

# ‘More Human than Human’: Colonial Logics and the Modern Subject in Science Fiction Films

Millennium: Journal of  
International Studies  
2022, Vol. 51(1) 184–211

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/03058298221128069  
journals.sagepub.com/home/mil



**Caio A. Martins Simoneti** 

University of Cambridge, UK

## Abstract

Science fiction has often been associated with colonial imaginaries, given its engagement with themes such as invasions and encounters with other civilisations. This article addresses these relations by focusing on the invasion plot subgenre and the nexus between the modern subject and colonial frameworks. It argues that conceptions of subjectivity are a site of symbolic struggle, acting not only as the bases of the reproduction of colonial logics in these narratives, but also as a *locus* for their disruption. It first analyses *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds*, highlighting how categories such as disembodiment, anthropocentrism and linear progress are crucial in reproducing the modern subject and colonial hierarchies in invasion stories. It then explores *Arrival* and *Annihilation* to argue that invasion plots can also present alternative forms of encounter as they disrupt modern subjectivity and colonial frameworks by contesting ideas of disembodiment, identity, progress and the human/nonhuman divide.

## Keywords

colonialism, science fiction, modern subject

## Introduction

In the film *Blade Runner*,<sup>1</sup> ‘more human than human’ is the slogan of Tyrell Corporation, a manufacturer of ‘replicants,’ synthetic humans with enhanced capabilities and a pre-determined life span. Just as the science fiction genre itself, replicants are marked by elements of

---

1. *Blade Runner*, dir. Ridley Scott (Warner Bros, 1982).

---

### Corresponding author:

Caio A. Martins Simoneti, University of Cambridge, Alison Richard Building, 7 West Rd, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire CB3 9DT, UK.

Email: cam248@cam.ac.uk

cognition and estrangement<sup>2</sup> – a degree of difference within a framework of familiarity which, in this case, allows for a hierarchical relation to the human. However, the idea of a hierarchical classification of humanity is not exclusive to science fiction, having been fundamental for colonial practice and thought over the past centuries. In fact, the science fiction genre has been marked by a series of tropes and themes that emerged in colonial processes: exploration, invasions, and encounters with alterity.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in a context marked by the ubiquity of science fiction films in popular culture as well as new debates regarding the lasting legacies of colonial empires, it is relevant to understand the connections between science fiction and colonialism, as well as their influence over contemporary politics.

This article argues that conceptions of subjectivity are a site of symbolic struggle as they appear as a key element in the reproduction, as well as in the disruption, of colonial frameworks in encounters with alterity depicted in science fiction invasion stories. It addresses how the constitution of the modern subject and his<sup>4</sup> Others is at the bases of hierarchical notions that have been used in justifying and legitimising colonial thought and practices. The reproduction of these conceptions of subjectivity offers the grounds for the colonial echoes in the invasion plot subgenre in science fiction. However, I argue that invasion stories can also break away from the reproduction of the colonial scenario precisely as they explore alternative forms of subjectivity, challenging the dominance of the modern subject. By presenting different accounts of subjectivity and the encounter with the Other, they disrupt established invasion tropes and colonial logics, offering sites of critical reflection upon everyday assumptions regarding subjectivity, rationality, development and nature, which sustain power relations in the contemporary modern/colonial world.

The lasting influences of colonialism have been discussed by postcolonial and decolonial scholars, addressing how the contemporary world has been shaped by the co-production of modernity and coloniality over the past centuries.<sup>5</sup> Hence, it is fundamental to identify the mechanisms through which colonial notions are reproduced and contested in contemporary political imagination, with a view to articulate alternative frameworks capable of displacing existing hierarchies. With that in mind, this article draws upon insights of International Relations (IR) scholars into the role of popular culture in producing the conditions for contemporary world politics by normalising meanings, expectations, and power relations.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, by critically identifying how colonial frameworks

- 
2. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: on the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979).
  3. John Rieder, 'Science Fiction, Colonialism, and the Plot of Invasion', *Extrapolation* 46, no. 3 (2005): 373–94.
  4. Categories such as 'the modern subject' and 'the human' are referred as masculine as they were historically modelled after modern Western Man, as discussed in the following section.
  5. Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993); Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Aníbal Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,' *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 168–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353>
  6. Jutta Weldes, 'Popular Culture, Science Fiction, and World Politics: Exploring Intertextual Relations', in *To Seek Out New Worlds: Science Fiction and World Politics*, ed. Jutta Weldes (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 6; Nicholas J. Kiersey and Iver B. Neumann, 'Worlds of Our Making in Science Fiction and International Relations', in *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies*, eds. Federica Caso and Caitlin Hamilton (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2015), 75.

are reproduced and challenged in films, it allows for intervening in the dispute over the production of meanings that constitute world politics.

The connections between science fiction and colonialism have been traced with attention to the political context of the origins of the genre. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a period of intense colonial expansion, was a crucial moment in science fiction's emergence, which took place primarily in countries involved in imperialist projects.<sup>7</sup> Themes of exploration and contact with unknown peoples in 'lost race' plots were inspired by tales of imperial adventure, and 'racial disaster' narratives were heavily reliant on racial ideologies tied to colonialism and eugenics.<sup>8</sup> However, John Rieder has emphasised that the science fiction subgenre most influenced by its references to colonialism is the invasion plot. By mobilising the notion of progress, these narratives present the possibility of the invasion of technologically superior alien races as a dark side of technological advancement and a reversal of the European colonial project.<sup>9</sup>

The links between colonial scenarios and science fiction narratives invites reflection on their political effects. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay has argued that science fiction has been driven by a desire for the imaginary transition from 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialism into a form of 'technoscientific empire' as 'a new project of deterritorialized supranational dominance'.<sup>10</sup> Science fiction would be a 'genre of empire' as – independently of its authors intentions – the genre's connection to technoscience would keep it from countering technoscientific hegemony, in fact making it 'the primary institution of art that makes this new regime habitable by the imagination'.<sup>11</sup> However, other scholars have presented how science fiction can both reinforce and criticise colonial meanings – sometimes within the same text.<sup>12</sup> For example, Naeem Inayatullah has argued that *Star Trek: The Next Generation* presents instances of critical reflection upon the possibility of the encounter with the Other as an opportunity for learning and engaging the self's inner Others. He highlights, nevertheless, that it remains tied to certain commitments that privilege sameness over difference, such as a unilinear conception of development (the 'Richter Scale of Culture') and the recourse to the 'universal translator,' which presents language as mere images of a single and universal given world.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Lorenzo

- 
7. Rieder, 'Science Fiction, Colonialism,' 375; Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., 'Science Fiction and Empire', *Science Fiction Studies* 30, no. 2 (2003): 231.
  8. Farah Mendlesohn, 'Fiction, 1926–1949', in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould (London: Routledge, 2009), 54, 56; Rieder, 'Science Fiction, Colonialism.'
  9. *Ibid.*, 377–78.
  10. Csicsery-Ronay Jr., 'Science Fiction and Empire', 232; Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., 'Empire', in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould (London: Routledge, 2009), 362–63.
  11. *Ibid.*, 241–42; *Ibid.*, 371.
  12. Rieder, 'Science Fiction, Colonialism'; Naeem Inayatullah, 'Bumpy Space: Imperialism and Resistance in Star Trek: The Next Generation', in *To Seek Out New Worlds: Science Fiction and World Politics*, ed. Jutta Weldes (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 53–75; Geoffrey Whitehall, 'The Problem of the "World and Beyond": Encountering "the Other" in Science Fiction', in *To Seek Out New Worlds: Science Fiction and World Politics*, ed. Jutta Weldes (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 169–93; Lorenzo Veracini, 'District 9 and Avatar: Science Fiction and Settler Colonialism', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 32, no. 4 (2011): 355–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2011.584614>.
  13. Inayatullah, 'Bumpy Space'.

Veracini has explored how *District 9* and *Avatar* are commonly read as critical narratives on the mistreatment of migrants and environmental devastation, while reproducing settler colonial logics present in South Africa and the United States.<sup>14</sup>

The question, thus, concerns the workings that lead science fiction artefacts to reproduce and reinforce – but also to challenge – the logics that provided the grounds for colonialism and continue to influence the modern/colonial world. Here, the theme of subjectivity appears as a relevant topic as colonial hierarchies have been grounded upon the simultaneous constitution of the modern subject and his Others, based on distinctions such as subject/object, nature/culture, embodiment/disembodiment, developed/underdeveloped, rational/irrational. Therefore, in the effort of investigating how invasion narratives also hold the potential to disrupt the modern subject and these hierarchical categories, subjectivity is framed as a site of contestation and political possibility, allowing for identifying ways to imagine the encounter and the possibilities of alterity beyond the colonial scenario. With that in mind, this article addresses how subjectivity is at the heart of colonial tropes and hierarchies present in invasion stories. By centring this dimension, it shows how invasion plots can also break with the conception of the modern subject and disrupt the colonial frameworks that have historically populated this subgenre, allowing for imagining the encounter with alterity otherwise and problematising widespread assumptions that sustain power relations in the modern/colonial present.

By engaging with these questions in science fiction films, I follow Michael J. Shapiro and Jacques Rancière in thinking through them as a form of critical practice.<sup>15</sup> For Shapiro, *thinking* implies inventing and applying conceptual frames that disrupt accepted knowledge practices, creating conditions of possibility for imagining alternative worlds and recognising political commitments behind political imaginaries.<sup>16</sup> Insofar as ‘[p]olitics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it’,<sup>17</sup> this article seeks to interrogate the reproduction and disruption of forms of subjectivity and colonial frameworks in these films, intervening upon the way they reinforce and challenge the assumptions and understandings that shape and delimit the horizons of the ‘visible,’ the ‘sayable’ and the ‘thinkable’ of world politics.<sup>18</sup>

The films selected for this analysis are *Independence Day* (1996), *War of the Worlds* (2005),<sup>19</sup> *Arrival* (2016) and *Annihilation* (2018).<sup>20</sup> They narrate contacts with extra-terrestrial Others, allowing for speculative exploration of the possibilities in the encounter with alterity. Moreover, all these are mainstream productions that received considerable media attention, which makes them more likely to have a significant impact upon popular

14. Veracini, ‘District 9 and Avatar’.

15. Michael J. Shapiro, *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203101506>. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

16. Shapiro, *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method*, xv.

17. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 8.

18. *Ibid.*

19. The film is a loose adaptation of H.G. Wells’ novel.

20. *Independence Day*, dir. Roland Emmerich (20th Century Fox, 1996); *War of the Worlds*, dir. Steven Spielberg (Paramount Pictures, 2005); *Arrival*, dir. Denis Villeneuve (Paramount Pictures, 2016); *Annihilation*, dir. Alex Garland (Netflix, 2018).

imagination. The first two films represent typical iterations of the invasion plot, however with divergences that reveal the different possibilities within this archetype. I mobilise these films to demonstrate how specific elements often present in invasion stories can reiterate colonial logics. On the other hand, *Arrival* and *Annihilation* appear as variations of the invasion story, also presenting the unannounced arrival of extra-terrestrials, but disrupting certain narrative conventions of the subgenre. This makes them particularly useful in highlighting how invasion stories can also contest colonial legacies, illustrating the possibilities of science fiction narratives to present alternative perspectives on subjectivity and the encounter with alterity to a wide audience.

The article is organised as follows: the first section discusses the theoretical framework informing the analysis, discussing the concept of *hauntology* as a reading tool and the role of the constitution of the modern subject and his Others in colonial logics. The second section analyses *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds*, mobilising them to highlight narrative elements in invasion stories that are haunted by the figure of the modern subject and the colonial hierarchies it sustains. Finally, the third section analyses *Arrival* and *Annihilation*, arguing that invasion plots also carry ideas that challenge the image of the modern subject, allowing for displacing colonial categories and thinking the encounter with the Other beyond colonial scenarios.

## Hauntology, Colonial Spectres and Modern Subjectivity

Hauntology is a useful concept for making sense of how colonial legacies structure the world despite the demise of ‘formal’ colonial empires, as well as for understanding the productive effects of silences and absences.<sup>21</sup> It emerged in the context of Jacques Derrida’s critique of Western metaphysics of presence, which addresses how Western thought is structured by the production of dichotomies such as presence/absence, inside/outside, identity/difference, spoken/written.<sup>22</sup> These binaries do not contain perfect, symmetric oppositions, but hierarchical relations – a privileged term appears as a notion of presence, a grounding force belonging to *logos*, while the other is understood as a negation, a disruption of the first.<sup>23</sup> This is an effect of *logocentrism* – the privileging of the spoken word over writing. Speaking is favoured as a form of self-present and immediate meaning, given the simultaneous presence of speaker and listener. Writing, however, is understood as a mere representation of speech, a second-rate substitute, involving contingency and the possibility of adulteration given the absence of the writer.<sup>24</sup> Through logocentrism, Western philosophy committed to a notion of ‘being as presence’ and a ‘metaphysics of presence’ which focuses on meaning as existing in itself, as

21. Nivi Manchanda and Sara Salem, ‘Empire’s H(a)unting Grounds: Theorising Violence and Resistance in Egypt and Afghanistan’, *Current Sociology* 68, no. 2 (2020): 243–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392119886866>.
22. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 2006).
23. Jonathan D. Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 93.
24. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 11–12, 30; Barbara Johnson, ‘Translator’s Introduction’ to *Dissemination*, by Jacques Derrida, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), viii–ix.

foundation.<sup>25</sup> This leads Western thought to prioritise questions of what exists and how things should be defined.<sup>26</sup>

Hauntology appears as an alternative to this form of reasoning. By emphasising the co-dependence between binary terms, it highlights that the privileged term is always haunted by the spectre of the second.<sup>27</sup> In other words, nothing has a purely positive existence: everything that exists depends on a series of absences surrounding it, which allow for its consistency and intelligibility – just as linguistic terms can only be defined in their positive characteristics through their difference from other terms.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the second term, as a spectre haunting the privileged one, is neither fully present nor wholly absent: it does not belong to ontology, which thinks being as self-identical presence.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, in order to account for this condition, Derrida proposes hauntology – which combines ‘ontology’ and ‘haunting’ – as an alternative to ontology.<sup>30</sup> While ontology refers to a study of that which exists, hauntology implies engaging with the agency of the virtual – that which does not fully exist, but has a considerable influence.<sup>31</sup>

Hauntology presents an insightful understanding of time – a spectre is never fully present, it has no being in itself, but presents a relation to what is no longer or not yet.<sup>32</sup> Mark Fisher has developed on how hauntology works in these two directions: it refers to both that which no longer exists in actuality but remains effective as a virtuality, such as the enduring influence of a traumatic event or a compulsion to repeat patterns, as well as to that which has not yet happened in actuality but is already exercising agency as a virtuality, such as an anticipation shaping current behaviour.<sup>33</sup> Thus, hauntology allows for engaging not only with the influence of colonial experiences of the past, but also with how fears and hopes regarding possible futures shape the politics of the present. Therefore, as Nivi Manchanda and Sara Salem observe, the notion of haunting not only implies the importance of looking at the past to understand the present, but it also unsettles the idea that past and present – and the *future* as well, as highlighted by Fisher – are necessarily and always distinct categories.<sup>34</sup>

For these reasons, hauntology presents a way to understand how colonialism continues to structure the world, as well as a theoretical tool for viewing silences and absences

---

25. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 11–12; Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 92.

26. Jenny Edkins, ‘Poststructuralism’ in *International Relations Theory for the Twenty-First Century: an Introduction*, ed. Martin Griffiths (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 96.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 17–18.

29. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 63; Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 82.

30. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 10.

31. Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 18; Danika Medak-Saltzman, ‘Empire’s Haunted Logics: Comparative Colonialisms and the Challenges of Incorporating Indigeneity’, *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2015): 17. <https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.2.0011>.

32. Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 82; Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 18.

33. *Ibid.*, 19.

34. Manchanda and Salem, ‘Empire’s H(a)unting Grounds’, 251; Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*.

as productive, exercising agency.<sup>35</sup> It allows for identifying how ‘spectres of colonialism’ – ghosts of moral, intellectual and legal logics that legitimated the violence of empire – still govern political imaginaries, maintaining assumptions about colonised peoples, hiding the unpalatable consequences of colonial ventures and justifying settler colonial presence and permanence.<sup>36</sup> Hauntology, thus, offers the possibility of thinking otherwise our postcolonial present and envisioning a different future.<sup>37</sup>

### *Hauntology and Interpretation*

The mobilisation of hauntology as a strategy of reading raises the question of interpretation. As the concept suggests, it is not a matter of there being a single meaning as a form of self-identical presence contained within the text, but an interplay of conflicting meanings and the absences that ultimately ground them. Thus, a hauntological reading of these films seeks to provide interpretations that are attentive to these spectres which destabilise the dominant meanings, interpretations and discourses found in these films. Drawing upon Shapiro’s understanding of *thinking* through films as a form of critical practice,<sup>38</sup> and on Paul Kirby’s conceptualisation of the science fiction/IR intertext as cultural criticism,<sup>39</sup> this endeavour brings forth interpretations that identify and disrupt the ways through which colonial notions are circulated and shape political imaginaries. Therefore, it follows a hermeneutic approach that confers cultural objects with meaning, not aiming to speak a singular truth of the artefact and its correspondence to the world, but to provoke a change of perspective through critical effort.<sup>40</sup> In providing readings that trace how subjectivity is a key element in the way colonial logics are reiterated and disrupted in invasion films, this endeavour identifies and intervenes upon the limits of the ‘sayable,’ ‘visible,’ and ‘thinkable’ of the ‘distribution of the sensible’ that governs imaginaries of world politics.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, with attention to the multiplicity of the text, this analysis focuses on specific narrative elements and internal assumptions present in these films. It selects and discusses particular aspects that represent how colonial logics haunt invasion stories, as well as how these can also be disrupted through them. It does not seek to make a totalising and final judgement on whether a film is intrinsically colonial or anti-colonial, but to bring up instances of reproduction and disruption of colonial logics – which can even coexist within the same narrative, allowing for multiple and conflicting interpretations. Before proceeding to the analysis of the films, however, I discuss the connections between colonial logics, the consolidation of the modern subject and the figure of the human.

35. Manchanda and Salem, ‘Empire’s H(a)unting Grounds’, 243–44.

36. Medak-Saltzman, ‘Empire’s Haunted Logics’, 16–17.

37. Manchanda and Salem, ‘Empire’s H(a)unting Grounds’, 257.

38. Shapiro, *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method*, 15.

39. Paul Kirby, ‘Political Speech in Fantastical Worlds’, *International Studies Review* 19, no. 4 (2017): 591. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/vix012>.

40. Ibid.

41. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

## Modern Subjectivity and Colonial Hierarchies

Despite being key elements of political thought and often taken for granted, notions such as ‘humanity’ and ‘the subject’ have not enjoyed stable meanings and do not refer to unchanging truths. As Michel Foucault remarked, the figure of Man of modern humanism, understood as the sovereign subject of knowledge – the empirico-transcendental doublet that is the condition of possibility for all knowledge and meaning – is a recent phenomenon.<sup>42</sup> Rosi Braidotti highlighted that ‘[n]ot all of us can say (. . .) that we have always been human, or that we are only that’ – not if humanity is understood as the construct associated with modern humanism and the Enlightenment.<sup>43</sup> In other words, Western social, political and scientific history has been marked by highly exclusive conceptions of humanity, which were shaped by the conversion of a specific mode of being human – white, European, heterosexual, male – into a standard of subjectivity, granting it a transcendental value as the figure of *the human*. This ‘universalised format of humanity’ appears as a normative referential of sameness, placing modern Man at the top of a hierarchical scale and rendering deviating, bodily marked, sexualised, racialised, and naturalised subjects as inferior.<sup>44</sup>

These dynamics of difference as negativity were fundamental for legitimising colonial ventures and justifying colonial violence. Moreover, they were part of a process of simultaneous constitution of modern and colonial subjects within a modern/colonial imaginary that was crafted in Europe’s relation to its Others.<sup>45</sup> This Eurocentric intersubjective universe continues to structure the contemporary world, presenting itself as a universal paradigm of knowledge based upon particular understandings of the relations between subjects and objects, entangled with ideas of nature/culture. The subject, as the figure of the Cartesian self-constituted autonomous individual, appears as the bearer of reason and agency, while objects are conceived as entities entirely external to the subject, marked by fixed properties and associated with nature.<sup>46</sup> However, in the formation of the modern/colonial world, the status of subject was not applicable to all peoples. As Europe was understood as the universal consciousness of humanity, its Others could only appear in an ‘objectivised mode’: as difference was framed as inferiority, other cultures were framed as objects of knowledge and domination.<sup>47</sup>

The constitution of the modern subject and his colonial Others was profoundly shaped by how divisions of subject/object, nature/culture, body/mind came to privilege notions of disembodiment and transcendence. Donna Haraway has highlighted how the modern subject of knowledge has been understood as a disembodied, transcendent position, in opposition to the embodied Others who are ‘not allowed *not* to have a body’ – the gendered and racialised who deviate from the standard of sameness of the white European

42. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 336–38, 347.

43. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 1.

44. *Ibid.*, 15, 26–28, 67–68.

45. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*; Quijano, ‘Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality’.

46. *Ibid.*, 171–72.

47. *Ibid.*, 173–74.



male. The ideal of the modern subject, thus, appears as a disembodied rational mind capable of seeing without being seen, representing without being represented.<sup>48</sup> Within this framework, consciousness is identified with the seat of human identity while the body is understood as merely an original prosthesis – the subject, identified with the rational mind, is conceptualised as *possessing* a body, not *being* a body.<sup>49</sup> The bodily marked, therefore, are associated with inert, passive nature – understood as objects.<sup>50</sup>

It is, thus, not a coincidence that modern political thought has so often associated the indigenous peoples of the Americas with a ‘state of nature’ preceding political society.<sup>51</sup> As humanity is understood as having a fixed meaning, associated with an element of disembodiment and transcendence such as soul and reason, those who are excluded from it can be considered as not quite human: animalised, naturalised.<sup>52</sup> Hence why debates around indigenous peoples’ humanity, souls and capacity for rationality were crucial for justifying or criticising colonial subjugation.<sup>53</sup> Thus, humanity appears as not a simply biological species designation, but a political category.<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, this notion of a passage from nature towards society and culture is connected to a specific understanding of temporality and history in modern Western thought, which was crucial for colonial endeavours.<sup>55</sup> Because difference had to be accommodated with a universalised conception of humanity, it was articulated in terms of a universal process of linear development over time: the indigenous peoples of the Americas were understood as referring to Europe’s past.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, the indigenous appeared as a less developed version of the European self, with the potential to eventually develop their capacity for reason and fully realise their humanity as modelled after the European modern Man.<sup>57</sup> The influence of these temporal conceptions was not restricted to

---

48. Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575.

49. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2–5.

50. Quijano, ‘Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality’.

51. Srinivas Aravamudan, ‘Hobbes and America’, in *The Postcolonial Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Colonialism and Postcolonial Theory*, eds. Daniel Carey and Lynn Festa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 37–70.

52. Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World* (Malden: Polity, 2017), 72.

53. Maria José Rodríguez-Salgado, “‘How Oppression Thrives Where Truth is Not Allowed a Voice’: The Spanish Polemic about the American Indians”, in *Silencing Human Rights: Critical Engagements with a Contested Project*, eds. Gurminder K. Bhambra and Robbie Shilliam (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 19–42.

54. Rafi Youatt, ‘Interspecies Relations, International Relations: Rethinking Anthropocentric Politics’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43, no. 1 (2014): 213–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829814536946>.

55. Naem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

56. *Ibid.*, 50, 79.

57. *Ibid.*, 53.

colonial thought, but would later influence theories of modernisation and development, as part of modern/colonial frameworks that outlived colonial empires.<sup>58</sup>

These binary conceptions of subject/object, nature/culture, human/nonhuman, embodiment/disembodiment, rationality/irrationality, sameness/difference, as well as the linear temporality of progress appear as fundamental elements for colonial thought and practice. Their mobilisation in the simultaneous constitution of the modern European subject and his Others allowed for the production of hierarchical relations which presented the Other as inferior and legitimised colonial ventures. Moreover, these notions remained key pillars of the modern/colonial world after the end of colonial rule. Hence the importance of asking how these notions are reproduced and identifying instances of contestation.

### **The Other and Modern Subjectivity – *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds***

*Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds* both display typical colonial tropes that characterise the invasion plot as the science fiction subgenre most shaped by its reference to colonialism.<sup>59</sup> By engaging with these films, this analysis highlights how the traits of modern subjectivity and colonial hierarchies intersect and are re-enacted in particular elements of these narratives, continuing to haunt contemporary imagination. Moreover, by identifying the differences in these films, it is possible to explore how the reproduction of such logics can be articulated in diverse ways, providing distinct interpretations and political meanings.

The two plots begin with the classic alien invasion scenario: the arrival of extra-terrestrial Others possessing advanced technology. In both narratives, the aliens cause destruction and the extermination of humans, who are rendered powerless as their attempts to attack the invaders' vehicles are made futile by their protective shields. From that starting point, *War of the Worlds* follows a divorced father and his two children as they struggle to survive the attack, while *Independence Day*'s narrative is centred around three main characters – an air force pilot, a satellite engineer, and the president of the United States – as they engage in the government's response to the threat. At the end of both narratives, the invaders are defeated: by a computer virus developed by one of the main characters in *Independence Day*; and by the unexpected action of Earth's microscopic fauna in *War of the Worlds* – a difference that deserves careful discussion.

### ***The Anthropomorphic Other and the Reversal of the Colonial Gaze***

Both films present a similar portrayal of the extra-terrestrial Others: they arrive in technologically sophisticated vehicles, which they rarely leave, and are generally described as possessing a more advanced form of intelligence. Moreover, they show an immediately aggressive attitude, with clear intentions towards exterminating humanity and taking over the Earth. Therefore, the themes of intelligence, technology and progress appear

58. Inayatullah and Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*; Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*.

59. Rieder, 'Science Fiction, Colonialism', 378.

as key elements in the characterisation of the invaders, as well as the source of their threatening character. These traits were fundamental in the constitution of the modern subject and his relations to his Others, as hierarchical understandings of rationality and development provided grounds for domination in the simultaneous production of modernity and coloniality.<sup>60</sup> As plots of invasion such as *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds* engage with these themes, they address the haunting possibility of being reduced by the Other's progress, presenting modern Western Man suffering colonial invasion as the 'dark counter-image' of technological revolution.<sup>61</sup> The extra-terrestrial Other, thus, is 'anthropomorphic' as it is identified with a more sophisticated version of the modern subject, outperforming modern Man and placing him in the subaltern side of the colonial relation.

This inversion of the position of modern Man also reflects the power imbalance in understandings of the subject/object relation in modern knowledge production. These dynamics are made evident by the opening narration in *War of the Worlds*, which affirms that men were unaware that they were being studied by 'intelligences greater than our own (. . .), perhaps the way a man with a microscope might observe the creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water'. Through this comparison, modern Man is associated with nature and rendered an object of knowledge, reproducing the Eurocentric modern/colonial paradigms imposed upon non-European peoples.<sup>62</sup> He is placed on the other side of the 'colonial gaze,' which distributes power and knowledge to the one who looks, while denying it to the one being looked at.<sup>63</sup> The extra-terrestrial Other, on the other hand, takes the position of the distant and unaffected subject of knowledge studying his objects from afar in an unequal relation of power and knowledge.<sup>64</sup>

### *Rationality, Disembodiment and Transcendence*

Another aspect of the representation of the aliens that frames them within modern subjectivity and colonial frameworks is the theme of disembodiment and transcendence. As 'greater intelligences,' their superior capacity to transcend the limits of physical embodiment is represented by the fact that, throughout most of both films, there are no alien bodies to be seen: they remain mostly inside their vehicles or mechanical suits. In *Independence Day*, the emphasis on disembodiment is also expressed by the aliens' capacity to use telepathy to communicate with each other and even to control a human's body for communicating in English. The underlying assumption is that the subject is identified with the rational mind, while the body is not more than an original prosthesis.<sup>65</sup> In addition to that, the initial indestructibility of the invaders' vehicles reinforces the notion that these enemies are beyond matter. It is, then, perfectly coherent that

60. Inayatullah and Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*; Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*; Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality'.

61. Rieder, 'Science Fiction, Colonialism,' 377.

62. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*; Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality'.

63. John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 7.

64. Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality'; Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges'.

65. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 2–3.

embodiment appears as their downfall: in *War of the Worlds* the aliens' vulnerability to Earth's microbes re-inscribes them into the realm of materiality, while in *Independence Day* the computer virus deactivates their defences, leaving them physically unprotected from human weaponry. By losing their status of disembodied rational minds – their transcendence – they fall from their dominant position.

This privileging of disembodied rationality as an element of identification between the extra-terrestrials and modern Man is expressed in *Independence Day* as scientist Dr. Okun discusses the invaders' anatomy. When asked about whether the invaders can be killed, he replies: 'Their bodies are as frail as our own. (. . .) You just have to get past their technology, which is (. . .) far more advanced.' In this observation, it is implied that what separates the modern human from the aliens is rather a quantitative than a qualitative difference. The Other appears as an enhanced version of Man as the modern subject, similar to his material constitution, but with a 'more advanced' iteration of his transcendental, disembodied component. Moreover, in *War of the Worlds*, the encounter with the technologically superior Other constitutes humans as embodied, naturalised and commodified as they are compared to microbes and maggots, and their blood is extracted and consumed as a resource by aliens. As described by a character, 'this is not a war more than there's a war between men and maggots (. . .) this is an extermination.'

Therefore, the modern human is made obsolete in the very dimensions of rationality and disembodiment that supposedly distinguished him from his nonhuman Others and his 'not fully human' Others – the bodily marked, gendered, racialised and sometimes animalised members of the *homo sapiens* species. This relation of difference within a framework of sameness – with an anthropomorphic Other – reproduces the hierarchical classification of humanity described by Quijano and Braidotti.<sup>66</sup> With the referential for humanity placed in the figure of the rational and disembodied subject, the aliens appear as 'more human' than the humans in the two films, outperforming them in those aspects that are privileged by the modern conception of subjectivity and the image of universal humanity that stems from it.

### *Aliens and Settler Colonial Haunting*

The hierarchical element is profoundly connected to another key characteristic of the extra-terrestrial Others in the two narratives: they are involved in settler colonial projects. The specific feature of settler colonialism is that 'settlers come with the intention of making a new home on the land, a homemaking that insists on settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain.' Within this venture, the most important concern is land, as the settlers not only make it their new home and source of resources, but also as they interrupt the indigenous' relations to it.<sup>67</sup> Finally, this process of homemaking ultimately requires the disappearance and destruction of the existing indigenous peoples. This elimination is justified by colonial hierarchies that categorise the native as inferior,

66. Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality'; Braidotti, *The Posthuman*.

67. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 5. <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630>.

backwards or belonging to the past, and consolidate the settler 'as the anthropocentric normal, and as more developed, more human, more deserving than other groups or species'.<sup>68</sup>

Some elements in *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds* can be read as expressions of the hauntological influence of these settler colonial dynamics. In *War of the Worlds*, although there is no communication with the Martians, the initial narration makes it clear that they 'regarded our planet with envious eyes.' Moreover, as the invaders proceed to eradicate humans, devastating entire cities, it is also noticeable that this is not only a process of destruction, but a reconfiguration of the land as they grow their own kind of alien red weed in the sites they conquer. In *Independence Day*, the aliens' intentions are stated explicitly: their plan for humanity is extermination. The aliens are 'like locusts,' travelling from planet to planet, consuming every natural resource and moving on to the next one. Therefore, in both films the central element in the invaders' plans is the occupation of the planet itself – or, in other words, land. Thus, the representation of the extra-terrestrial Other reproduces fundamental traits that characterise settler colonialists. Understood as 'superior' in colonial hierarchies, the aliens reward themselves the right to invade Earth, exterminate its original inhabitants, and reshape it according to their own way of life, making it their new home.

The case of *Independence Day* deserves particular attention as it presents a clear intertext with the Independence of the United States and the theme of self-determination. The persistence of spectres of settler colonialism in *Independence Day* can be identified when we question who the subjects of independence are and what characterises them. Through hauntology it is possible to read the film against the grain, scrutinising unstated assumptions and absences that trouble its dominant discourse of resistance and self-determination, and which reveal conflicting co-existing meanings. Firstly, the film's most obvious reference to colonialism appears in its title and the president's speech before the final human counterattack against the aliens:

'Perhaps it's fate that today is the 4th of July, and you will once again be fighting for our freedom. Not from tyranny, oppression or persecution. But from annihilation. We're fighting for our right to live, to exist. And should we win today, the 4th of July will no longer be remembered as an American holiday but as the day when the world declared in one voice: "We will not go quietly into the night. We will not vanish without a fight. We are going to live on. We are going to survive." Today we celebrate our Independence Day.'

The date is thus converted from a United States holiday remembering the struggle against British colonial rule to the celebration of an act of resistance from all humankind against the extra-terrestrial invaders.

However, hauntology allows us to observe the subject of the United States' independence – the modern white settler subject – in relation to the absence that grounds his existence: that of the indigenous. This reading reveals how *Independence Day*'s dominant discourse of self-determination is dependent upon the erasure of the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas as a condition of its plausibility. By observing

---

68. Ibid., 6.

this absence, which haunts both the fictional text as well as the historical narrative of the Independence of the United States, it is possible to notice the conflicting meanings that are in motion in the film. In both cases, 'independence' simultaneously means freedom from external power to the settler, as well as continued exclusion and erasure to the indigenous. It naturalises the settler as native, consolidating the settler state and dispossessing the indigenous of their land.<sup>69</sup>

Therefore, through hauntology it is possible to identify how, despite the apparent praise of self-determination and anti-colonial struggle, *Independence Day's* dominant theme is grounded upon the erasure of indigenous peoples and the violent perpetuation of settler colonial occupation. Thus, the film, in its condition of a widely consumed product of popular culture, appears as a possible vehicle for the reproduction of these settler colonial frameworks and the reaffirmation of settler subject. However, when these spectres of colonialism are identified through hauntology, meanings shift as both the alien invaders and the United States government appear as settlers in indigenous land, and the speech against extra-terrestrial occupation appears as an act of 're-occupation' by the white human settler.<sup>70</sup> As indigenous peoples across the Americas continue to struggle for rights to self-determination, a hauntological reading of *Independence Day* provides a critical intervention in the field of shared meanings that sustain settler colonialism, allowing for the recognition of the independence that did not happen: *decolonisation*.

### *Alien Anthropocentrism and Environmental Catastrophe*

Another aspect in the narrative that shifts meanings and presents an identification between the extra-terrestrial invader and the modern human is the environmental question, which reveals the logics of extraction that underline colonial practices and modern anthropocentrism. While the aliens' predatory behaviour is condemned, the film also features occasional remarks on human-generated environmental damage, made by David Levinson, the satellite engineer. Throughout most of the film these observations remain in the background, but at a certain point they take centre stage. When Levinson finds out about the government's intent to pursue the nuclear option, he objects with irony: 'We've gotta burn the rain forest (. . .), dump toxic waste, pollute the air, rip up the ozone. Maybe if we screw this planet up enough, they won't want it anymore.' At this point, Levinson brings up how the relation of modern humans towards their planet is not so different from the aliens' plans – they already develop activities that are profoundly predatory and destructive to their environment. This analogy is further sustained by Dr. Okun's comments on alien anatomy earlier in the film: 'They are not all that dissimilar from us. . . Breathes oxygen. . . Comparable tolerances to heat, cold. . . Probably why they're interested in our planet.' In this observation, the alien invasion mimics the search

69. Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 136; Qadri Ismail, 'Exiting Europe, Exciting Postcoloniality', *Kronos* 43, no. 1 (2017): 44–45. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2309-9585/2017/v43a3>.

70. Tuck and Yang, 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor'; Medak-Saltzman, 'Empire's Haunted Logics'.

for inhabitable planets and ambitions of ‘space colonisation’ proposed by public personalities and movements such as transhumanism.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, it is worth noting that, by the end of the film, nothing indicates any sort of self-critical learning from modern humans. They will apparently continue to live and relate to their planet – and potentially to other planets as well – in the same predatory way as before the invasion.

These remarks illustrate how the film portrays both alien and human characters as embodying the modern anthropocentric ideal in nature/culture, human/nonhuman divides:<sup>72</sup> an autonomous subject endowed with a transcendental element – rationality – who is destined to emerge as conqueror of nature.<sup>73</sup> As opposed to this dominant subjectivity, nonhumans appear as resources to be extracted and efficiently managed through technical mastery.<sup>74</sup> This is also reflected in how humans and their blood appear as a natural resource to Martians in *War of the Worlds*, echoing how modern Man commodifies nonhuman species to his ends. Therefore, as Rieder remarks in his discussion of the original *The War of the Worlds* book, within the modern temporality of linear and universal progress – and, I add, the anthropocentrism that accompanies it – the extra-terrestrial Other appears a version of modern Man’s future.<sup>75</sup> The difference that separates them is merely a question of development over time within the same notion of progress. With both inhabiting the framework of modern subjectivity, reproducing the anthropocentric and colonial hierarchies between the subject and its naturalised Others, Man and alien become versions of the same.

### *More Than Human, Less Than Human: The Alien As the Degraded Other*

It must be noted, nevertheless, that the dominant feature in the portrayal of aliens in *War of the Worlds* and *Independence Day* – and likely the most resonant aspect with audiences – is that they are maintained as Other. The fact that they present elements associated with the modern human, such as disembodiment, rationality, and technological development does not imply any form of recognition, respect, or empathy. Their presentation deploys classic alien aesthetic elements that make them repulsive, such as tentacles, slimy bodies, and exoskeletons. Most importantly, they are presented as morally depraved, parasitic, ‘like locusts,’ and simply evil – their colonial venture is pure extermination and extraction, with no euphemistic justifications of a civilising mission or a religious Manifest Destiny. Thus, while these films present the aliens as outperforming the modern human in certain aspects, this does not keep them from appearing as a degraded Other.

Therefore, aliens are simultaneously more *and* less than human. Despite their superior technology, they are primarily presented as corrupt and absolutely unworthy of sympathy, which is exemplified by *Independence Day* when Captain Hiller unceremoniously

---

71. Nick Bostrom, ‘A History of Transhumanist Thought’ in *Academic Writing Across the Disciplines*, eds. Michael Rectenwald and Lisa Carl (New York: Pearson Longman, 2011).

72. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

73. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, 28–29, 72.

74. *Ibid.*, 55.

75. Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, 5.

drags an unconscious alien across the desert.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, the final narration in *War of the Worlds* mentions ‘man’s’ right to live on Earth, among its organisms, referring to natural immunity ‘earned’ after years of evolution, which retrospectively frames Martians as having always been inferior, unfit and undeserving of Earth, regardless of their technology. Thus, in these instances both films take a moral-teleological dimension with the triumph over an enemy that was always presented as unworthy and degraded.

The interplay of meanings that present aliens as more, less, or like human reflects the shifting dynamics involved in the constitution of subjects in the colonial encounter, as well as the mobility of categories such as modernity, humanity, and development. In *Independence Day*, the final attack against the aliens appears as a moment when modern Western Man seeks to recover and secure his status as modern and fully human by showing his technological and moral superiority, taking the dominant position that the degraded Other was never worthy of. In this sense, it can be compared to the dynamic production of racial ordering that characterised colonial contexts, for example in the cases of the First and Second Italo-Ethiopian Wars (1895-1896 and 1935-6) analysed by Italo Brandimarte. After the Ethiopians’ victory in the 19th century, Italy’s status was compromised, and a racial mythology framing Ethiopians as belonging to the white race – and, therefore, civilised – emerged. In the Second war, fascist Italy presented technological warfare as the means to reclaim its place as a white and modern imperial power, securing its modernity and imagined superiority over Ethiopians, reconfiguring them as black and inferior.<sup>77</sup> In both history and film, the categories of inferiority/superiority, as well as the grounds for these distinctions appear as unstable, shifting, and requiring violent enforcement to reaffirm the superiority of modern Western Man.

### *Diverging Resolutions: Different Ways to Live with Ghosts*

Although *War of the Worlds* and *Independence Day* share many commonalities, there are also insightful contrasts. Despite their similar portrayals of the invaders, the two films diverge in the way they are vanquished: in *War of the Worlds*, the Martians unexpectedly become ill and die as they fall prey to Earth’s microorganisms, while in *Independence Day* the main characters succeed in using a computer virus to deactivate the aliens’ defences, making their spaceships vulnerable to human weapons. Even though the idea of the computer virus emerges from a comment about catching a cold, there are significant differences between the meanings evoked by the computer virus of one film and the microbes of the other.

In *War of the Worlds*, the defeat of the Martians appears as an unexpected event precisely because it is completely independent from the will and the actions of the main characters and humans in general. The ‘war’ – or colonial process – between aliens and humans is interrupted by the intervention of a nonhuman agency that is traditionally excluded from the realm of politics and strongly diverges from modern political subjectivity, which associates self-consciousness, rationality and intentionality with capacity

76. I thank Reviewer 2 for highlighting this example.

77. Italo Brandimarte, ‘Breathless War: Martial Bodies, Aerial Experiences and the Atmospheres of Empire’ (paper presented at the ‘Doing IPS PhD Seminar’, London, UK, 27 May 2022).



for political action.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, the key role played by microorganisms in the narrative presents alternative conceptions of subjectivity, agency and power, which differ from and expose the limits of the modern subject represented by both modern humans and Martians. Moreover, the role of the microbes in the film echoes their participation in the histories of colonialism, both as a catastrophic force in the Americas – which led to the deaths of countless indigenous persons and continues to threaten indigenous communities.<sup>79</sup> – as well as an obstacle to colonial ventures in the case of Africa, where diseases hindered European presence in the interior of the continent.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, as the film invokes the impacts of the nonhuman in the development of colonialism, it contests the modern subject's monopoly of the realm of politics.<sup>81</sup>

On the other hand, in *Independence Day* the computer virus appears as a product of modern Man's ingenuity and technological mastery. In contrast to the action of *War of the World's* microbes, this outcome does not rely on an agency that is external to the conflict between humans and invaders but is rather the result of the rational agency of the modern subject: the triumphant return of modern Man to dominance. Therefore, the conception of subjectivity and the colonial hierarchies that had placed the modern human in a subaltern position remain intact – they are only inverted. While *War of the Worlds* presents the intervention of a different form of agency which destabilises the centrality of modern subjectivity, the resolution of the plot in *Independence Day* preserves the same assumptions regarding subjectivity, power, and the conditions for political agency. Although the power relation between human and alien is inverted as modern Man finds a way to trump alien technology, the terms of these relations remain the same: rationality, technological mastery, military power.

These comparisons are illustrative in showing how popular culture narratives can engage with their colonial spectres in different ways. It is possible to understand these divergences by drawing upon Geoffrey Whitehall's analysis of science fiction through Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of *major* and *minor uses of language*.<sup>82</sup> As *Independence Day's* resolution reaffirms the centrality of modern subjectivity and the elements that sustain the hierarchies of colonial relations, it appears as a major use of language: 'a literature that reifies its own authorization by assuming a constant that serves as a standard measure to evaluate its own authority and domination'.<sup>83</sup> In other words, *Independence Day* can be read as reaffirming the same relations of power and oppression that it seems to condemn at first glance and that are taken for granted in modern Western political imagination.

---

78. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

79. Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* (Cambridge: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).

80. Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

81. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

82. Whitehall, 'The Problem of the 'World and Beyond'; Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 104–106.

83. Whitehall, 'The Problem of the 'World and Beyond', 173.

A minor use of language, on the other hand, consists in that which subverts the constants and standards of the major use.<sup>84</sup> In *War of the Worlds*, while the relation between humans and Martians remains largely tied to the language of modern subjectivity and colonial hierarchies, the intervention of the microbes presents an opening to other forms of subjectivity and agency. Not only does the film depict an inversion of the colonial situation, placing modern Western Man in its subaltern side, but it also presents a resolution that does not rely on the same colonial logics, allowing for a critique of the very assumptions that sustain them. Therefore, as it displaces the centrality and power associated with the modern subject and presents a political effect that is exterior to the colonial relation, it allows for a minor reading of the colonial invasion. It takes the major language of technological superiority, power, and colonial domination and makes it unfamiliar, providing a critical distance from dominant understandings of subjectivity, agency and power.<sup>85</sup> In doing so, *War of the Worlds* points towards alternatives to the spectres of colonial logics and modern subjectivity that haunt its own narrative.

In analysing *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds*, it was possible to highlight instances in which invasion stories re-enact the language of modern subjectivity and the colonial logics grounded by it. While a minor reading of the colonial invasion already presents a potential for critical distancing from dominant modern/colonial notions of political subjectivity, invasion stories can also be a source of radical disruption and speculation upon the possibilities of the encounter. The next section engages with films that diverge from typical tropes of the invasion plot, making them particularly interesting for such explorations.

## Exploring Alterity – Arrival and Annihilation

Through *Arrival* and *Annihilation*, this section demonstrates how the invasion story can be mobilised to challenge the conception of subjectivity at the bases of colonial hierarchies, presenting audiences with alternative possibilities of the encounter with alterity and disrupting the subgenre's long-standing relations to imperial imaginaries. A common thread that unites *Arrival* and *Annihilation* and distinguishes them from classic plots of invasion such as *War of the Worlds* and *Independence Day* is the question of uncertainty in the contact with the Other. In both films the encounter is filled with ambiguity towards the alien's characteristics, intentions, and the kind of relationship they are about to establish with Earth. There is a stark contrast to the immediate and clear dynamics that play out in the films analysed above as *Arrival* and *Annihilation* engage with the complex, although more plausible, idea that the Other may not be reducible to a version of the conceptions of subjectivity and colonial relations that have dominated modern political thought. In accepting ambiguity and incomprehension, they engage with the possibility of alterity more deeply.

### *Arrival: Uncertainty and Ambiguity in the Contact Zone*

*Arrival's* plot is set in motion by the appearance of twelve alien spacecrafts around the world. It follows Dr. Louise Banks, a professor of Linguistics, as she is contacted by the

84. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 106.

85. Whitehall, 'The Problem of the "World and Beyond"', 174.

United States military and given the task of finding a way to communicate with extra-terrestrial beings – the ‘heptapods’ – in order to find out the purpose of their presence on Earth. Throughout the film, Banks and her team enter one of the spacecrafts and participate in a series of sessions during which they engage with two heptapods to establish communication. From this outset, a notable contrast between *Arrival* and the films in the previous section rests in the heptapods’ relative *immobility*: they show no action besides allowing access to their crafts and communicating through low-pitched sounds and logograms projected onto the transparent screen separating them from the humans. This slow and ambiguous attitude is a clear departure from the immediately aggressive posture of the extra-terrestrials in *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds*. While these films quickly present the aliens’ settler colonial intentions, *Arrival*’s plot revolves around the uncertainties in the long and sometimes confusing process of establishing communication.

This difference stems from the distinct portrayals of the extra-terrestrial Other in the film. While *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds* present aliens that can be read as mirroring the modern subject and his colonial relations to his Others, the heptapods’ rather inactive presence does not allow for quick conclusions in *Arrival*. Their characteristics, as well as the nature of the relationship they are to establish with Earth, are unknown – the process of unravelling them is the very thread that guides the narrative. This uncertainty towards the character of the Other is illustrated when Louise explains the complexity and the assumptions that surround the main question the military want to ask the aliens: ‘What is your purpose on Earth?’. She highlights how one cannot take for granted that the heptapods understand what a question is, nor that they understand the notion of intent: ‘Do they make conscious choices or is motivation so instinctive that they cannot understand a ‘why’ question at all?’. In doing so, the film takes seriously the condition of otherness, engaging with the possibility that the extra-terrestrials do not share the most fundamental characteristics of the modern subject, such as rationality, intentionality and self-consciousness.<sup>86</sup> It makes a minor use of the figure of the rational, self-conscious subject, making it unfamiliar and contesting its ‘taken-for-grantedness’.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, in contrast to the anthropomorphic aliens in *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds*, the film engages with the possibilities and uncertainty that surround the contact with alterity, problematising the tendency to imagine the Other as a reflection of one’s own subjectivity.<sup>88</sup>

This slow and careful approach allows the film to present the complex and ambiguous dynamics involved in what Mary Louise Pratt calls the ‘contact zone’: the space where historically and geographically separated peoples meet and establish ongoing relations, often marked by inequality and coercion.<sup>89</sup> As Naeem Inayatullah highlights, the crucial elements of first contacts in the contact zone are ambiguity and uncertainty, with risks and the potential for both danger and rewards. It is a space marked by learning through

86. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

87. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 106; Whitehall, ‘The Problem of the “World and Beyond”’, 173–74.

88. Inayatullah and Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*.

89. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 6.

trial and error, as well as the possibility of miscommunication due to the opacity of understanding.<sup>90</sup> In the film, these characteristics of the contact zone are thoroughly illustrated in the attempts to establish communication with the heptapods, as well as in the growing anxiety of the military personnel over the possible dangers of their presence. Because the aliens cannot be automatically identified with the familiar framework of modern subjectivity, they are unpredictable and therefore it is not clear how humans should react to them.

### *Learning with the Other – Collapsing the Self-identical Subject*

Another crucial aspect in the characterisation of the heptapods relates to their actual purpose in establishing contact, which is understood at the end of the film: they will need our help in the future. Despite their superior technology and capacity for space travel, they carry a lack. In Inayatullah's discussion of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, we see how civilisational superiority is constructed in terms of completeness. Just as imperial powers, the Federation does not see itself as developing, but as fully *developed* and guiding others through development. Therefore, the actual purpose of the Federation's engagements with other civilisations – its need to learn from the Other – is never explicit, as the mission is presented as filling the lack of others, not searching and filling its own lack.<sup>91</sup> In *Arrival*, however the supposedly more advanced civilisation is shown *asking for help* – and also offering us help. This collapses distinctions between inferior/superior civilisations and further highlights the possibility of the encounter with difference as a source of learning and self-reflection, as discussed by Inayatullah.

The question of learning through the contact with alterity leads us to note that *Arrival's* contrast with other narratives is not limited to its understanding of the Other, but also involves a different perspective on the human subject as well. As Louise is immersed in the heptapod's language, she is changed by her contact with the Other, indicating a break with the self-identical and stable image of the modern subject, criticised in the works of scholars such as Braidotti, Hayles and Quijano.<sup>92</sup> The film brings forth the element of co-constitution of subjects in the contact zone through their relations, and also the possibility of an 'ethnological moment': when difference appears not as degeneration, but as a resource for critical self-examination, which impacts not only how the Self sees the Other, but also its own culture and traditions.<sup>93</sup> This is illustrated by how the contact with the heptapods' language and how it conceives time offers an alternative form of communication and meaning, leading the main characters to reflect on the specificities of their own language and temporality.

### *Language As World-making and Multiplicity*

The way language structures thinking and conceptions of time is a key theme in *Arrival*. The film emphasises how heptapods' conceptions of language and time are nonlinear,

90. Inayatullah, 'Bumpy Space', 61.

91. *Ibid.*, 57–58.

92. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*; Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*. Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality.'

93. Inayatullah and Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*, 11, 44.

which differs from Western temporality and languages. Moreover, heptapods also present an alternative relation between speech and writing as writing conveys meaning, not sound, and is unrelated to spoken communication. Therefore, they consist of different languages altogether, designated ‘heptapod A’ for speech and ‘heptapod B’ for writing. This discovery leads Ian, one of the protagonists, to a moment of critical self-reflection: ‘Perhaps they view our own form of writing as a wasted opportunity.’ In this ethnological moment, the contact with difference leads him to critically contemplate his own culture and his Self is opened to the possibility of being otherwise. Notably, the ‘wasted opportunity’ he identifies is the core of Western logocentrism: the subjection of written language to a secondary status of representation of speech.<sup>94</sup> The encounter allows for considering what is lost in Western logocentrism and allows for speculation: if heptapods’ writing and speech are unrelated and each exists on its own right, having equal value, maybe presence is not privileged over absence; maybe their thinking and experience of the world is completely different from what is taken for granted by Western metaphysics of presence. Perhaps the very distinction between presence and absence does not even exist in heptapod metaphysics. These questions open the possibility of imagining a form of thinking in which the hierarchical binaries that sustain modern/colonial dynamics are unfounded and even inconceivable.

The question of language and difference opens the possibility of multiplicity. As language is shown to be world-making, shaping the subject’s experience of time and the world, it collapses the possibility of a world of sameness in which language is isomorphic to reality and words are merely images of universal shared things.<sup>95</sup> This leads us again to a comparison with Inayatullah’s engagement with *Star Trek: The Next Generation*: while the sheer possibility of the universal translator binds it to a certain privileging of sameness, *Arrival* further embraces the possibilities of alterity, breaking with the modern paradigm of difference as negativity discussed by Braidotti, Quijano, Inayatullah and Blaney.<sup>96</sup>

### *Time, Multiplicity and the Disruption of Progress*

The question of time and how language shapes its experience is profoundly related to questions of sameness/difference and is also part of *Arrival*’s disruptive potential. It is present in the story’s content – as Louise learns heptapod B her experience of time changes – but also in its form, as the film’s narrative is not strictly linear. It is quite intuitive that the nonlinearity of time in the film can destabilise the ideas of progress that frequently inform invasion plots. As time is experienced in a nonlinear form, there can be no developmental historical scale from primitive to modern, no certainty that there is a teleological path towards civilisation and that a specific society has reached its final phase.

Yet, what is more interesting is how the thesis that language and experience of time are interconnected can disrupt the notion of progress beyond the question of the ‘shape’

94. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 30; Johnson, ‘Translator’s Introduction’, viii–ix.

95. Inayatullah, ‘Bumpy Space’, 73.

96. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*; Quijano, ‘Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality’; Inayatullah and Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*.

of time (linear/nonlinear). If in *Arrival* language is world-making, opening the possibility of multiplicity as it displaces sameness in favour of difference, then time also appears as multiplicity. It is not so much that modern humans are ‘wrong’ in perceiving time as linear and heptapods present them the unmediated truth of time as nonlinearity, but the fact that both forms of experience of time are informed by language and co-exist. The film suggests that there are multiple forms of experiencing time and the world, which presents a reality that is always plural and cannot be reduced to a single universal set of things that are simply represented by different words.

With that in mind, it is worth going back to the origins of teleological conceptions of historical progress. As Inayatullah and Blaney highlight, theories of development and modernisation have their origins at the need to conciliate a commitment to sameness – a universal and single humanity – with the empirical diversity in human societies. Development does so by accommodating difference within a spatialised and linear notion of time, which temporalises difference.<sup>97</sup> However, in *Arrival* the very commitment to sameness that framed difference as a problem is displaced by the world-making character of language and privileging of multiplicity. Therefore, not only is progress unfit for the heptapod’s nonlinear temporality, but the very problem that led to the idea of historical development as a solution never existed. In this way, by asserting difference, *Arrival* disrupts the idea of hierarchical progress at its most basic foundations.

### *Facing Ghosts and Reimagining the Encounter*

Although *Arrival* presents an engagement with the Other that breaks away from the colonial frameworks often found in invasion narratives, the film openly engages with spectres of colonialism. The uncomfortable uncertainty in the contact zone leads characters to bring up historical examples of colonial encounters, fearing the heptapods’ intentions. When Louise refers to Captain Cook and Australian aborigines to illustrate miscommunication, Colonel Weber – the most prominent military character – remarks: ‘Remember what happened to the aborigines: a more advanced race nearly wiped them out.’ In this context, these spectres of colonialism do not appear as an unreflected reproduction of colonial logics, but as an observation on their legacies and how they shape expectations towards future encounters with alterity. Therefore, *Arrival* does not portray colonial relations with the Other as seen in the previous films, but it does show how its characters are haunted by the agency of this virtual possibility.<sup>98</sup> It presents an alternative to colonial frameworks, while also showing their lasting influence.

Finally, as *Arrival* destabilises the categories that operated in the constitution of the modern subject and his Others, it offers the possibility to reimagine the encounter in other terms. It provides a critical reflection that allows for considering roads not taken and refusing the modern/colonial present as a necessity. In a way, it accompanies *Star Trek: the Next Generation* in what can be seen as a form of ‘apology’ to all colonised peoples of the world, as Inayatullah interprets the Federation’s attitude of

97. Inayatullah and Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*, 50, 79–82, 91.

98. Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 18.

offering contact instead of imposing it.<sup>99</sup> However, while *Star Trek: the Next Generation* sometimes remains tied to commitments to sameness expressed by the universal translator or the Richter Scale of Culture,<sup>100</sup> *Arrival* manages to disrupt the core of notions of subjectivity and progress that are often found in invasion plots and sustain the modern/colonial world.

### **Annihilation: Radical Alterity and Dangerous Indifference**

*Annihilation* shares some of the key elements of *Arrival* but takes them further. Just as in the latter, the film follows a scholar – biologist Lena – as she and her team engage with an extra-terrestrial phenomenon: ‘the Shimmer,’ an anomalous area of transformative energy that emerges from a lighthouse struck by a meteor. The alien energy of the Shimmer causes a series of mutations in living organisms within its perimeter, including the main characters. Thus, the film presents not only an encounter with the Other, but also a moment of estrangement towards that which used to be familiar – and towards one’s own Self.

The portrayal of the Other in *Annihilation* not only diverges from those in *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds*, but also presents a departure from *Arrival*’s depiction. Throughout most of the film, one can hardly refer to a specific Other – alterity appears rather as a phenomenon manifested in mutations than as the encounter with another entity. It is only at the end of the film that Lena finds the alien: an apparently amorphous being which starts to mimic her appearance and movements after having contact with her blood. Here, the anthropomorphic element of the Other is not pre-existent like in the first two films, but a result of the encounter. Moreover, the film also differs from *Arrival* as the Other can hardly be said to have any form of individuality, consciousness or intentionality. In *Arrival*, despite Louise’s caution in not assuming that her interlocutors possess these traits, the heptapods eventually show these characteristics, as well as the capacity for their own form of sophisticated abstract thought. In this case, the Other shares at least some basic elements that allow for a certain level of identification and communication with humans. In *Annihilation*, however, it never becomes clear whether the entity that Lena encounters can be said to have any sort of consciousness, intelligence or intentionality. When asked about what the alien wanted, Lena answers: ‘I don’t think it wanted anything (. . .) I’m not sure it even knew I was there.’ The only conclusion is that ‘it’s unlike us,’ as stated by Dr. Ventress, the team’s psychologist and leader. Therefore, the film presents an Other that is completely divergent from the image of the conscious and rational human as the modern subject.

It is precisely because *Annihilation* presents the alien as something that cannot be accommodated within the political repertoire of modern Western thought that it allows for disrupting the modern subject and the colonial spectres that often haunt invasion stories. However, this encounter does not establish a relation that is benign for humanity either: differently from the benevolent heptapods in *Arrival*, the transformative force of the Shimmer destabilises the conditions that allow for human life as we know it. Still, as the Other does not appear to possess any form of intentionality or consciousness, it is not

99. Inayatullah, ‘Bumpy Space’, 59.

100. Ibid., 74; Whitehall, ‘The Problem of the ‘World and Beyond’, 177.

possible to subject it to the same kind of moral judgement that can be directed towards the aliens in the other films. Its posture towards Earth and its inhabitants appears to be that of a *dangerous indifference*, a behaviour that is more similar to that of viruses or environmental phenomena, than to any colonial engagements. Much like Isabelle Stengers' conception of Gaia, the Shimmer seems to be blind and indifferent to the damage that its intrusion causes.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, *Annihilation* explores the ethical difficulties that appear in the engagement with a radical alterity that does not fit the categories of subjectivity and individual accountability that largely shape modern political thought.<sup>102</sup> It presents the challenge of dealing with the intrusion of an indifferent agency that poses a question but is not interested in a response – an extreme alterity that offers no possibility of negotiation.<sup>103</sup>

### *Disrupting the Self-identical Subject, Transgressing the Human/Nonhuman Divide*

Another key aspect of *Annihilation*, which it shares with *Arrival*, is the emphasis on co-constitution and the disruption of the stable self-identical and self-constituted subject. As mentioned above, the Other in *Annihilation* only presents anthropomorphic elements after being in contact with humans. Moreover, this relation of co-constitution goes both ways: Lena and all the characters that enter the Shimmer are affected and irremediably changed by the encounter with alterity. At the end of the film, Lena manages to escape, but she is no longer *the same*. Besides any psychological effects, she is also physically marked by her encounter with the Shimmer. This is evidenced by an ouroboros tattoo – which was initially seen in her teammate's arm but has somehow appeared on her own – and by a momentary flash in her eyes during the final scene. Thus, the film can be read as favouring relational co-constitution rather than identity, difference over sameness, which breaks with the image of the modern subject as a form of pristine self-identical and self-founded presence.

The disruptive potential of this privileging of relationality is particularly visible in how the film blurs the boundaries of the human/nonhuman, nature/culture, subject/object distinctions, which constitute the anthropocentric ideal of the modern human as separated and above his Others. When Lena analyses plants that seem to be 'in continuous mutation' and is asked whether those are pathologies, she replies: 'You'd sure as hell call it a pathology if you saw it in a human.' At this point the human/nonhuman divide is stated only to be broken later in the film when the team's physicist concludes that the Shimmer is a prism, refracting not only light and radio waves, but also DNA – *all DNA*. Lena confirms this after checking her blood: 'It's in me. It will be in all of us.' In this

101. Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, trans. Andrew Goffey (London: Open Humanities Press/Meson Press, 2015), 43. Stengers' concept is a reformulation of Lovelock and Margulis' notion of Gaia as the assemblage of relations and forces that make up the Earth's system. Stengers' Gaia is described as 'one who intrudes,' being 'blind to the damage she causes' (ibid.). Notably, she criticises Lovelock's idea of a 'vindictive Gaia,' precisely because it presents an interpretation of Gaia's agency in terms of intentionality and responsibility (ibid., 46, n2). Stengers' Gaia, however, is not a 'righter of wrongs' but is 'indifferent to our reasons and projects' (Ibid., 46–47).

102. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 26–38.

103. Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times*, 46.



moment, the modern subject grounded upon the human/nonhuman distinction and the privileging of disembodiment is shattered. The Shimmer exposes how the main characters are not only inevitably embodied, but also at the same ontological level as everything else. They have never been ‘human’ – as the modern humanist subject – but posthuman subjectivities as assemblages of nature-culture, human-nonhuman components in specific configurations of vibrant, self-organising matter.<sup>104</sup> The anthropocentric conception of the modern subject, as well as the fundamental categories which placed him above his colonised and naturalised Others, are displaced.

### *Transformation, Contingency, and the Disruption of Progress*

Transformation, entropy and change are recurring themes in the film, and also key to the disruption of anthropocentrism. There are three moments when these questions intersect with the place of the human. First, during a flashback, Lena discusses ‘God’s mistakes,’ talking about cellular senescence: ‘You take a cell, circumvent the Hayflick limit, you can prevent senescence. (. . .) It means the cell doesn’t grow old, it becomes immortal. (. . .) They say aging is a natural process, but it’s actually a fault in our genes.’ We see aging appearing as a defect, as well as speculation on the possibility of fixing it. At this point, Lena expresses the humanist (and transhumanist) hope of mastering nature and transcending its limits, which frames immortality as desirable and embodiment as a flaw. She also manifests the desire for the preservation of sameness – not only is she talking about immortality, but also about remaining young. Thus, the adult subject appears as the standard of sameness, the ideal of presence to be secured, with senescence and old age manifesting as its negation, the force of absence that haunts it and ultimately points towards death. Lena’s remark expresses the modern subject’s privileging of disembodiment and stable self-identity.

The second moment when these themes appear is during a conversation between Lena and Dr. Ventress. The latter states that ‘almost all of us self-destruct,’ either by vices or by destabilising a good job or happy marriage. She develops: ‘these aren’t decisions. They’re impulses. (. . .) Isn’t self-destruction coded into us? Programmed into each cell.’ Here, the film refers to Lena’s previous remarks, but as a reversal: self-destruction appears not as a fault, but natural, ‘programmed,’ inherent to us. Ventress presents a form of fatalistic humanism, in which the human is submissive to the invincible force of decay as a *telos*, without the promethean hope of resisting it, previously expressed by Lena. Still, the value of the human, however impotent, is preserved as he appears at the centre of his own entropic tragedy.

These two moments highlight the contrast and disruptive character of the third. At the end of the film, not only is Lena changed by the encounter, but so is her perspective on the transformative force of the Shimmer. This is evidenced during an interrogation session that takes place after she escapes. While she had initially associated the mutations with pathologies and tumours, she later abandons her negative judgement: ‘Sometimes it was beautiful.’ When her interrogator remarks that the Shimmer was ‘mutating our environment, (. . .) destroying everything,’ Lena responds: ‘It wasn’t destroying. It was

104. Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Braidotti, *The Posthuman*.

changing everything. It was making something new.’ Contrasting with Ventress’ and her own early remarks, Lena breaks with the privileging of sameness and the self-identical stability of the subject, displacing the ontological centrality of the modern human. Once modern anthropocentrism is de-centred, instead of destruction or entropy, Lena sees change as generative. Here, the film presents the privileging of transformation over preservation, difference over sameness, and a perspective of the subject as in constant becoming rather than as self-identical stability.<sup>105</sup> As Lena abandons the moral centrality of the human, change appears as neither an obstacle to be surpassed by human mastery, nor a tragic curse, but as a reality to be accepted and reckoned with.

*Annihilation* also presents a disruption of linearity and progress. Its narrative oscillates between flashbacks to Lena’s life with her husband, her incursion in the Shimmer, and her interrogation after escaping it. Temporal confusion is widespread: the order of the events shown in flashbacks is initially unclear to the viewer, and the team members lose their short-term memory and sense of time after entering the Shimmer. Most of all, the privileging of difference, contingency, and the de-centring of the human shatter the possibility of progress. When the modern subject is abandoned as moral and teleological referential, there can be no direction from primitive to modern, underdeveloped to developed. There are no grounds on which to base a hierarchical comparison of civilisation between the modern human and the alien in the encounter. There is simply difference, an otherness that reflects as Lena herself is transformed.

Therefore, *Annihilation* presents a rupture with a conception of subjectivity that is stable and self-identical, as in the encounter neither the self nor the Other remain the same. By displacing the centrality of sameness and the human, it opens the possibility of observing difference and contingency without the moral and teleological values that rely on the modern subject. It presents a form of alterity so radical that it completely disrupts the bases of widespread hierarchical notions that produce the modern subject and his Others, which not only sustained colonial thought, but remain present in the modern/colonial world through notions of modernisation and development. Thus, the film offers a take on the extra-terrestrial Other and the encounter that can be read as a break from the colonial logics that often haunt invasion stories.

Drawing upon Whitehall’s analysis of *The Martian Chronicles* through Deleuze and Guattari, it is possible to read *Arrival* and *Annihilation* as presenting the encounter as an event. It appears not as a certain state of affairs, an encounter between human and alien as distinct ‘geo-political’ identities, but as a moment of becoming that exceeds pre-defined identities. In the encounter, the event, the boundaries between human and nonhuman lose meaning and open the possibility of actualising alternatives.<sup>106</sup> Read through this lens, *Arrival* and *Annihilation* reject a territorial politics of invasion and stable identity in favour of a politics of encounter and becoming. In such a politics, the Other appears neither as human, more human, or less than human, but as a possible world.<sup>107</sup> Like *The Martian Chronicles*, *Arrival* and *Annihilation* appear as events in themselves,

---

105. Ibid.

106. Whitehall, ‘The Problem of the “World and Beyond”’, 185–88.

107. Ibid., 187–88; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 17.

presenting alterity as lines of flight from the dominant distribution of the sensible that governs world politics, and allowing us to think otherwise.<sup>108</sup>

Finally, both *Arrival* and *Annihilation* present engagements with the encounter that differ from typical conventions of invasion plots, making them particularly fruitful for critical reflection. By focusing on the uncertainties that surround the contact zone and disrupting the categories that constitute the modern subject and his Others, these two films provide resources for imagining the contact with alterity beyond the colonial frameworks and hierarchies that remain deeply rooted in modern/colonial political imagination. Thus, as artefacts of popular culture, *Arrival* and *Annihilation* allow for provoking estrangement and thought among the wider public.

## Conclusion

This article sought to engage with the debate on the relations between science fiction and colonialism. It focused on the invasion plot, the science fiction subgenre most determined by its reference to colonialism,<sup>109</sup> arguing that subjectivity appears as a site of contestation and political possibility, being key in both the reproduction and disruption of colonial categories in these stories. It mobilised hauntology to analyse instances in *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds* which expose how the constitution of the modern subject and his Others is at the bases of colonial logics often reproduced in invasion plots. It particularly highlighted how power relations based on hierarchical understandings of notions such as rational/irrational, human/nonhuman, subject/object, embodiment/disembodiment and nature/culture are re-enacted in the encounter with the Other, which appears at times as an enhanced version of the modern human, as well as a degraded, inferior Other.

Moreover, it argued that invasion stories also hold the potential to displace colonial frameworks as they problematise the category of the modern subject. By thinking through *Arrival* and *Annihilation*, this analysis explored how they present elements that disrupt and move away from colonial tropes that recur in invasion stories. It discussed how these films favour difference and multiplicity over sameness, destabilising notions of progress, disembodiment, the centrality of the human, as well as the possibility of a self-identical, self-constituted subject. This allowed for conceiving complex and radical portrayals of alterity, exploring the uncertainties and the estrangement that accompanies the moment of the encounter beyond the narrow limits of the colonial scenario.

More importantly, by identifying instances of reproduction and disruption of the modern subject and colonial frameworks in these narratives, this article sought to intervene upon the limits of the 'visible,' 'sayable,' and 'thinkable' of world politics.<sup>110</sup> As modern/colonial notions and hierarchies continue to shape the contemporary world, the critical engagement with these films allowed for understanding them as sites of dispute over meaning, carrying the potential to disrupt current power relations, opening the field of

108. Whitehall, 'The Problem of the "World and Beyond"', 186–87; Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

109. Rieder, 'Science Fiction, Colonialism', 378.

110. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

possibilities for thinking the encounter otherwise and imagining alternatives to the modern/colonial present.

### **Author's Note**

The research that led to this manuscript was initiated at the University of Sussex. However, the author is currently affiliated to the University of Cambridge.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Italo Brandimarte, Adriana Mandacaru Guerra, Gurminder K. Bhambra, Lauren Wilcox, Aida A. Hozic, Benjamin Tallis, the editors and the anonymous reviewers.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was initiated in the context of the author's master's degree, which was partially funded by the University of Sussex Chancellor's International Scholarship. It was further developed in the context of the author's PhD degree, which is fully funded by the University of Cambridge Harding Distinguished Postgraduate Scholars Programme.

### **ORCID iD**

Caio A. Martins Simoneti  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9524-7190>