

Cognition on the Relation between the “Ego” and the “Other” in Science Fiction Movies

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Abstract

Mankind is always trapped in the introspection in one's identity and the relationship with others, about which, many philosophers and psychologists like Freud and Lacan, have established various theories. Many science fiction movies can function as allegorical stories for the interpretation of those theories about the two concepts and their relation. Deep probing and comprehensive analyses of those movies in light of Freud's and Lacan's theories about the “ego” and the “other” make it easy to see that the “ego” has an intrincating relation with the “other”, which symbolizes both other people, the world and the ego itself. The “other” is intimidating to the “ego”, but the integrity with it is also what the ego pursuits. So, for the harmony between the “ego” and the “other”, the “ego” should pursuit its integrity with the “other”, while confirming its own identity.

Keywords: science fiction movies, the “ego”, the “other”, cognition

1. Introduction

French novelist, playwright Jean-Paul Sartre says, hell is other people (Flynn, 2013). Man is trapped in the relationship with the others. The words—the other, always arouse a feeling of foreignness accompanied by threat. But while turning inward, mankind is also bewildered by the essence of ego, and lost in the inquiry “who am I”, which keeps echoing in the depth of the soul. Different schools of philosophers and psychologists provide different answers to those questions, which are thought-provoking but abstruse to ordinary readers. Fortunately, modern technology makes it possible to present intricate thinking with thrilling stories on the screen. So, enlightening thoughts could also be conveyed in some excellent contemporary science fiction movies, which could be taken as the allegorical expression or modern interpretation of those philosophers' and psychologists' theories. Deep probing and comprehensive analyses of those movies in light of the theories about the “ego” and the “other” can provide assistance to the ordinary audience to acquire insights into the concept of the “ego”, the “other” and the relationship between the two, so to have a profound understanding of the movies as well as obtain tranquility in mind and harmony in the world.

2. Definition of the “Ego” and the “Other”

Freud was arguably the first thinker to explain human's psychological movement systematically. He distinguished three structural elements within the mind, which he called id, ego, and super-ego (Freud, 1962). The id is the instinctual sexual drives aspiring to satisfaction; the super-ego is the internalized social mechanisms acquired during growth; the ego is the conscious self that is created by the dynamic tensions and interactions between the id and the super-ego and aims to reconcile with the requirements of external reality. That means the ego is a dynamic compromise of people's instinctual desire and the social morality and it is always in the struggle of the two.

Jacques Lacan, a noted psychoanalyst in the twentieth century (April 13, 1901 to September 9, 1981) whom is referred to as “the French Freud,” explored the significance of Freud's discovery of the unconscious and developed Freud's theory about the ego. Lacan proposes that human beings are not born with the sense of ego, and an infant initially feels integrated and unified with his mother as a whole. However, negative experiences like anxiety, distress,

frustration caused by the mother's failure to respond to the infant's requires, or the mother's separation from him, compels the infant to forge the concept of otherness, and realize that the mother is an "other" outside him. Lacan posits that with the awareness of the existence of otherness, between the ages of six and eighteen months, which Lacan calls the mirror stage (Lacan, 2006), the infants obtains the ability to identify their own images in reflective objects and that helps them to form the concept of ego.

Lacan utilizes the terms "other" with a lower-case o and "Other" with a capital O differently. The capital-O Other, at the mirror stage represented by the mother, refers to the overarching "objective spirit" of trans-individual socio-linguistic structures, and then, ideas of anonymous authoritative power or knowledge like that of God, Nature, History, Society and so on. The lower-case-o "other" designates the imaginary ego and its accompanying alter-egos, which respectively refer to the part of "ego" unconsciously shaped by the influence of the others, and others similar to the "ego" (Johnston, 2018).

3. The "Ego" and the Capital "Other" in Science Fiction Movies

The capital Other at the mirror stage is represented by the mother and later, is represented by grant things like God, Nature, but no matter in the mirror stage or later life, the capital "Other" always leads to the ego's anxiety and fear. At the mirror stage, the uneasiness caused by the ego's separation from the mother and the subsequent awareness of its incompleteness is the beginning of fear, and later the capricious nature poses more threats, which are manifested in various myths, stories with diversified fearful monsters, devils or ghost in the ancient. With the evolvement of human civilization, especially after Industrial Revolution, human beings acquired tremendous knowledge about the earth, but after the universe unfolded to people with its staggering vast and depth after the invention of telescope and the advancement of astronomy, terror is caused by human's ignorance about the universe. This terror finds its vent in various science fiction movies which has gained its popularity since the beginning of the 20th century.

The movie *War of the Worlds* depicting the invasion of some vicious aliens, is probably one of the most classic. It was adapted from H G Well's novel of the same name published at 1898. In the movie, a technologically-advanced alien species riding huge octopuses-like three-legged war machines wreaks havoc on Earth. They incinerate dozens of people with blasts of heat beams and cover the earth with a horrible rapidly-growing red vine fertilized by blood of those people harvested by them. Humans seem have no place to escape, but fortunately those aliens are killed by disease-carrying bacteria on earth, which humans are immune to.

Following *War of the Worlds*, pyramids of invasions of wicked or monstrous aliens are depicted in science fiction movies of different styles, such as *Independence Day* and *Pacific Rim*, in which fearful aliens either from the outer space or a paralleled universe land on earth or arise from the ocean intending to exterminate human beings and occupy the planet. That might be the darkest nightmare of mankind about the "Other" derived from feeling of impotence to comprehend the "Other" and the feeling of insignificant in facing the grandness of the "Other", the universe.

At the same time, the frustrations and failures that accompany human's strong willingness and unremitting effort to achieve the unity with and comprehension of the capital "Other" offer more materials to monster or fairy stories in the ancient and science fictions in the present. For example, in *Aliens*, the crew of a spaceship find a mysterious hive of unknow creature on the moon, and then, they were attacked by the terrifying xenomorph in it, with only one of them surviving at last. In another movie *The Happening*, the nature is irate for human's misbehavior and so rejects humans as pests by releasing some kind of airborne contagion carried in the wind and causes an inexplicable rash of suicides of mankind. Mankind seems comes to the edge of extinction, but fortunately that contamination comes to an end leaving some people survived. It seems no matter how hard mankind tries to comprehend the capital "Other" represented by the nature, the universe, it still seems so unsurmountable and intimidating.

To mitigate that fear, some comic science fiction movies and movies about friendly aliens were produced, like *Men in Black* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, in which the aliens become friendly or mankind can coexist with the aliens, but those ferocious outer space creatures still keep popping out in diversified movies as the representation of man's deeply rooted fear cause by the "Other".

4. The "Ego" and the Lower-Case "other" and the Alter-Ego in Science Fiction Movies

In Lacan's theory, the lower-case-o "other" designates the imaginary ego and its accompanying alter-egos, which refer to the others who, in the ego's eyes', have similar feelings and thoughts as his.

4.1 “Ego”—the Lower Case Other

Why is the “ego” taken as the lower-case “other”? According to Lacan, the formation of the concept of “ego” is accomplished with the assistance and confirmation of the “other”. The infant is encouraged to identify with the mirror image by verbal and gestural encouragement from the “other”—the adult holding him/her up in front of the mirror, so the formation of the infant’s ego is unavoidably affected by the adult’s body language and verbal description, like “You are a pretty boy.” Accordingly, the infants’ ego is projected by the desires and fantasies of the adults—the others. So, Lacan considers the recognition that happens in the mirror stage amounts to “misrecognition”. Moreover, in the infants later life, other persons’ speech, gestures, moods, facial expressions, and so on can also act as a “mirror” to him affecting the development of his ego. Therefore, the “ego” ultimately is a foreign introject of others’ conscious and unconscious wants and willingness, instead of the inherent nature of the infant itself. That is why the ego is taken as the lower-case “other”.

Due to the “other’s important role in the formation of the “ego”, it is naturally that one may take something into his personality without questioning or even knowing it, so in one’s ego, there is something foreign, something one can hardly comprehend or control, which may lurk in the deepest part of man’s consciousness, and exerted its devastating power at some time. The darkest and frightening part of that transforms, in movies, into variety of mutated evil creatures as zombies or monsters. This kind of nightmare is first well expressed in Franz Kafka’s novel *The Metamorphosis* in which a man is shocked to find out, as he wakes up one morning, that he has transformed into an ugly bug, which he and his family cannot accept, and at last he dies lonely without a slight of love or sympathy from his family. With the popularity of the movie, that nightmare in man’s mind has also been elaborately depicted in science fiction movies. The most hideous and horrible metamorphoses of the ego for mankind are probably Zombies, which appear in a series of movies, like *Resident Evil*, *I am the Legend*, *28 Days Later*.

In these movies, human beings are transformed into terrifying, flesh-eating Zombies, which are also contagious. To make it worse, their transformation is caused by the arrogant and selfish human beings themselves, who assume they could play the role of god and manipulate lethal viruses to get profits. For example, in *Resident Evil*, a powerful corporation named Umbrella has a hidden research facility called The Hive underneath a fictional city Raccoon, where the scientists develop genetically engineered drugs for medical purpose and biological weapons. In order to make a large fortune by selling the virus, a man steals the lethal T-virus, and foolishly contaminates The Hive when he leaves. To check the contamination, the artificial intelligence Red Queen seals the Hive and kills all the staff and guinea pigs. But the staff are not dead. The virus has turned them into zombies, which at last almost contaminated all the human beings and make mankind extinct, despite the resistance lead by the heroin. In *I am the Legend*, and *28 Days Later*, humans also metamorphose into zombies because the infections of some viruses produced and released by mankind himself. It can be presumed that both the hideous appearance and the wicked producers of the zombies are the representatives of the darkest side of the inscrutable lurking part of the “ego”, which are taken in unconsciously and may run out of control and make the “ego” metamorphose into terrible things.

However, deep down in people’s mind, there is some wish that there is something good, which is also concealed, could show up and make the “ego” a superhero capable of defeating the evil part of the “ego”. That wish is manifested in science fiction movies whose characters are endowed or furnished with some kinds of superpower because of genetic mutations or science experiments, such as *X-Men*, *Spider-Man*.

In *X-Men*, children are being born with a special X-factor in their genes, which give them diversified special powers and make them mutants, and they manage to help prevent some catastrophes with their superpower. In *Spider-Man*, a high school student boy develops superhuman strength, super-fast reflexes and the ability to scale walls and ceilings, after being bitten by a genetically modified spider. He first uses his newfound powers to make money, but after some tragedies he assumes the responsibility of a superhero and uses his powers to fight the evils.

Notwithstanding, as the “ego’s” development is constantly affected by the “other”, it is hard for the “ego” to confirm its own identity among all those interferential elements coming from outside. So, different identity crises emerge and are displayed in those movies. For example, in *X-Men*, quite a few of x-men firstly feel repelled by their abilities, like Wolverine, Jean Grey, Rogue, who resist to accept their own abilities and hate themselves when their abilities hurt their loved ones, and some characters with super-power even take the wrong side and cause damages and casualties.

This struggle in one’s “ego” to confirm its identity also breeds some enlightening science fiction movies, like the movies about clone men. For example, in *The Sixth Day*, the main character, Adam Gibson (Schwarzenegger) returns home after work to find that there is another him celebrating his birthday with his family. He thinks that the other “him” is a clone, and feels upset, panic and even angry, but he does not disrupt his family by charging to fight with

the guy. Instead, he fights his way to find out the truth and protect his family, even by cooperating with the clone man. However, unexpectedly, he is turned out to be the clone. Big blow it is, he accepts his new identity quietly but sadly despite the great loss he experiences in his mind. Although there is internal struggle and fight, after saying goodbye to his family he leaves and heads to Argentina to begin his new life. The ego's struggle to acquire its own identity and to aspire for nobility is perspicuous.

More Intensive struggle is presented in *The Island*, in which the two main characters who are deceived into believing that the compound they are living in is the last place on earth uncontaminated by a nuclear war, but the fact is they're human clones meant to serve as sources of body parts for the people who pay to make themselves cloned. The payers are told that those clones do not achieve sentience, just like plants. But when the two clone characters escape from the compound and find their sponsor—their original version for help, their sponsors feel threatened by their existence and turn them in to the institute, but the clones heroically defeated their sponsor and manage to go back to the compound and free all the clone people, exposing the illegal business of the institute. The selfishness and inhumanity of the sponsors contrast sharply with the sense of responsibility and kindness of the clones, and at last, the latter win, which may symbolize the victory of the good part of the “ego” over the bad part.

Both movies stand people's wish that there is a pure and divine part in one's ego, and although it may be screened by the sophistication cultivated during growth in social life, it may take the dominance and lead to a brighter world.

4.2 “other”—the Alter Ego

According to Lacan, others are related to as alter-egos, because the ego imagines the “others” to be like the ego, who share a set of thoughts, feelings, and inclinations with the ego. With this imagination the “others” seems comprehensible to the ego, and the mysterious, unsettling foreignness of the “others” becomes tolerable, the complex social life navigable. If this imagination falls apart, others become totally foreign and incomprehensible, the panic and horror caused by the threaten of the unfamiliar “other” may be overwhelming, so to take the others as alter egos become necessary.

Without this illusion, if all the others turned to something without similar feelings and senses, the world would be a horrible place. For example, in *The Invasion* an alien life form, much like a fungus or spore, clings to the space shuttle Patriot as it crashes back to Earth, and infects people having contacted with the fragments. After people are infected, when they fall into sleep at night, the spore takes over the brain during REM sleep, and changes them into pod people controlled by the alien life. The town turns to a horrible place. The heroin, Carol Bennell, a psychiatrist tries everything to keep herself uninfected and at last helps scientists create an airborne vaccine with her son Oliver's blood, who is immune to the spore because of chickenpox he had as a baby. The vaccine finally saves mankind.

In the movie, the fright caused by the mutation of the people with similar human emotions and feelings to cold and emotionless human form aliens crushes the ego's imagination of the “other” and the subsequent fright suffuses the story, which is the major factor that makes the movie a horrible one.

5. The Relation of the “Ego” and the “Other”

The “ego” and the “other” seem as a pair of contradictory but closely related concepts. The “other” is different from the “ego” but is existing in the “ego”; the “ego” cannot lose itself in pursuing the integrity with the “other”, but cannot afford losing empathy with the “other”.

5.1 The Relation between the “Ego” and the Capital “Other”

Although the capital “Other”, the nature and the universe once posed a great threat to the human being, and bred a lot of stories of monsters or gods, as what have been mentioned above, with the evolvement of human civilization, especially development after the Industrial Revolution, human beings acquired tremendous knowledge about the earth, which fostered the illusion that man can conquer the nature, and so arrogance began taking roots in the mind of human beings. And that arrogance leads to many catastrophes both depicted in movies and taking place in reality. As described in movies like *The Day After Tomorrow*, because of global warming caused by human's activity, a new Ice Age is imminent, and mankind is at the verge of extinction. In reality, at the beginning of 2020, a horrible epidemic affecting the whole world might be traced to the consumption of wild animals as food in China and the plague of locusts in Africa was aggregated by global warming. All of them warn people, that to pursue integrity with the capital “Other”, or at least a harmonious relationship with it, is essential for the existence of human beings.

5.2 The Relation between the “Ego” and the Lower-Case “other”

According to Lacan, the lower-case “other” refers to the ego itself, because the “ego” is formed under the influence

of other people and it can be taken as a projection of others' expectation. Therefore, the relation between the ego and the lower-case "other", firstly is a kind of internal friction in mind, but this friction may be devastating if not well dwelt with.

On one hand, if the "ego" identifies himself with others' expectation, he will feel lost or even denial of himself, which has been demonstrated in movies like *The Fly*, in which a scientist makes a matter transmission experiment on himself and accidentally fuses his own genes with a house fly that was trapped, and he slowly transforms into a terrifying mutant creature known as "Brundlefly", which he detests and but cannot resist, so at last he begs his girl-friend to end his life. The Brundlefly may symbolize the distorted ego created when the "ego" cannot help from being completely taken over by evils of the "other". In real life the feeling of being lost or self-denial caused by surrendering to others' willpower also leads to tragedies like hurting other people or oneself. So, to distinguish the one's ego with the "other" and obtain one's own identity, is quite important.

But according to Freud, the "ego" is a dynamic compromise between the id—the instinctive desires, and the superego—the social rules. That means to reconfirm the ego's identity and value of living demands the "ego" to break from blind seeking acceptance and recognition of others or succumbing to the id, so, to pursue integrity with the nature and human society, like what the superheroes in science fiction movies do.

5.3 The Relation between the "Ego" and the "Alter Ego"

"Others" are related to by Lacan as alter-egos, because according to him, the "ego" imagines that the "others" have similar thoughts, feelings, and inclinations with the "ego", so to make the others comprehensible and social life tolerable. But actually, that alter ego is mostly an illusion, because although all the human beings are genetically similar, the differences are prominent, some of which are out of people's imagination, not to mention there are some extremely evil ones, so conflicts are unavoidable, which is the reason why Sartre says, hell is other people.

Nevertheless, the illusion is necessary for one to fit into the society and to get sympathetic to others to establish harmonious relationship, so that life can continue.

6. Conclusion

The "ego" and the "other" are intricate concepts. They are antagonistic but closely related to each other. The "other" is an intimidating force to the "ego", but the "ego" is formed under the influence of the "other". So, the "ego" sees the "lower-case other" as alter-ego, but the alter-ego is undoubtedly different from the "ego". If the relation between the "ego" and the "other" is not well managed, tragedies would arouse, like what has been depicted in those science fiction movies. So, as an individual, the "ego" should try to suppress the "id", the instinctive rash of oneself, and find harmony in its relation with other people instead of blindly following others; as human beings, in the awe of the capital "Other", the nature and the universe, the "ego" should try to understand the capital "Other", to pursue integrity with it, instead of compromising it and turning it into a mighty enemy. However, at the same time, the "ego" should not lose itself in its pursuing for the recognition of the "other". Otherwise, the "other", no matter the other people or the nature it signifies, may turn out to be the hell to the "ego".

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