

Role of Aliens in Science Fiction Film

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Abstract: This study examines the role of aliens, known as extraterrestrial life, in science fiction films exemplified by *Independence Day* (1996) and *Arrival* (2016). Through a comparative analysis, the research explores how aliens has symbolized the unknown and fear, reflect human characteristics, values, and social issues. The study reveals that the portrayal of aliens has shifted over the decades from merely stimulating curiosity and entertainment to conveying profound global messages. By depicting alien encounters, these films uncover the inner core of humanity and highlight the darker aspects of human nature, demonstrating the significant traits and ethical dilemmas that define human existence. This study further illustrates the depiction of aliens in film-making often serves as a mirror of human beings wants for power and control, and selfishness, emphasizing the complexity of the coexistence and the ethical concern that arises from the appearance of “The Unknown” and in the face of difference.

Keywords: aliens, media studies, science fiction films, sociology, anthropology

1. Introduction

Science fiction is a genre of speculative fiction, which typically deals with imaginative and futuristic concepts such as advanced science and technology, space exploration, time travel, parallel universes, and extraterrestrial life. This genre originated from humans' curiosity and imagination about the unknown. From all the mentioned concepts, extraterrestrial life, as many people conceived as aliens, is widely popularized in science fiction films due to its unique physical form and its use as a metaphor.

The image of aliens can be seen as a symbol, representing the unknown, our fears and hopes, and our place in the vastness of the universe. Through their portrayal, science fiction challenges us to think beyond the boundaries of our known world and explore the possibilities that lie beyond. Through contact and conflict with aliens, human beings' own characteristics, values and social problems can be reflected.

This research delves specifically into two films, *Independence Day* (1996) and *Arrival* (2016), through a comparative case study approach. These two science fiction films involve first contact with aliens to explore the role of aliens in science fiction films. Through providing a different vision, the inner core of humanity is revealed in the depiction of aliens in the film, which indirectly implies the evilness inside human nature.

The existence of aliens demonstrates important traits of human nature. The two case studies in this essay explore multiple ways of portraying the “otherness” and alteration of aliens. The role of aliens in science fiction films went through significant changes during the past decades- from a tool that

helps to create entertainment effects or trigger audiences' curiosity about the unknown to a container of global messages that resonate with a larger number of audiences.

2. Historical backgrounds of aliens in science fiction

The image of aliens has changed from being based solely on human curiosity to an expression of human being's features. The image of aliens in films changes continuously along with historical events, cultural differences, and technological developments, being portrayed more realistically with the development of special effects and CGI and being impacted by the emergence of artificial intelligence. The image of aliens when they first appeared in science fiction movies was very absurd, being a strange shape that did not resemble a human, such as *A Trip To The Moon* (1902), and are likely to be made to fulfill audience's curiosity. However, imagination alone cannot satisfy contemporary sci-fi audience [1]. Overtime, science fiction films have developed more implicit and reflective content. Later, a conventional image of an alien emerges. Aliens were depicted as hostile beings. They were utilized to create a sense of fear and threat, representing an unknown and potentially dangerous force that humanity had to confront. Aliens were depicted as aggressive invaders, reflecting society's anxieties about potential enemies and the vulnerability of human civilization, especially during time of heightened geopolitical fear of external threats. These images of aliens were mostly cruel, warlike, and irrational. For example, in the film *The War of the Worlds*, aliens from Mars, unable to survive due to sudden climate changes on Mars, planned a large-scale invasion of Earth. They killed humans who shouted "We are friends"[2].

Now, some science fiction films put greater focus on exploration and deeper philosophical ideas. Aliens are sometimes shown as beings with advanced knowledge and technology that humans could learn from. This can create positive interaction with the unknown. Overall, science fiction films gradually served as a role of conveying messages instead of entertainment.

3. Comparative analysis

3.1. Case study: *Arrival*

In the film *Arrival*, the image of aliens breaks the stereotype of aliens and conventional sci-fi stories. It conveys these messages through a high-dimensional perspective that alters the landscape of alien film. *Arrival* introduces the concepts of language and time through the perspective of "heptapods". In *Arrival*, aliens serve as catalysts for human growth, understanding, and unity through peaceful means. The aliens' gift to humanity is something to unify our divided world, bringing peace and harmony to nations. *Arrival* focuses on communication, understanding, and the philosophical implications of alien contact.

The creatures in *Arrival* perceive time and things differently. They introduce their own language system to human beings, which is non-linear. In this, a concept called non-zero-sum game is introduced, representing a win-win situation, which is unlikely to happen in other regular sci-fi films [3]. Determinism and free will are also the key points explored in this film. During the communication with the aliens, the director presented a montage sequence of memories of the protagonist and his daughter, featuring various memory clips of him and his daughter.

Language is the core of *Arrival*. Heptapods gave their language as a gift to humans so that they could be able to perceive the past, future and present simultaneously. Furthermore, a concept called the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis was shown in the film, meaning that language determines mind. The protagonist completely changes her mind set when interacting with the alien. They basically shared an identical thinking pattern. In the film, one of the heptapods told Louis: "Louis can see the future." Hardly can this connection be found in other science fiction films that two different species are sharing the same language and same thinking mode.

3.2. Case study: *Independence Day*

Independence Day is a classic action blockbuster of the 90s that emphasizes heroism and patriotism. This film is set against the background of an alien invasion of Earth. The story is simple. It shows a divided world at first. Due to the arrival of aliens, all the major cities in the world became very panicked because of the aliens' attack, and this alien arrival also brought about broken families. However, the US president regrouped a group of people and finally defeated the invaders [4]. *Independence Day* conveys a more believable image of aliens, a terrifying and negative image. The image of the aliens in *Independence Day* reminds me of another film called *District 9*. The image of the aliens in *District 9* is very similar to that in *Independence Day*. They are cruel and brutal, ignoring the kindness given by people.

This film depicts a more narrative content based on historical backgrounds and mainly emphasizes human unity and cooperation, which has a strong connection with the cultural background at that time. In the film, aliens could be viewed as a more traditional narrative as opposed to *Arrival*. The main reason is that aliens, in this film, expand the scope of conflict from a nation-to-nation scale to a human versus extraterrestrial life scale. It builds two clear sides of the conflict between humans and aliens. The aliens in it are shown in a very aggressive image while the military and government were well-celebrated in the film as contrary to the aliens. In fact, many heroic figures have been shaped through the negative image of aliens in the film. One of them is a Vietnam veteran who spent most of the film drunk and embarrassing his children. But in the end, in the final battle against the aliens, he sacrifices himself to destroy the entire alien spaceship. This film reveals American cultural attitudes, values, and identities from various perspectives. Just like the shot at the very beginning of the film, there was an American flag with a quote on it that said, "We can in peace." *Independence Day*, to be more specific, the United States defends its authority by being unconquerable. In *Independence Day*, many of the landmark buildings in the United States were destroyed due to the arrival of aliens. Defeating the aliens symbolizes a rebirth [5].

3.3. Comparative analysis

The two case studies present inverted reflections on each other despite the same starting point of aliens coming to Earth. However, the opposite perspective and outcome lead to different resolutions in an adverse direction. The threat of violence is presented in both films. However, the initiators are different. Violence on *Independence Day* has been presented as the only pathway for humans to survive, and a fight between humans and aliens is a necessary and passive act due to the aggressiveness shown by aliens, which is an idealized situation [6]. A good example might be the first interaction between humans and aliens on *Independence Day*. When the president expressed kindness to aliens and suggested a way to coexist, these aliens rejected the peace offered by the president [7]. But in *Arrival*, on the contrary, violence presented is regarded as the wrong path. In the process of interpreting the language of the aliens, the protagonist asks them why they came to Earth. The heptapods' answer was uncertain whether it represented "implement" or "weapon". This unclear message inspires some soldiers to kill one of the heptapods. The military chooses violence despite this ambiguity and overlooks the possibility that heptapods might have good intentions, which is ironic. *Arrival* is much more than a simple alien invasion action movie; it centers on themes of communication and some other ideas [8]. Unlike *Independence Day* when a war is inevitable, however, a war is prevented when Louise uses this language as a gift and her knowledge of the future to convince the leader of the Chinese military, General Shang, to not to start a fight. *Independence Day* keeps with the politics of some disaster movies, when some catastrophic event causes division and weakness. Then, some heroes emerge and save the world. However, there is not excessive glorification of the government and militaries in *Arrival* [9]. On the contrary, it portrays scientists in

a more favorable light, even if not as heroes. In fact, Louise is portrayed as a stranger in her own world. Her contributions is not supported and recognized. When the aliens disclosed their language to humans, the government believed that this language was intended to cause conflicts among humans and eventually produce only one leader. But linguists, on the other hand, believed that the heptapods gave them this language to encourage communication between governments, which has been proved right in the end of the film. Compared with the traditional image of aliens in *Independence Day*, I think *Arrival* completely breaks the original image that aliens are supposed to have. They are rarely depicted as a positive image. This film breaks some of our familiar notions and perceptions about aliens. I think *Arrival* has made very impressive contributions to the genre of aliens, which is very unexpected.

Although *Arrival* has a smaller narrative scale compared to *Independence Day*, the intended meaning it brings has an extremely large extensible space. Removing the elements taken from the real political pattern, the light science fiction tone leaves the audience sufficient philosophical thinking space, and they will not be disturbed from thinking about its main idea due to overly hardcore plot content. At the same time, the complete set of novels behind it fully supports readers' exploration of the movie and the possibility of its extended core, which forms a sharp contrast to the viewing experience produced by *Independence Day*, which focuses on visual effects and science fiction settings. Such a pattern attracts completely different audiences, determines the sales strategy of the film company, and has a huge influence on novels and other film and television derivative works, playing a decisive role in the selection of the market audience during the early promotion of the film [10].

4. Philosophical and ethical questions raised by encounters

The role of the alien can be a reflection of social issues. The traits represented by Aliens are symbols of the people in that era. The two films mentioned the sense of crisis raised by encounters. The sudden emergence of encounters forces humans to work with each other without the concept of a nation, leading to the disappearance of internal conflicts. In fact, human beings contain a lot of internal conflict that is hard to resolve. However, when it comes to the alien, things change simultaneously as aliens represent aggressiveness and threats toward the Earth, which means humans start to dismiss the concept of nation and internal conflict and disagreement and start working together. The image of aliens is defined by the director. Since there are so many social concepts that can be expressed, aliens can carry some of their own cultural attributes. For instance, in the film *A Trip to the Moon*, the image of aliens is designed to satisfy human beings' desire for exploration.

In addition, the encounter with aliens also challenges our understanding of morality and ethics. As we face an unknown and potentially powerful entity, we are forced to question what is right and wrong in our actions towards them. Do we have the right to defend ourselves at all costs, even if it means using extreme measures? Or should we attempt to communicate and understand their intentions before making any hasty decisions?

Finally, the encounter with aliens forces us to confront our own mortality and the fragility of our existence. The realization that there are beings out there that may be more advanced or powerful than us can be a humbling experience. It makes us question what truly matters in life and what we should be striving for as a species. In this way, the encounter with aliens can be a catalyst for personal and collective growth. Furthermore, the cultural attributes that aliens may carry can also lead to a reevaluation of our own values and beliefs. As we encounter different ways of thinking and living, we may be forced to question the assumptions that we have held for so long. This can lead to a deeper understanding of ourselves and our place in the universe.

5. Future potentials of aliens in science fiction

In accordance with what is mentioned above, the two films discuss the sense of crisis raised by encounters. The sudden emergence of encounters forces humans to work with each other without the concept of a nation, leading to the disappearance of internal conflicts [11]. Aliens, under this scenario, become a catalyst of the cooperation of human beings worldwide due to the fact that aliens represent aggressiveness and threat toward the Earth, which means humans inevitably start to ignore internal conflict and start working together. From the above-mentioned analysis, it seems that the appearance of Aliens in sci-fi films often provides a strong reflection of the people in that specific era; in other words, aliens have gradually become a symbol of time and era in sci-fi filmmaking. In order to justify this claim about the high correlation between Alien filmmaking and the era behind film production, several aspects could be considered, including historical context, cultural differences as well as technological advancement.

Historical events have witnessed the strong influence of aliens in its development. Back in the time period of the Cold War, aliens at that time were often depicted as invaders, which is the symbol of severe global tension and alertness. A great example is a film called *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), in which the film elaborates on the arrival of aliens, and the robot it contains has been viewed as a metaphor for nuclear hazardless. In contrast, in the post 9-11 era, which is the time period after 2011, alien films often represent the trend of collaboration and global unity. This is especially noticeable in the film *Arrival*, where aliens went to Earth not as a symbol of extra-terrestrial invasion but instead as a representation of exchanging ideas and offering support, providing great allusion to the importance of communication and cooperation from an international perspective. Besides Historical context, cultural differences also strongly justify this strong correlation. In Western films, aliens are viewed as invaders and threats, as exemplified in the previous case study of *Independence Day* (1996). However, in Eastern cinema, such as Japanese anime, aliens are designed as mystical creatures or even friends of human beings. In the 1998 Japanese anime film *Cowboy Bebop*, aliens and humans are not confronted with each other but instead coexist in a greater complex universe, which is a more unconventional depiction of aliens due to the significant cultural differences. Finally, the technological development also plays an important role. With the development of special effects and CGI, aliens are portrayed in a more realistic way, as demonstrated in the film *Avatar*, where aliens are presented in a more vivid world of Pandora. As time goes on, the emergence of artificial intelligence also demonstrates a greater impact of alien films. The film *Ex Machina* (2014) seems to blur the lines between AI and alien-like intelligence, providing a thought-provoking question related to the ethical implications of advanced technology.

As a result, the image of aliens will change along with the human events and will be presented according to human expectations. Therefore, in the future, the image of aliens may cater to some trends of social development, for example, globalization or dealing with climate change and geographical disasters, conflict between human beings and artificial intelligence, etc. Some films might depict aliens as being concerned about or affected by the ecological damage on Earth, highlighting society's increasing awareness of the importance of a sustainable planet. Moreover, as society continues to grapple with issues of inequality and social justice, alien narratives could potentially address these themes. Aliens might be portrayed as observing human societies and questioning our disparities in wealth, access to resources, and opportunities. This could prompt viewers to reflect on their own actions and strive for a more just world. Furthermore, alien stories could offer visions of futuristic urban landscapes that incorporate advanced ecological technologies. Aliens might serve as examples of how to live in harmony with nature and create sustainable habitats. This could inspire us to re-imagine our own cities and work towards a more sustainable future.

6. Conclusion

In this more diverse and sensitive era, many messages can only be conveyed implicitly. The role of aliens in science fiction films has gradually changed from a pure component for entertainment to a container of important social implications. They prompt us to question our place in the universe and our responsibilities towards aliens, the other potential life forms. As technology progresses and our understanding of the universe expands, the portrayal of aliens in films is likely to become even more complex and profound. This will inevitably continue to shape our collective consciousness and inspire new discussions and explorations in the realm of science fiction and beyond. Such science fiction films provide a platform for thinking and reflection instead of merely entertainment. In addition, the presence of an alien in science fiction films makes the film more nuanced, and their existence reveals the essence of negative human nature.

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