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The Alien as Other:*Spiritual, Political, and Cultural Representations of the Alien in Late 20th Century Cinema*

by Ben Franz

As far back as the days of cavemen and their wall sketches, storytellers have sought a mechanism through which to discuss our successes and failures, our foibles and our virtues. This is commonly referred to in scholastic terms as 'The Other'. Simply put, the 'Other' is a representation of the human creature without being specific to the person, though very definitely characterizing the particular trait the storyteller wishes to focus our spectatorship on. The actual vehicle referred to as 'The Other' has evolved over the course of time, and when modern storytelling adapted to cinema, 'The Other' rapidly became entities of an entirely fantastical nature. By the late 20th century, bolstered by the efforts of Carl Sagan and several generations of feature length films, the main entity of intellectual curiosity worthy of being labeled 'The Other' was clearly the intergalactic Alien. In this paper, we will explore 'The Other' and its representations in the three-fold manner: Spiritual, Political and Cultural. The generative combination of aspects will provide a context for how the Alien is viewed now in cinema, as well as a thorough depiction of how we got there.

In each section we will employ several films which will best display the particular aspect of the representations mentioned above. For the nuances of the Spiritual, we will be exploring the marvelous and the magnificent in *Contact* (1997), and *Close Encounters of The Third Kind* (1978). As will be determined, both of these films speak to those subjects which are far greater than ourselves.

Spiritual Representations

Contact is a film of deep resonance. A film which not only explores the search for Alien life, but challenges our inability to believe in subjects greater than ourselves, and it speaks volumes to the spiritual debate now raging between Atheists and Theists across the world. Speaking of Atheists, our protagonist, Ellie Arroway, is the text book example. Given to doubt and suspicion of anything she is not inherently interested in investigating, she can't provide the committee vetting researchers with the guarantee she believes in God.

The very essence of the film is contradicting Ellie's supposition that nothing is greater than herself. Within this film, we will through Ellie's eyes be forced to reflect upon our own hubris and understand that the universe is far grander and more complex than we ever imagined. This is the gateway to magnificence.

J.P. Telotte in his text Science Fiction Film gives a great reflection of the above notion:

'...explores the contemporary fascination with the possibility of powerful alien beings in a far different way, not as a story of invasion and destruction, but one of scientific curiosity and even invitation.' (143)

Indeed as the film opens, Ellie Arroway is currently employed at SETI, which is the 'search for extraterrestrial intelligence'. Despite an early life encounter with a very religious man, Dr. Arroway remains unconvinced of the existence of God. Aliens, however, are a whole different story. As she is portrayed in both the very wise book by Carl Sagan, and the film, Dr. Arroway clearly wants to believe there is something greater than ourselves. In fact, she views the entire search sponsored by SETI much in the way Telotte has framed it above.

She desperately wants a return signal, something that will enable her to throw down the nagging feelings about her fellow humans and their attachment to God, and prove conclusively that there exists real and tangible elements to believe in.

This point of the 'real and tangible' brings us back to the committee table. There she was asked

directly if she believed in God, God being the comfort zone for many members of the human race. Since she's unable to directly say that she believes in a supreme deity, she at first is rejected from alighting to space, to utilize the daring and devastatingly curious design the extraterrestrial signal provided mankind. Prior in the film, SETI had received an 'invitation' as Telotte had suggested. A signal had arrived from the stars and provided a template for an exploratory vehicle of strange and spectacular proportions.

It was Ellie Arroway's great hope to use that vehicle for exploration. And the significant reason why, is best explained by Telotte:

'Moreover, it pairs its story of an astronomer's search for signs of some intelligent life in the universe with the larger question of humanity's spiritual yearnings, using both types of search to point out meaning in our existence.' (143)

Spiritual yearnings have always powered and developed for the human need for something to believe in. While it's true that the US government tries to prevent a 'litmus test of faith' from affecting the appointment of judges, when you're a scientist exploring the greater cosmos, the frailty of human belief seems to be a necessary stepping stone. In order to describe and relate notions of the infinite to humans, you must be prepared to frame it in a familiar and non-threatening context. Though Ellie Arroway finds the notion of Aliens far more appetizing than that of an invisible entity which billions 'serve', they're both equally far-fetched notions to the ground level observed with one serious distinction.

God has always been a concept of debate and affirmation with humans. In fact, deities were likely the first real form of 'The Other' which stuck. Hence all the wonderful pagan pantheons of gods to read about. The great and expressive literatures which exist in bygone eras, directly reflect the current fascination with extraterrestrial life; with the caveat that there are actually people who will firmly attest to the existence of God, and not be considered lunatics. The same cannot be said for alien life at this point.

This is a point well reflected in the film. Dr. Arroway is permitted a moment of great exploration. She goes through a Japanese version of the device, and encounters the infinite in galactic terms. When she actually encounters new life, its frame of reference is to appear in the guise of her father – much the way deities of old would take avatars to appear to their followers. Her experience in the greater cosmos is brilliant, even marvelous. As Tellote details: '„Contact effectively draw[s] on that marvelous impulse, as they set about expanding our own knowledge, especially knowledge of our own nature.' (143)

However, the brilliant revelation of this experience is short lived. When asked to confirm her findings to the committee upon returning to the US, Dr. Arroway finds she's incapable of doing so; all her video footage failed to capture anything and she's left with nothing but static. Her fantastic narrative of the marvelous encounter with Alien life, which affirmed for her the personal spiritual longing to know something greater than herself, is entirely discounted by the committee. She would have even been out of SETI if it had not been discovered that there were in fact 18 hours of static found on her video recorder.

Although Dr. Arroway's search for the Marvelous was only conclusive and revelatory for herself, it did build upon a solid base of belief. Early in the film, one of her fellow astronomers is prevented from entering this new fangled transport NASA has built by a religious zealot. As that zealot was prepared to die for his belief, so too are the scientists depicted in this film. After all, in that context to experience that which is marvelous is worth a lot of agony.

In no experience of the spiritual as magnificent is that more true than *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1978). Roy Neary, our protagonist, will go through many challenges. As Telotte details:

' Roy Neary... has set about his assigned task of finding the problem, fixing it, and restoring power and thus light to his world – of bringing it back to normalcy. However, not only can he not find the problem, he cannot even find himself – that is where he is at present, his coordinates on a map. In this case another kind of supernatural force has intervened: the science fiction version of the supernatural, the alien other, which has almost immediately and incomprehensibly unhinged his reality and left him crying out in the darkness for help, for reorientation, for a better map of what now seems a far more mystifying reality.' (142)

Roy Neary is on the path to a revelation which effects a far greater number of people than Dr. Arroway could have even conceived of. Whereas her experiences are that of an explorer, pursuing as a sailor would the 'New World', Neary will attempt to make sense of a harrowing and spellbinding event which entirely reorients his life on a path he never would have imagined possible. The spiritual events in *Close Encounters* are thoroughly undeniable, and as we find with *Contact*, every bit as magnificent and life changing, given the story plays itself out on a much grander and public scale.

With the encounter in that field of Indiana, Roy Neary enters a new and different life; he has been so entirely altered by his cosmic encounter that he can no longer relate to the world as he once did. As Tellote wisely frames it:

' ... Close Encounters does hold out a key potential, A possibility of a combination of growth and renewal that might result from the alien/other experience and thus from the new sense of reality it brings. The film suggests that Neary and, by extension, the rest of humankind, might grow to a new maturity, one in which he will be able to maintain a sense of that child within, or at least of that childlike wonder and naiveté that are ultimately necessary for opening up to and understanding the human place in the universe'. (151)

When you touch the infinite, as Neary clearly does with his form of 'The Other', it cannot help but to change your perspective in significant ways. In the beginning of the film, Neary is characterized as a family man who's willing to spend time with his kids playing with trains. Once the encounter occurs, everything changes for him, as it would, presumably, occur for anyone else.

These are the deep and telling truths that are explored in the film. While those cultists who obsess over UFOs can only theorize what would happen, this film attempts to play out such a scenario

should it happen in a manner which could not be relegated to the annals of conspiracy nut bars and their loopy theories. 'What would objectively happen to the common man', this spiritual journey asks. In playing out the scenario we see a man adapt to a more open and inquisitive nature. At the start, he assists his children at play with trains, but as it gets deeper into the story, he's carving mountains out of mashed potatoes.

This film as Tellotte notes requires Neary to acquire '...a kind of growth and development through the open and innocent vision of the child' (152). Not only does this support his need to create a model of Devil's Tower out of mashed potatoes, but it directly speaks to the spectacular nature of a meeting with a spiritual other. It entirely causes you to reconsider life and how you view it. Once he encounters the aliens in that cornfield, Neary can no longer associate with his family. They remain static, problematic people, as if Spielberg is suggesting that suburbia breeds the worst social ills and a disconnection with the Universe in general. As the story of the film is set up, Neary is not even aware of the spiritual rut he's inhabiting, it takes a power failure and a trip to rural Indiana to wake him to the true nature of life, the universe and everything.

In fact, as Tellotte notes, the entire human race is in state of spiritual 'lost' -ness:

' Close Encounters further develops this sense of disorientation, shows it to be a standard modern condition, and even extends it to the audience through a series of jump cuts that shift us around to a variety of Earth locations – the Sonora Desert in Mexico, the Gobi Desert in China, various locales in the United States, including atop Devils Tower – all helping to develop a larger sense of mystery and dislocation here.' (154)

In all these places we are treated to scenes of clarity and an almost religious sense of purpose. Its as if in these particular locations the Aliens have placed markers for us to be. This is supported by Tellotte's continued thought:

' At these and various other sites, though, as well as in the brains of selected humans throughout the world, there are also traces of location, hints not only of an alien presence but also of a rendezvous point, a place of answers where we might come together and no longer feel "lost".' (154)

This generative tension between the feelings of “lost” and “answers” informs Neary's eventual pilgrimage to Devil's Tower. In the United States, the film creates a nexus of warmth around that historic site, so Neary and a few others find themselves answering the spiritual call of the Aliens, and setting out for that site.

Though their pilgrimage is fraught with peril, it's a necessary part of developing this clear and open childlike consciousness. As depicted by most characters in the film, to be closed and safe is to become lost in modern living. While we humans are now given to comfort in the contemporary era, it's clear that such a state does not provide for much connectivity or association with anyone, hence the spiritual vacuum of suburbia.

When Neary finally reaches his destination and brings out the 'light show' conclusion at Devil's Tower (158), we have achieved the spiritual enlightenment the Aliens in this case have sought to provide us . Speaking in a musical structure that 'transcends all language' (158), the Aliens accept into their mother ship Roy Neary while returning many including a mother's young son, Barry.

This exchange on Devil's Tower is deeply public and bears the imprimatur of an authentic spiritual transcendence. This is a Mount Sinai for the Modern World. Here, all the world, not simply government officials or a solitary researcher, witness a climactic life changing event. The Alien successfully becomes the cipher for uplift of our civilization from our modern malaise of spiritual loss. Thus does the Alien represent the spiritual other in the private place of revelation, and the very public incontrovertible moments of pure and simple transcendence.

While the Alien serves as a wonderful lens for spiritual motifs, it can also work in a similar vein in political stories. For this section we will explore *Alien Nation* (1988) and *Alive in Joburg* (2005). There are many other motifs and subjects by which to discuss 'The Other' and politics; but for the rareness of it, I will touch upon the notion of The Alien and Immigration.

Political Representations

Immigration has always induced some sense of concern in the citizens already living in a country. As John J. Appel meditates:

“The alarming increase of alien criminals” became a favorite topic of newspaper editorials sometime after 1890 whenever a sensational crime was committed in the foreign section of a large city.' (The New Immigration, 93). This is precisely a large part of the problem raised in the scenario delivered in the movie *Alien Nation*. As can be told by the date in the quote, American sentiments towards immigrants have not changed much in the past 100+ years.

In *Alien Nation*, a ship comes to Earth bearing a ragtag group of Aliens fleeing an oppressive society. This is the story of all immigrants for the ages. The 'Newcomers', as they're referred to, are no more or less law-abiding than any other segment of the population. However, as in the passage above, pundits, journalists and legal authorities publicly wring their hands and discuss what to do about them as a whole whenever crime is committed in their section of large cities.

That the Newcomers, like all other new minorities, are reviled is not revelatory. Rather its the methods in which they are regarded as second class citizens that are. In this film, unlike other minorities, the Newcomers are marginalized from the get go. Appel has this to say about marginalization:

'The sociologist Robert E. Park was one of the first to describe the son of immigrants who is torn between the conflicting demands of two cultural traditions. Park conceived his as “condemned to live in two societies, and two not merely different but antagonistic cultures” an individual who lives in two worlds, and yet belongs to none'.(101)

The Newcomers, being members of an advanced civilization experience this very resentment in a telescopic manner. For every Newcomer represented as a criminal element, there are at least two who lead normal and successful lives within the greater structure provided by the US. As *Alien Nation* progresses, it becomes clear that we have not learned much as a civilization. As Jan Mair contends:

'The end of the millennium has not only brought us paranormal madness. It has also returned us to the beginning, to the days before feminism, before the recovery of the Non-western history, identity and futures began, before the Western representations of the Other and the notion of Otherness were deconstructed and shown to be imperialist in nature' ('Rewriting the American Dream', 48).

This imperialist attitude is one the United States has shown to the world on many occasions. There's a good reason why a film exists from the early part of the century titled *The Ugly American*. As we've proven time and again with our treatment of 'The Other' simply that there's no desire to grow and improve such relations. In fact, *Alien Nation* still serves as a perfect reflection of the sentiments and hostility expressed by red state voters for immigrants from Mexico and regions south. While the illegal immigrants have come here without permits or governmental approval, they nevertheless have landed here in need of aid.

The Newcomers did not come to Earth because they wanted to invade, per se, rather because where they had come from was so very intolerable. They had no other choice but to find a new inhabitable planet, and hope that the natives would not hate or disassociate from them too greatly. In this sense the extraterrestrials in *Alien Nation* serve a perfect reflection of the Other, right here in the US.

Although, strictly speaking, it's not inherently part of the late 20th Century, *Alive in Joburg* (2005), captures the essence of a problem that was a severe issue during that time period: Apartheid. In this short, the aliens aren't even granted a name. They're simply referred to as 'the Aliens'. Refugees from something akin to the 'ark' in the *HALO* series of games, they are forced to settle in the areas of South Africa already inhabited by the native born Africans. Such slums as Soweto-Killipland are brought to burgeoning levels by the Aliens.

During the years of Apartheid, it was common to see whites and Afrikaans informing the media of their fears of the Africans; here we see the Africans informing of the same problems involving the

Aliens. Seemingly, it would appear as though the Africans would be fine if Apartheid were upheld and the Aliens sent away. This disenfranchisement of the Other is a constant riff, and as noted by Gregory Lee and Sunny Lam, not as useful as it would seem:

' But if there is a 'loss of sense' in the modern world, a sentiment of alienation, then its transcendence, its overcoming, the process of de-alienation will not be overcome by a return to 'nativist' traditions...any more than it will be a return to Morris dancing in England. Like Said, we would advocate not a pseudo-universality, nor a slight of hand multi-multiculturalism (that is not the hybridism we intend), but rather the encouragement on new and composite identities based on new material realities that give rise to new imaginaries.' ('Wicked Cities', 115)

As with the realpolitik problem with Apartheid, it was not enough to simply imply that Africans could be part of the greater society now. They had to work to create a government which represented fairly the needs of whites, Afrikaans, and Africans. Such a solution would therefore be required to properly solve the problems of those poor Aliens in Johannesburg. One would need to stimulate a new imagery of the fabric of the society, one which could even contain an Alien prime minister.

While it would be relatively simple to dump them somewhere different from everyone else, what the Aliens simply require is the same services as the rest of the population: running water, electricity, flu shots. This disenfranchisement of the Aliens in *Alive in Joburg*, directly reflects the scorn, derision and violence meted out to the Africans during the Apartheid generation. The simple irony of Africans joining the brutal, over-violent police force to 'take care of the Aliens' is saddening in the extreme. It's every bit the same evil as when Afrikaans enlisted in the corps to 'normalize relations' with the Africans.

As can be seen, the Alien is highly effective when describing the destabilization of society and the harsh politics we dispense onto immigrants and minorities.

Culturally, the Alien serves several functions. We will experience the cultural implications of Aliens and thus 'The Other' through the following films: *Alien* (1979), *ET: The Extraterrestrial*, and *Cocoon* (1985). Culturally, Aliens come in two forms: Cuddly or Terrifying.

Cultural Representations

'The Other' has often served two purposes in culture, to fascinate or to terrify. As we see in the film *Alien* (1979), not only did this iteration scare, it confirmed a paradigm of classical thought: the feminine is not only fear-inducing, it's absolutely vile:

'Alien collapses the image of the threatening archaic mother, signifying woman as 'difference', into the more recognized figure of the pre-Oedipal mother; this occurs in two images of the monstrous-feminine: the oral-sadistic mother and the phallic mother. Kane's transgressive disturbance of the egg/womb initiates a transformation of its latent aggression into an active, phallic enemy. The horror then played out can be read in relation to Kristeva's concept of the semiotic chora. Kristeva argues that the maternal body becomes the area of conflicting desires (the semiotic chora). These desires are constantly staged and restaged in the workings of the horror narrative where the subject is left alone, usually in a strange and hostile place, and forced to confront an unnameable terror, the monster.' (Creed, *Alien and The Monstrous Feminine*, 137)

In Classical thought, the female has always been considered dangerous. In *Alien* and its subsequent sequels, the feminine fear concepts are extrapolated to create a tapestry of sexual transgression which greatly disturbs the spectators. Pre-Oedipus, as Barbara Creed contends, the concept of mother would incite fear because children were incapable of truly understanding the nature of procreation.

Often, it was figured birth happened orally. Hence the concept of the 'Oral-Sadistic Mother'. The very notion that the woman ingested food which would then become child in the womb, sends a shiver up the spine. Very similarly to the shiver that is inspired when the appropriately named 'face-hugger' attacks him in that very womb-like vessel. Kane, accepts the procreative substance of this mysterious alien through his mouth, leading to a horrific birth sequence:

'From this forbidden union, the monstrous creature is born. But man, not woman is the 'mother' and Kane dies in agony as the alien gnaws its way through his stomach. The birth of the alien from Kane's stomach plays on what Freud described as a common misunderstanding that many children have about birth, that is, that the mother is somehow impregnated through the mouth – she may eat a special food – and the baby grows in her stomach from which it is also born. Here, we have a third version of the primal scene.' (Creed, 130)

The very transgression of the alien infant chewing its path to light through Kane's stomach is

highly disturbing. It speaks to the fear we experience of things we do not comprehend. There is nothing more miraculous, yet misunderstood than the process of birth. Within that event are many details that leave the casual observer horrified. Although it is the method of reproduction and continuance of the species, Man has had few desires to fully internalize it as non-threatening. This lack of understanding for the role of the female in the progression of the species created a formative sets of tropes in Ancient mythology; that of the Spider Woman and the Sphinx:

'For instance in the Spider Woman myth of North American Indians, there was the only the Spider Woman, who spun the universe into existence and then created two daughters from whom all life flowed. She is also the Thought Woman or the Wise Woman who knows the secrets of the Universe. Within the Oedipus narrative, however she becomes the Sphinx, who also knows the answers to secret of life; but here her situation has changed. She is no longer the subject of the narrative, she has become the object of the narrative of the male hero. After he has solved her riddle, she will destroy herself. The Sphinx is an ambiguous figure; she knows the secret of life and is thereby linked to the mother-goddess but her name, which is derived from 'sphincter', suggests she is the mother of toilet training, the pre-Oedipal mother whose must repudiate by the son so that he can take up his proper place in the symbolic.' (Creed, 134)

This is the inherent notion of the fear bred by 'The Other'; it's objective, not subjective in nature. Truly, the feminine is not the scary, horrific biological system men secretly believed it to be. However, those of us who are male feel the need to be the subject of the story, to place the feminine as an object of lust, love, or in this case terror. As described in the Oedipus story, the Sphinx is rather beautiful and glorious creature. That she is condemned to death by Oedipus' successful answering of her riddle seems highly unfair. This, however, is the very impulse employed in the film *Alien*.

In the film, the crew must fight a creature created of a new paradigm of femininity which forced itself upon the male animal, and caused an inversion of the birth process thereby subjecting the men of the crew to a fear of what come emanate from their stomachs. Although the purpose of the horror story is to create a sense of fear of the unknown (or in this case the unknowable) to the spectator, *Alien* took it a step farther. It summarized all the sexual objectivity of the feminine and created a new process to fear from that which is maternal in nature.

That the onboard computer on the ship is named Mother is no accident. She too feeds into the fears expressed about the feminine by portraying the archetype mentioned above of the 'pre-Oedipal mother'. The feminine is often considered 'other' in mythic literature, and as the newest installment in such literary cycles, Alien was highly successful in framing 'The Other' as an object of pure unabashed terror.

Not all aliens are terrifying, however. Many are sent to help us. These we will coin 'magical helpers'; or as Spike Lee would put it, entities whose purpose is simply to help the normative succeed. In an interview excerpted below from Cineaste magazine, Spike Lee makes his case about the perils of framing black characters as 'magical helpers' for white people, or as he directly states, 'magical niggers':

'What really bothers me is this new phenomenon of the 'magical nigger' that you see in films such as *The Green Mile*, *The Family Man*, *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, and *What Dreams May Come*. These films all have these magical, mystical Negroes who show up as some sort of spirit or angel but only to benefit the white characters. I mean, Michael Clarke Duncan gave a good performance in *The Green Mile*, but when I saw that movie I knew he was going to get an Academy Award nomination. The Academy just loves roles like that because it makes them feel so liberal. But if this character has such magical powers that he can touch Tom Hanks and cure him of his urinary tract infection, why can't he use those gifts to walk out of prison? ...And what about *The Legend of Bagger Vance*? No disrespect to Will Smith because I really put this more on Robert Redford, the director, but this is a film set in early 1930s, Depression-era Georgia. Georgia has always been one of the roughest states for black people, a lot of Negroes were castrated, lynched and whatnot in Georgia. So this is sick--they didn't even have black caddies! And if this magical black caddy has all these powers, why isn't he using them to try and stop some of the other brothers from being lynched and castrated? Why is he fucking around with Matt Damon and trying to teach him a golf swing? I don't understand this! That is insane...*The Family Man* is the same thing. Don Cheadle is a great actor, but it's this same magical nigger mystique--magical Negroes who appear out of nowhere and have these great powers but who can't use them to help themselves or their own people but only for the benefit of the white stars of the movies.' (Crowdus, Georgakas, 2001)

As can be seen, the direct nature of the complaint is mainstream normative Hollywood only views 'The Other', in this case Black actors, in objective terms, as they can lend assistance to White stars. In a similar vein then are Aliens cast. We begin this exploration of the magical helper with Spielberg's phenomenal *ET: The Extraterrestrial* (1982).

In *ET*, we encounter Elliot, a young child who struggles with his parents' divorce. One night Elliot's brother and his friends encounter a strange and curious creature in the woods:

'When the aliens move and speak to each other, they use snuffling noises and bounding movements reminiscent of a cute animal. Indeed, E.T. is often believed to be an animal--at one stage, a dog-catcher is after him, at another, he is imagined to be a coyote, and at a third, Elliot's brother suggests he may be 'a monkey, or an orang-utan, or something' (Addison-Smith, 'ET Go Home', 5)

In rendering the creature simply named ET as a cute nonthreatening type, he becomes a useful cypher for Elliot and all the juvenile spectators this film and others like it cater to. In fact, ET is so non-threatening he does not wish to stay on this planet, which as Addison-Smith notes, is the mark of the 'good alien':

'Such contemporary constructions of and interest in notions of home and homeland are reflected in Science Fiction's positive constructions of alien life, in that 'good aliens' place over whelming importance upon the concept of home. In E.T., for example, the narrative is centered round the need for the alien character, E.T., to go home. E.T. has been accidentally left behind by his countrymen when their craft briefly lands on Earth. E.T. is found and 'adopted' by a dysfunctional, white, American family, who live in a suburb on the frontier of the city, a raw, half-built place on the border between the civilised world and the wild forest. E.T. becomes an intrinsic part of that family, developing an especially close relationship with the young boy, Elliot. However, E.T. cannot stay on Earth, but must go home and in his childlike, limited, English repeats the word 'home' more than any other. For example, when Elliot declares his wish for E.T. to stay, E.T. responds only 'Home, home, home'. Likewise, in a moment of intertextuality, when E.T. sees a child dressed up as Yoda (from Star Wars), he staggers towards him, crying 'Home'. Elliot's famously heart-rending cry of 'E.T. phone home' is not so that he can ring up and communicate with his 'people' while still staying on Earth, his new 'home'-- he has no desire to become a migrant--but rather, so that he can be picked up and delivered back to his homeland. This desire for home is not only one of psychic want but also of physical need. E.T. gradually becomes sicker and sicker the longer he stays away from his homeland. His connection to a particular place is profound. His 'countrymen' know this, and do return in order to 'save' one of their own, who is otherwise unable to survive in the Western world.' ('ET Go Home', 4)

One can easily see how the cynical (or possibly realistic) eye would view the 'good alien' concept as synonymous with 'good nigger'. ET does not want to stay here. He wishes only to return to his homeland.

In a similar vein, we encounter the aliens in *Cocoon* (1986). A group of assisted-living residents are reinvigorated by youth after swimming in a pool which contains strange shell-like brown

structures. After a few more visits to the pool, they discover the structures are in fact cocoons housing aliens. As Addison-Smith informs us, these are 'good aliens':

'A similar narrative trajectory underpins *Cocoon*, in which a group of aliens comes to Earth where long ago they had to evacuate an outpost, and so left behind, deep under water, cocoons containing their countrymen. When the aliens' existence is discovered by a human, he becomes anxious that the aliens are going to invade America. An alien reassures him that, 'All we need to do is get our friends and leave'--and that they do.' ('ET Go Home', 5)

Subtextually, it would appear as though the formative and principal trait of 'good aliens' much like many manifestations of 'The Other' is that their sojourn amongst us is only temporary. However, this self-same notion can be true of 'bad aliens'. Certainly there must be some deep elemental distinction between both groups of aliens. Addison Smith suggests the following:

'They do not share know ledges of their respective cultures--as would be hoped for in multicultural or hybridic exchange--but rather, the aliens give a particular affect to the humans. This is particularly evident in *E.T.*, where the alien and the little boy, Elliot, share a psychic bond. When Elliot's brother is questioned by scientists about the nature of this bond, he makes it clear that the two do not share thoughts so much as feelings. *E.T.*'s connection to the world of emotion is a bodily one: his warm, red heart visibly pulsates at times of particular emotional intensity, and the red tip to one of his elongated fingers lights up as he touches and heals the humans who surround him. When *E.T.* begins to sicken. Elliot knows that this means that the little alien is now 'feeling everything'. Elliot becomes ill as *E.T.* does: their identities are now physically and psychically joined. Elliot finds out nothing about *E.T.*'s culture, but rather, *E.T.* teaches him about love and ultimately reinvigorates his family life. Although this film is entitled *E.T.*, the narrative is fundamentally about the rejuvenation of Elliot's culture. Likewise... *Cocoon*, contact with the aliens inspires a rebirth of traditional relationships of romance, family and love. In fact, the aliens in all these films allow the white characters a chance to escape their contemporary alienation. The aliens do not teach the white characters anything about their culture, but rather create in the humans positive feelings so that they can self-improve and better enact their own lives...It is their teachings rather than their continued presence that is vital.' ('ET Go Home', 5-6)

Thus do we connect the notion of the 'good alien' with the 'magical helper'. Through their connection to each other, does the white normative human learn very crucial and important life lessons from 'The Other', in this case the extraterrestrials. As they are a temporary presence, their existence on the planet is highly non-threatening which enables the exchange of ideas which are of crucial importance to the humans – not the aliens themselves – to occur.

In all these cases, the aliens are from intergalactic highly advanced species. They need nothing

from us humans but a modicum of assistance to achieve the goal necessary to return to their personal homelands. While they dwell among us, however they impart emotional and bonding lessons to us. Further stating the case Spielberg lays out in *Close Encounters* of the dissociative and disconnected nature of modern society. As Elliot struggles with the aforementioned divorce, ET heals him by enabling Elliot to understand that his father (as well as ET) loves him very much. They simply cannot live in the same place for whatever reason. This bonding is highly instructive to Elliot and makes him a stronger, better adjusted individual.

Likewise, the aliens in *Cocoon* instruct the elderly people they encounter how to tighten the bonds of their families. In a slightly different trope, the aged are permitted the chance to join the alien others in their journey back to their homeland. This is acceptable, for the geriatric Americans have been imbued with an element of otherness from the aliens. They no longer act their age, and have been spiritually rejuvenated and their lives extended.

Through these two films do we come to a complete understanding of the useful alien, he/she or it who serves as the 'magical helper. They exist solely to teach normative white America how better to lead their lives. In this way they parallel all manner of cultural others in many different literary and cinematic traditions. It's a rare thing to find a dominant culture who actually understands how to care for its own citizenry. In many ways, it seems the greater notion of 'The Other' is to inform us how incapable we are when on our own.

Clearly, in the late 20th Century and today, the alien is a very satisfactory vehicle to be utilized as 'The Other'. Whether the purpose is to terrify (*Aliens*), inspire (*Close Encounters*, *Contact*), educate (*Alien Nation*), lecture (*Alive in Joburg*) or simply to illustrate other perspectives, aliens are a terrific lens which reveals our obsession with human races and removes them entirely from the equation. Through their usage, we can explore all the attitudes, problems and general malaises we experience as a

society and a world without forcing us into the traditional recriminations, while maintaining the very best traditions of storytelling.

The Advanced alien society enables us to infuse a small measure of humility into our greater consciousness. Certainly we are at the peak of advancement, but we should be aware that there could be greater powers out there, entities who have far exceeded our wildest understandings and visions of technologies and social development. Through the usage of both 'good' and 'bad' aliens we are forced to confront our problems and achieve new dynamic solutions. What was most thrilling about Alien, for example, is even as we were confronted with the horrors of the feminine and maternal issues of epic, even mythic tropes, the protagonists were a woman and black man. Ripley and Parker are the heroic workers who take on the new and devastating creature, with Ripley eventually dispatching it to the bleak vacuum of space. Elliot heals and matures in ways his parents' divorce never would have permitted him to do otherwise. The police officer at the center of Alien Nation learns to accept his new jurisdiction.

Thus do aliens serve as an appropriate lens through which to measure the effects and stories involving 'The Other'. They contextualize our issues in a palatable form which we can bear to witness in the wonderful democratizing arena of the darkened theater. Even though it's now in vogue to utilize vampires as 'The other' in the contemporary cinema, I strongly suspect a return to aliens as the principal measure of otherness is not far away at all.

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