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ANTHROPOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE FILM “THEY LIVE”

Abstract

*This paper is an anthropological analysis of John Carpenter’s famous film *They Live*. The film allows many interpretations, but here we have focused on the criticism of a despiritualized, materialistic world in which the basic moral distinction between good and evil has been lost, which is why man, society, culture, and nature are on the path of degradation. The director also warned the viewers that a return to traditional religion, specifically Christianity, is the only way to escape the ruin towards which the world is headed, governed by the unbridled material interests of capitalists.*

Our approach here is interpretive; the method is to interpret the elements of the film as symbols that we read in the context appropriate for our purpose, and the goal is to present to the readers an anthropological interpretation of the film as a symbolic representation of the detour on which humanity strayed while developing materialistic ideas as the basis of modernist secularism and a way to return to the path of healthy progress.

Keywords: *They Live, John Carpenter, anthropological analysis, unrestrained capitalism, deviations of secular humanism, return to Christianity.*

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INTRODUCTION

The feature film *They Live* is a famous work by director John Carpenter, released in 1988. Carpenter is famous for horror movies, but this movie does not belong to that genre. Here, the author used an element of science fiction – the presence of aliens on Earth – to address a very realistic social issue. However, there are other reasons this film stands out among other films in Carpenter’s oeuvre. It also stands out among Hollywood films in general. People still talk about *They Live*, more than forty years later, because of its timeless and even growing topicality. Carpenter himself explained this increasing agreement between the film and reality in an interview by classifying the film in a genre to which it does not formally belong: “You have to understand something: it’s a documentary, it’s not science fiction”. As a clarification of the designation documentary, he specified that the film talks about “unbridled capitalism”.¹

They Live was created at a time when Great Britain and the USA themselves adopted the socio-economic ideology of the free market – unrestrained capitalism – after several experiments in other countries showed the tragic effects of its application.² In his film, Carpenter showed a society completely subordinated to that order. We compared his futuristic vision with some of the latest directions of development within capitalist society – surveillance capitalism and transhumanism. We shall see that Carpenter’s vision corresponds to these phenomena in surprising ways, as if he were describing them, even though they could not have been predicted at the time the film was created. We conclude that the symbols used in the film represent the essence of neoliberal ideology so that they naturally correspond even to the phenomena that emerged after the film.

Carpenter did not stop at the depressing vision of a society subordinated to the interests of unbridled capitalists. Throughout the film, there are reminders of Christianity as a religion of salvation. We concluded that he saw a way out of materialistic nonsense, either in Christianity itself, the supreme religion of salvation, or in a principled return to traditional spirituality – whatever it is in each specific society.

¹ Jordan Zakarin (2015), “John Carpenter Looks Back on ‘They Live’: ‘It is Not Science Fiction. It is a Documentary’”, *Yahoo Entertainment*, October 9.

² Naomi Klein (2008), *Doktrina šoka: Uspon kapitalizma katastrofe*, Zagreb: V.B.Z. d.o.o.

Our approach here is interpretative; the method used is interpreting film story elements as symbols that we put in contexts appropriate for our goal, and the goal is to show that *They Live* is a representation of the detour on which humanity went astray while developing materialistic ideas as the basis of modernist secularism. The film depicts a world in which man has lost his soul, society has lost its moral values, and culture has lost its communicative meaning. Nevertheless, it is also a call for a return to authentic man, society, and culture, all of which implies a spiritual dimension.

GENRE TRANSFORMATION: FROM ACTION AND SCI-FI TO DOCUMENTARY

In his earlier interviews, John Carpenter talked about the movie *They Live* as an action genre, emphasizing the struggle of a lonely homeless man against a powerful organization. He did not emphasize the socio-political message in the foreground, even less the cultural-anthropological one, because the process of globalization of neoliberal order had not yet advanced enough to confirm the full visionary significance of the film. He presented the political aspect as specific to the USA, as a critique of the domestic economic policy under President Ronald Reagan.

However, it was already clear then that the film is not only about the situation in the USA, thanks to the science fiction element. Researchers have already noted that filmmakers often set the plots of alien-themed films in the USA, as Americans are considered “legitimate representatives of Earthlings and interpreters of the common interests of the entire human species”³. This was one of how Hollywood production supported the rise of the US into a global empire long before that direction of world development became apparent.

The film respects, in a formal sense, the rule of the sci-fi genre that aliens necessarily come to an American city and do whatever they set out to do, be it good or bad for the people. However, in contrast to all other films about aliens that attempt to depict these creatures as unfamiliar entities, the film *They Live* clearly utilizes the concept of an alien purely as a symbol of a man transformed into an inhuman being

³ Владимир Рибич, (2010), “Свемир као амерички империјални простор”, Бојан Жикић (прир.) *Наш свеј, друш свејови. Антропологија, научна фантастика и културни идентитети*, Београд: Српски генеалошки центар и Одељење за етнологију и антропологију Филозофског факултета у Београду, 158.

by extreme materialism, who appears to be from another planet. The design of their faces, which we will discuss later, speaks of the dying of humanity in people who subordinate themselves and everything around them to their material interests.

In later interviews, the director no longer mentions either the action or sci-fi aspect of the film, but describes *They Live* as a documentary whose relevance is growing. We do not know if Carpenter was surprised by the inspiration with which he made a film of such visionary power and symbolic depth. Near the film's end, a precise prophecy was even uttered: specifically, the year 2025 is mentioned as the deadline by which aliens are expected to dominate the Earth completely. In any case, new meanings of film are revealed before us as we observe the trends of global development. The symbolism of the film *They Live* is increasingly turning into reality, while the film, in terms of genre, is truly becoming more and more documentary.

Here, we will pay attention to the latest phenomena in the lap of unbridled capitalism that were not even conceived at the time of the filming of *They Live*, but which he nevertheless predicted. This is proof that in his film Carpenter captured the very essence of the destructive impact of capitalism on man and society. As it is more and more exposed in reality through the imperial progress of the market in all parts of the world and areas of life, so the film takes on an increasingly documentary, realistic quality.

CONTENT OF THE FILM

The action of the film is set in a big city in the USA and the following circumstances: the world has been taken over by aliens, whose faces look like rotting corpses, beneath which a metal skull with mechanical eyes can be seen. They live by parasitizing various planets throughout the universe, depleting their resources and abandoning them when they have devastated them. Aliens are integrated into human society in positions of power. They also have their private world located underground, where they have built a system of vast tunnels and rooms. There, they can disappear from the surface of the Earth at the moment when they need, and to move freely, hold meetings, and talk openly. We are also shown the launch site for their teleportation through space, without effort or spacecraft.

To keep their presence and activities hidden from humans, aliens keep humans in a hypnotized state through meaningless, empty values of consumer society and subliminal messages suggesting submission. A signal is being broadcast from the building of the central national television that disables people from seeing the real state of affairs and from thinking critically. To bewitched people, the hideous faces of the aliens appear as ordinary human faces. They do not even see that every image or text in advertisements, in the press, and on traffic signs represents a colorful lie behind which is hidden a decisive command to people to be submissive and to carry out their consumer tasks dutifully. Liberation would occur when people see the truth, but the signal broadcast prevents that.

A group of scientists accidentally discovered the signal, and a resistance movement emerged. Still, the fight is pretty futile. Firstly, because the truth about the presence of extraterrestrials sounds incredible, and secondly, because the truth makes people physically ill due to its interference with the misleading signal. That is why the people nervously and impatiently turn away from rebels, and with relief return to the deception to which they have become accustomed as a normal state of mind. The resistance movement produces special dark glasses through which the true state of affairs can be seen as a black-and-white reality, but they are intended as an auxiliary tool for those who have already believed in the truth. People who have seen the truth are divided into those who fight for everyone to come to their senses and those who treacherously collaborate with the aliens for the privileges they receive in that tragic colonial system.

THE STORY

Throughout the entire film, we follow the main character, who is in every scene. He is a simple man looking for a wage job. He believes in the American Dream, which says that with honest work, you can achieve decent living conditions and perhaps the opportunity to acquire something more than necessary. The hero's last name is Nada, which means "nothing" or "anything" in Spanish and Portuguese. He is, therefore, a modest somebody with an optimistic attitude that his destiny depends on his two hands and a little luck. Nada occasionally encounters the actions of the resistance movement trying to present the truth to people. He does not understand what it is about, but he is interested, so he starts

researching as soon as he gets the chance. The local church serves as the headquarters of the resistance movement, where Nada gets his first pieces of information and, most importantly, a pair of glasses.

Everything that Nada learns gradually and fragmentarily gains full meaning – for him and the film’s viewers – when he uses the glasses. Instantly, he saw the shocking truth, and all the knowledge he had received until then without understanding and with doubt now became a solid picture of reality. With great effort, Nada manages to persuade a colleague and friend to put on glasses, after which he is no longer alone with his knowledge of the truth. The two decide to reach the center where the stun signal is emitted and disable the broadcast. They complete the task but at the cost of their lives. Nada dies with a smile, however, as the fatal antenna explodes and people across America suddenly see the truth clearly: the hideous faces of the aliens among them and messages from all around suggesting them to give up their free will. In the final shot, Nada gives the camera his middle finger with his last strength.

TWO IMAGES OF MAN IN EXTREME CAPITALISM

What Carpenter saw immediately when Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher subordinated their states to the needs of unbridled capitalism became increasingly clear to the moviegoers as the neoliberal order conquered the world from those two political centers. Humanity is breaking down into two castes, which tend to become different anthropological species – but both equally tragic. On the one hand, there are powerful owners of almost everything, with no living human soul in them. On the other hand, there are ordinary people, whose whole being and life are in slavery to the market. Both are in the grip of extreme materialism as a worldview. *They Live* vividly depicts the situation where humanity is subjected to the free market regime. The ruling group is completely dehumanized due to its orientation solely towards increasing its wealth. They treat people and nature without any understanding, compassion, or respect – just as if they came from another planet to which they can go when they have ruined everything on Earth. Ordinary people, on the other hand, are also prevented from leading a life in which all human potential would be manifested. The masters of the market wage war against all values and institutions that interfere with the absolute dominance of their material interests. The war is waged through perfidious techniques of psychological manipulation, which Carpenter

portrayed in the film as the influence of the mass media, considering that at the time of the film's creation, digital reality and the corresponding information society had not yet been developed.

The special quality of the film is its visionary ability regarding the further development of capitalist society towards total control and man towards complete transformation into another being. With the digitalization process, which covers more and more areas of life, the conditions have been created to place the world imperceptibly under the absolute control of unbridled capitalists. Much of the latest scientific and essay literature deals with the various details and aspects of this process. Here, we will pay attention to the two most dramatic flows of this development: the planned development of society in the direction of the so-called digital concentration camp and transhumanism as a planned evolution of man in the direction of his union with machines, which in time should take over from man the leading role in the world. We can recognize both in the film *They Live*. However, at the time of its creation, it was not possible to predict these specific phenomena, considering that the necessary conditions for their planning and realization did not yet exist.

SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM

The amalgam of digital opportunities and capitalist ambitions introduced capitalism into a new development phase of information capitalism.⁴ The massification of the Internet and the accelerated progress of artificial intelligence, however, represent an irresistible temptation for the most powerful people in digital reality to turn the existing neoliberal capitalism astray even more than the market ideology itself. In recent times, it has been shown that the development of IT techniques and technologies, which led to the development of the IT society, is the condition that was needed for everything to move towards the establishment of global totalitarianism.

Instead of rational capitalism, which is bound to a relationship of reciprocity with citizens through democratic institutions,⁵ a group of Google insiders began abusing the company's specific capabilities to collect and process knowledge about every Internet user. Taking advantage of the absence of any democratic regulation in the digital realm, Google

⁴ Šošana Zubof (2020), *Doba nadzornog kapitalizma: Borba za budućnost čoveka na novom rubu moći*, Beograd: Clio, 40.

⁵ *Ibid*, 65.

has established and enforced its own rules that allow it to advance its “ability to guess and read the thoughts, feelings, intentions, and interests of individuals and groups, whether or not the observed person knows it and approves, thereby gaining privileged secret access to behavioral data”,⁶ and thus a large measure of control over the digitally networked world. This is neither a spontaneous nor a necessary phenomenon within the information era or information capitalism (100),⁷ but rather a deliberate deviation, which its researcher Shoshana Zuboff called *the project of commercial surveillance* or *surveillance capitalism*.⁸

Data about people’s behavior, but also those collected by Google’s specific services and projects, such as Earth or Street View, become the raw material for the production of “highly profitable algorithmic products” that are sold to clients interested in knowing our future behavior.⁹ Although digital reality was supposed to be a new dimension of the existing democratic order, which improved it so that everyone could have unlimited communication and access to an immeasurable amount of information, there was a “perversion of the digital dream” .¹⁰ In this new digital nightmare, “information and connectivity are paid for by behavioral data” over the collection and use of which people have no control, not even in the form of copyright.¹¹ The processing of collected data is directed toward the production of forecasting tools and the modification of human behavior to remove human free will as much as possible, given that it is a factor that hinders the reliability of predictions.¹²

Instead of collecting information about users only to improve the services – what Zuboff calls “the cycle of behavioral value reinvestment” – it is used for this only to a small extent, while the main business of digital firms is to sell insights into our most intimate inner lives, so to anticipate our future decisions as successfully as possible.¹³ The relationship of reciprocity between digital companies and Internet users has been broken without the users being aware of what is happening. While we think we are users and clients on the Internet, we are, in fact, a mine of

⁶ *Ibid*, 95.

⁷ *Ibid*, 100.

⁸ *Ibid*, 21.

⁹ *Ibid*, 79.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 18.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 67.

¹² *Ibid*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid*, 83.

raw materials whose processing and sale of “derivatives”¹⁴ benefit only participants in the “markets of future behavior”.¹⁵ People are not even a product, not even when our behavior is “shaped for the needs of others” through “the creation and development of means of behavior modification”.¹⁶ Even then, it is only about improving the quality of the raw material to ensure the “integrity of data and control”.¹⁷

There are no democratic institutions in the digital world. Neoliberalism repeats itself in the digital reality after imposing itself in this analogue one through a market over which no democratic institution has control. Digital reality, like the free market, is a realm of total lawlessness, where powerful players do only what is in their interest without any control. Capitalism that is not balanced by democratic institutions produces enormous and growing social inequality. But, in all previous forms of capitalism, inequality was external, expressed by the amount of money. The absolute novelty of surveillance capitalism, in addition to the means it uses, is that it attacks the last thing that makes people equal, which is the inner freedom of each person to make decisions. The consumer society has already greatly threatened man’s freedom of will through the violence carried out by the mass media and subliminal messages. However, it was only with the massification of digital techniques and technologies that the conditions were created for the complete disempowerment of each individual.

Surveillance capitalism stands on a huge and growing difference in knowledge, which transforms to power and authority.¹⁸ “The surveillance capitalists know everything about us, but we do not know how they do it. They gain enormous new knowledge from us, but it is not intended for us. They predict our future for someone else’s sake and not for our interest”.¹⁹ Basic inequality is no longer found in external, material conditions, nor is it expressed in money. “Surveillance capitalism is characterized by an unprecedented disproportionality in terms of knowledge and the power derived from that knowledge”, writes Shoshana Zuboff. These are the conditions for the establishment of a totalitarian society. The natural tendency of surveillance capitalism is to carry

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 97.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 21.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 19.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 81.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 22.

out the “transformation of the market into a project of total certainty”,²⁰ which for everyone else will mean living “in a world ‘with no way out’”.²¹

It has already been noted that “capitalism inevitably transforms into imperialism and colonialism. These are the legal stages it goes through”.²² Surveillance capitalism is developing precisely on the colonization of a completely new area, which until now has not been recognized as a source of free raw materials. It is the area of a man’s privacy, his personality, which is controlled in order to exhaust a newly discovered resource, the processing and sale of which brings money but also an unprecedented measure of power and authority to imperialists. Zuboff writes: “Just as industrial civilization developed at the expense of nature, which could leave us without planet Earth, so the information civilization, shaped by surveillance capitalism and its newly acquired instrumental power, will develop at the expense of human nature. It could cost us our humanity. [...] If industrial capitalism seriously endangered nature, what kind of damage will surveillance capitalism do to human nature?”²³

John Carpenter showed the main characteristics of a totalitarian society that grew under the auspices of unrestrained capitalism more than thirty-five years ago. In *They Live* we see masses of people whose thinking and behavior are under complete alien control, to a much greater extent than television and the press were able to produce. The degree of enslavement shown in the film corresponds to that described by Sh. Zuboff. We also see that it is a one-way relationship, just as Zuboff presented the situation in surveillance capitalism: the aliens have complete knowledge, power, and authority, and people know absolutely nothing about the situation they are in, about the aliens and their activities, about the mechanisms of enslavement, about the structure of society and the values that rule in it. They cannot even understand the very mechanism of government and the means used by the ruling caste if they know about them.

The film depicts a world of total surveillance. However, when it was filmed, neither the Internet, cameras, drones, phones, watches and other devices with artificial intelligence were in widespread use. However, in the film, we see armed drones controlling every corner of the city and shooting at every suspicious movement, while the police relentlessly

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

²² Борис Над (2021), “Гангстери капитализма: Како је Америка постала најмоћнија (нео) колонијална сила, 1. део”, *Печай – лист слободне Србије*, број 684.

²³ Šošana Zubof (2020), *op. cit.*, Beograd: Clio, 22, 31.

defend the existing order. The aliens have their exclusive communication network – both a network of underground tunnels and multipurpose wristwatches that keep them connected while among humans.

Thanks to neoliberal capitalism, “economic and social inequalities have returned to pre-industrial, feudal patterns, but we the people have not”, writes Shoshana Zuboff. “We are not illiterate peasants, serfs or slaves. [...] We know that we deserve dignity and the opportunity for a better life”.²⁴ *They Live* shows socially, existentially, and psychologically degraded people who are held in that position by force by the authorities. Carpenter clearly emphasizes the importance of knowledge about the state of society for preserving freedom “by the ideals of individual autonomy and the preservation of the deepest values of a democratic society”.²⁵ In this sense, the film reminds us that in the neoliberal market order, people are kept in submission by denying them knowledge and insights, but also a right to democratic action. As much as this is true for the world in which psychic manipulation is carried out through the media, it is even more true for the abuse of power in the digital world described by Shoshana Zuboff because it penetrates the very soul of man and also tends to outsmart and disempower all democratic institutions.

In the information society, the largest number of people do not have even the most general idea about digital technologies. It is an area close to anyone who is not educated and skilled for it. In such conditions no glasses of truth help, and any struggle can only take the weak form of an individual boycott. This is how the film depicts the struggle of the few individuals who can see. It was painstaking and futile until Nada solved the matter on a systemic level. Shoshana Zuboff does not propose a crude bombing of Silicon Valley to stop the project of total surveillance but rather an intelligent attack by a democratic society on “aspects of the operation of surveillance capitalists that must be challenged and removed to stop and defeat that market form”.²⁶ For the question of mass resistance that can be provided in the conditions of a totalitarian society to preserve inner freedom, Carpenter turns to spiritual reality. This will be discussed here in the chapter on the spiritual meaning of the film.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

TRANSHUMANISM

Just as Shoshana Zuboff studied the deviation of the neoliberal market into surveillance capitalism, Olga Chetverikova shed light on the development of a materialistic image of man: from secular humanism, which removed the soul and spirit from man, to transhumanism and further to posthumanism.²⁷ Both deviations – surveillance capitalism and transhumanism – gained their full momentum with the development of digital techniques and technologies. The film *They Live* cannot, therefore, be only a moral critique of unbridled capitalism. It also points to the inhumane nature of secular humanism as a materialistic view of man, which goes hand in hand with unbridled capitalism and its materialistic approach to existence.

Transhumanism is a further development of secular humanism, where man overcomes the natural limitations of his body and mind through association with superior machines. “That is why transhumanism”, Chetverikova writes, “is simultaneously the last stage of humanism and its self-destruction”.²⁸

Interpretation of the film *They Live* in a transhumanist key is increasing its documentary quality. So far, we have said that Carpenter chose aliens as a symbol of capitalists to emphasize their distance from humanity. However, in the light of transhumanist ideas, the aliens in the film look even less as a symbol and even more as a realistic representation of the ruling caste, in whose favor the most transhumanist ideas are developed. By the fact that the aliens have their exclusive world in the underground and that they can move effortlessly through the entire universe, while humans are limited only to their classical place of residence, Carpenter, using space symbolism, showed us the total effects of transhumanism, as trans-socialism too, so to speak, because the connection of the personal being with technical products leads to the formation of two completely different anthropological species that can no longer even belong to the same society, to the same world.

“Both exclusiveness and elitism are the most powerful ideas that are driving the world’s most powerful people today”, remarked Chetverikova,²⁹ who investigated the ideology of transhumanism from the point

²⁷ Ольга Четверикова (2013), “Диктатура “просвещённых”: дух и цели трансгуманизма“, *Русская народная линия*.

²⁸ Ольга Четверикова (2021), “О морали у науки, трансгуманизму и постчовеку”, *Сроксйво по избору*, 15. септембар.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

of view of traditional Christian anthropology. She defines this ideological movement as “eugenic fascism, which is based on the biological caste system: superhumans on the one hand and human resources, biomass, man for use or digital digit – on the other”.³⁰ *They Live* shows this huge gap, with the important note that in the film the two species overlap in a social sense in a one-way manner: aliens essentially participate in the life of human society. In contrast, humans do not participate in alien society in any way except with a few traitors. It also describes the situation in surveillance capitalism – the state of unequal access to and disproportional distribution of knowledge, control, and power.

Interestingly, the global society in the film is inverted from any historical hierarchical society. As a rule, belonging to a higher class comes with greater beauty of soul and body. It was marked as nobility. The aliens in the film do not have any personal qualities that we would call beautiful or noble. On the contrary, Carpenter portrayed them as total scumbags, psychologically and physically, which further highlighted the fact that their power and authority are based only on their material supremacy and not on any personal qualities. Also, with nobility comes greatness. In the film, on the contrary, the world of aliens is located underground, and the high social positions they occupy in human society are held by fraud and abuse of technical superiority. With this symbolism, the director suggests that world power is aspired to by people from the underground, with a worthless, petty-bourgeois and corrupted spirit that wants only at any cost wealth, power, and authority.

We can also successfully interpret the visual design of the aliens in a transhumanist key. They are depicted as a combination of cyborgs and zombies: metal skulls with mechanical eyes, which can be seen under rotted faces, show us what the longevity and immortality of transhumanists will look like, realized in the mechanical union of machine and spiritless body. Carpenter’s choice to call the ruling caste exactly aliens, rather than cyborgs and zombies, also fits the transhumanist agenda. This ideology seeks to overcome all physical limitations and givens, including man’s attachment to the Earth: the declaration of the transhumanist movement points out as one of the tasks “overcoming [...] our limitation to planet Earth”. Transhumanism is, in fact, only a transitional phase towards posthumanism, in which people and the human world will be just the insignificant past of some machine-intelligent beings who will

³⁰ Олга Четверикова (2020), “Трансхуманизам – идеологија новог светског поретка”, *Српско-руско удружење Православна породица*, 30. јануар.

quite easily become travelers through space since they will not be limited by biological factors.

This introduces us to the spiritual meaning of the film by underlining the following meaning: where, on the one hand, the soul is subordinated to material interests, and on the other hand, the body is revived and immortalized by a machine, there can be no talk of a whole man as a unity of spirit, soul, and body, as the Christian understanding of man was given by the Apostle Paul (1. Thess. 5, 23),³¹ and therefore, no liberation from materialistic totalitarianism.

THE SPIRITUAL MEANING OF THE FILM

The film *They Live* can be interpreted in a spiritual key as a criticism of the godless man and the consequences of godlessness exhibited in social order, system of values, and man. Numerous and unequivocal associations with Christianity as a religion of salvation appear in the film. We will start with the name of the main character, Nada. We said what it means in Spanish and what sense it has in the social interpretation of the film. We do not know if Carpenter was familiar with the meaning of the word *nada* in Slavic languages, where it means *hope*. Coincidence or not, the Slavic viewer goes directly to the Christian interpretation of the film through the hero's name. Because Nada is the bearer of hope for the salvation of humanity from the dictatorship of demonic beings, and he fulfills that hope at the end of the film.

Another Christian element in the film is the aliens themselves, who, as we just said, can be understood as Christian demons, for two reasons. First, in the Christian literature on UFO phenomena, encounters with extraterrestrials and UFO sightings are undividedly interpreted as demonic phenomena, as “a new outpouring of demonic deceptions on humanity”. Even “UFO researchers themselves concluded that the phenomena they studied were essentially identical to the phenomena labeled as demonic”.³² This should be kept in mind when we wonder why Carpenter chose his villains to be aliens and not zombies, cyborgs, or other fantastical creatures. Another reason to interpret Carpenter's aliens as demons is the characteristics he assigned to them, characteristic

³¹ Епископ Николај (2016), “Азбука истине”, *Сабрана дела Ејискојиа Николаја у 13 књија*, Књија 8, Шабац: Манастир Светог Николаја – Соко, 424-433.

³² Јеромонах Серафим Роуз (2015), *Православље и религија будућности*, Манастир Успења Пресвете Богородице – Подмаине, 147.

of Christian descriptions of demons:³³ they are ugly and merciless; they have their world underground; they keep the secularized human world in terror invisibly; in their true form they are invisible, but they are visible in the form of the humans; they keep people in mental slavery through psychological violence; they encourage people to turn towards material reality, thereby distracting them from the authentic inner life of the soul.

A third strong association with Christianity as a religion of salvation is that Carpenter located the headquarters of the resistance movement in a church building. The Lord founded the church as a community that equips people in this world to resist demonic influence, for a fight that is waged “not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places”, as the apostle Paul explained (Eph. 6, 12).

Related to this is the fact that Carpenter appointed a blind priest as the leader of the alien resistance movement, thus showing the importance of relying on spiritual vision, seeing the hidden essence behind deceptive physical forms. The priest, as a spiritual man, is blind to misleading advertisements and the subliminal messages behind them, but he sees the truth. On the other hand, people outside the church, immersed in the sensual world, are blind to the spiritual essence of their life situation. That is why they do not believe what the priest tells them, nor can they listen to the truth. At the same time, they are influenced by a misleading signal. Just like in reality: the victims of consumerist materialistic ideology are disinterested and even hostile to the message of the church about the salvation of the soul. Therefore, the film *They Live* is an interpretation of the Lord’s words from the Gospel of John (8:32): “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” – with the important note that later in the same Gospel the Lord said that He is the truth (14:6).

Knowledge of the truth means not only direct intuitive insight but also theoretical knowledge. Carpenter attributed the impulse to alien resistance to science: a group of scientists accidentally discovered the emission of a hypnotic signal, and a resistance movement was organized around that discovery. However, the main role in the resistance is played by the church. In the secularized world, people are directed towards the exclusive evaluation of rational knowledge, which is used

³³ Владимир Димитријевић и Јован Србуљ (прир.) (2007), *Избави нас од лукавоја: Православље и маија*, Друго, допуњено издање, Београд: Православна мисионарска школа при храму Александра Невског.

by science, with the complete devaluing of knowledge through belief in God, His word, and His action in this world. Carpenter sends a message that science can discover some truth but that the church is the only place where results can be achieved in the fight for freedom, truth, and life.

A significant moment for the Christian interpretation of the film takes place in the conversation between Nada and his collaborator on the task, in which the two try to answer questions about the terrible creatures they saw through the glasses: who they are, where they came from and how long they have been among people. Nada briefly presents a childhood memory of his father, who had suddenly become inexplicably evil, to the extent that he even endangered the child's life. To that, Nada's partner replied: "Maybe they have always been with us, those things out there. Maybe they love it, seeing us hate each other, watching us kill each other, feeding on our cold fuckin' hearts." This conversation cannot be understood in a social, economic, or ecological key. Only in the spiritual key does it become clear: aliens represent demons who cunningly dehumanize people and parasitize human depravity. Because neither the hypnotic signal nor the subliminal messages, or the depletion of Earth's resources affect people so that they become evil. The dialogue directs us towards a Christian interpretation of the film and, therefore, further beyond the film, towards a Christian perception of the neoliberal order as a complete perversion of a society based on Christian values and beliefs.

In terms of the latter, Carpenter proved himself to be a visionary. Starting with the COVID period, Christian apocalyptic rhetoric suddenly appeared in the media, which had never been seen before in the secular world. Everywhere, people began to talk about satanists, the cabala, the coming of the antichrist, the battle of Armageddon, the mark of the beast, the end of the world, and the world's elite steeped in occultism. In the situation of a forced pandemic, where the secular approach failed to explain to people the meaning of the totalitarian order to which the whole world was suddenly subjected,³⁴ the spiritual discourse was instantly reintroduced into public speech after being absent for a couple of centuries.

It is precisely this necessity of a spiritual approach that Carpenter hinted at in the dialogue above, from where it extends to the entire film and further to reality. We can interpret Carpenter's aliens in the

³⁴ Љубомир Кљакић (2022), "Велика поларизација: Социологија Sars 2 Covid 19 капитализма", *Национални инџерес*, Година XVII vol. 41 Број 1/2022, 9-44.

way that the world financial oligarchy is often understood today – as inspired by the occult and thus introduces a demonic spirit into its affairs, which further affects all of humanity.³⁵ Bishop Nikolay pointed out that a person's spiritual orientation sets the tone for his life and actions: "Whose spirit you are filled with, you are one with him: if with the Spirit of God – you are one with God, if with the spirit of evil, you are one with the infernal adversary of God and the Father of yours".³⁶ The idea of permeating existence's spiritual and physical planes is returning to today's reality. It is not a new or unusual idea. It is present in all societies of all times – except in modern secular society, which is an anomaly in this regard. The movie *They Live* shows that a secular, materialistic view of the world has led to the perversion of man and society and that the only real way to fight is to return to a spiritual point of view as natural to human beings.

Finally, Nada's peaceful and almost joyful death during the destruction of the fatal antenna unequivocally reminds us of the Lord's sacrifice for the salvation of the world. Christians are expected not to hesitate to follow the example of the Lord's suffering when they find themselves in such a situation. That is why we have reason to understand the film's ending as Carpenter's interpretation of the Lord's words from the Gospel of John (15, 13), which read: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends".

In addition to this direct similarity with Christ's sacrifice, we also see a parallel with the Old Testament. Before Nada went into action, the blind priest preached the truth but did not have much success. We understood this as a reminiscence to the Old Testament prophets, who spoke about salvation even though they did not see the Savior and whose words contemporaries were usually not interested in, but on the contrary. Salvation came to everyone only through the act that destroyed the power of evil over people.

³⁵ Зоран Милошевић (2019), *Окултизам и полиџика: О улози аристократије (која се надахњивала Библијом) и елиџе (која се надахњује кабалом) у друшћиву*, Шабач: Центар академске речи.

³⁶ Епископ Николај (2016), *op. cit.*, 425.

A LITTLE SOMETHING ABOUT THE FORMAL STRUCTURE AND A CONCLUSION

There would be much more to say about the film *They Live*. For example, its narrative form corresponds to the structure of a folk story – a fairy tale or a myth. Several researchers dealt with the structure of the traditional story, such as Vladimir Propp, Joseph Campbell, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, to name only the most prominent ones. There should be no doubt that this also contributed to the timeless relevance of the film since the characteristic universal structure, here used by John Carpenter, is recognized at the archetypal level of mind.

Also, we can interpret each element in the film in several ways and unlock its meaning using several keys: social, moral, existential, economic, spiritual, ecological, psychological, ideological, and ontological. The symbols that appear in the film are ambiguous, so each of them and the entire film can be placed in multiple interpretive contexts. Here, for example, we paid more attention to the ambiguity of aliens.

The dynamic element in the film is the timeless categories in which people of Christian culture polarize the basic opposition between good and evil. Thus, the film emphasizes the differences between truth and delusion, freedom and violence, bravery and heartlessness, insight and deception, struggle and conformity, loyalty and betrayal, effort and parasitism, honesty and concealment. The moral qualification of abstract pairs of opposites is also projected onto the outside world: polarization between humans and aliens, the resistance movement and traitors, the earth and the underworld, our world on Earth and the wilderness of outer space. Thanks to that, *They Live* is a strong message about the supreme importance of simple moral categories of good and evil.

We can generally interpret the film as a pair of special glasses through which we can see the simple black-and-white truth about the post-Christian world, in which there is no reliable spiritual leadership of faith in God, who is all good and merciful, and so no ability to distinguish between good and evil. The rejection of faith is at the root of perversions such as unbridled capitalism, with its disastrous impact on man, society, nature, and culture. We will quote here, as very appropriate, the words of Vladeta Jerotić:

“Discerning and recognizing spirits is one of a true Christian man’s first and indispensable gifts. What the invisible radars of hearing are on the tips of a bat’s wings, even more, sensitive spiritual radars must

be nurtured in the heart and mind of the Christian in the midst of blind and dazzled humanity today. Who today is not aware of the invisible war of spirits inside us and outside us [...] he easily becomes prey to visible spirits of malice through false authorities, seductive achievements of civilization, and wrong teachings, which numb the bodily senses of man, thus leading his soul to ruin”.³⁷

The documentary potential of the film *They Live* has yet to be fully fulfilled. The demonized unbridled capitalists have not yet achieved unlimited power over the world. However, the penetration of neoliberal market ideology into digital reality, on the one hand, and the appearance of apocalyptic terminology in the broadest public discourse, on the other hand, show that we are very close to the realization of dystopia and that an increasing number of people are aware of it. Carpenter has showed that the only stronghold for resistance to the post-Christian degradation of man and the whole world is traditional faith, morality, values, and an integral understanding of man, which considers his spiritual side.

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³⁷ Владета Јеротић (2020), “Телевизија и људски дух“, *Пријатељ Божји*.

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