

# Identity Construction and Spaces In-Between: The Checkpoint and the Tunnel in the Television Series *The Aliens*

Ilaria Villa, Università di Milano

---

Citation: Villa, Ilaria (2019) "Identity Construction and Spaces in Between: The Checkpoint and the Tunnel in the Television Series *The Aliens*", *mediAzioni* 25, <http://mediazioni.sitlec.unibo.it>, ISSN 1974-4382.

---

## 1. Introduction

The use of the alien as a trope for representing ethnic diversity is a recurrent theme in science-fiction narrative. Many literary and cinematic stories in the history of British and American science fiction can be seen as mirroring widespread fears of different races, nations and cultures. This connection is explored in narratives belonging to various periods and sub-genres of science fiction and has been examined by several authors (Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 2002; DeGraw 2007; Lavender 2011; Jones 2018). Countless examples across time and media could be mentioned: to name just a few, without any pretence of being exhaustive, we might mention Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898), which, "like the other invasion-fantasy books of the 1880s and 1890s, captures a fundamentally xenophobic fear of foreignness" (Roberts 2006: 148) and whose Martians "are described in Goebbelsian terms of repugnantly slimy and horrible 'racial' otherness" (Suvin 1979: 78); the wave of science-fiction films in 1950s America for which "the threat of invasion has been commonly associated with the fear of invasion by the metaphorically 'alien' Soviet Union" (Martini 2012: 259); or the British science-fiction cinema of the same period, "projecting the alien Others of the cinema screen onto the immigrant Others who began to settle in the nation's towns and cities" (Jones 2018: 103-104). The association of the alien from another world with a racialized "Other" is not necessarily found only in narratives about menacing and invading aliens: for instance, the protagonist of *The Brother from Another Planet* (Sayles 1984) is an alien who looks like an African American human and who has come to Earth to escape

enslavement on his own planet (Nama 2008: 154-155, 169-170). Whether friend or foe, however, the alien in science fiction is in many cases an embodiment of the ethnic outsider, within the context of a genre in which, often, “racial difference gets displaced on to species difference: the encounter with the alien can be a metaphor, parable or allegory of the encounter with a different ethnic group” (Butler 2013: 187).

A very recent example of this trope can be found in the British television mini-series *The Aliens*, composed of six episodes of about 45 minutes each. Based on an idea by Petra Fried and Matt Jarvis (Kelly 2016), who were among the producers of *Misfits* (Overman 2009-2013), *The Aliens* was created and written by Fintan Ryan, who had previously worked on BBC series like *Never Better* (Ryan 2008) and *In the Flesh* (Mitchell 2013-2014); it was directed by Jonathan van Tulleken (ep. 1-3) and Lawrence Gough (ep. 4-6) and it was broadcast by the British channel E4 between 8 March and 12 April 2016. In this story, set in an alternative version of today’s United Kingdom, aliens from another world are an ethnic minority and are kept strictly separate from humans. The premise of the story immediately recalls Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9*, to which the series has been compared (Kelly 2016; Tate 2016); however, unlike Blomkamp’s “prawns”, who are very much non-human in aspect, Ryan’s aliens, except for a few minor differences, are virtually indistinguishable from humans and are thus better suited for representing issues of racialization, governmentality and fear of the “alien in our midst”.

*The Aliens* provides us with a very interesting portrayal of xenophobia and of institutionalized ethnic segregation and an in-depth analysis of it will be a central concern of my PhD research project. In the present paper, which provides merely a preliminary investigation, I have chosen to focus, in particular, on the use of space: as Ryan himself stated, the core idea for the series was the alien ghetto itself, as he wanted to write a crime drama with a “police no-go zone” (NME 2016). Space divisions are thus central in the narrative and are, I argue, fundamental in creating social divisions and shaping the characters’ notions about the world they live in. For this reason, I will explore how the issue of bordering is represented in the series and how the action of border crossing is significant for constructing the cultural identity of the protagonist, Lewis. I will

rely mainly on cultural studies and on semiotic approaches, drawing also on border studies and on the academic literature on identity construction.

## **2. Borders, identity, and border crossing**

The literature on border studies is vast and has been expanding over the years. As Tuulikki Kurki explained in her introduction to *Writing at Borders* (a special issue of *Culture Unbound*), border studies have regained strength from the 1990s onwards because of

geopolitical changes that initiated in Europe (e.g. the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of the EU), in the US-Mexico borderlands, and in the global context of strengthening migration movement [...]. In addition, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States made border related security concerns a prominent theme worldwide [...]. (Kurki 2014: 1056)

Recent literature has conceptualized borders as fluid social constructions, highlighting their discursive structure and permeability: “a border is not so much an object or a material artefact as a belief, an imagination that creates and shapes a world, a social reality” (van Houtum *et al.* 2005: 3). Van Houtum and van Naerssen, in particular, have provided an interesting perspective on borders, considering them as a practice more than as a spatial feature: what is important is not the border itself, but the practice of producing borders by which we divide space and label what is left outside as “other”.

Borders do not represent a fixed point in space or time, rather they symbolise a social practice of spatial differentiation. Semantically, the word ‘borders’ unjustly assumes that places are fixed in space and time, and should rather be understood in terms of bordering, an ongoing strategic effort to make a difference in space among the movements of people, money or products. [...] The making of a place must hence be understood as an act of purification, as it is arbitrarily searching for a justifiable, bounded cohesion of people and their activities in space which can be compared and contrasted to other spatial entities. (Van Houtum and van Naerssen 2002: 126)

The purpose of bordering is to build enclosed and cohesive spaces in opposition to other spatial entities: therefore, borders “create new or reproduce

latently existing differences in space and identity” (*ibid.*). By dividing places, borders create and enforce otherness:

A boundary is established to separate those who do, and do not, belong to the nation. Across this boundary values are projected that define the characteristics of the self and the Other; force is then mobilized to ensure that the boundary and the differentiated identities remain intact (Papastergiadis 2006: 432).

As borders “create peoples, languages, races and genealogies” (Balibar 2010: 316), they are fundamental in processes of identity construction, which are based on ideas of belonging to a certain place and culture:

Since identities are not static but continuously being (de- and re-) constructed, processes of identity construction require ongoing processes of bordering and ‘othering’ of us/them [...]. Borders between countries ideally delineate and signify different identities on both sides of those borders [...] and the projection of countries (especially when regarded as nation-states) as significant cornerstones of identities. (Madsen and van Naerssen 2003: 62)

Since the processes of bordering are crucial in the discursive construction of one’s identity, the action of border crossing has consequences on the shaping and re-shaping of identities: “those who step across cultural and geographical boundaries are, in varying degrees, likely to find themselves transformed. As we physically move, so do our personal and social boundaries shift” (Gardner 1995: vii). The negotiation of one’s own identity in relation to cultural borders and otherness has been described by Ming-Cheng Lo as “the encounter, conflict, and/or blending of two ethnic or cultural categories that, while by no means pure and distinct in nature, tend to be *understood and experienced as meaningful identity labels* by members of these categories” (Lo 2005: 396, my emphasis). This means that cultures are not ontologically pure, but they can be perceived and represented as contrasting and polarized categories: this is what happens in *The Aliens*, where the idea of society that is promoted and enforced is that of a dual society, with two ethnic identities – human and alien – which are kept as separate as possible both at a spatial level and at the level of status, as we shall see.

### **3. *The Aliens*: creating difference, enforcing divisions**

As already mentioned, *The Aliens* is set in an alternative United Kingdom in which aliens are an ethnic minority. In the television series we are not told any details regarding the aliens' arrival and about the events that led to their segregation, but on the official website of *The Aliens* we find a fictitious newspaper article explaining that the aliens arrived in 1977, when their spaceship crashed "into the Irish Sea 10 miles west of the northern Welsh coastline" (All 4 2016). They were similar to humans both in their appearance and in their social structure; after being placed in temporary camps for the first months, they were found inoffensive and allowed to live within British society, with "[t]emporary housing [...] set up throughout the country to support Aliens while they acclimatised to human institutions" (*ibid.*). However, the attempt at integration failed:

Supporting Alien integration had proved a massive strain to the UK economy. Human taxes were increased by 20% while Aliens were exempt from paying them at all. A 1988 public consultation revealed that the vast majority of UK citizens were anti-Alien integration. Aliens claimed that they had been housed in the most poorly resourced parts of the country and faced widespread discrimination from public institutions. 75% of Alien males were out of work, and levels of crime and poverty were rife in Alien communities. (*ibid.*)

The answer to social unrest was racial segregation, apparently with the idea that the cause was not bad management of alien integration, but the decision itself to achieve integration in the first place; therefore, in 1990 the aliens were forced to move to an area of their own, an enclosed zone separated from the rest of the world by a high wall which would later begin to be called Troy. No explanation for this name is provided, but we can surmise that it has been chosen by the aliens themselves, because when we see the alien world for the first time in the first episode of the series (02'30") the camera shows the official sign of the "Designated alien zone", over which the name "Troy" has been handwritten, in a sort of appropriation of the place by the aliens through the action of naming it. The most logical explanation for the choice of the name of the alien city is thus its association with the ancient and mythical city of Troy, both because of the high walls surrounding it and because of the idea that the alien city is besieged – not by ancient Greeks, but by today's humans.

At the beginning of the series the level of separation is extreme. The aliens are not considered as equals by humans and they are not entitled to any kind of rights: in Troy there are no schools, no government, no representation of any sort, so that the aliens will always remain in a state of emotional and intellectual starvation and will therefore not be able to escape their subordinate position. As anticipated in the introduction, the alien zone is also a no-police zone: aliens are left to themselves, without any kind of control or institution, and, as a consequence, Troy is *de facto* ruled by organized crime. Since humans have no control inside Troy, they are also forbidden to access it; as for aliens, they are allowed to go over to the human side only during the day, not because of some right to movement but because they work for humans in low-skilled jobs (ep. 1: 12'01"; ep. 3: 41'42")<sup>1</sup>.

It is clear that this system is a benefit for humans, who can use the aliens' workforce and at the same time keep them socially and economically segregated. The border thus becomes a way to manage alien labour as a commodity by way of differential inclusion: as Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson argued,

borders, far from serving simply to block or obstruct global flows, have become essential devices for their articulation. [...] [B]orders are [...] devices of inclusion that select and filter people and different forms of circulation in ways no less violent than those deployed in exclusionary measures (2013: 3-7).

An interesting aspect in the management of the aliens' differential inclusion is that, even though they have not been accepted into human society, they have come to speak the language of their oppressors. It is explained in the series that the very first aliens who arrived on Earth had no memory of their previous lives (ep. 3: 10'51"-11'00"): this is why they speak English and English only, because, presumably, they learnt it when they came into contact with humans in the UK. This narrative decision was probably a way to avoid creating a whole new alien language, accent or linguistic variety; however, if the choice of erasing the alien culture is influenced by necessities of simplicity and economy, it also has interesting implications. Fulfilling the most heartfelt wish in a colonizer's dream,

---

<sup>1</sup> This is, of course, reminiscent of the disciplining and regulation of non-white work under the regime of apartheid.

the alien civilization has no past, no heritage, no language, no culture of its own. Since the first aliens arrived without memories, the British government could have tried to help them search for their origins in order to retrieve something of their past culture; or it could have decided to assimilate the aliens completely, since there was nothing in their own culture which could “clash” with human society. What happened, however, was that humans enforced their language and their habits on the aliens but kept a rigid separation between the two worlds. Therefore, even though the aliens could initially have been framed as invaders, humans emerge as the true colonizers in the story: borrowing from Franz Fanon, aliens have “no culture, no civilization, and no ‘long historical past’” (2008: 17)<sup>2</sup>.

This separation is enforced not only at a spatial level – aliens cannot live outside their assigned area – and at an economic level – as mentioned above, aliens can only have low-skilled jobs – but also at a symbolic level: for example, aliens are forced to wear second-hand clothes, which mark them as belonging to a lower class. Indeed, the clothes worn by aliens in this series are easily recognizable as being out of fashion and, therefore, old: actor Michaela Coel, who plays one of the alien protagonists, explained the reasoning behind this choice.

Troy civilians [...] are wearing these [...] [s]hell suits, that are [...] thrown over from the human side. What we don't sell any more? We got to give them something to wear, don't we? And they've just thrown over, like, a million shell suits because [...] they don't sell them anymore, because no one buys them. (Leech *et al.* 2016: 03'19"-03'32")<sup>3</sup>

To sum up, aliens live in the area which has been assigned to them, have the kinds of jobs that humans allow them to have, dress in the clothes humans gave

---

<sup>2</sup> This is another choice which is diametrically opposed to the one made in *District 9*, where aliens have their own specific language: this feature, as their appearance, marks Blomkamp's “prawns” as distinctively “other” (Mizoguchi 2016). It has also been noted that the alien language created for *District 9* “makes use of ‘clicks’, which a South African audience will likely associate with the distinctive phonemes of San, Khoi, isiXhosa, or isiZulu” (Valdez Moses 2010: 156). This trait reinforces the parallelism with the ethnic groups that have been the victims of segregation in South Africa and gives the alien community a specific cultural identity; on the contrary, Fintan Ryan's aliens have experienced a sort of cultural assimilation, having irretrievably lost an important part of their heritage.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that these clothes were not given to the aliens out of solidarity, but were, in Coel's words, “thrown over” – without any sort of positive interaction between the two communities – because they had no more value in the human world.

them, and talk in the language humans – presumably – taught them: thus, it is clear that otherness is not an intrinsic characteristic of the alien group, but is created and enforced through the action of bordering, be it physical or symbolical.

#### **4. The tunnel and the checkpoint in *The Aliens***

The protagonist of *The Aliens*, Lewis, is a human border guard. He is first presented to us as someone who is strongly prejudiced against aliens, as most humans are (ep. 1: 00'00"-00'40"); however, in the first episode, he finds out that, even though his late mother was human, his biological father is an alien. After this discovery, Lewis crosses the border to go into the alien zone and then continues to move secretly between the two zones: this action of moving between one place and another changes his ideas about the two worlds and about his relation to the alien and the human culture, providing a clear example of the connection between movement and identity construction.

Ironically, even though crossing the border without previous authorization is illegal in *The Aliens*, Lewis has more than one way to do it. The alien zone and the human zone are intended to be completely separate; however, in a realistic representation of the permeability of borders in the real world, the two zones are actually connected in two ways. One is the checkpoint, which is the “official” passage, and which is used by humans to handle the flow of working aliens; the other link is an illegal tunnel. Being in-between the two worlds, both the tunnel and the checkpoint can be considered as liminal spaces: they belong to what Bjørn Thomassen (2009: 16) calls “the spatial dimension of liminality [...] specific places, thresholds [...] areas or zones”, among which he includes “border areas between nations”.

As for the tunnel, its relevance lies mainly in the fact that its very existence implies the cooperation of aliens and humans on both sides, working together to establish a connection that goes against the authorized use of space. Even though the viewer does not know how and when the tunnel was built, humans and aliens must have built it together; and, indeed, they continue to handle it



together, because, as we can see in Lewis's first crossing scene (ep. 1: 25'00"-27'14"), each group has control over its own entrance. It is mostly thanks to the illegal tunnel that the main characters of *The Aliens* can move from one place to another, showing the viewer both sides of the border: thanks to this space of invisibility, characters can sometimes overcome the boundaries of a law that tries to keep the two cultures separate. The cooperation of aliens and humans in the handling of the tunnel, however, does not aim to achieve some sort of contact or blending between the two communities, but is, apparently, a mere means to gain economic profit. The human family that lives at the tunnel's entrance must be paid to provide access to it; as for the aliens, they can make use of the tunnel to evade human control and to deal in alien hair, which has psychoactive effects on humans. Therefore, it seems that the segregation system in place is a benefit to those who smuggle people and goods from one side to the other.

The tunnel as transitional space is central, in particular, in Lewis's first crossing scene mentioned above. Here, this interstitial passage has the function of taking Lewis into a completely new place, a place which, to him, is unknown and mysterious. The tunnel as an entrance to another world is an established trope in literature, cinema and television, although its figurative import may differ widely according to varying contexts: well-known examples, to mention but a few, are *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll 1865), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick 1968), *Doctor Who* (Newman *et al.* 1963–). The tunnel "has classically operated as a device that marks the crossing of boundaries between two worlds [...] being a kind of liminal zone connecting the real with the fantastical" (Cornea 2007: 89). It is one of the various kinds of portals – the others being doors, gates, vortexes and thresholds – in fantasy and science fiction, whose function is to allow the protagonists to leave their known world and enter an unknown one (Harwood-Smith 2017: 56). In *The Aliens*, Lewis's first crossing scene may indeed recall Alice's fall down the rabbit hole, because the protagonist finds himself in a world where rules are different and nothing, at least at first, makes sense to him. In order for Lewis to understand and accept this new world he himself has to change first, as Alice herself does:

To cross a frontier is to be transformed. Alice at the gates of Wonderland, the key to that miniature world in her grasp, cannot pass through the tiny door beyond which she can glimpse marvellous things until she has altered herself to fit into her new world. (Rushdie 2002: 353)

The great difference between the two places is emphasized by the two scenes immediately before and after Lewis's crossing of the tunnel. At the entrance of the tunnel, on the human side, we see a nice house in a middle-class neighbourhood (25'23"); the tunnel's exit, on the alien side, shows a caravan in a semi-desert area filled with rubbish (26'49"). This scene thus brings into sharp relief the enormous gap between the two sides of the wall, which are geographically close but poles apart as to the economic and social status of their inhabitants: one side is wealthy, whereas the other is wilfully kept in poverty and degradation. This contrast is underlined by the different use of light and colours in representing the two worlds, acting as a consistent semiosis throughout the series: in the human world there is a prevalence of light-blue (ep. 2: 20'25"; ep. 3: 27'08"), which conveys an idea of tranquillity, whereas in the alien world we see a lot of red and brown, and, in general, a wider range of colours (ep. 2: 11'54"; ep. 3: 08'08", 33'06").

As Lewis crosses the tunnel again in the following episodes, he gets to know the alien world better and begins to feel more at home there. In the fourth episode, we already see him crossing the border with determination and self-confidence (12'06"-12'31"). Shortly afterwards (12'35"-13'13"), we find out that he has decided to begin a new life in Troy, to work there and to "be" alien in every sense. This happens because, in the essentialist world in which he lives, only two possible categories seem to be conceivable: therefore, the choice of where to belong must be total and exclusive. Crossing the border has indeed been fundamental in shaping Lewis's identity and self-perception, as well as his relationship with the cultures between which he moves.

For what concerns the liminal space of the checkpoint, we can first note that it is used in the story as a way of managing the flow of working aliens: therefore, it shows that the function of the border is not only to exclude aliens from the humans' social life, but also to manage their inclusion – though always as members of a subordinate group – in the economic life of the country, regulating

their contribution to it and, essentially, handling them as a commodity. The series includes countless scenes showing aliens at the checkpoint, being inspected, intimidated and treated as criminals, as they queue to cross the border and go to work as cleaners and kitchen hands in the human zone (ep. 1: 00'50"-01'10"; 09'57"-10'44; ep. 2: 39'38"-40'20"). In this continuous re-enactment of the power of one social group over the other, we can recognize an embodiment of what Nicholas De Genova calls the "Border Spectacle" (2002: 436-439): a theatricalization of the border which is used to stage a constructed illegality, setting a scene of

ostensible exclusion, in which the purported naturalness and putative necessity of exclusion may be demonstrated and verified, validated and legitimated, redundantly. The scene (where border enforcement performatively activates the reification of migrant 'illegality' in an emphatic and grandiose gesture of exclusion) is nevertheless always accompanied by its shadowy, publicly unacknowledged or disavowed, obscene supplement: the large-scale recruitment of illegalized migrants as legally vulnerable, precarious, and thus tractable labour. (De Genova 2013: 1181)

The checkpoint, in *The Aliens*, is also interesting as a liminal space of its own, particularly because it includes a portion of no man's land in the alien zone, which has to be crossed before arriving at the gate. The no man's land is grafted onto the border, extending its ambiguous regime of power: it is a liminal landscape (Andrews and Roberts 2012) of its own kind and it plays a crucial role in Lewis's evolution as a character, as it is connected to moments in which he chooses to remain within his personal liminal space, refusing to move on in his own perceptions about identity and culture.

We can observe how this liminal space affects Lewis's identity and behaviour at the end of the fourth episode, where he is trying to save his colleague Truss, who has chased him into the alien zone and been stabbed by some criminals who have recognized him as a border guard. Since Truss is seriously injured, Lewis helps him get in a car and starts driving towards the checkpoint. However, saving Truss's life could be dangerous for Lewis, because the former has found out that Lewis's father is an alien and could expose him as a product of

miscegenation<sup>4</sup>. Lewis, therefore, tries to convince him to keep this information secret, but Truss refuses to help him: “Here’s the deal. You take me back... and with my last breath, I will tell everyone what you are” (ep. 4: 37’24”-37’31”). This is the first time Lewis is crossing the no man’s land: due to the extension of the liminal space, here crossing the border is not a matter of one brief moment, but entails a choice, a deliberate act which may be completed or interrupted. The grafting of the border onto an idea of extended space and time gives Lewis an opportunity to think, to change his mind, to stop. This scene, lasting four minutes (36’50”-41’00”), is unnaturally long if we consider that the entire episode is 45 minutes long: Lewis starts to drive, tries to convince his colleague, realizes that he is bound to fail, stops the car, walks away, stops again and kneels down, while Truss slowly dies in the car. By deciding not to act, Lewis is extending the liminality and the momentarily safe uncertainty of his present situation. Thus, we are reminded that the action of crossing a border is never easy and inconsequential, but requires determination and commitment to change.

The checkpoint remains a crucial space in the series until the very end, when it becomes the theatre not only of the illegalization and the differential inclusion of the aliens, but also of repression and the containment of violence. This becomes clear in the last episode, when a gang war is going on in Troy and the border guards simply decide to close the gate on trouble. Their adopted policy is “let them do what they want as long as they remain inside Troy”: since Troy is essentially an ethnic ghetto which can be isolated from the rest of the city, officers are not interested in the living conditions of the minority as long as there is no threat for the dominant community. We can observe the presence of similar policies and concerns in today’s world, especially for what concerns African-American ghettos, which might have been a point of reference for the series<sup>5</sup>: for example, Kent and Carmichael’s 2014 study on American cities

---

<sup>4</sup> This fear of miscegenation and of loss of ethnic purity is shared by both humans and aliens in the series, both groups reinforcing the idea that the two species must not mix: in fact, not only do we know that Lewis’s mother kept her relationship with an alien secret in order not to be rejected by her human family and friends, but we also see that Lewis’s father has to hide from the other aliens the fact that Lewis’s mother was human (ep. 3: 01’22”-01’33”).

<sup>5</sup> It seems that *The Aliens* was not conceived as a story rooted in a British context, but as something more widely relatable to a global audience: while talking about what inspired the

found that very high levels of ethnic segregation were connected with lower levels of police strength, a correlation which, in their opinion, could be explained by the lower levels of interracial crimes. The way the police in *The Aliens* handle – or refuse to handle – violence in the alien zone may also recall black British ghettos, such as the Milton Court Estate mentioned by Michael Keith in his *After the Cosmopolitan*:

The estate became notorious in the 1980s for the increasing levels of confrontation between police and British black (mostly black Caribbean) residents. [...] The decline of police-community relations spiralled in a manner that replicated processes explored in other parts of London. In the early 1990s many characterised the area as ‘no go’, with cab drivers, postal services and at times even emergency ambulances refusing to service the area. (2005: 65)

Similarly, in the segregated society of *The Aliens* Lewis is the only border guard who wants to intervene and stop the war and no one else is interested in the safety of Troy’s residents. His chief goes so far as to dismiss his arguments with a joke, in a dialogue that would sound absurd if we did not know that racism against aliens is institutionalized and considered normal:

Lewis: I just want to say, this policy of containment, I’m against it. Yeah, there’s criminals over there for sure, but there’s normal people too. Little kids and... Dominic. What’s Dominic ever done to anyone?

(His colleagues stare at him)

Lewis: Dominic’s the cleaner. I’m saying I’m for intervention into Troy. I think we should do it.

Chief: Lost me at ‘people’.

(Lewis’s chief and colleagues laugh)

(ep. 6: 19’46”-20’04”)

Lewis is apparently the only one who now sees aliens as subjects worthy of consideration and protection: in Emmanuel Lévinas’s words, he has seen “the

---

scenic design of the series, Tom Bowyer, the production designer of *The Aliens*, stated that the wall was “based on the Gaza concrete slabs” (Leech *et al.* 2016: 01’50”-01’53) and that “[t]he research [for designing the alien city] is frighteningly [...] easy to find. There’s really shanty towns all over the world” (*ibid.*: 03’52”-04’00”).

face of the Other” (1991: 199), recognizing the Other as human. Since no one else agrees with him, he finally decides to act against his chief’s orders and against every accepted social rule: he opens the gate and crosses the border in order to reach Troy and provide help as he can (ep. 6: 20’27”-20’57”). By crossing in plain sight, Lewis turns the act of border crossing into an act of public resistance.

However, Fintan Ryan does not give in to the possibility of a simplistic happy ending and brings the story to a more realistic conclusion: Lewis’s intervention quickly misfires, as not only is he unable to stop the gang war in Troy, but he ends up by unwittingly helping the rise of yet another criminal boss, failing to create the world he wanted and, essentially, becoming a double outsider. In the end, Lewis’s father, who is a criminal on the run, convinces him of the need to go back to the human world and “play human”, as it were: Lewis will pretend to have crossed the border only to arrest him and bring him to justice. Lewis’s failure makes him realize that in fact he is not strong enough to fight for his origins, and come out about them: he lives in a dichotomic world where only two mutually exclusive identities – human or alien – seem to be possible and acceptable, and this renders him unable to conceive of and speak up for any alternative combination.

Maybe, social change cannot happen all at once, but must begin slowly, patiently and persistently, as when Lewis tells his chief that things should change: “We’re what’s wrong here. Keeping them inside that wall. Saying that they’re different. It’s us. We’re the problem” (ep. 6: 41’39”-41’48”). From this sentence, we can see that, while still talking from the safe position of someone who is reckoned to be human, Lewis is starting to denounce the segregation of aliens. As the series was not renewed for a second season, we cannot know how things might have evolved: with this ending Lewis is left still reassuringly occupying the liminal space, unable to see his two conflicting identities as a continuum and not as fixed alternatives.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, we can confirm that the action of repeatedly crossing the border changes Lewis, shaping his re-definition of himself and creating a conflict between two cultural representations that are perceived as incompatible. The evolution of Lewis's character would be impossible without this movement between the two worlds. However, Lewis is, in the end, unable to harmonize the two sides of his identity: this arguably happens because, in the social context he lives in, only mutually exclusive identities are acceptable and no blending between the two cultures is allowed. In order for individuals to be able to construct for themselves a complex cultural identity, society as a whole should open up to this possibility. As van Houtum and Strüver argue,

[o]vercoming borders is [...] mainly about overcoming the socially constructed imaginations of belonging to a certain place and of the need for a spatial fixity. For, when imagination has the potential to divide people it also has the potential to unite people. Overcoming borders then asks for the reimagining of borders and the reimagining of outsiders as insiders. (2002: 142)

This is exactly what Lewis is trying to do when he talks about aliens being "people" and deserving protection. However, it appears that he is the only person in this story – at this stage, at least – who is interested in changing the dominant discourse concerning the two races and their relations: neither humans nor aliens are interested in what happens outside their ethnic group, and it is this powerful social construction that Lewis, in the end, is unable to overcome. New imaginaries, new mindsets and new stories have to be summoned up and shared before any real change may occur.

## Works Cited

All 4 (2016) "The Timeline", *The Aliens*, available online <https://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-aliens/articles/all/the-timeline/3963> (visited 18/06/2019).

- Andrews, H. and L. Roberts (2012) *Liminal Landscapes. Travel, experience and spaces in-between*, Abingdon & New York: Routledge.
- Balibar, E. (2010) "At the Borders of Citizenship: A Democracy in Translation?", *European Journal of Social Theory* 13: 315-322.
- Blomkamp, N. (2009) *District 9*, New Zealand, USA & South Africa: TriStar Pictures.
- Butler, A.M. (2013) "Science Fiction Criticism", in N. Hubble and A. Mousoutzanis (eds) *The Science Fiction Handbook*, London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Carroll, L. (1865) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, London: Macmillan.
- Coëgnarts, M. and P. Kravanja (2015) *Embodied Cognition and Cinema*, Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Cornea, C. (2007) *Science Fiction Cinema. Between Fantasy and Reality*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Csicsery-Ronay, I. Jr. (2002) "Dis-Imagined Communities: Science Fiction and the Future of Nations", in V. Hollinger and J. Gordon (eds) *Edging into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 217-237.
- De Genova, N. (2002) "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 419-447.
- (2013) "Spectacles of Migrant 'Illegality': The Scene of Exclusion, The Obscene of Inclusion", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36: 1180-1198.
- DeGraw, S. (2007) *The Subject of Race in American Science Fiction*, London & New York: Routledge.
- Fanon, F. (1958) *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil. English translation by R. Philcox (2008) *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York: Grove Press.



- Gardner, K. (1995) *Global Migrants, Local Lives. Travel and Transformation in Rural Bangladesh*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Harwood-Smith, J. (2017) "Portals", in M.J.P. Wolf (ed) *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, New York & Abingdon: Routledge, 56-63.
- Jones, M. (2018) *Science Fiction Cinema and 1950s Britain. Recontextualizing Cultural Anxiety*, New York & London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Keith, M. (2005) *After the Cosmopolitan? Multicultural Cities and the Future of Racism*, London & New York: Routledge.
- Kelly, S. (2016) "THE ALIENS Are Among Us in E4's New Sci-Fi Series. Stephen Kelly Checks the Creator's Credentials", *SFX*, 3 February, available online <https://www.pressreader.com/australia/sfx/20160203/281629599292023> (visited 18/06/2019).
- Kent, S.L. and J.T. Carmichael (2014) "Racial Residential Segregation and Social Control: A Panel Study of the Variation in Police Strength Across U.S Cities, 1980-2010", *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 39: 228-249.
- Kubrick, S. (1968) *2001: A Space Odyssey*, UK & USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
- Kurki, T. (2014) "Borders from the Cultural Point of View", *Culture Unbound* 6: 1055-1070.
- Lavender, I. (2011) *Race in American Science Fiction*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Leech C., T. Bowyer and M. Rowe (2016) "Creating a Believable World", *The Aliens*, DVD edition, UK: Channel 4 & BBC.
- Lévinas, E. (1969) *Totalité et Infini: Essai Sur L'extériorité*, La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff. English translation by A. Lingis (1991) *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

- Lo, M.M. (2005) "The Professions: Prodigal Daughters of Modernity", in J. Adams, E.S. Clemens, A.S. Orloff (eds) *Remaking Modernity. Politics, History, and Sociology*, Durham and London. Duke University Press, 381-406.
- Madsen, K.D. and T. van Naerssen (2003) "Migration, Identity, and Belonging", *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 18: 61-75.
- Martini, E. (2012) "Beyond Human: Human-Alien Hybridisation in Modern Science Fiction", in F. Fantaccini and O. De Zordo (eds) *Studi di Anglistica e Americanistica. Percorsi di Ricerca*, Firenze: Firenze University Press, 257-274.
- Mezzadra S. and B. Neilson (2013) *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*, Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Mitchell, D. (2013-2014) *In the Flesh*, UK: BBC Three.
- Mizoguchi, A. (2016) "What Languages Do Aliens Speak? Multilingual 'Otherness' of Diasporic Dystopia in *District 9*", *Journal of African Cinemas* 8: 169-179.
- Nama, A. (2008) *Black Space. Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film*, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Newman S., C. E. Webber and D. Wilson (1963–) *Doctor Who*, UK: BBC.
- NME Blog (2016) "E4's 'The Aliens': Sci-Fi Goes Gangster", *NME*, 4 March, available online <https://www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/e4s-the-aliens-sci-fi-goes-gangster-10551> (visited 18/06/2019).
- Overman, H. (2009-2013) *Misfits*, UK: E4.
- Papastergiadis, N. (2006) "The Invasion Complex: The Abject Other and Spaces of Violence", *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 88: 429-442.

- Roberts, A. (2006) *The History of Science Fiction*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rushdie, S. (2002) *Step Across This Line: Collected Nonfiction 1992-2002*, Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Ryan, F. (2008) *Never Better*, UK: BBC Two.
- (2016) *The Aliens*, UK: E4.
- Sayles, J. (1984) *The Brother from Another Planet*, USA: Cinecom Pictures.
- Suvin, D. (1979) *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Tate, G. (2016) "Dog Whistles, Dishwasher Tablets and Narcotic Fur: Behind the Scenes of Sci-Fi Drama *The Aliens*", *The Guardian*, 2 March, available online <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/mar/02/the-aliens-e4-tv-daze> (visited 18/06/2019).
- Thomassen, B. (2009) "The Uses and Meanings of Liminality", *International Political Anthropology* 2: 5-27.
- Valdez Moses, M. (2010) "The Strange Ride of Wikus van de Merwe", *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies* 11: 156-161.
- Van Houtum, H., O. Kramsch and W. Zierhofer (2005) "Prologue. B/ordering Space", in H. van Houtum, O. Kramsch and W. Zierhofer (eds), *B/ordering Space*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1-13.
- and A. Strüver (2002) "Borders, Strangers, Doors and Bridges", *Space and Polity* 6: 141-146.
- and T. Van Naerssen (2002) "Bordering, Ordering and Othering", *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 93: 125-136.
- Wells, H.G. (1898) *The War of the Worlds*, London: William Heinemann.