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**WE ARE ME, AND THEY ARE HIVE.  
INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY  
AS A RELATIONAL CHARACTERISTIC OF  
HUMANS AND ALIENS IN SCIENCE FICTION<sup>2</sup>**

**Abstract:** The aim of this text is to show how the motif about collective mind / genetic memory of aliens is used as a mean for construction of the identification marker which substantially differs human from alien races, and which is built on the opposition between individual and collective identity as relational characteristics of humans, and their alien enemies. Examples from shows and films "Battlestar Galactica", "Star Trek", "Stargate", and "Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Third Beings)" will be used as explanatory material.

**Key words:** identity – individual and collective; identity – construction, description, ascription; Us/Them; science fiction; anthropology.

We construct identity in order to be similar with someone, and different from someone else. In order to emphasize difference between those two intents, but also the consequence of the identity construction, we tend to represent the given construct in a way that it basically negates the construction process, and suggests the alleged essentiality of identity instead. Such cases are tested in real world by research of so-called identity description and ascription, which always leads to the expected inconsistencies in identity construction practices. However, science fiction offers almost laboratory conditions for examining ways in which identities are constructed with the aim of separating a group or community from another one on cultural cognitive level. Among frequent methods of that kind is the use of motifs about collective mind / genetic memory of aliens as an exceptionally important tool used for

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confrontation with humans. The aim of this text is to show how the mentioned motif is used as a mean for construction of the identification marker which substantially differs human from alien races, and which is built on the opposition between individual and collective identity as relational characteristics of humans, and their alien enemies.

Two franchises, one reimagined TV-series and the film with different versions provided basic alien characterization for this discussion: "Star Trek", "Stargate", "Battlestar Galactica", and "Invasion of the Body Snatchers"<sup>3</sup> – the races of Borg, Goa'uld, Cylons, and Pod People respectively. The common feature of all of those alien races is their collective existence, besides the fact of all of them being pictured as the adversary of human race in the shows they appear in. The nature of their collectivism is a bit different indeed when they are mutually compared, and single members of those races appear in different relations one to another or to the humans, some of them behaving quite egoistic, often – as is part of Goa'uld's manner for example – but what underlies their collectivism is that their existence is pre-determined and that they all share either group mind and/or collective memory, which certainly contributes to how humans in science fiction shows perceive them, but also to how consumer of such shows is instructed to read their identificational positioning in relation to humans, and consequently how to evaluate human identity.

If there is a focal point in contemporary anthropology, either the one around which the most of the research interests are structured, or such which overwhelms the discipline by being interwoven into many of its other subjects, identity would compete for it certainly, thus getting closer to the most exploited concept in anthropology, culture itself. Even such a small anthropological community as Serbian anthropology is features abundance of researches referring to identity and culture in its most recent production (Nedeljković 2006, Đerić 2007, Gavrilović 2007, Radović 2007, Brković 2008a, b, Maksimović 2009). The stronghold of researches concerned with identity and culture is that culture determines identities produced within it, therefore whenever we discuss identity, it is cultural identity (Жикић 2003, 2005). Identity is reflexive category by itself, meaning that it always needs some other identity to which it is related, gaining its content in consideration to some opposing quality (Прелић 2008).

Conceptualizing identity views We/Them opposition as its basics. This opposition is communicated in science fiction in the form of "Humans vs. Aliens". Two motives are featured then usually: conflict between human and alien races,

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<sup>3</sup> Original film by Don Siegel, 1956, based on a novel *Body Snatchers* by Jack Finney, 1954; later versions of the film include *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* by Philip Kaufman, 1978, *Body Snatchers* by Abel Ferrara 1993, and *The Invasion* by Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2008.

and the picture of hive, swarm, or complete thought/memory/experience sharing in portraying cognitive and affective levels of aliens' inner life.

Alien collective mind as presented in science fiction is directly opposite to whatever we know about human mind, as well it is aberration considering brain- and nerve activity of the life-forms on this planet. The purpose of such presentation is to estrange alien races portrayed that way from the human biosphere<sup>4</sup> at all, but also to differ between the identities constructed by that means stressing which one should be considered as inherently human, and which one should fail to meet that honor. When presented as having collective mind, aliens are always thought of as being aliens in plural, beings which physical manifestations are irrelevant compared to their essence, and their essence is hive-like. Biological base of their existence is group, and their culture is determined the same manner – if those races are presented as having culture at all.

Their perception of humans is the one of extreme animosity, and it is motivated by perceiving human individuality as some kind of "nature's anomaly", abnormality which is threatening their own order and so on. Alien races view humanity almost in a manner which suggests that uncontrolled permeability constitutes filth, or point of pollution (cf. Ferguson 2002), hence they see humans as intruders in alien quest for perfection of their existence. "There is no room for other" expresses one of the Pod People in the last version of "Body Snatchers", when it is discovered that some of the humans are immune to biochemical reactions which lead to taking over of their bodies by aliens, and it is kind of a definition of aliens' attitude towards borders conceptualized as impermeable barriers between ultimately separate categories. Alien equals inhumane and its features could be changes an mutation, which reminds one of clearly modernity concept of humanity which equals it with stability (cf. Rizo 2004).

When alien identity is portrayed as a group identity certain logic underlies such artistic expression, making it plausible with notions of group mind or collective memory: if the race possesses one mind, or each of its members share the same memory, then the identity implied that way and attributed to the race and its members must be anything else but the group identity. Group mind and collective memory are not synonyms, that much is true, as suggested by examples of Borg, Cylons, or Goa'uld. On the other hand, group mind and collective memory are prerequisites for such way of identity construction of the alien races, which marks those races as compact whole.

Humans look handicapped a bit when facing aliens with a group mind or collective memory. The narratives of science fictions' depictions of human-alien conflict involving hive-like aliens usually begins with humans facing hard times because of the advantages of their enemies caused by their cognitive inner abilities. What makes humans capable of resisting life-forms based

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<sup>4</sup> Wherever it may be placed in some imagined universe of course.

on group existence is that what probably made them top the food chain – their individual abilities and their individual personalities. Such individual abilities are most effective when different persons work together of course, but that is sidelined somehow when we review construction of human identity in relation to alien identity in science fiction. Of the most importance then is the idea of human individuality, and it is based on certain social, political, culture, religious, and partly science concepts.

Purpose and essence of the existence of hive-like alien races are deliberately overlapped and merged in science fiction presentations. That purpose-as-essence is connoted as biological category, and as imperative of whatever aliens do or take into consideration. That may sound a bit strange when having in mind that Cylons are robotic race essentially<sup>5</sup>, but that very idea is presented as meaning of their behavior in *Battlestar Galactica* reimagined series. Cyclones are presented as created by humans, and as they have evolved in a manner which is not disclosed in the show. Whatever their acts may be, those are displayed and explained as motivated by the purpose of discovering god and meeting the inherent perfection of existence. God after which Cylons look upon is conceived as creator of universe and everything that exists, similar to the monotheistic notion of god in religions of our world, while human pantheon of supernatural beings, and beliefs and customs which follow it are based on Greek pantheon and Zodiac. This philosophical positioning aims clear Cylons' separation from the mankind, and forms the basis of their ideology, which suggests that mankind should be destroyed for the reason of being threat to Cylons' ultimate goal of unifying in perfection with their god. Cylons perceive human existence as not pure biological, but as biology upgraded by society and culture, and that existence is full of contingency, hence it is something which challenges order of things suggested by the perfection of their god.

Borg, Goa'uld or Pod People are not imagined with so high and noble cause as that of Cylons, although it is true that Borg inclines toward perfection, which is conceived different than similar notion in Cylons: Borg performs assimilation, Goa'uld simply exists, while Pod People do the assimilation for the sake of their existence – that is their way of being into world. Common thing for all of those alien races is that they lack concepts of society and culture as we know them. It is quiet clear for the Pod People, because original organisms, which initiate transformation of individual humans into hive-like aliens, are presented as parasitic life-forms similar to viruses. Borg is cybernetic hyper-organism which clusters myriads of units and is controlled by a group mind; similar to Cylons, Borg is familiar to some sort of social organization.

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<sup>5</sup> Cylons were not imagined as robotic race originally; they are biological race in a book *Battlestar Galactica* by Glen A. Larson and Robert Thurston, MCA Publishing 1978.

That social organization in both races is of kind which reminds one more to the social organization of some animal species of Earth, than to human society: there is hierarchy of certain types of kinds of the species, and the purpose of that hierarchy is plausible to the purpose of existence of the whole race.

Technology used by both Borg and Cylons, which could be considered perhaps as the cultural trait otherwise, is not their by its origin, so it could not be discussed in any manner in which anthropology studies culture. We do not know that exactly for Borg, but the main principle of its existence is assimilation – of biological entities and technologies alike, so it reasonable to suppose that Borg did not originate any kind of artifact or cultural institution. That is true for Goa'uld technology too in a manner of speaking – they have either inherited technology from the mysterious race of Ancients, or acquired it from some advanced races they had defeated and adapted it to their needs and biological characteristics, while Pod People are body-snatching parasites simply, with no artifacts by their own. Cylons use technology which is human originally, only adapted to meet their mechanical demands.

Key distinction in presenting social organization and/or cultural features of alien races to human culture and society is that aliens are not free of some kind of pre-determination; their relations and institutions are presented as lacking free will, so their actions in material world, as well their worlds of ideas are always guided by something which is external to individual agents, or individual units of alien races. Their concepts and deeds are presented as determined by the nature of their existence, so they are not comparable to human moral development. Aliens representations which feature creatures lacking emotions, or with emotional expressions so suppressed that humans can neither observe them, nor interpret them if can observe them is convenient manner of portraying creatures free from morality: if aliens are not able to express their emotions clearly, or lack them completely, they can hardly judge their deeds, reflect on them, pose questions about them, view them from another perspective, and eventually correct consequences of deeds caused by poor judgment. That makes convenient tool for categorizing aliens using binary distinction when compared to humans: their lack of morality puts them in a category opposed to humans, making them more similar to animals than to any sentiment species, according to human perception of what is that that makes us human. It is not intelligence by itself, but something which is also omitted in presentations of hive-like alien races: it is free will, which constitutes crucial element for the individuation of human identity.

Works of science fiction discussed here share common language of cultural modernity. Those novels, movies or TV-series were released in late modernity and in post-modernity indeed, but what underlies character specification in all of them is preserving modernity notion of what human consists from, where included "parts" are biological body, personality, mind, free will,

sometimes the soul. The important part of that notion is the capacity of creating artifacts that enhance human body in certain conditions, which altogether suggests which part amongst all of the human identity constituents is a crucial one, that which does not need any further improvement, and the same one which aliens lack, free will. It is key word for human individuality, no matter any of the empirically based facts on human spaces, and no matter any of historical and cultural contingencies of the mankind (Neame 2003).

Self-awareness makes basics of personal identity, and that is used in communication performed by certain science fiction motives, which feature individual uniqueness of human beings as conceptual framework for constructing basis of human identity. There are two basic connotations of human identity in Western civilization: philosophical and psychological. Philosophical connotation refers to individuality of human consciousness as to subject of all men's thought, emotional, and willing activity, where material basis of personality as self-awareness is supplied by men's social being. Psychological connotation refers to all of the traits and features which make one individual different from the other individuals, but also to inner dynamic organization of conation, cognition, and emotion (Thomas 2000). Anthropological connotation could be added here to, and it could refer to the whole and sovereign being, which is source of action and core of creativity, placed into single physical body, possessing single mind and/or soul.

It follows however that human identity must be essentially individual identity, with the consequence of that alien identity must be conceived as collective identity in relation to human identity (Edwards 2005). Alien identity is thus built due to construction of the difference: notion of what is essence of humanity is used to imagine the opposite notion, the one of what is strange and alien to humanity, wherefrom latter is used as a tool of construction of such race identity which will possess features fundamentally different to the constituents of human identity.

Collective memory is one of such features. In real world it is not biological characteristic; we speak of collective memory as of social and cultural memory. It is certain content of cultural knowledge which could not be held by an individual only, but is shared by human group to which individual belongs, and which owns that knowledge (Wertsch and Roediger 2008). Cultural communication in science fiction uses collective memory as conceptual framework for making distinction between group identity and individual identity. Together with group mind, collective memory is kind of an "organic abnormality", when reviewed from human perspective.

Such organic abnormality develops itself further into social and cultural abnormality when humans evaluate consequent alien behavior. It is clear that such evaluation is based on human values, on their ideas of social and cultural relations, institutions, norms etc, but the depiction of humans in contact with

friendly alien cultures suggests that difference is constructed also on the level of evaluation of treating the other races and their cultures by humans and aliens respectively. Humans use the acculturation method of integration when in contact with friendly or non-conflict prone aliens. They always leave such aliens choice of using acculturation methods of marginalization or separation in respect to human community, but never face them with assimilation. On the other hand, hive-like alien races, such as Borg, Goa'uld, or Pod People tend to assimilate whatever race or culture they encounter with, and to expand their collective memory onto them (cf. Ellaway 2008). This way of treating other races is clearly presented in an opposite manner to humans' ways on the same matter, where the most important distinction is that hive-like aliens' behavior is strictly goal-oriented, and it is so by the virtue they share mind and/or memory which guide them and direct them in every step they make.

Human actions are motivated by variety of reasons, and some of their goals are not just always, and I am not having in mind clear traitor figures like Dr. Baltar of *Battlestar Galactica*. There are envy, jealousy, overestimating of own abilities, or pure judgment amongst the motives which guide humans, although it is true that in every science fiction show mentioned here the accent is on virtuous behavior of men and women which represent our race. But what is more important than any single motive influencing humans' deeds and actions is that humans think of them, reconsider them, view them from different points, judge them again, and again, always guided by high moral principles, or at least having those in mind when feeling sorry for their deeds not meeting moral standards or repenting because of suffering they made other people to.

On the other hand, whatever any Cylon, Borg, or Pod People do, it is done because the creature *is* Cylon, Borg, or whatever it may be: each and every single member of hive-like alien races share the same goal with the whole race, where every thought, action, or deed of such creature are shaped by that goal, and the sole existence of its race is so much shaped by that goal, that it could be considered equal to that goal. Borg is dedicated to absorption of the universe, Pod People to the concept of survival, and Cylons to uniting with their god. Goa'uld are a bit different concerning that matter, because their inner racial individuation is the strongest of all four races discussed here, but that is also what makes point here.

Goa'uld's purpose of living is existence by itself. They are born with the memory of all of their ancestors, they have to seize body of some host in order to live, and they do nothing in particular besides pure exercise of power: they rule over conquered planets severely, they fight among themselves for power and status and not for particular privileges or wealth, and they unite only to fight enemy races, such as mankind. Although individuated to the manner which is strange in depicting other hive-like races, they all behave the same way when carefully observed, leaving no other possibility for themselves than to be

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aggressive, arrogant, cruel, cold, ill-tempered – all of them, no exceptions, and no motives other than power behind their behavior. Their behavior is completely moral-free and their existence is based on nothing but physical prerogatives.

Crucial difference between humans and aliens then is that humans must be moral persons in order to be considered humans after all. They may be good or bad, but they must be aware of such evaluation, as well of that their lives are not subjects of anything like existential pre-dominance, but depends on decisions they make, values and norms they create and respect, and comprehension of why they do things they do, together with ability to correct whatsoever is considered to be wrong. Humans rely upon free will and they are capable of making their future the same way they make their fortune. Human identity is related to alien identity just in order to underline relation of difference between what is considered to be a human condition – in biological, social, and cultural way, and what is considered as abhorrent to it; for there is plenty of evidence of how human suffering is caused by other humans exclusively in the real world.

Purpose of using motive of group mind or genetic memory in alien races, when that races are in such conflict with the mankind which could not be resolved other way but by the war until the ultimate destruction of the one side, implies cultural communication of identification marker posed with the aim of making the essential distinction which will conceptually separate human race from alien races. That marker is constructed based on the binary opposed individual identity and collective identity, as relational attributes of humans and aliens respectively. Human identity is based on the concept of moral person, i. e. on such notion of personality which insists on free will as the distinctive feature which makes us human at all.

The opposing alien identity is based on the mechanistic idea of relating particular parts of the organism to the central organ which controls the organism, where latter is presented in the form of alien group mind and consequent patterns of alien behavior determined by the nature of genetic, collective memory. The whole alien race is thus imagined as an organism, and single alien beings or units are presented as parts of that organism.

Values associated to concept of moral person, and to the free will as the basic determinant of personality and individual identity correspond eventually to what is considered plausible to the basic social and cultural norms and values of modern world, such as equality, democracy, negotiation as the premises of decision-making, reconsideration of own deeds and taking responsibility for them.

Alien group existence when reviewed from such point is not just fundamentally different and opposed to whatever is considered as property of human identity, but makes also an ultimate horror of existence: that which is impossible in the sense of biology and which is completely unacceptable in the sense of social and cultural organization. When opposed to what is considered as determinant of acceptable social and cultural existence of humans, then it accents

what is that makes us humans after all. Marking these two types of identity serves purpose of insisting that only one of them – individual identity, but as the cultural identity – is or at least should be basis for building any other cultural identity which makes human social and cultural existence possible.

Consequently, cultural communication made by the use of motive of alien group mind or collective memory in science fiction, when hive-like aliens are in ultimate conflict with humans, should be read as conveying message that only society and culture built upon the values inherent to the conceptual framework of such cultural identity make conceptual bounds of human existence, in order that such being could be considered human at all.

That is kind of an optimistic picture of mankind of course, almost propaganda of humanity, and that is what science fiction is for probably, alongside with different forms of cautionary tales, from religion and mythology, to urban legends and literature (wherever negative side-effects of social and cultural life may be overcome, see for example Ковачевић 2006, 2007, Ковачевић 2007, Жикић 2006, 2007, Антонијевић 2007, 2008, 2009, Радловић 2007, Синани 2006, 2007, Ваћевић 2007, Трифуновић 2007, Христић 2007). What we know about humanity – both as anthropologists and from other social and cultural experiences and sources – is much more like to Hobbes' perspective on the mankind; and what is truly scare in Hobbes is that he has reviewed social and cultural side of the man, although his expressions, poetic sometimes, looked as he portrayed some imaginary "essence of man". Human condition looks indeed very often as a condition of war of everyone against everyone and in such war there is no place for the notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, no matter whether war is fought at the real battlefield or inside universities. Then the life of man really appear to be solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short<sup>6</sup> and far from the values and virtues implied by science fiction or any other source of "humanity propaganda".

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<sup>6</sup> *Leviathan or the Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill*. By Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury London, printed for Andrew Crooke, at the Green Dragon in St. Pauls Church-yard 1651, [http://www.leopoldwilson.info/library/authors/thomas\\_hobbes/leviathan/index.html](http://www.leopoldwilson.info/library/authors/thomas_hobbes/leviathan/index.html) Part I, Chapter XIII.

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### **Bojan Žikić**

#### **MI SMO JA, A ONI SU ROJ: INDIVIDUALNI I KOLEKTIVNI IDENTITET KAO RELACIONO SVOJSTVO LJUDI I TUĐINA U NAUČNOJ FANTASTICI**

Cilj ovog teksta je da pokaže kako se motiv kolektivnog uma/genetskog pamćenja tuđina upotrebljava kao sredstvo konstruisanja identifikacionog markera, koji suštinski razdvaja ljudsku od tuđinskih rasa, izgrađenog na opoziciji između individualnog i kolektivnog identiteta, kao na relacionim svojstvima ljudi, odnosno njihovih tuđinskih protivnika. Kao eksplanatorni materijal, po-

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služće primeri iz serija i filmova "Galaktika", "Zvezdane staze", "Zvezdana kapija" i "Invazija kradljivaca tela (trećih bića)".

**Ključne reči:** identitet – individualni i kolektivni, identitet – konstrukcija, deskripcija, askripcija, Mi/Oni, naučna fantastika, antropologija.