman, they are the No-Thing of humanity.

The Final Alienation of Human Essences

By overviewing all these typologies of representations, from allegories and metaphors to parables and allusions, then to denegations, we can distinguish within the complex processes of alienation several levels of meaning alterations. We can either read the aliens as foreigners, as substitutes for the racial or gender bias in society, or as an expression of capitalism, imperialism or globalism. While at the first level

any political reference can be transparently linked to conflicts, crises or cultural confrontations, subsequently represented by the monstrous creatures, a second approach uses a more nuanced dialectical contrast interpretation. Here alien representations are not explicitly linked to any particular reality, they function as disguised ideological or cultural concealments, to prevent the recognition of politically charged values and ideas. To the point of interpreting *Arrival*, this dichotomy is applicable in decoding the story centered around the unexpected visitation of an *alien life-form,* as both an exposure of the current state of global discord and a dissimulation apropos of the ideologies of transnational collaboration. Next, the arrival of the strange heptapods, which has a positive effect by changing the nature of humanity, which should take us to discover our ability to transcend time and to communicate at an unprecedented level, is the final misrepresentation. This makes the aliens more than projections of ideological discourses, where globalization and transnational cooperation are encouraged; the impossible heptapods articulate more than cultural and political codes. They are manifestations of an incoherence in our own unconscious, visible signs of our empty search for meanings beyond our immediate condition.

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