



Human-Alien Encounters in Science Fiction: A Postcolonial Perspective

Borbála Bökös

Partium Christian University (Oradea, Romania)

E-mail: bokosborbala@gmail.com

Abstract. An (un)conventional encounter between humans and alien beings has long been one of the main thematic preoccupations of the genre of science fiction. Such stories would thus include typical invasion narratives, as in the case of the three science fiction films I will discuss in the present paper: the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956; Philip Kaufman, 1978; Abel Ferrara, 1993), *The Host* (Andrew Niccol, 2013), and *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009). I will examine the films in relation to postcolonial theories, while attempting to look at the ways of revisiting one's history and culture (both alien and human) in the films' worlds that takes place in order to uncover and heal the violent effects of colonization. In my reading of the films I will shed light on the specific processes of identity formation (of an individual or a group), and the possibilities of individual and communal recuperation through memories, rites of passages, as well as hybridization. I will argue that the colonized human or alien body can serve either as a mediator between the two cultures, or as an agent which fundamentally distances two separate civilizations, thus irrevocably bringing about the loss of identity, as well as the lack of comprehension of cultural differences.

Keywords: postcolonial, identity, memory, hybridization, *Avatar*, *The Host*, *Invasion of Body Snatchers*, Science Fiction film.

For a long time in the history of science fiction the figure of the alien had undergone major changes thus shaping various cultural fantasies about either monstrous and evil alien invaders, or friendly and peaceful Others. Science fiction portrays alien-human encounters either in a positive, or in a negative way, however, one thing is certain: each encounter can be interpreted as a certain border crossing, a transgression, in which a great number of differences (biological, cultural, social) on both sides appear to be responsible for the majority of the conflicts. The alien, if portrayed as a terrifying, hostile entity, could be interpreted as a metaphor for human isolation, for human monstrosity, and, thus, reflect on our unspoken and unrevealed desires. While attempting to analyse

the experience of the encounter between man and alien, Michael Beehler uses the concepts of Freud and Kant (the uncanny and the sublime) for explaining experiences of internalization, or “naturalization,” and externalization, or “expulsion.” The “illegal alien,” as Beehler puts it, threatens the *institution* of mankind – his “anthropology.” So, the alien represents a crisis in human’s ability to designate themselves, and the search for the alien becomes the human being’s search for determining themselves (Beehler 1987, 34–39).

Moreover, the presence of the alien is always already bringing about an existential threat for humankind: people have to face the horror that they are not in the center of Creation any more, and can easily become suppressed, hunted down.¹ Such anxieties are easy to track in the huge number of invasion films that appeared in the 1950s and 1960s, and expressed America’s fears of being attacked and annihilated by the communists in the Cold War era. The reported sightings of UFOs in the 50s, and the emerging popular urban legends about such flying saucers undoubtedly added to the rise of a certain subculture which created extreme versions of science fiction plotlines, that is, the paranoid-type of invasion stories, in which the anthropomorphic aliens did not merely resemble humans, but managed to take over humans (their minds and/or bodies), assuming both their appearances and identities. On the one hand, this parasitic relationship brings into question the problem of dominance: aliens, being superior to humans in terms of technology as well as morality, sometimes appear as wise intergalactic judges of men, deciding whether the irresponsible and utterly dangerous, yet painfully emotional and, thus, valuable humankind deserves to survive on planet Earth, or, since mankind is unable to change, it should be exterminated (see, for example, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Robert Wise, 1951; Scott Derrickson, 2008). On the other hand, starting with the 40s one can observe a tendency in science fiction, an inversion of the Wellsian invasion pattern, according to which humans take the role of alien conquerors, and try to colonize less advanced worlds. In one way or another, the encounter with the alien Other is always a disturbing and life-changing, not to mention culture-changing experience. While analysing the encounter of the discourses of the Other in science fiction and in postcolonialism respectively, Jessica Langer draws parallels between “the science fictional Other and the Orientalized Other” and argues that “in science fiction, otherness is often conceptualized corporeally, as a physical difference

1 The most obvious example of hostile, domineering, and invading aliens can be found in H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* (1898). In the novel, the alien tripods aim at conquering and colonizing Earth.

that either signposts or causes an essential difference, in a constant echo of zero-world racialization” (2011, 82). The creation of racial as well as cultural divisions serves as a major tool of colonialism, especially in Sci-Fi stories of humans conquering aliens, which closely corresponds “to the historical dehumanization of indigenous colonized people – even, perhaps especially, when those ‘aliens’ are humans themselves” (Langer 2011, 82).

Apart from the fact that fear from the Other can be interpreted, in a Freudian sense, as a representation of our repressed fears, Patrick Lucanio asserts that it can also be a symbol of “transformation, directing us toward an individuated life” (qtd. in Telotte 2001, 48), that is, pointing at our own place in the universe, as well as our potential for overcoming all obstacles and dangers in general. In addition, the idea of transformation can also be understood in this context as a process of reconciliation with the alien, in and through one’s coming of age. In my reading it is precisely the (alien-human) body that serves as a means of colonization, that is, a complete eradication of humanity, or, on the contrary, as a means of healing the horrors of colonial encounter, of restoring the sense of self-determination.

The three films I propose to analyse – the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956; Philip Kaufman, 1978; Abel Ferrara, 1993), *The Host* (Andrew Niccol, 2013), and *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) – are all invasion narratives, yet each of them deals with the idea of border-crossing, of transgressing the boundaries of cultures and races in rather peculiar ways. In analysing these films I am interested in the specific moments of (violent) colonial encounters and the ways of recovering from the effects of such encounters. I will argue that in almost all cases the preservation of memories as well as remembering the past and, to a certain extent, hybridization will serve as crucial elements in the process of self-preservation of both the colonized subject and the colonizer, and will become essential ways for recovering/finding cultural identity.

“An Impostor or Something”

The *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is a typical American invasion-type science fiction horror film, the first version of which appeared in 1956, directed by Don Siegel, starring Kevin McCarthy and Dana Wynter.² There were two remakes of the film, one in 1978, directed by Philip Kaufman, starring Donald Sutherland, Brooke Adams, Veronica Cartwright, and another one in 1996, directed by Abel Ferrara, and starring Gabrielle Anwar, Billy Wirth, and Terry Kiney. In all three

2 The film is an adaptation of Jack Finney’s science fiction novel, *The Body Snatchers*, from 1954.

versions the core elements of the plot are the following: an alien invasion occurs on Earth, at the beginning in a silent, but very meticulous way, that is, the seeds of alien life forms have fallen from space, and survived on Earth in the form of plant seeds, which later on develop into pods, and, if placed next to a sleeping human being, become able to grow into a duplicate of that person. When the pod fully grows and acquires all physical features of its host, it will be awakened to full consciousness, and will be able to absorb all memories and personality traits of the sleeping human being, yet it will be unable to copy certain essential human traits: emotions, feelings, and a sense of empathy. After the birth of the pod person,³ the original human being's body disappears forever. The main conflict of the storyline centres on one or two characters who discover the secret invasion and try to put an end to it. Their attempts to fight the aliens are presented differently in the three adaptations: sometimes they manage to call the world's attention to the problem (1956's film), or they might even be able to stop the invasion by themselves (1996's version), but other times their fight proves to be futile, and thus they fall victim of their tragic destinies (1978's version).

In the common storyline of the *Body Snatcher* movies the extraterrestrials appear as ruthless colonists, who later present themselves to the protagonists as a race that brings harmony and peace to mankind, and claim that colonization, hence the ultimate taking over of humanity, is an inevitable, yet not entirely unpleasant process. What makes this type of colonization so frightening is the delayed discovery of the invasion itself, since these types of aliens, as Matthew Bennell, the main character of the second film (1978) realizes, do not come to Earth on metal ships, as one would expect them, but in a rather treacherous way: they silently sneak into your house, and replace you while you are asleep.

In the original film (1956) the story is told in retrospect by the main character, Dr. Miles Bennell, a doctor in the small California town of Santa Mira. As he comes home from a scientific conference at the beginning of the film, he realizes that many of his patients suffer from some kind of mental disease, a strange type of hallucination: they all believe that their close relatives are not the same, that they were changed somehow, replaced by a weird doppelganger. The first sign of the disturbing changes that have taken place in the town is perhaps the figure of the little boy running away from home, and hysterically crying about his mother not being his mother any more. One of the patients of Dr. Bennell, Wilma, also claims that her uncle Ira, with whom she lives, has also been changed, and he is

3 The film brought about the appearance of the term "pod people," now part of American slang, denoting rigid, emotionless persons.

no longer her “real uncle.” She is certain that the person who pretends to be her uncle now is “an impostor or something.” To the question of the doctor: “how is he different?” Wilma answers: “That’s just it. There is no difference you can actually see. He looks, sounds, acts, and remembers like Uncle Ira. [...] But [...] there’s something missing. He’s been a father to me since I was a baby. Always when he talked to me there was a special look in his eye. That look’s gone. *Dr. Bennell*: What about memories? There must be certain things that only he and you would know about. *Wilma*: There are. I’ve talked to him about them. He remembers them all down to the last small detail, just like Uncle Ira would. But Miles... There’s no emotion. None! Just the pretense of it. The words, gesture, the tone of voice... everything else is the same, but not the feeling. Memories or not, he isn’t my uncle Ira” (*Body Snatchers*, 1956).

Miles Bennell tries to find a logical explanation for this peculiar behaviour, and asks for the help of the local psychologist and his friend, Dr. Dan Kauffman, who explains to him that whatever is happening in the town can be simply a case of “mass delusion,” a rather strange psychological disease, which spreads from person to person, but the effects eventually wear off in a few days. The same happens to Wilma: in a short time she excuses herself of behaving in a silly way, and assures Dr. Bennell that she is no longer in the need of any physical or psychological treatment. By this time it is obvious for the spectator that Wilma has also been replaced. The appearance of the duplicates produces an uncanny sense of anxiety – in a Freudian sense –, since the doppelgangers emerge via the possession of someone’s mind and body. The image of the “impostor or something” is, according to J. P. Telotte, “largely about a fear of the other, about what is ‘out there,’ but also about what that otherness means for the self, the fundamental strike it makes at your own sense of security and identity. In this case that fear is eventually justified by the revelation that alien seed pods have begun ‘snatching’ people’s bodies while they sleep and replacing their real selves with something inhuman” (2001, 19–20).

The dehumanization of humans is perhaps the greatest threat in all science fiction storylines, and it is one of the most disturbing types of invasion narratives. As Vivian Sobchack argues: “while we may react with varying degrees of detached wonder to invading Martians or Metalunan Mutants who are distinctly seen as ‘other’ than ourselves, our responses to those aliens clothed in our own familiar skins are another matter entirely. We expect unnatural behavior from something seen as unnatural, alien behavior from something alien. What is so visually devastating and disturbing about the SF films’ ‘taken over’ humans is the small,

and therefore terrible, incongruence between the ordinariness of their form and the final extraordinariness of their behavior, however hard they try to remain undetected and ‘normal’” (2004, 120–121).

When passionate humanity is gone, and the cold, inhuman alien race takes control, the colonization of Earth seems to be almost inevitable. This also takes us to the realm of the uncanny, that is, the familiar disturbed by the unfamiliar. Something that was known, ordinary, and secure, suddenly becomes dangerous and unknown, thus creating a sense of anxiety, a sense of the whole world’s just being not right, being ultimately distorted. The snatched body, the simulacrum of human beings itself becomes a very effective symbol of colonial encounter as well. It is precisely this newly forged body, in which the host’s memories and personality traits are also absorbed, that functions as the ultimate means of colonial control and the final eradication of the colonized subjects. In this sense, the colonized body ensures the survival of the alien race and denies all possible forms of communication or comprehension between the two races.

The process of snatching people’s bodies also raises the question regarding the problematic relationship between colonizer (aliens) and colonized (humans) and the need to (re)claim one’s personal identity in order to survive and find their own place in the world. The protagonists in all three movies, desperately, not only try to reclaim their lost values (e.g., replaced family members, lost homes), but also attempt to heal/restore their highly wounded selves: they try to deal with the trauma of colonial encounter and try to figure out a way of survival. I claim that there are two levels in which the story of the *Body Snatcher* movies works. First, such a film works on the level of personal survival and coming of age through preserving one’s humanity, that is, his or her identity. Remaining human in a world colonized by aliens is a rather impossible task, yet it seems to be the only option for the characters of the movies; it is the only way they can reclaim their own lost lives as well as their future. On a second level the story is an example of both conquer and resistance through mimicry. The pod people take control through imitating and essentially “becoming” the colonized subjects, while humans fight back through pretending that they have already been snatched. They repeat the cold, emotionless behaviour of the colonizers, of the pod people, thus they essentially perform a mimesis, which, in the sense of the term used by Homi Bhabha, undermines the authority of the alien colonizers. Mimicry “inheres in the multiple acts of translation, inaugurating a process of anti-colonial self-differentiation through the logic of inappropriate appropriation” (Bhabha 1994, 150). In the films’ world the impostors are also copied and fooled by humans. Mingling with the pod people

through imitating their attitudes, their emotionless facial expressions, and their wide-open, dull eyes seems to be the only way of escape and survival for the human protagonists, until emotions give them away. The otherness and the estrangement of the protagonists in the new world taken over by the aliens are suggested on many levels and in various ways in the three film versions.

The perception of the horrors of colonization is perhaps best exemplified in the case of the third adaptation, in which one can observe a completely unique approach to the initial story of body snatching. The story is told from the point of view of Marti (Gabrielle Anwar), a teenage girl whose father receives a job at a military base, so the whole family has to move there. The teenager's narrative point of view is important here for two reasons: first, because it foreshadows a coming of age story, that is, a rite of passage of the protagonist, and second, because it sets the tone for the forthcoming human resistance. Marti appears throughout the film as a rebellious, typical teenager, who is not getting on well with her stepmother, and, typically for her age, thinks that even her father acts against her. The loneliness and isolation that she experiences within her own family suggests that she will have to face isolation on a very different scale: after the colonization takes place, she and her boyfriend will remain the only humans on the base, the only ones of their kind. According to Nicole Brenez, Marti goes through three stages in her escape, which I also interpret as stages of her growing up: first, she disrupts the marital relations of her parents, then she discredits the stepmother, and finally she takes the mother's place as she becomes the mother figure for her little brother, Andy (Brenez 1988, 4).

This film version of the *Body Snatchers* is undoubtedly the most haunting among all, since it brings the issue of alien colonization in the heart of a family. Marti witnesses the transformation of her close family members, starting with herself, and is forced to deal with the horrible, half-developed duplicates. She attempts to defeat them, cheat on them, and ultimately manages to escape them. In this sense her coming of age occurs in and through her process of resisting alien colonization.

“I See You”

James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) is another story about invasion, yet in this one humans play the role of colonizers. The story takes place in the far future, and envisions Earth as a no longer habitable planet: all natural resources were used up and people live in crowded urban environments with little hope of getting access

to a more decent way of life. The main character, Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) is a former marine, whose legs are paralysed and who lives among miserable conditions. One day he receives news of his twin brother's death and gets a chance to step in his place in completing a certain Avatar Program. Therefore, he has to travel to Pandora, a faraway planet, where humans set up entire mining colonies in order to extract a precious mineral, the unobtainium. This mineral could solve Earth's energy problems and could also bring huge profits for the administration responsible for dealing with the energy crisis. The protagonist learns that Pandora is the home of a rather primitive, humanoid type of species, called the Na'vi, who live in perfect harmony with nature, and worship a mother goddess, Eywa, who can be found everywhere, in all living beings. Humans are more technologically advanced than the giant, blue-skinned Na'vi, and in their process of violent colonization they conquer more and more territories thus taking away the lands from the indigenous locals. In order to learn more about the planet and get closer to the Na'vi in an attempt to fully colonize them, humans have created the Avatars, these half human, half Na'vi hybrids, who can be remotely operated by the colonizers. The avatars were created from human and Na'vi DNA; this is why it is only Jake Sully who can transfer his consciousness into the body of the avatar that was genetically engineered from his twin brother's DNA. As Jake starts to inhabit the avatar body, and gets to know the Na'vi better, he undergoes a profound process of initiation and self-knowledge that results in sympathizing with the colonized race, then becoming a full member of their tribe, and finally becoming the leader of the Na'vi resistance.

Many scenes of the film are about how Jake experiences and gets used to his new body, the tall, blue-skinned avatar, and how he tries to blend in the Na'vi tribe and learn more about their culture. He has a kind but severe teacher in the person of a female Na'vi, Neytiri, who happens to be the daughter of the tribe's leaders. Neytiri always scolds him, telling him that he is too blind to see the way of the Na'vi and that he is clumsy in the forest and behaves like a big child. The expression that the Na'vi use for greeting, "I see you," can be interpreted on another level meaning "I see your soul, I understand you, I comprehend your whole existence." Jake is unable to "see" the real values of the locals at first, but as he learns more and more about the world of the Na'vi, about how living beings are connected to each other and to the all-encompassing nature-mother, Eywa, he comes to his age and finally manages to see the natives for who they really are. Thus, his new identity is developed always under the influence of and in reflection to the cultural identity of the Na'vi group.

Victor Turner in his *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* describes the formation of the identity of the “liminal personae,” of the “threshold people.” In Turner’s view personal identity as well as group identity formation is a constant process of reflection and always subject to revision. A community always defines and views itself as related to how others perceive and judge the same community (Turner 1991). As Sartre argues: “I am possessed by the Other: the Other’s look fashions my body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculpts it, produces it as it is, sees it as I shall never see it. The Other holds a secret; the secret of what I am” (qtd. in Nandy 1983, 17). Self-identification is always a part of coming of age processes, of rites of passage. As Turner claims, rites of passage occur in every human culture, and refer to those periods when an individual is put on a trial, when they have to leave the community in order to fulfill a personal duty (that of growing up). Thus the term of “liminal personae” could stand for either a person or a whole group who is in transition from one phase to another (e.g., a child growing up). “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon” (Turner 1991, 95).

Turner also asserts that the person who undergoes the initiation must “be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status” (1991, 103). This is precisely what happens to Jake Sully. He, as a human, belongs to the colonizers, yet when his conscience is transferred to the avatar body, and he lives and acts like one of the Na’vi people, he feels closer to them than to his own race. He sometimes feels that he is caught in-between the two races, the two cultures. The remotely operated avatar in this sense can be interpreted as a mediator between the two groups: humans and the Na’vi. The technological superiority of humans serves as the main divide between the colonizers and the colonized: in the film the Western myth of technological progress stands at the core of humans’ colonial ideology. Jake belongs to both groups, yet he does not truly belong anywhere. As a human he is an outsider in his own society, because he can no longer serve his country with his paralyzed legs. As a Na’vi he is not yet fully accepted into the tribe, he has to prove that he is worth being called one with the people. While analysing virtual online identities (avatars), and making use of Lisa Nakamura’s

concept of “identity tourism,” Langer asserts that avatars “act not only as erasures of possibilities outside of them, but they also act as *reinscriptions* of the particular chosen identity types” (Langer 2011, 87). Thus, Jake Sully’s choice to be one with the Na’vi deconstructs the very notion of race as the sole means of identity formation.

When Neytiri first takes him to her tribe, to the Omaticaya, he almost gets killed, until Moat, Neytiri’s mother, examines him and decides that he should be given a chance. When Jake says he wants to learn, Moat, the spiritual leader of the tribe asserts: “we have tried to teach other Sky People. It is hard to fill a cup which is already full” (*Avatar*, 2009). The Na’vi call the half human avatars dream-walkers, demons, and consider them as spiritually inferior to them, because they are unable to comprehend the deep connections between Pandora’s living beings.⁴ Thus, in this case the colonized indigenous race decides to take in the former marine, in order to learn more about him, and, eventually, to teach him their ways, so that he can learn to “speak and walk” as they do. They consider the mindset, the greedy, aggressive behaviour of the colonizers as something which is more related to insanity, and they attempt to cure Jake out of it. So Jake’s rite of passage begins: he not only learns the language and the rules of the tribe, but also has to prove himself as a warrior and a hunter, that is, he has to grow into spiritual maturity and manhood.

Reflecting again on Turner’s theory, a rite of passage can not only occur in the case of one individual, but also in the case of communities, societies. In the film the Na’vi people and their culture are strongly violated by the colonizers: their homes are destroyed, their families are lost, and very soon they find themselves as outcasts, as a lonely, helpless group, praying to their goddess for survival. As a defeated nation they quickly realize that they need to reclaim their lost lands, their homes, together with their cultural heritage, and, ultimately, the control over their own destinies, their own lives. That is, the always peaceful natives need to go through a rite of passage to rebuild themselves and save the entire Na’vi race. Subsequently, they also enter a liminal phase in which they have to deal with the horrors of colonial encounter. They have to “grow up” not only in the sense that they should step out of the role of being an infantile, uncivilized, inferior culture,

4 Humans are stereotyping the Na’vi in their turn. They call them “blue monkeys,” and whenever they talk about them, they express a typical imperialist attitude. They consider the Na’vi people uncivilized, savage, who need to learn English and go to school. This, of course, resonates with Edward Said’s description of the westward expansion of the United States in the process of which they were taking away the lands of Native Americans, killing many of the indigenous people in the process (1993, 8).

as the colonizers would label them, but also in the sense of realizing that they must take more aggressive steps if they want to survive, and they have to stick together not just as one tribe, but also as an entire nation.

Switching Sides

Andrew Niccol's film, *The Host* (2013), is an adaptation of Stephenie Meyer's novel of the same name, and quite faithfully to its source text tells the story of alien invasion from a romantic perspective. In *The Host* a parasitic alien life-form takes over the entire humankind in a way very similar to what we could see in the *Body Snatcher* movies. The aliens, called "Souls" look like small, shiny caterpillars, and once they are implanted into a human being, they take control over their body, absorbing all the memories and emotions, but erasing the host's consciousness. According to Ashis Nandy, there are two types of colonialism: the first one refers to the taking of lands, to the occupation of territories, while the second one occurs as a direct consequence of the first one, that is, the conquest of minds, selves, cultures, "pioneered by modernists who thought that imperialism was the messianic bringer of civilization for the colonized world" (qtd. in Ghandi 1998, 15). One can intercept both types of colonization in all the three movies. In the *Body Snatcher* films and in *The Host* the conquest of minds literally happens when the aliens occupy the bodies of the hosts, thus taking over not just Earth, but all human history and culture as filtered through memories and knowledge still inscribed in the minds of the human bodies. In *Avatar* the human colonizers try to force the Na'vi to accept their "dominant" culture and civilization, by building roads and schools for them, and by trying to teach them English.

In *The Host* the Souls justify their conquest of Earth by maintaining that they are a peaceful race, and because humans are violent and destructive they deserve to be eradicated.⁵ A handful of humans stay hidden throughout the alien conquest, and form a resistance. One of the members of the human resistance is Melanie Stryder (Saoirse Ronan), who later becomes captured by the colonizers. The colonizers implant a Soul in her body, called Wanderer. Wanderer is an old, experienced Soul, who has already travelled to a great number of planets and has lived in many bodies. Upon waking up in Melanie's body she has to realize that humans are different from all the living beings she has ever seen and/

5 The same reasons are used in the *Body Snatcher* films in the scenes when the aliens explain the need for colonization, and in *Avatar*, when humans try to convince themselves about the inevitability and righteousness of colonizing the Na'vi.

or lived in, because Melanie would not give up her consciousness and would fight to regain control over her own body. Wanderer is surprised by the intensity of Mel's human emotions and memories. At first she tries to fulfil her part in the colonization process by accessing Melanie's memories and thus providing information to the Seekers (hunters of remaining humans) about the whereabouts of the last group of human resistance. However, in a short time a bond is formed between Wanderer and Melanie, so the colonizer decides to help her host escape and get back to her family.

Having access to Melanie's memories plays a crucial part in this process. Wanderer, or as she is later called Wanda, realizes that Melanie keeps herself alive by constantly remembering who she is and by reliving memories of her past. In this way she not only maintains her humanity, but also manages to bring closer to Wanda the things she values in human life. Remembering is a painful but necessary action for both of them, because through remembering they can find a way of dealing with the trauma of colonization, moreover, this is the only way Wanda is able to hear and understand the point of view of the colonized host. As Bhabha argues, "remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membling, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (1994, 63). As Wanda looks into Melanie's memories she not only learns a lot about her host's past life – of how much Mel loved and still loves her little brother and her boyfriend – but also begins to better understand humanity and make sense of what has happened to an entire race which now faces almost complete extinction. This kind of remembering is essential both for colonizer and colonized, since it is only possible to survive together, as being mutually dependent on one another if they comprehend each other's backgrounds and motivations. Speaking of sites of memory, Péter Gaál-Szabó argues that they "are able to mediate memory across generations on both individual and collective levels and can easily contribute to the negotiation of the memory content through their functionality" (2017, 80). In the case of the encounter between Melanie and Wanda within the same body one can easily observe that Wanda's visualizing, as well as reliving Melanie's memories would lead to a preservation and nurturing of human cultural memory, together with the other's, that is, Wanda's alien consciousness and vast experiences of previous lives and inhabited worlds. One aspect of cultural memory, as Gaál-Szabó understands it, is "the necessity of interpretation by participants evoking memory, which is closely connected to identity negotiation" (2017, 77). When Wanda relives Mel's memories, and decides to help her go back to her beloved ones, she

also decides to go against her own kind and take part in the human resistance. Wanda's choice brings about a different meaning of alien-human encounter in the context of the film: that of acknowledging the colonial past, and creating the possibility of continued resistance. As Leela Ghandi claims: "the postcolonial dream of discontinuity is ultimately vulnerable to the infectious residue of its own unconsidered and unresolved past. Its convalescence is unnecessarily prolonged on account of its refusal to remember and recognize its continuity with the pernicious malaise of colonialism" (qtd. in Langer, 2011, 84–85).

Comprehending human nature and cultural memory as connected to identity is very similar to what Jake Sully experiences in the *Avatar*, when he finally understands the essence of the profound biological and spiritual network through and in which the Na'vi live. Neytiri shows Jake the trees called Utraya Mokri, that is, the Trees of Voices, which provide access to the voices, the memories of Na'vi ancestors. When Jake himself is connected to the trees, he is also able to hear them, and understands that they are alive forever within Eywa. Similarly, Melanie in *The Host* is able to show Wanda all those past memories – cheerful and painful – that determine who she is, so Wanda starts to love and appreciate her so much that she is ready to face all kinds of dangers even risk her life in order for Melanie to be happy and free again. When Wanda and Melanie reach the secret home of the human rebels – an underground network of caves – they are at first almost killed and then looked at with disgust, since the hiding humans do not see Melanie within, but only the evil alien, a parasite, who has taken over the girl's body.⁶ Being afraid of provoking the remaining humans, Melanie and Wanda do not reveal at first that Melanie's consciousness is still alive within the body. However, Melanie's uncle, the old and wise Jeb Stryder becomes suspicious. He says to Wanda: "I started thinking... When they put one of you in our heads, do we still exist? Trapped in there? If our memories are still alive, are we? You gotta believe some people wouldn't go down without a fight" (*The Host*, 2013).

When the humans finally realize that Melanie is still alive and Wanda is trying to save and protect her, their initial hostility towards the alien race disappears and gives way to mutual understanding and dependence. In this situation colonizer and colonized rely on each other. Wanda teaches the humans how to remove the invaders from the bodies without hurting the Souls, so that people can get a chance for reclaiming their planet and their lives. She is even ready to sacrifice herself for Melanie, by choosing to die, thus giving back the body to

6 In contrast with the *Body Snatcher* films in *The Host* there are very visible physical signs of otherness: once a body has been infused with a Soul, the person's eyes become blue and shiny.

her. Nonetheless the film has a happy ending: both of them survive. All in all, the negotiation of identity, that is, fighting and then temporarily making peace over the same body is possible through a painful process of coming of age. Both Wanda and Melanie have to learn a great deal of things about each other, and even if Wanderer is an old and very experienced Soul, dealing with the human world and with the extremely strong and deep human emotions and memories proves to be a hard and purgative, but beautiful process of learning, something that, as she admits at the end, is worth dying for. Seeing through each other's perspectives determine Melanie and Wanda to outbalance the deconstructive effects of alien colonization with a new, recuperative work that would provide a healing of old wounds and a possible vision of a future in which the two species can coexist in a mutually dependent relationship.

Conclusions

In the above analysed three films alien-human encounters were characterized both by traumatic experiences of losing one's identity, home, and culture as well as by possibilities of making up for the losses, of working through the traumas of colonization not only individually, but also as communal attempts to understand and endure transformations in the existence of a culture. Colonial encounters in the three science fiction films are portrayed as processes in which the human and/or alien bodies play crucial roles. In the *Body Snatcher* movies the bodies taken over serve as means of dominance of one species over the other (that is, the emotionless aliens take away feelings, the essence of humanity), and there is little hope for human survival or reconciliation with the invaders. In *The Host*, however, it is precisely the body of Melanie Stryder which becomes a site of negotiation for regaining, preserving, as well as rebuilding the host's identity, while in *Avatar* it is Jake Sully's genetically modified avatar body that serves as a means of hybridization and reconciliation between the humans and the Na'vi. The stories of these invasion movies work on both the levels of individual and communal histories, as they present possible ways of healing the wounds of colonial encounters via personal or communal coming of age stories, as well as through making use of one's memories.

References

- Beehler, Michael. 1987. Border Patrols. In *Aliens – The Anthropology of Science Fiction*, eds. George E. Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin, 34–39. Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Brenez, Nicole. 1988. Come Into My Sleep. *Rouge*. <http://www.rouge.com.au/rougerouge/sleep.html>. Last accessed 30. 03. 2019.
- Gaál-Szabó, Péter. 2017. Cultural Memory and Countering History through Memory in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Sermons. In *Intertextuality, Intersubjectivity, and Narrative Identity*, ed. Péter Gaál-Szabó, 77–90. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Ghandi, Leela. 1998. *Postcolonial Theory. A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Langer, Jessica. 2011. *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nandy, Ashis. 1983. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Said, Edward. 1993. Empire, Geography, and Culture. In *Culture and Imperialism*, 1–15. New York: Vintage.
- Sobchack, Vivian. 2004. *Screening Space. The American Science Fiction Film*. New York: Ungar.
- Telotte, J. P. 2001. *Science Fiction Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Turner, Victor. 1991. *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Cornell University Press.