Aliens or Alienation?
The Commoditized Creatures That Walk Among Us

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Our daily mythology–in settings such as our movies, TV shows, books, video games, and so forth–is abundantly populated by lurking, horrific entities. These come to us in a wide array of forms, ranging from aliens or extra-terrestrials from other worlds, "creatures" (like Godzilla or King Kong) from the edges of this world, or in-between-worlds characters like vampires and zombies. If we decide not to take the stories from, say, *The X-Files*, at face value, then this aliens-to-zombies phenomenon is a signal of something other than UFO visitations or the existence of Bigfoot. The overall aim in this essay is to argue that *alienation*, not aliens, is what abounds in this society, and then to illustrate this by looking at how the particular forms in which aliens and their monstrous ilk have proliferated can be interpreted as one piece of evidence of our alienation.

To structure this undertaking, I'll begin with a brief survey of traditional concepts of alienation, coupled closely with an argument for a more fully psychodynamic comprehension of alienation than it has typically been given. The core point of this essay, argued next, is that alienation is inherently widespread in capitalist society. This occurs because capitalism necessarily renders not only products but also people and our meanings and relationships into commodity forms, that is, into things to be instrumentally exchanged, not as objects-in-their-own-right. Finally, I'll examine the movie <u>Alien</u> as a model of how commoditization of our popular arts tends to alienate us from the potentially healthy functions that can flow from a mythology of aliens and monsters.

<u>Alienation Theory: Its Shortcomings and Its Usefulness</u>

Until a decade or two ago, the term "alienation" had long been in vogue both in academic study and in critical rhetoric about society. Since (as I'll argue in the next section) the diminished usage of the term in no way means that people are less alienated, two questions here become germane: Just what is "alienation"? And why did the term fade from use?

An amalgam of the varied traditional understandings of alienation would read along the following lines: It is peoples' global, ill-defined sense of strangeness, apartness, loss, meaninglessness, fearsomeness, or the like with regard to others, oneself, or one's surroundings. These states result in affects such as anxiety, anger, fear, powerlessness, or deadened uninvolvement in relation to oneself, others, and the external world.

The nature, salience, sweep, and degree of seriousness of alienation vary extensively among traditional definitions. Some writers see alienation quite discretely, for example, as voters' dissatisfactions with their political choices. Others view it as thoroughly existential, seeing all humans in an isolated, radically ungrounded state wherein all attempts at generating meaning and at having fulfilling relationships are foredoomed to failure.

Almost without exception, traditional concepts of alienation highlight a subjectivity-objectivity gap of some literal or figurative sort between the individual and the wider world. Richard Schacht is one of the more

influential skeptical inspectors of alienation theories. He notes that as the term "alienation" typically is used, "one can be reasonably sure that the matter under concern is some sort of separation" (p. 249), but nothing more specific until the writer has explained further. Schacht concluded from this lack of specificity that no useful ends for disciplined, verity-seeking thinkers such as empirical philosophers or sociologists were to be attained by lumping together widely disparate phenomena under a rubric of "alienation." Coupled with changing political times and fashions, skepticism like this contributed mightily to the downfall of alienation thinking and rhetoric.

In sum, traditional notions of alienation are richly evocative. Perhaps, to many people who are thoughtful about their society, they also are rather unsettling in their formidable suggestion of widespread, inchoate malaise. However, these notions also are, it seems, sufficiently slippery and perplexing to feel untenable to many people.

An introduction of psychoanalytically-based thinking can be reparative toward this fatal-seeming critique of the concept "alienation." Its quality of nebulousness does not reflect intellectual imprecision, but rather suggests that the condition of alienation flows from deep psychological processes, with wellsprings outside words or conscious logic. Instead of delimiting alienation to some sort of empirically identifiable or consciously describable subject-object rift, therefore, I urge it be understood in object-relational terms: Alienation abounds when preoedipal, paranoid-schizoid elements regularly predominate in the makeup and functioning of many individuals as a result of the developmental socialization and ongoing workings of their society, where other more mature personality structures and interrelationships are realistically attainable.

Defining alienation–or any other human condition–in such a psychosocial dialectic helps psychological and social ways of understanding ourselves become less mutually alien. The patterns, structures, and meanings of our society, when they are approached via this dialectic stance, form a sort of deep background that mightily, if quite subtly, forges our everyday understandings, functioning, temperaments. To most people in an alienated populace, though, such "deepness" of background means "remote from my experience." This depth is more accurately termed "pervasiveness," ironically so pervasive as to seem universal and, ordinarily, imperceptible. Thomas Mann articulates a similar view:

> A man lives not only his personal life, as an individual, but also, consciously or unconsciously, the life of his epoch and his contemporaries. He may regard the general, impersonal foundations of his existence as definitely settled and taken for granted, and be ... far from assuming a critical attitude toward them ... yet it is quite conceivable that he may none the less be vaguely conscious of the deficiencies of his epoch and find them prejudicial to his own moral wellbeing.... Then, in such a case, a certain laming of the personality is bound to occur.... (p. 32)

Let me now turn to fleshing out an object-relational formulation of alienation by applying it to a critical understanding of how and why this "laming of the personality" occurs.

Capitalism and Its Inherent Malaise

In understanding this or any society and its ways, it is central to grasp how that society organizes to make, get, and use its supplies. This may seem to be a stupefyingly self-evident observation. It is, however, easy to overlook that supplies, viewed psychodynamically, are far from fully encompassed by the traditional concrete conceptualization as food, clothing, and shelter. A supply, then, is anything concrete or abstract that is necessary to be exchanged by humans for life to subsist and to flourish. C. Fred Alford (1988), for instance, asserts that from the work of Melanie Klein we see how "love and hate are the preeminent passions.... It is they that make the world go around" (p. 8). Love and Hate, along with their many affective, behavioral, personality, and relational relatives and offshoots, may be understood as a kind of primal supplies, and are present in some socially shaped form in virtually every social setting.

A culture's ways of producing, distributing, and using its supplies, whether they are in concrete and/or abstract form, structure everyday social transactions and our shared world. What is most compelling about psychosocially understanding our society in supply terms is that culturally–not merely economically–it is capitalist. Political scientist Edward Greenberg (1980) observes in this vein that there are many possible socioeconomic configurations. He continues that "unique to capitalism, however, is the universality of the commodity form. A commodity is anything whose essential purpose is to be bought and sold for profit" (p. 73).

With the historical introduction of capitalism, says Greenberg (1980), "... *all elements of the social order become marketable things*" (p. 75) [Emphasis added]. Capitalism's particular mode of supplying, then, is commoditization of the needs and desires of everyday life. Commoditization bypasses a mutuality logic of use (e.g., "What is the healthy place within human society for this product or practice?"). Instead, it elevates to predominance an instrumental logic of exchange (e.g., "Whatever gets me to my goals," such as a goal of selling the product). When we instrumentalize something, such as a person, we make it merely a thing of manipulation toward some outside end.

Capitalism not only makes concrete and abstract things into instrumentalized commodities, it commoditizes amalgams of the two to get more bang for the buck, for concrete things help commoditize abstractions. Antiques, for instance, commoditize peoples' desires to recapture a past. Similarly, rock 'n roll recordings, videos, and concerts commoditize both sexual desires and urges to rebellion. Not only does this make our sexual longings prone to be more attached to, say, Madonna or Mick Jagger than to our lover, it also helps render rebelliousness sustaining of the status quo rather than threatening to it.

We who live in capitalism interchange supplies in two main ways. One readily observable way is directly, as bought-and-sold commodities, including our daily bread, our beach balls, our psychotherapy. All such commodities are subject to instrumentalization by their being obtainable to us near-exclusively through capitalist corporations, specifically via the value-establishing and rationing mechanism provided by our pecuniary means, and via the influences of advertising, marketing, public relations, and the like. A second, more subtle way of supply commoditization is "as-if" commoditization, wherein a sort of bottom line thinking governs nonpecuniary transactions. We commoditize others–and ourselves–when we exchange interpersonal supplies governed by a calculated, end-justifies-the-means logic. Christopher Lasch (1979, 1984) ably shows us how much our society valorizes narcissistic traits like instrumental self-construction of an image to, say, advance in a career or hustle

someone into bed.

It is, in sum, systemically rational in capitalist culture to maximize instrumental gain, whether measured as increased sales of a literal commodity or as narcissistic interpersonal gain.

Perhaps it is evident, given my earlier construction of alienation as more-primitive-than-could-be object relations, where this line of thinking points: The logic of commoditization is the primitive logic of the paranoid-schizoid position, the psychosocial working-out of clinical narcissism. For a person functioning in this state, whatever is experienced or defined as objects of the underdeveloped shaky self, or whatever is seen as objective to (i.e., outside) the self, is fundamentally a thing of manipulation. Objects so constructed have little or no experienced life, meaningful existence, or dynamics of their own. Objects-as-only-things seem to be concrete, but "concrete" in this setting mostly means something like "inert" or "solid" in a deadened sense, rather than solidly, reliably established via healthy internalization and psychologically reliable continuity. Indeed, the depth of paranoid-schizoid experience is that nothing subjective or objective can be anything more than shaky and evanescent.

The capitalist commodity, seen in this context, may be understood as a fetishized object, as a pathology of the transitional object processes. Phyllis Greenacre (1952). demonstrates that a fetish is in a sense a transitional object process gone sour:

> The infantile fetish, although related to the transitional object, is the product of marked disturbances in infancy and is a defensive measure in response to great need stemming from early inadequate object relationships. The fetish is more concretized in its form and use, and tends to be permanently incorporated into the individual's life, constricting further development of object relationships. (as cited in M. D Faber, 1981, p. 105)

Faber (1981) notes that Greenacre points out how a healthy transitional object process helps promote a developing individual's sense of protection, of flexibility and adaptiveness, of symbol development, and of human mutuality. The fetish, in contrast, just because it has fixed-seeming "solidity and durability of form," hampers growth (p. 105). Such a fetishization process, whether enacted vis-à-vis people, things, or ideas, prevails not only in children with problematic development, but also in adults infantilized by commoditization.

There is in this psycho-logic a self-sustaining paradox. The anxiety-burying effects of the seeming solidity of the fetishized commodities/objects thwart the emergence of more flexible, more mature, give-and-take subject-object relational dialectics of mutuality, of abstraction and symbolization, and of play. We can healthily have an object by being able to release it from nonstop concrete immediacy because we can hold it symbolically, in its internal, supply-sustaining subjective representation(s). Stated metaphorically, we can have our cake (i.e., have the continuity of objects with a separate existence from ours) and eat it too (i.e., have nurturance from our subjectivity-sustaining supplies without devouring them). Alienation, seen in this psychodynamic sense, does not involve simple, literal separation (in the current metaphor, agonizing lack of needed cake) that traditional definitions sought as its essential defining ingredient. Rather, alienation understood object-relationally involves insufficiently healthy separation and individuation; that is, the inability to negotiate the apparent paradox of holding on by letting go.

The systemic paradox is that capitalism intuitively or deliberately promotes less mature, more anxiously rigidified states in its members, the better to sell its wares (that is, literal commodities) and promote its ways (commoditization of relationships). In his <u>Democracy in America</u>, originally published serially in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville (1969) discerned this same sort of paradoxical pattern and highlighted its quality of manic denial of both supply limits and of mutuality of relatedness:

> Americans cleave to the things of this world as if assured that they will never die, and yet are in such a rush to snatch any that come within their reach, as if expecting to stop living before they have relished them. They clutch everything but hold nothing fast, and so lose grip as they hurry after some new delight....
>
> Death steps in at the end and stops him before he has grown tired of this futile pursuit of that complete felicity which always escapes him.
>
> At first sight there is something astonishing in this spectacle of so many lucky men restless in the midst of abundance. But it is a spectacle as old as the world; all that is new is to see a whole people performing in it. (p. 536)

This profoundly articulate and astute passage from more than a century-and-a-half ago could describe contemporary shoppers' behavior in a mall. Capitalism in America systemically needs this sort of hungry uncertainty about supplies of all sorts in order to expand its hegemony, as our only mode of supplying, over both workers and "consumers." Psychological hunger (regularly closely coupled with physical hunger) that is only transiently satiated works wonders to bolster sales of a product, an image, or a self.

Indeed, capitalism slyly fuels itself on its own uncertainties. Advertisers and other hucksters like politicians regularly, if sometimes quite subtly, put forward their wares and their ways (a line of clothing, an automobile or soap, "lifestyle" change strategies, a political program or an ideology) as a sort of antidote to the afflictions that people, if mostly inchoately, feel ail them. Charles Revson, founder of Revlon Cosmetics, speaking in a moment of candor that helps cement this point, noted that, "In the factory we make cosmetics; in the store we sell hope" (as cited in Tobias, 1976, p. 107).

So far, I've aimed to survey at a broad level a fundamental and problematic way our society operates. I now want to look at a particular example of the workings of alienation: How American capitalist society structures our monster mythology in a commoditized way that tends to alienate us from productively dealing with our own unconscious processes, and so fuels a sense of alienation.

<u>Our Alienated Unconscious, Commoditized via Aliens</u>

Primitive processes have to be accommodated in any society (and in thinking about society) because they are humanly necessary and universal. Thomas Ogden (1989) points out how more primitive traits can be adaptive and desirable (with "primitive" clearly connoting developmentally early origins, not necessarily atavism).

Likewise, the phenomenon of aliens and monsters is a real and omnipresent one, for these exist in all senses except the most literal. A rich alien/monster mythology is one central means by which a society may assist its members of all ages in productively accommodating primitive processes. (It is one mark of the ill health of our society that in its everyday use, "myth" is a pejorative term, virtually a synonym for "falsehood.") A healthy society mobilizes a mythology in which tales that are untrue only at the literal level help us uncover and process our inner lives. In capitalism, there is instead a thoroughgoing quasi-mythology. Its essential purpose is to exploit peoples' inchoate desires for mythology's healthier clarifying and mastering function in order to sell them commodities like films.

Let me now briefly look at a psychologically rich cinematic example of how our projected internal states are artistically materialized for us, but one whose mythological potential is badly undercut by its commodity status: The 1979 movie Alien, directed by Ridley Scott.

Alien shares several elements with many other science fiction and horror movies (such as the blockbuster Jurassic Park, which, like Alien, was an Oscar winner): (a) a setting in a locale far from the everyday experience of the audience, intended to evoke regressive feelings of isolation and to unleash the *terra incognita* of the unconscious; (b) A Frankenstein-like theme that illustrates how the unreflective pursuit of scientific or technical frontiers unleashes a kind of monomaniacal dehumanized insanity; (c) a story line that looks askance at the motives and trustworthiness of large institutions like corporations or governments, but offers no real politically or socially based solutions, and little beyond hardy survivalism in the way of resistance; and (d) of course, a highlighting of some horrifying creatures that emerge from *terra incognita* single-mindedly salivating after people to destroy, and, not infrequently, devouring or eviscerating them.

Glen and Krin Gabbard give us a sophisticated chapter-length plumbing of Alien in their book Psychiatry and Cinema. Their main aim is to highlight this movie's perceptive portrayal of the unconscious in Kleinian terms. As a beginning, they observe that horror and science fiction are generically a ripe playground for portrayals of unconscious mechanisms, and further assert that "no science fiction or horror film ... has evoked the full range of Kleinian anxieties so thoroughly as Alien" (pp. 226, 228).

These anxieties are, in a phrase, the return of a split-off, devouring, unrequitedly bad object from which there is no escape. Deep in space, crew members from the spaceship in Alien enter a maternal-like body, symbolized in the form of a spacecraft of another species, a vessel with a very viscerally organic construction, and itself long ago fatally ravaged by its taking in bad contents of a species alien to itself but still providing haven and nurture for that species' eggs. Despite the warnings and the orders of one crew member--Ripley (played by Sigourney Weaver), whose character seems chosen by the moviemakers to embody their view of relatively higher ego functioning--the crew then transfers inside its own spaceship haven a being that bloodily and murderously erupts from an egg into a devouring creature that represents "a thoroughly bad part-object, unrelenting in its evil and destructive nature."

Gabbard and Gabbard (1987) are masterful in pointing out how this movie's story line and various of its cinematic techniques are used to evoke Kleinian themes of persecutory anxiety, part-objects, unconscious modes of experience, and the like. For instance, the movie's cinematography relies heavily on use of kaleidoscopically cut shots of only parts of the creature's body (frequently, its heavily salivating mouth, with rows of jagged teeth), thereby evoking fragmented, devouring part-objects (see, for more examples, pp. 232-233). Ultimately, all but the resourceful Ms. Ripley are annihilated by this primitively cunning, unambiguously evil creature.

A tale this unnervingly regressive needs to end with some sort of resolution so that viewers' nerves are not left as jagged the alien's teeth, thereby undercutting the movie's box office potential. (Alien seems to have accomplished this task, for it not only attained moviedom's fourth-largest dollar gross of 1979 [Gabbard & Gabbard, 1987, p. 226], it also has produced three sequels.) Alien resolves the considerable tension it evokes via a kind of survivalist scenario: At story's end, Ripley maneuvers the alien into the main ship, escapes with the ship's cat into a survival pod and atomically blasts the alien and the mother ship containing it into nonexistence, at least until the sequel. Gabbard and Gabbard accurately note that by this maneuver "Ripley has rid herself of badness via projection and then destroyed the badness (p. 237)." Her terrors obliterated, Ripley then enters suspended-animation sleep evoking "the nonambivalent, all-good, blissful union with the all-good mother" (ibid). The Gabbards could have further shown how her withdrawal into the pod is politically as well as psychologically regressive. Her manner–solo escape from cataclysmic danger, while others less clever and hardy perish–mirrors the essence of a late-20th century individualist survivalist strategy.

The Gabbards (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1987) do address, if rather in passing, the "dystopia[n]" political context in which the terrorized crew had found themselves (p. 231). They note that a "sinister 'company' blithely declares its employees expendable" in order to acquire the creature for its weapons research division (ibid). The only impact of this deathly, absolute, instrumental depersonalization that the Gabbards remark upon is that "just as there is no place on the ship to hide from the monster, there is no familiar, consoling institution to give meaning to the persecution of the characters" (ibid). By their emphasis on "the company's" treachery as an after-the-fact loss of potential solace, they underplay the role of the sociopolitical environment (the "company" and its on-board agents, the computer ["Mother"], and a crew member who turns out to be an android) in fomenting at its outset the anxiety/devouring process.

A Closing Comment

The Gabbards, despite being astute psychoanalytic observers, pay only slight attention either to the political overtones of this movie's plot or to the place in our mythology occupied by Alien and its many artistic relatives. In this they are, perhaps, like many of us. We have, in general, unreflectively entrusted a great deal of the welfare of our world to institutions (and the people who operate them) whose central motivation (along with extracting from us the most labor they can) is to maneuver us out of as much money as they can, by the most effective means they can find. The devices to do so even include exploiting the insights uncovered by psychoanalysis. Like they do for many commodities, sellers of our popular arts manipulate developmentally early states to increase the volatility of the fuel mixture of their product's sales rocket.

In a passage from their chapter on <u>Alien</u>, Gabbard and Gabbard (1987) do quite insightfully highlight the powerful psychological element that pulls people into sci-fi and horror movies by drawing upon Freud's (1920/1955) notion of repetition compulsion. In the same passage, and apparently quite unintentionally, the Gabbards give us grounds for an explanation as to why the proliferation of aliens and their horrific ilk in our society does not more effectively assist us in encountering and processing our own unconscious: "People line up to see movies like <u>Alien</u> in order to reencounter powerful unconscious anxieties while retaining a sense that they have some control of an active nature the second time around" (p. 231). I have sought in this essay to illustrate the ill psychosocial effects that flow from the fact that the dominant goal of people such as movie producers is not to help people work through their unconscious anxieties, it is to encourage, fetishize, and exploit these anxieties, leaving them largely unresolved and festering, such that, time after time, "people line up to see movies...."

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