CHAPTER 6

BEINGS FROM ANOTHER WORLD:
ON THE SYMBOLIC FUNCTION OF THE IMMIGRANT

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Abstract

The so-called immigrants are guarantors of the demographic renewal of urban societies, ensuring that the most inclement needs of their labour market will be covered. But they are also, as part of a system of representation, able to make social disorder thinkable. Their socioeconomic function both requires and is required by their symbolic function, putting them between quotes to make sense of them. Foreign workers are enticed to meet hegemonic material requirements in the societies that receive them. But such requirements, based on the massive derogation of cheap labour force, cannot be met without a previous or parallel set of rhetoric operations that make each foreign worker an immigrant, a non-objective figure that leads to (and depends on) a process of political, media and popular assemblage, that turns him/her into a conceptual character, into a being from another world.

Keywords: immigration, alien, stigma, function, monster, conceptual character

H.P. Lovecraft begins his brief essay "The Street", originally published in the form of a book in 1920, like this: "Men of strength and honour fashioned that Street; good, valiant men of our blood who had come from the Blessed Isles across the sea…" What follows is a metaphor of the United States' own history that found in that imaginary street the perfect scenario in which to synthesize what, from the anti-modern point of view of the author, had been a process of degeneration, a gradual dissolution of the foundational values with which the fugitive European puritans had begun to build the nation back in the seventeenth century. Among the first signs of its decline was the appearance of strange, grim, malevolent people in the street:

> New kinds of faces appeared in The Street; swarthy, sinister faces with furtive eyes and odd features, whose owners spoke unfamiliar words and placed signs in known and unknown characters upon most of the musty houses. Push-carts crowded the gutters. A sordid, undefinable stench settled over the place, and the ancient spirit slept.

It is easy to see in that image Lovecraft's rejection of what the racist North American nativism interpreted as a detestable invasion by immigrants of inferior races and cultures. But the interesting thing is how one of the great masters of twentieth-century terror literature included immigrants among the indescribable and amorphous abominations that comprised his gallery of creatures.

The incorporation of the Immigrant into the Lovecraftian evil bestiary - along with Azathoth, Shoggoths, Tsathhoggua, the Great Cthulthu and other unmentionable others - should not be surprising. In stories of horror, fantasy or science fiction tend to be filled with all kinds of physical and/or moral monstrosities that emanate from the outside to the place of a certain ordered society to disrupt it, subvert it or ruin it. These monstrosities can come from remote and exotic countries - real or imaginary -, from the outer universe, from the beyond or from the underworld, but they always embody the Absolute Stranger, the Total Foreigner, who, suddenly, abruptly or in a sibylline way, bursts into the social cosmos so that all kinds of chaotic and dissolving energies act in its midst. Dracula, King Kong, the Mummy, Godzilla, Freddy Kruger and all types of zombies, ghosts, sects, demons, or extra-terrestrials, compose a vast gallery of cruel and devastating entities that manage – either alone or in legion - to breach the walls and borders that protect "us" from the beyond in which the most radical forms of alterity inhabit. Although the character may be an Alien that better and more explicitly sums up that living horror that has slipped into or broken through our world to destroy it or submit it, step by step.

So, it is hardly surprising that the immigrant and the monster are brought together in the shuddering lovecraftian pantheon. Not only because almost all of our literary or cinematographic monsters are immigrants - that is, entities that arrive from a different place, be it the sub-soil, the afterlife, another country, another galaxy or another dimension -, but because the so-called "immigrants" are thought of and perceived as hyper-dangerous deformities which come to life in the nightmare of the Invasion of the Body Snatchers, the legendary film by Donald Siegel of 1956. There, the protagonist desperately screams to an incredulous and indifferent world: "They're here already! You're next! You're next!"[1] After all, immigrants are aliens; alienigĕna, means, in Latin, "born somewhere else", and it is for this reason that the first meaning that the dictionary of the Oxford Dictionary for "alien" picks up associates it with "belonging to a foreign country". Their perception may be that of an unsettling corporeity that has broken through illegitimately into the scenarios of our daily life, in shared spaces in which we encounter them, with a phenotypic aspect to which all kinds of common places, in most cases laden with negative implications, are associated. They are the immigrants: men, women, boys, and girls hiper-visibilised, since it is impossible not to notice them, often in a way not dissimilar from that of Lovecraft in his tale: that is, contemplating them as they unsettlingly meander through that Street, the mother of all our streets, all our squares, all our parks, all our public transports, etc. That is, as they become the unequivocal sign of the imminent danger that all the xenophobic – i.e. alienophobic – ideologies presume that their omnipresence in our landscapes implies every day.

A nuance could be added to what has been said. It is true that as an alien, the immigrant can be imagined as a creature that brings with him/her everything that is feared in the outer worlds that surround us, that besieges us. But that same condition is what also makes him/her a bearer of all kinds of hopes for renewal or change. This is an ambiguity that is not only structural, but even structuring, of the monster and of its conceptual relative, the immigrant. The mythification that commemorative and trivialised anti-racism makes of the immigrant, the way it makes him/her a kind of civilising hero that brings virtues of exemplary authenticity, is of the same nature that, in certain stories, it sees in the monster the physical expression of a kindness and a truth that the "normal people" have lost.

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[1] Regarding the analogy between immigrants and extraterrestrials in the cinema, it is not by chance that the protagonists of Men in Black (1997) are agents of a special unit of the immigration police, or that Alien Nation (1988) imagines a future in which the aliens have joined the earthly society and live among their original inhabitants, promoting "ethnic" or "racial" conflicts.

The outer being that has come this far is the one through whom it is possible to imagine overcoming the present, improving it, even free it. For the xenophobe, the immigrant is the undesirable external agent that triggers the alteration or alienation of a desired order, but the antiracist does not stop thinking in similar terms, even if by reversing them, by making his/her alterophilia the expression of a desire for transformation, even a moral redemption of society thanks to the intrusion of the stranger. Our repertoire of monsters and other imaginary aliens would not fail to provide us with a handful of examples of how, in parallel with the immigrant, the hopes of individual or collective salvation can also be deposited in them. Deep down, the stranger we have seen appear among us is the living proof that not only, as the antiglobalisation motto proclaims, "another world is possible", but that world is somehow already here.

Strange bodies

One could, from these premises, develop two presumptions that others have already noted. One of them has to do with the above question: certain people from poorer countries who come to work with us exhibit an immediately observable aspect that can and must be pointed out as an exception and often as a source of alarm. In effect, the racialised person is charged with such a quantity of pejorative and disqualifying connotations that their co-presence in the same public space becomes an almost automatic source of anxiety, discomfort or fear, but also sometimes of a sympathy that does not deny - on the contrary - its exceptionality, all in keeping with his/her status as a stigmatised individual, in the sense noted by Goffman (2009) in his famous essay on deteriorated and difficult identities. That is why the immigrant is the subject of a permanent task of focusing that denies him/her the right to the disaffiliated consideration that is supposed to preside and organise relations in public urban areas - that is, relations with strangers in spaces of generalised accessibility (Delgado, 2008). One assumes that the user of the so-called "public space" never stops, even for a moment, conceptualising and judging the surrounding actions and characters, from which normally he/she only expects a modicum of scenic intelligibility. In such a space defined by a relation of indifference towards those with whom immediate cooperative action is not to be foreseen, everything changes when a socially discreditable individual or group is detected – "immigrants", for instance, are recognisable as such based on immediately perceivable sensitive qualities, compounding non-Euro-Western features and aspectual elements that denote a poor socio-economic extraction.[2]

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[2] Nadja Monnet has produced an excellent research on the visibility of "immigrants" in the daily activity of the Plaza de Catalunya in Barcelona; an example of how "different people" are tied to a particular

In these cases, the interaction, even if only visual, becomes mechanically problematic since the strangers who are there are no longer totally unknown: they have been identified, recognised, scrutinised, detected, placed under surveillance. They are put in a permanently active state of exception that affects their whole being. The problematisation that their mere presence creates doesn't have to be justified by a certain objective conduct, nor by their reputation as a risk factor. The fact of their incarnation in the street or the plaza is much more than that: it implies an ontological alarm, since their being there is that of the Intruder and that of the Usurper, a tangible proof that the World - ours, of course - has been or is being invaded by instances that we imagine as substantially strange to us, by living entities coming from universes that are incompatible with our own, the contact with whom will surely be highly damaging, if not lethal to us. They are, again in a literal sense, beings of another world.[3]

The interchangeability between the imaginary figures of the monster and the immigrant is based on a deviation, by excess or default, a deformity, that makes them distorted, dislocated or deranged beings, in regard to a normality of which, ultimately and paradoxically, they are, ad contrario, the guarantors. What Claude Kappler has written in his treatise on medieval monsters is equally applicable to the immigrant: "Nature amuses itself: the monster isn't, a priori, a denial or a questioning of its established order, but the test of its power "(Kappler, 1980: 21).

This premise - that of the deformed and threatening foreigner as endorsement of normality - is what allows us to insist on the validity of Georg Simmel's famous digression on foreigners (2012), in which the great German sociologist established that they – the immigrant being an extreme case of the foreigner – create the possibility of conceiving that what is alien can be recognised as being present. Simmel argued that the foreigner embodies the contradiction of a being who is at the same time near and far: physically close, but morally distant. An inhabitant of another country isn't a foreigner, as long as he/she remains in it; only becoming one here, in this place that is not his/hers, but ours. Needless to say, that virtue of the foreigner – that of someone who is inside, but who does not belong to the inside – is what synthesises what is at the same time remote and close – so to represent all kinds of external dangers that managed to slip into the heart of society.

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space, and are denied the right to move beyond that space as well as the right to privacy that "non-different people" can claim as theirs only (Monnet, 2008).

[3] Nothing new in such appreciation. A splendid Spanish film, directed by Icíar Bollaín in 1999, tells the story of two Dominican women who come to a town in Alcarria to marry two Spanish men they have only previously contacted by mail. The title is eloquent enough: Flowers from another world.

It was based on Simmel, and on the first urban ecologists of the Chicago School on the figures of invasion or intrusion to refer to migratory avenues (cf., for example, Park, 2002), that Isaac Joseph (1996) underlined how the current figure of the immigrant is perfect to think about social disorganisation from within or, what is the same, to rationalise about a whole set of negative signs of the present that, thanks to the presence of the completely alien, can be explained as a consequence of their own contradictory, logically unacceptable, impossible existence in our midst.

The immigrant gives materiality to the "beyond is here" or the "there are other worlds, but they are in this one" of the surrealists. His topological ambiguity - there, here - brings him closer to that figure that is familiar to the anthropologists who study rituals: the liminal being, who is forced to be trapped for a certain period – sometimes his whole life; even that of its descendants - in an undefined territory without clear borders that imaginarily stretches between the place of departure and that of arrival but without ever completing the journey. Just like the initiate in the rites of passage, the immigrant is placed in that inner space in which, as Victor Turner wrote in his classical essay (2005 [1965]), is neither one thing nor the other. As eternal neophytes, liminary beings are no longer what they were; but they haven't yet been given the right to hold a new status or rank. That is, without a doubt, the case of the immigrant, destined to embody a human entity in a situation of chronic liminality: permanently in a threshold - in that space that is neither inside nor outside –, always suspended in an ambivalent relationship with the social mediations and the institutions into which he/she is, nevertheless, trapped.

Ordinary language recognises the immigrant's liminal or border condition, as applied to a being that is not at a border, but rather that he/she is the border that keeps the inside and the outside of the social system always separate and distinguishable. The immigrant is part and parcel of the social system, but with the status of a foreign entity. The immigrant – very much like the teenager or the concubine - is converted into a noun. not someone who has moved, who was there before and now is here, no matter how it seems, but is someone who has already left, but has not yet been given the right to arrive. Immigrants exist in an intermediate limbo, moving in its bosom towards us, but never arriving. They are conceptually perceived as beings in movement, in perpetual instability, even though we know that they're not moving and that they became sedentary.

We could well say that the ideology that makes immigrants travellers trapped in the outside they have never left – that is to say, as aliens to the inside in which they are, but in which they have not really entered – has become, literally, verb among us.

The active participle is that impersonal verbal derivative that denotes the ability to perform the action that expresses the verb from which it derives – to immigrate, in this case – and that, in the present tense, implies an update of a permanently renewed action, the reinstatement of a pilgrimage that never ends, which demands to be repeated again and again, never reaching the final destination: the now and here in which the immigrant is, but to which he/she cannot belong. That is why the logical impossibility of the expression "second" or "third generation" immigrant is constantly reiterated: the anomalous condition of an immigrant parent or grandparent is inherited as an original sin of which not everyone can be redeemed.

This analogy between the immigrant and the ritual passenger brings us back to the symbolic role of the monster and the monstrous. Indeed, when theorising about rites of passage, Victor Turner emphasizes the role played by monstrous representations in them, to which he attributes an essentially socio-intellectual role, so to speak, in the sense that they act in the manner of a kind of thought-inducing mechanism by decomposing or altering the key elements of social relationships to highlight their relevance. That what is distorted or disproportionate allows the neophyte to clearly distinguish the value of certain factors of social reality that have been undone and reshaped in the ritual setting and that invite or oblige him/her to speculate about social links, be them empirical or metaphorical. It can also be said that the monstrous alteration of the divisions in the social order acts in the manner of the concave and convex mirrors of the "alley cat", to use the figure proposed by writer Valle-Inclán in his Lights of Bohemia when referring to the relation of Spain with Europe: a deformed but highly eloquent mirror image of the terms in which a certain social structure is produced and developed, still seeing itself as its own parody, as its aberrant caricature.

All the above allows us to depict the immigrant as a "semantic molecule", in Turner's terms, whose monstrous imperfection helps conceptualise those other imperfections of the social order that, through him, becomes thinkable. The exceptional nature of the immigrant's presence in public space can be compared with that of the classificatory imperfection represented by the abominable animals of the Leviticus, whose cursed nature derives, according to Mary Douglas (2007), from their (mainly) locomotive inadequacy to the species they belong. The poor foreigner - the immigrant – correlates to marine animals without fins and scales, to land animals that either crawl or have hands instead of paws – a taxonomic stridency that in light - or in shade – of their imperfection provide for the systematic ordering of ideas, especially when it comes to elucidating those of perfection or unity.

The same can be argued by following, in his controversy with Douglas, Dan Sperber's (1975) interpretation of the role played by monstrous – or even hybrid – animals in certain symbolic devices studied by ethno-zoologists. In short, by their very presence, immigrants deny the ideal state of the social thing, while they make it thinkable by validating and sanctioning it. Every derangement, fragmentation, disorder, discouragement, decomposition, etc. that affect society can be thought of as the contingent result of the anomalous and undesirable presence that immigrants embody, thus appealing for their urgent eradication or, if that is not possible, at least for an heightened surveillance.

The two functions of the immigrant

It is well known the way two of the most referenced European social anthropologists have addressed the question of totemic classifications and the privileged role that certain animals or plants deserved in them. The first, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown argued that totemic species were chosen because of the strategic contribution they made to the maintenance of social stability, even if for reasons as elementary as sustenance. That is to say, the privilege enjoyed by some but not other natural species in the totemic taxonomy and the ritual treatment they deserved corresponds to the contribution they make to sustain social order, even if simply by their role in the basic diet upon which the totemic community depended on (Radcliffe-Brown, 1996). Faced with this presumption, Lévi-Strauss argued that totemic animals were rather defined as such because of the role they played as symbolic operators, chosen from observation of the environment for speculative purposes; that is, as objects available to a collective mind that used them for certain conceptual operations, such as conceiving the passage from nature to culture, for example. Thus, against the structural-functionalist perspective natural elements such as vegetables were "good to eat" and that made them totemic, in the structuralist interpretation they were essentially recognised as "good to think" (Lévi-Strauss, 2003: 162).

This is where two meanings of the term function become contrasted. A given entity can fulfil a function in the organicist sense – that is the position Radcliffe-Brown adopts –, i.e., in the sense that the productive and dynamic task carried out by a given organ at the service of the proper functioning of a certain structural morphology. But it can also fulfil a function in the logical-mathematical sense, i.e., as a relation between mutually dependent variables in a formal plane. C. Lévi-Strauss speaks of "symbolic function" in this last sense, by adopting that meaning from glossematics,

which views it as equivalent to the semiotic function, or the capacity a sign has to express an amorphous content that is initially external to it, but with which becomes solidary (Hjelmslev, 1971: 73-74). There is no need to dwell here with the genesis of the symbolic function's idea, as it was proposed by structural anthropologists.[4] Let us simply note that it refers to a certain type of logic operations of the unconscious mind whose task is to impose given forms to any content, with the goal isn't to refer some facts to their objective causes, but rather to articulate them in a congruent and significant totality, and to organise them in such a way that the final product allows to integrate contradictory data, to order fragmentary and unformulated experiences, objectify confused feelings, etc..

As a matter of course, an organic function is not incompatible with a symbolic function. An object of the perceptible world can be useful, or even essential, to maintain a certain social structure, thanks to its role in the techno-ecologic and techno-economic spheres, while at the same time becoming an instrument at the service of the intelligibility of experience. Thus, the immigrant is not only a fundamental part of a production system based on human exploitation or a guarantor of generational change, but a true conceptual character, in the sense Deleuze and Guatari suggested for that notion in their introduction to their acclaimed essay What is philosophy? A certain system of representation generates, as the imaginary philosopher referred to by Deleuze and Guatari, its own conceptual characters; that is, personalities through which a social complex can think of itself as other, forced to incarnate its strongest concepts, or at least the very strength of its main concepts, not to designate something extrinsic, "an example or an empirical circumstance, but an intrinsic presence to thought, a condition of possibility of the very same thought" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1991: 9). As a conceptual character, the immigrant represents what is heteronomic, that is to say "the other names", that may correspond not only to the profile of who conceives them and speaks to or with them, but also to their negation or their opposite, as if the social order and its self-representation can find in the immigrant something similar to what Nietzsche found in Zarathustra or Plato in Socrates – in other words, someone with whom to talk, even if, as in the present case, in controversial terms, that is, with whom we can imagine ourselves antagonistic and incompatible.

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[4] Actually, Lévi-Strauss includes the theoretical value symbolic function in only a few instances of his work. There are references in chapters I, IX and X of his Structural Anthropology, which correspond to texts originally published between 1949 and 1951 (Lévi-Strauss, 1958: 28, 202, 225 and 245). He only returns to this notion twenty years later, in the "Finale" of the fourth volume of his Mythologiques, The Naked Man, and only to mention how the beatitude that laughter produces is the reward our conscience receives for having seen this symbolic function satisfied, whereas the opposite of laughter would be anguish, which is the consequence of our inability to achieve it (Lévi-Strauss, 1971: 571).

The immigrant is an opportunity for our "thought to fraternise with its enemy", as Kappler (1999: 13) put it when discussing the relationship between monsters and humans in early medieval cosmology.

It is from this framework that the immigrant can assume his/her role not only as a guarantor of demographic renovation or agent of a precarious labour force at the service of a strategic informal economy, but also as a symbolic-conceptual artefact. This perspective doesn't deny the obvious fact the so-called "phenomenon of immigration" is above all a phenomenon of exploitation, as well as proof of the dependence that urban-industrial societies have on contingents of foreign young people they cannot help attracting; but it helps explain why the objective role of immigration and immigrants in relation to the demands of the labour market and of the demographic logic seems to matter so little, that it deserves so little public relevance, compared to that obtained by other more ethereal arguments in the media, in institutional discourses, in militant pronouncements of all kinds, or in popular judgement. With his back to the objective data, what seems of primary public importance is not the objective facts but moral considerations that refer to the above-mentioned ideal order of the social system that, for better or for worse, the immigrant as symbolic operator and conceptual character brings into question.

There is nothing incompatible between the socioeconomic function of the immigrant and that other function that conceptualises him/her in order to spark meaning. On the contrary: one requires the other. Let us accept the assertion made by Marvin Harris when, taking up the imaginary debate between Radcliffe-Brown and Lévi-Strauss, he tells us that if certain animals are good for thinking that is because before they have been declared good to eat – or, as he puts it, they present a favourable practical cost-benefit ratio (Harris, 1995: 15). If we bring this point of view to the understanding of the "immigrant", it becomes clear that if thousands of foreigners come to live among us, the reason is not to spark our reflexive speculation, but to attend hegemonic material requirements of the receiving society. But such requirements, based on the massive stigmatisation of a cheap labour force, cannot be satisfied without a previous or parallel set of rhetorical operations that have made an immigrant of each foreign employee. The immigrant is a non-objective verbal figure that results from, and depends on, a process of political, mediatic and popular construction, that makes him/her a legendary character, a mystification needed to recognise in him/her new versions of old mythological figures, enigmatic variations of the "The Thing from Another World", the title of a mythical B series film of the 1950s.[5] It is through this transfiguration that the exploited foreigner becomes

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[5] The Thing from Another World is a 1951 film directed by Christian Nyby and Howard Hawks.

the Alien: a threat or a hope, but always someone that is there to be controlled, to be persecuted, to be protected or who to be expected – never as what he/she is, but as a product of our imaginary, someone who is always someone more and something else.

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