

# 8 Imaginary faces

## Aliens, monsters, and otherness<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. The significance of the human face

The fascination with the study of the human face is constant in the history of humanity. While the face is a visible element of the anatomy and appearance of the human species, it remains quite an enigmatic subject and very difficult to fathom. From ancient treatises on physiognomy to the ubiquity of automated face detection (Kosinski *et al.* 2023) and AI face recognition systems much in vogue in today's "culture of surveillance" (Gates 2011), the face remains a subject of profound interest that cuts across a range of disciplines, from evolutionary biology to artificial intelligence.

Jurgen Ruesch (1956) refers to the human face as the signifier par excellence, Ray Birdwhistell (1970) as a message board, and Max Thorek (1946) as an advertisement to the world. Indeed, faces communicate. They always tell a story, for they represent the visible core of people's identity. As research carried out in cognitive psychology and neuroscience has shown, the face is a broadcast screen onto which a multilayered array of facial stimuli is elicited and constantly monitored by others in real-life settings. Information such as gender, identity, age, skin pigmentations, and basic emotions are inferred and "read" from faces. Darwin (1872) held that facial expressions in humans have something in common with other animals. Other thinkers sought to identify a possible grammar of emotions through the study of facial expressions (Le Brun 1992).

The face is the site of perception, signs, and semiosis. It is quite revealing to notice how biology condensed four out of five senses in the human face. Indeed, sight, hearing, smell, and taste are all grouped in the upper part of the body. Faces are also socially and culturally significant as they give a sense of self-identity and the template for enabling recognition by others - who we are and where we came from. As Juri Lotman pointed out in *Culture and Explosion* (2009):

Man became man when he realized himself as a man. And this occurred when he noticed that the different members of the human race consisted

of different people, different voices and different experiences. The face of the individual, as with individual sexual selection, was probably the first invention of man as a man.

(Lotman 2009: 155)

The central role and the significance of the human face as a scientific subject are, thus, evident both in the so-called exact or hard sciences, such as medicine, evolutionary biology, and genetics, and in the sciences of man and society, such as cultural anthropology, history, literature, and psychology. While the exact sciences deal with the human face in its organic dimension, the study of its physiological and biological functions, its origin, evolution, and the genetic architecture that lies beneath it. The human sciences deal with the social functions and values as well as the cultural and societal implications of the study of the human face. Each culture elaborates a specific set of values that tends to vary in space and time. The human face, coupled with its many representations and the social values attached to them, constitutes an integral part of it.

The sciences of man and society study the human face generally based on ‘representations’ that culture itself filters, stores, and hands down within its social imaginary and its own tradition, namely their own “self-portrait” of a culture (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973; Lotman 1979).<sup>2</sup> Texts, in both oral and written form, are illustrations of such representations. Portraits and self-portraits, drawings, caricatures, statues, and pictures make up some of the visual repertoires of face representations as archaeological history, art history, and the history of artifacts have been well documented.

Today, this array of face representations has been boosted by the proliferation of digital representations of the human face. It suffices to mention the widespread use of the “selfie” by the new generations (Peraica 2017; Rottberg 2014) and the wide access to photo production and reproduction on a mass scale (Fontcuberta 2016). Personal testimonies and first-hand accounts of the members of a society - the interpreters - are also pivotal for reconstructing the history and the study of visual and/or verbal representations of the face. Given the centrality and significance of this theme, it is not surprising to find a wide range of depictions of human faces in many cultures and societies around the world, ranging from the earliest findings of cave paintings from the Paleolithic period to the digital or “artificial faces” (Leone 2021d) of the Internet age generated through computer algorithms and digital manipulation.

## **2. Looking at faces beyond normativity: on monstrosity and wonder**

Yet a question remains as to whether only humans and primates are endowed with face-like traits or also nonhuman animals (Leone 2021d: 2) or if even extraterrestrial beings have a face. Undoubtedly, there seems to be

a conundrum about the study of the representation of nonhuman faces, not so much in regard to nonhuman animals but in respect to off-planet entities or what goes under the rubric of “post-human” (Graham 2002). Whether it is possible to conceive of faces that are not human in this specific sense of the term remains an open question. Are there faces that are literally out of this world? Do gods and aliens have faces? And if so, what do they look like?

Indeed, it should be noted that, besides the representations of men’s faces in their manifold forms and shapes, there are numerous depictions and descriptions of nonhuman or pseudo-human faces, as it were. These are, very often, representations of gods and goddesses, imaginary beings, and fantastic creatures that often have a very ancient pedigree and whose origin is very difficult to trace with precision because they are shrouded in myths, archetypes, fiction, and legends (Borges 1957). Ancient teratology is dotted with descriptions of the physical appearance of monstrous, shapeless, horrible, and evil beings that could be grouped in a generic fashion, in the category of ‘artificial faces’, ‘deviant’, or ‘aberrant faces’ in order to set them apart from the mere ‘organic faces’.<sup>3</sup>

Internationally renowned scholars, such as Umberto Eco (2007) and, much earlier, the philosopher Karl Rosenkranz (1853), have traced the history of the “aesthetics of ugliness” in the social imaginary of Western societies and have pointed out that the concepts of the ‘stranger’, the ‘monster’, and the ‘alien’ often overlap. This point is worth pondering, and I will come back to it. The concept of *monstrum*, in its mutability, sums up all the aberrant forms and arises as a general category in which to include what deviates from the norm: faces that go beyond normativity. Indeed, according to the Latin lexicographer Festus, things that come out of the natural world fall into the genre of *monstra*.

*Monstrum* comes from the Latin *mōnēo* (to admonish, to warn). *Monstrum* was a polysemous term. It primarily designated divine warnings, which burst forth unexpectedly, almost assaulting us. It meant, then, ‘monster’ in our contemporary sense, and finally, it could also be used as a synonym for ‘wonder’. In its original meaning, *monstrum* is, thus, the sudden appearance of something extraordinary, which violates nature and is a warning and a caution to man.

This term opens up a chasm of meaning, and the etymological trace here becomes the cue to identify the link established between monstrosity and wonder. The monster bears witness to unprecedented, unforeseen, ‘subversive’ forms of life in a certain sense, which, by producing wonder, induce reflection and the redefinition of our common sense and the solid reality to which it clings (Cattaneo 2002: 42–43). As Alberto Abruzzese pointed out, the monster represents

a figure that is distinguished by the imaginative force with which its forms upset the ordinary perception of nature and men, by the fear it

instills in them of their chaotic, alien, strange character. A formless creature. A hybrid figure, often between the human and the beastly, in which a diabolical split between soul and flesh, spirit and matter, excludes any harmony, any veiled beauty.

(Abruzzese 2003: 385)<sup>4</sup>

As a ‘formless form’, the *monstrum* stirs our imagination, making us converse with the unknown toward the abyss of a perceptive emotion based on wonder.

### 3. Outer appearance and face representations of aliens

A study of the outer appearance of alien races and their representations is, in and of itself, a very fascinating as well as a thought-provoking subject. This chapter is the result of an attempt to penetrate this more or less unexplored territory. Undoubtedly, it is not very common for academics to discuss this particular subject, although scientists and scholars are catching up in covering some aspects of this large and controversial subject (Centini *et al.* 1998; Jung 1967, 1978; Lewis and Kahn 2005; Battaglia 2005; Roth 2005; Wegner 2003). This makes the topic under examination even more compelling. The theme of the existence of ET races has a fairly long history (Dick 1980). Already from the beginning of the 1950s, there was a rise in public awareness about flying saucers and unidentified objects, as evidenced in the press coverage of such phenomena in the United States (Strentz 1970). The literature on the subject is vast. It encompasses studies in the fields of ufology, cultural anthropology, critical studies, psychiatry, psychology (Newman and Baumeister 1996; Blackmore 1999), parapsychology, psychic research (Swann 2017, 2018), and occult studies, social sciences, as well as cinema, science fiction studies, and narratology (Lepselter 2005, 2016).<sup>5</sup>

Today, the subject has seen a resurfacing. This is partially due to the encapsulating of an element of “alien disclosure”, “alien abduction”, and contacts with extraterrestrial civilizations within the theories that are generally grouped under the rubric of “conspiracy theories” (Aaronovitch 2009; Brotherton 2015; Gramigna 2021; Wheen 2004; Thompson 2013). Academic studies carried out on this subject have generally focused on this one aspect, namely the conspiratorial element embedded in such discourses. As it will be apparent in what follows, however, I will take a different route. For our present purposes, we shall be concerned primarily with the representation of alien races, with a specific focus on the face and the outer appearance, and leave aside the rest of it as it will fall outside the scope of the present inquiry.<sup>6</sup>

To provide the reader with a quick reference of what I refer to as the outer appearance of an alien race, we may consider the visual representation of the type of alien generally referred to as the “Greys”. Visual representations of the Greys are often present in numerous accounts of ET encounters as well as in fictional works.<sup>7</sup> The image of the Grey has become a sort of quintessential visual icon of what an alien looks like in the social imagery of Western culture. Suchlike visual representations have become ingrained in the social perception of what the representation of the physical appearance of an alien looks like. Greys are typically purported as humanoid beings with gray skin, elongated bodies, very large heads, and very large black eyes. Greys are often depicted as having

[a] hairless body that is gray or green in color, have very large almond-shaped eyes, very thin body and a large head again with no hairs, no eyebrows, or eyelashes, a very flat nose and ears or sometimes just holes in place of ears.

(Challoner 2005)

Such representations, as the one just described, surface in the culture so much so that they have a life of their own. Borrowing a term coined by Susan Blackmore (1999), these images make up what the author has termed “memeplexes”, that is, ideas that grow, spread, and develop along the lines of biological evolution in a cultural system. These are the kinds of representations this chapter focuses on. It is also worth noting that the image of the Grey as a prototypical alien representation is also evident in the emoticons of the ‘alien’ available on many social media platforms, from Facebook to Twitter, as well as in all instant messaging apps.

My interest in this particular area of research, thus, lies in one particular aspect of this large and complex issue. The focus of the present chapter revolves around the physical descriptions of alien races that can be found around the very broad discussions on UFOs, alien races, off-planet entities, and ET encounters. Indeed, descriptions devoted to the explanations and discussions of the outer appearance of extraterrestrials abound in the literature on the subject. However, it is hard to find a systematic and coherent survey that catalogs with scientific rigor and accuracy the forms of extraterrestrials based on their physical appearance. This would definitely be the work of a lifetime and, as far as I am concerned, no one has successfully achieved such a project up to now. Undoubtedly, I am fully aware that the present project only scratches the surface of such a large and complex phenomenon and is far from being exhaustive.

To my knowledge, there has not yet been a study that has cataloged all alien species according to their outer appearance. The closest you can get

is the survey of alien races titled *The Alien Races Book* (Carlson 2017), which contains a very large number of images and descriptions of alien races. Other attempts at cataloging different types of aliens can be found in Centini *et al.* (1998), who provide a classification of twenty-one types of aliens and include depictions and sketches of the types discussed. The authors refer to an earlier study by the Brazilian Jaser Pereira, who has cataloged 333 types of “animated entities” (Centini *et al.* 1998: 79). Many other descriptions, typologies, and classifications can be found on YouTube channels although these attempts are unsystematic.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, information on the subject is scattered throughout many different sources: personal accounts and first-hand reports rendered public by ET experiencers, magazines and journal articles, books and literature of various sorts – from science fiction to WikiLeaks reports – mainstream media as well as “alternative” media outlets, videos, and podcasts, not to mention the cultural myths, legends, stories, and rumors circulating on this subject. This makes the job of a researcher a challenging one, at best.

#### 4. What do aliens look like? A physiognomy of aliens

As there is a physiognomy of man, there is a physiognomy of aliens. This is an interesting hypothesis that is worth exploring. Ancient physiognomy has a long pedigree. It has been used since time immemorial in the West – from Aristotle up to Cesare Lombroso – and in the East, where it flourished under the aegis of Fakiir Al-Dīn Al-Rāzi. Although the face is a visible element of man’s anatomy and outward appearance, it still remains an enigmatic and difficult-to-read object. It is no coincidence that the study of the face has given rise to multiple cultural models and various interpretations, schemes, and modes of representation. Ancient physiognomy, in fact, postulated a tight link between two opposite poles, the inner (invisible) and outer (visible) appearance, thus identifying a close connection between the two, that is, the principle of identity between inside and outside, being and appearing, face and character. This aspect is quite evident in Jhoann Kaspar Lavater’s definition of physiognomy. Physiognomy means the ability to recognize, from a man’s outward appearance, his inwardness (Lavater 1989: 31). Thus, the challenge and aim, often disregarded, of traditional physiognomy as a pseudo-scientific project has been, since ancient times, to enclose the human face within certain categories, specific types, codes, characters, patterns, and so on. This desire to determine the face, typical of all physiognomy, constitutes its profound ambition and greatest limitation.

It is well known that Aristotle, in *Prior Analytics*, gave an example of how to use certain types of signs to infer and identify the character of people. For instance, the large extremities of the lion are regarded, from this standpoint, as an indicator of courage. Physiognomy is generally

regarded as a pseudo-science whose purpose is to infer personality traits from the physical appearance of an individual. Physiognomy was predicated upon a connection between the inner, invisible characteristics of man from the outer, visible features of physiognomic traits (Antonini 1900; Caroli 1995; Daston and Park 1998; Delaunay 1928; Foerster 1884, 1893). Traditional physiognomy is based on the principle of identity. This principle postulates that there is a correspondence between being and appearance, exteriority and interiority, face and character, and body and soul. It is, evidently, a rigid and deterministic scheme that contributes to making the face something rigid, pigeonholing it into neat and predetermined dichotomies: face and mask, appearance and essence, expression and reticence, zoomorphic traits, and human features. This type of approach, based on the principle of identity, held sway from Aristotle until the nineteenth century.

As pointed out before, physiognomic descriptions of what aliens look like are not a reminiscence of a science fiction movie but are very much present in first-hand accounts of those who reported having had interaction and/or communication with such entities. Thus, there is a physiognomy of man, and there is a physiognomy of aliens. The latter is applicable and refers to the characterization of the physical appearance of alien races. In this respect, it follows the same logic as classic physiognomy, namely to identify and sort out alien types from their outer appearance. Such descriptions provide an identikit for the identification and recognition of alien species and discerning between them. There are also key differences between the two as there is no intention to infer personality traits from the physical appearance of aliens but only to identify, cluster, and categorize the aliens encountered into different groups or families.

This is not surprising, considering that attempts at cataloging monstrous creatures and evil entities of all sorts are not a novelty, especially in the domain of aesthetics and art history and concerning specific periods of Western history, such as the Middle Ages (Baltrušaitis 1955, 1960; Kappler 1980). Furthermore, it is well known from research carried out in the fields of forensic anthropology, forensic medicine, and forensic genetics that personal identification of people is based on several criteria and methods, among which is found in the physiognomic study of the face (Falco 1923). Personal identification is based on different types of representations of the face of the individual, photographs being the most obvious ones. To the image of the face, one must add other types of representations: sketches, parodies, drawings, and oral and written descriptions. A similar procedure is used by experts in the field of ufology to identify alien races.

What struck me is that descriptions of aliens often dwell not only on the characterization of the shape and size of the body, skin colors, hands,

and fingers but also on a description of facial features, for instance, the shape and color of the eyes, shape of the head and the ears, and so forth. May this be a proclivity of the human eye, it is significant that faces play a significant role in descriptions of alien races, too, as they are a key element in identifying people's identities. In what follows, I will examine two main areas to expound my study. Firstly, I will dwell on a brief discussion on the concept of 'representation'. I argue that this concept is a useful tool for the analyst of culture inasmuch as what we are dealing with when studying faces are usually representations of facial features embedded in visual or oral records. Thus, a study of the face from a cultural point of view entails a study of such representations. This is a key concept for unpacking this subject.

Secondly, I will provide an overview of those accounts of the people who have witnessed or claim to have had interactions with off-planet entities. These unique individuals are generally referred to as "alien abductees" in the literature on ufology as well as in "alternative" media or as "alien abduction". I will, instead, use slightly different terminology and refer to the subject who had interactions and communication with alien races as "experiencers". This choice of terminology is predicated upon the idea that the term "abduction" retains a somewhat negative connotation, while the term "experiencer" is a more neutral word. When an "alien experiencer" has reported his own experience first-hand, he or she can be regarded as an interpreter of the alien culture he or she knows.

At this juncture, it is also worth mentioning that cultural anthropology, ethnography, and folklore studies have for centuries investigated phenomena of the unnatural, the supernatural, the paranormal, and the mystical by relying on oral or written testimonies derived from the "interpreters" themselves, namely those enmeshed in a particular set of systems and beliefs (Kluckhohn 1949; Rosaldo 1980) that witnessed significant events in a specific sociocultural setting. Think, for instance, of the vast amount of research conducted on the culture of shamans, shamanism, and medicine men (Castaneda 1974; Mails 1979).

Let me also clarify, from the outset, what my stance is in regard to the subject treated. Despite the term "conspiracy theory" being very much in fashion, it is not my intention to couch the views discussed in this chapter from this point of view, nor is my contention to attach a value judgment to the theory discussed. My goal is fairly humble. That is, to show that the relevance of the face as an indicator of identity and recognition is found not only in the identification of people but also in the description of alien races provided by the witnesses who have made their experiences public. Thus, I want to make clear that my interest in the theories is primarily in interpreting the work of alien experiencers as an iconic representation of

a ubiquitous and global phenomenon – undoubtedly, a phenomenon that today has reached a global scale.

### 5. The nature and paradox of representations

As said earlier, the sciences of man and society study the human face on the basis of ‘representations’ that culture itself has handed down in its social imaginary. Thus, a discussion on the concept of representation is in order. How can such representations be studied? What is their use? To start with, the approach to the study of representations stemming from semiotics – the study of signs, semiosis, and meaning-making – should be able to distinguish various systems of representations. The range of representations varies. It includes verbal representations, such as oral and written language, as well as visual data, such as diagrams, drawings, photos, and so on. Furthermore, from a semiotic perspective, it is worth discerning between different types of systems of representation and providing a comparative analysis of their grammar. Visual representations of the human face are, thus, multifarious. It goes without saying that visual representations of the face play a key role in the process of recognition of others (Gramigna and Voto 2021).

The distinction between analogical and digital information and codification is an important corollary to this discussion. This distinction applies to the representation of faces, too, and should not be disregarded. This yields the distinction between analogical and digital representations of faces, a difference that often goes unnoticed. When we discuss organic faces as well as when we talk about the human face in concrete interactions and everyday life settings, we operate in the realm of analogical codification. The latter “constitutes a series of symbols that in their proportions and relations are similar to the thing, idea, or event for which they stand” (Ruesch and Kees 1956: 8). While analogical codification deals with continuous functions, digital codification is based on discrete step intervals. The organic face, as embedded in the network of nonverbal communication, is an analogic codification device. This is an aspect worth pondering, and such distinction should not be eliminated.

The concept of “representation” is relevant to the present discussion. This is a complex concept for which there is no universal definition. Each discipline has provided its own meaning to it. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein provided more than fifteen definitions to explain what the concept of representation stands for. The verbs ‘to represent’, ‘to present’, ‘to express’, ‘to exhibit’, ‘to reflect’, ‘to project’, and ‘to keep in place/to be in place of’ are some of these terms. What is important to stress is that in every form of representation, something is in the place

of something else. This is one of the most important key aspects of every representation. To represent means to stand for something else, which is at one and the same time evoked and erased. If we take a particular example of a representation, for instance, an ID card, one would say that this is an illustration of a representation of a human face. Usually in any ID card, there is a pictorial representation of the human face. However, as said before, a representation entails two aspects: (i) to point to a particular person, object, or event and (ii) the real person, however, is erased from the representation because he is not physically present there. This is the paradox of the representation, that is, to evoke or call forth the object represented and, at one and the same time, to erase it. We can, therefore, conclude that the principle of duplication is at the base of the nature of representation (Gil 1980).

## 6. Defining aliens: a real conundrum

There is a real conundrum in this field of research. Because reports come from very different sources, it can be challenging to disentangle the information provided and to assess and ascertain the accuracy and reliability of these sources. Moreover, fictional books and film industries – especially Hollywood – have drawn on the *topos* of the alien, which is often present as an element or a character of a science fiction plot with certain stereotypical features. This has yielded a mix of facts and fiction which is not so easy to disentangle. This has created a plethora of texts, myths, and legends surfacing in different cultures in different channels and forms – from Internet memes to YouTube videos – and variations that are sedimented in the “social imagery” (Taylor 2003) and the collective consciousness of people.

If this is not enough to contend with, it is worth recalling that perception and anthropomorphism are interlocked phenomena, a link that has been aptly emphasized and discussed at length in the study *Faces in the Clouds* (1995) by Stewart E. Guthrie. As can be gleaned from this study, the proclivity to perceive humanlike forms is a ubiquitous phenomenon:

Faces and other human forms seem to pop out at us on all sides. Chance images in clouds, landforms, and ink blots present eyes, profiles, or whole figures. Voices murmur or whisper in the wind and waves. We see the world not only as alive but also as humanlike. Anthropomorphism pervades our thought and action.

(Guthrie 1995: 62)

Thus, it is probably a natural predisposition of the human brain to gauge inputs from the external world regarding recognizable patterns. And the

face is undoubtedly one of the most recognizable shapes. Thus, some of the descriptions of encounters with aliens that we know of dwell on the face of the being encountered, and there is often an element of anthropomorphism attached to it. This aspect caught my attention.

Because some of the accounts of ET encounters provide some clues and give some attention to the representation of what may be referred to as “alien face” – namely, what an off-planet entity looks like to the human eye – then it is relevant to set out an inquiry along the lines of the present study and bring up the testimony of those who have experienced and described their experience first-hand. However, this terminology would immediately set aside “alien face” instead of “human face” in a dichotomic fashion. At this conjunction, a note of caution should be sounded. It is perhaps inaccurate to refer to the outer appearance of an off-planet entity as an “alien face”. Undoubtedly, the organic face has its biological roots and functions. Thus, the face, in its narrow meaning, is “an assembly of bone, gristle, muscle, skin, hair, blood, blood vessels, and organic matter”. Its physical function is “to present the chief organs of the senses to the world and to operate them with the utmost advantage” (Brophy 1945: 12–13). However, the term “face” has been used prescinding from its narrow meaning – the organic face – in order to make sense of experiences and go beyond the face as a physical organ. Think of the perception of the environment or the morphology of urban space in terms of a face – Simmel’s morphology or “face of the city”. Likewise, one can describe the face of a building, the “face of history”, and many more examples of this logic can be added up. Thus, besides a narrow definition of a face in its biological dimension, there is also a wider meaning of the face understood as a broader phenomenon, and that includes the outer appearance given by facial characteristics. In this regard, the term ‘face’ can be used to discuss the outer appearance of what goes beyond being human.

One may immediately react to the argument of this chapter with a mix of suspicion and incredulity. Indeed, some might ask whether extraterrestrials have faces or whether they exist at all. Is it even thinkable to take up this subject as a topic of research? To some, this may seem rather bizarre. However, in this chapter, I argue that asking these questions is relevant inasmuch as one cannot simply disregard the issue as irrational, illogical, implausible, mistaken, or simply impossible. On the contrary, there is a host of pivotal questions that arise from taking up this subject and that are worth exploring. Some of these issues fall outside the scope of the present chapter. It is, nonetheless, worth mentioning them in order to fathom the depth and significance of the issue at stake. The themes of make-believe and degrees or gradients of credulity (what is believable and what is not), the social construction of reality, simulation, and the question of veracity

and truthfulness through discourse, the issue of information and disinformation, the question of culture, counter-culture, and exo-culture, the problems of censorship and free speech are all relevant themes that make up an important corollary to this subject which cannot be disposed of in a few words and would deserve a separate and much lengthier elaboration.

### **7. Constructing otherness: the alien/human dichotomy and the construction of the 'us' versus 'them' narrative**

From the viewpoint of the study of cultural phenomena, what we are dealing with are 'texts' of various nature – understood in the broad sense of the term as to encompass anything that has meaning – which by all means makes up the texture of a system. A broad definition of text encompasses

not only written texts, literary in particular but any coherent verbal statement, oral, too. "Text" can even designate a vehicle of articulate global signification: painting, theater representation, dance, ritual. Finally, and this is the maximum extension, culture – besides textualized cultures – can be thought of itself as a text.

(Segre 1982: 677)

Ultimately, what we are dealing with are "cultural units", that is, "simply anything that is culturally defined and distinguished as an entity. It may be a person, place, thing, feeling, state of affairs, sense of foreboding, fantasy, hallucination, hope or idea" (Eco 1976: 67).

Although some texts may be regarded as "non-texts" from the point of view of a specific culture and relegated to the fringes of cultures, this does not mean that they lose their status as texts and have no value at all. On the contrary, as much of the research in the field of the semiotics of culture has shown, the edges and the peripheries of culture are the places of more active semiotic processes, for the boundary "is the area of accelerated semiotic processes, which always flow more actively on the periphery of cultural environments, seeking to affix them to the core structures, with a view to displacing them" (Lotman 2005: 212).

Let me further qualify such statements. From the perspective of the semiotics of culture, cultural systems are dynamic systems that must be understood from a twofold perspective: from the inner and the outer point of view. The inner point of view is the conception of culture from the point of view of the culture itself, that is, from within. The outer point of view is the one of a scientific metasystem that attempts to reconstruct or describe that culture from an outside perspective. From the inner point of view, culture is linked to its opposition, non-culture. This opposition is also conceived of

as information versus entropy, order/chaos, and culture/nature. Moreover, from the inner point of view, culture does not need its outer, chaotic agent but can be understood immanently. As opposed to the consideration of the inner view given earlier, from the outer perspective, culture, and non-culture appear as two interrelated spheres. From the outer point of view, culture, and non-culture mutually condition each other, and they need each other. This is an important qualification to keep in mind because the theme of the alien is often couched in a dichotomic fashion, constructing an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ narrative.

The theme of the alien being thought of as a form of extraterrestrial life has a very enigmatic status. This is a very complex and controversial subject, almost without limit. Today, this subject resurfaces in many forms of public discourses that are quite distant from the other, from ‘alternative’ and ‘truth media’ to mainstream media. To these media outlets, one should not disregard the personal accounts of those referred to as “alien experiencers” or “alien abductees”. Extraterrestrials are generally characterized by a physical appearance that makes them somewhat different or ‘other’ than human beings. Indeed, aliens encapsulate the idea of absolute otherness. The problem of the existence and appearance of aliens is shaped according to a twofold status. On the one hand, most of the representations in Western societies are mediated from works of science fiction and cinema that depict extraterrestrials as figures marked by a shape and a culture that sets them in opposition to the lore of the common person.

Taking up the *topos* of the monster as a creature without form – shapeless creature – and the archetype of the enemy that comes from the outside – the unknown – aliens are often depicted as ugly and malevolent beings. The alien and the enemy are quintessential representations of chaos. The alien comes from the edges of culture. It challenges rational thinking, violates the customs of civil society, contrasts with normality, and is an ultimate threat to humanity. Thus, the construction of the enemy and the demonization of the other are often welded to each other in the representation of the alien. This narrative is sometimes counterbalanced with another, less frequent, and chronologically more recent motif that depicts the extraterrestrial as a benign entity who intervenes to support humanity and often is enmeshed in an anthropomorphic dimension.

The link between alien, otherness, and foreign to a given culture also finds a correlation in the semiotics of culture. Lotman and Uspenskij, for instance, provide both a social and mythological reading of this phenomenon. For Lotman and Uspenskij, the starting point is the high degree of ambiguity that characterizes the concept of “alien” (“*čuzoj*”), to which the term *izgoy* (“outcast”, those who live at the margins of culture) is interlocked. The alien or foreigner comes from a different culture and dwells

in a society and a culture that are foreign to her/him. For this reason, the alien shows a certain ambiguity and has a twofold connotation, for she or he belongs to two domains, the outside and the inside, the 'own' and the 'other'. Undoubtedly, the alien can be seen either as an enemy, toward whom the 'own' community shows feelings of hostility and defense or as the holder of a particular knowledge (as in the case of shamans and sorcerers), that is, someone to be feared and respected with reverence (Lotman and Uspenskij 1985: 165).

### **8. Conclusions: the phenomenology of an alien**

Today, the archetype of the alien has seen a reemergence through the widespread use of digital media and the massive proliferation of 'conspiracy theories'. Such matters are at the forefront of discussion, arousing interest among experts and ordinary people alike. In some of these theories, the existence of extraterrestrial entities is supported, and the present, past, and future role of alleged "alien races" in the evolution of human beings are discussed. These accounts pay attention to the outward characteristics of extraterrestrials and their physical appearance, including facial features, in order to identify them, sort them out, and distinguish one from the other as well as to set them apart from human beings. We could, therefore, speak of a phenomenology of the alien, which also includes a description of their outer appearance coupled with other characteristics: culture, language, telepathy, and other psychic abilities, and whether they are benign or malign. While phenomenology is traceable in contemporary public discourse, it is also at a crossroads between ufology, alternative history, anthropology of aliens, and personal accounts of "abduction experiences".

It is important to note that, in general terms, in such narratives, there are two energies, regarded as positive and negative, and this is taken as a rule of thumb that applies throughout the entire universe. Aliens, too, fall into one of these categories. Some have a positive agenda, others very positive, while others are very depicted as dangerous and negative. In these narratives, it can be found some explicit references to entities that are identifiably classified through their external characteristics and, specifically, through some facial features (shape of the face, shape of the body, and color of the eyes) and other characteristics of the body (height, color of the skin, the number of fingers). According to this premise, there are different types of aliens that have different physical appearances. Some illustrations of alien groups are the following: the "Reptilians", the "Mantis" or "Mantid", the "Pleiadians" (or Nordic aliens), the "Felines", and the "Andromedans". As for the common body structure into which aliens can be generally categorized, we can recall the following: "humanoids", "reptoids",

“insectoids”, and “Greys”. Reptilians are probably the most common and well-known species. They have been popularized, so to speak, by the many works of David Icke (1999). “Mantis” or “Mantid” has a green body, very large oval-shaped eyes, and a very small nose. “Andromedans” are thought of as having certain characteristic features, such as “a tall, slim body frame; very long arms; almond-shaped eyes and skin tones ranging from pale to olive-tinted. They are also said to have pointed ears and high cheekbones with a narrow face shape”.<sup>9</sup>

The archetypes of UFO or aliens, in their positive or negative connotations, have often been used in literature and science fiction films so much so that it became a consolidated genre. This genre has often portrayed the encounter between human civilization and extraterrestrials, so much so that it crystallized in a particular *topos*, namely the encounter with extraterrestrial race and culture. One of the first works of literature that tackled the theme of contact with an extraterrestrial race is the well-known science fiction novel *The War of the Worlds* (1898) by the English author H. G. Wells. It is one of the earliest stories to detail a conflict between mankind and an extraterrestrial race. This novel thematizes the theme of the alien invasion from Mars, capitalizing on the fear of negative aliens coming from outside to subjugate the Earth and the human race. It is worth remembering that in 1938 this novel received a lot of attention from the mass media when a young actor, Orson Wells, based a radio show on this book. The effect on the audience was so dramatic and powerful that it triggered a massive panic in the listeners, who believed the alien invasion from Mars had really happened.

Another seminal text that brings us back to the theme of the alien invasion is the science fiction book *Who Goes There?* (1938) by the father of American science fiction, John W. Campbell. The alien is depicted as an elusive creature, hard to catch, who is able to infiltrate the human mind and take it over. In this connection, the film by Don Siegel, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), should also be mentioned. This film was based on a book by Jack Finney. Phenomenal is also the transposition of the novel by Campbell mentioned earlier, which was made by John Carpenter, *The Thing* (1982). The idea of a non-hostile alien who is willing to cooperate with men can be traced back to the 1950s. The idea of the positive, non-hostile alien was put forward thanks to the contributions of writers such as Clifford Simak, Jack Williamson, and Philip Dick. I should at least mention a film that has put forward the idea of a benign, positive creature coming from another dimension: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), directed by Steven Spielberg and *E.T.* (1982).

To have or to construct an enemy is important not only for building our own identity but also to have an obstacle against which to measure our

systems of values and beliefs. It is not important whether this enemy is real or not (Eco 1993). What matters is the construction and the demonization of the enemy. Enemies are different from us, and they behave according to customs and lore that are not our own. The other, the person that is different from us, the stranger par excellence, is the foreigner. In the Roman bas-relief, the Barbarians were depicted as bearded and snub-nosed. Indeed, the term “Barbarian” derives from the fact that Barbarians spoke a different language than the Roman language and, as such, were considered outsiders and a person that is not able to talk. The enemy is usually depicted as ugly. There is a general cultural rule according to which the enemy must be ugly because what is good is identified with what is beautiful, and one of the main features of beauty has always been what in the Middle Ages was called *integritas*. This means that one must have everything that is required by the average representative of that particular species. Therefore, if you are a human being, you will be regarded as “ugly” if a limb or an eye is missing, if the skin color is different from the average, or if the stature is below the average.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter results from a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant Agreement No 819649-FACETS; PI: Massimo LEONE).
- 2 In this connection, see the special issue “Cultures of the Face” (Gramigna and Leone 2021) published in *Sign Systems Studies* 49 (3–4).
- 3 In this regard, see the abundant literature on face disfigurement (Rifkin *et al.* 2018; Skinner and Cock 2018).
- 4 My own translation from Italian.
- 5 A list of MA and PhD dissertations devoted to the UFO subject is available at: [www.cisu.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/UFOTheses\\_by\\_Paolo\\_Toselli\\_updated\\_20170101a.pdf](http://www.cisu.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/UFOTheses_by_Paolo_Toselli_updated_20170101a.pdf) (last accessed 11 November 2019).
- 6 The bibliography on this topic is vast. Many recent pieces of research have delved into the issue from different perspectives philosophical, journalistic, and psychological. This shows that academics and scientists have begun to question why such theories persist even though they are improbable and unreasonable and, above all, how it is that we have reached such considerable proportions today. Among the most recent publications, and for those who wish to explore the topic further, I would like to point out the research by Aaronovitch (2009), Wheen (2004), Thompson (2013), Lewandowsky (2021), Lewandowsky and Cook (2020), Lewandowsky *et al.* (2017), Damiani (2004), Cohnitz (2017), Leone (2016), Butter and Knight (2020), McCrea (2004), Pipes (1996), Oreskes and Conway (2010), and Eco (1990, 2021).
- 7 An image of a quintessential representation of a “Grey” is found on the Wikipedia page devoted to UFOs: <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/UFO> (last accessed 21 December 2019).
- 8 Regrettably, I was not able to retrieve and consult this study.
- 9 <http://starseedsigns.com/andromedan-starseed/> (last accessed 20 December 2022).

## **Filmography**

*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), [Film] Dir. Don Siegel.

*Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) [Film] Dir. Steven Spielberg.

*E.T.* (1982). [Film] Dir. Steven Spielberg.

*The Thing* (1982). [Film] Dir. John Carpenter.