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“Do You Hear the Aliens Sing?”:
Analysing America’s Alienation in Starkid’s Musicals
The Guy Who Didn’t Like Musicals and *Black Friday*



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Summary

This study will analyse how two of Starkid's musicals, *The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals* and its sequel, *Black Friday*, engage in a critique of America through the figure of the alien. In order to describe how this is done, I examine the evolution of musical theatre, highlighting its social influence and commentary. This, combined with a study of how the alien has been used as a mirror of the troubles of humankind, will be the basis of my analysis of these plays, where I examine how the "other" can represent "us."

The analysis of these two comedy-horror musicals will revolve around the alien's nature and role. At the same time, since both plays depict how America's policies and politicians were corrupted before the alien invasion, I will argue that this corrupt capitalist system, where money becomes a religion, is the real origin of human apocalypse. Not only the public sphere, but also the private lives of the characters are shown to be monstrous, often deriving from dysfunctional families. The need of love or lust is one of the aspects that the alien takes advantage of, using the female body as a source and means of production. On this countdown to the end of the world, the heroes/heroines are tested, and they must realise who is the alien and whether they had been alienated all their lives.

The critical approach chosen for this analysis is broad and eclectic, but it is indebted to ecocritical and posthumanist scholars (Åsberg and Braidotti, Nayar or Halberstam and Livingston, among others), complemented with Marxist criticism (when talking about the description of America's capitalism) and feminist points of view (the industrialization and commodification of the female body).

The main objective of this BA thesis is to demonstrate that the image of the alien, inserted in musical comedies, mirrors and magnifies the faults of humankind, serving as a commentary on our civilization. Finally, my conclusion is that *The Guy Who Didn't Like*

Musicals and *Black Friday*'s light-hearted comedies, mixed with the horror of the alien apocalypse, enact an inevitable disaster caused by earthlings' mistakes. In this performative context, the audience is the "humankind," observant of the "alien-performers" that provide a representation of the mistakes humanity makes.

Key words: musical theatre, comedy, horror, Science Fiction, alien, Starkid Productions, *Black Friday*, *The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals*, capitalism.

Introduction

Space seems so far away... and yet it is part of our daily routine. Humankind seems to have a need to reach for the stars and seek answers for the unknown. This fascination for the secrets of the universe, which sometimes leads to the creation of conspiracy theories, is reflected in science fiction television shows (*The X-Files*), podcasts (*Last Podcast on the Left, Lore...*), movies (*E.T., Star Wars, Star Trek...*), and even theatres and musical plays. Starkid Productions, which had its origins in the University of Michigan, in 2009, became famous thanks to *A Very Potter Musical*, a parody of the magical world of *Harry Potter*. After this, they have produced several musical comedies, some of them set in space and featuring alien creatures: *Ani: A Parody* (a parody of *Star Wars*) and *Starship*. In 2018, they premiered *The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals*, a horror-comedy musical:

Everything in Hatchefield seemed normal until people began singing... Then, they began dancing... And now, a musical pandemic is sweeping the entire city. It's up to Paul (an average guy who doesn't like musicals) and his friends to stop this musical apocalypse and fight for humanity's future. (*Starkid Productions*)

This “musical pandemic” is the result of the influence of an alien meteor whose objective is to dominate humankind in a type of “flashmob” situation. A year after *The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals*, *Black Friday* was premiered which, sequel-like, brought back characters and themes from the previous play. The main point in common was the alien apocalypse, which came this time in the form of a doll, and allowed Starkid to engage in a sharp satire on America's capitalist, consumerist society:

Black Friday is a new horror-comedy musical about the shopping day from hell. When the holiday season's hottest new toy, the Tickle-Me Wiggly, hits the shelves, the city of Hatchefield goes mad for it, literally. That's when Tom Houston, Lex Foster, Becky Barnes and a few familiar faces, must fight through a sea of murderous mall-goers to save humanity from an inter

dimensional being with a taste for chaos. When Wiggly comes to town, will the world survive Black Friday? (*Starkid Productions*)

Therefore, this project will be devoted to how *The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals* and *Black Friday* represent and criticise America through the “alien,” portraying a corrupt capitalist system that is the true origin of humankind’s apocalypse. For this, it is necessary to understand the history of musical theatre. This form of art has been a tool for criticism for centuries, using comedy to raise awareness of different topics, as Gilbert and Sullivan did in the 19th century (Mordden 28-29). The stage was a unique space in which every type of “other” could be portrayed, and the cast progressively became more diverse (Riis 421). Through its performances, the American musical was a singing voice with a will to change society: “the musical ha[d] long been an instrument of American culture in reflecting and satirizing whatever was stirring in the nation at large” (Mordden 234). Starkid is an example of how musical theatre can denounce society’s actions. In order to understand how the alien is represented in both plays, a chapter has been devoted to how these creatures are used as a metaphor of humankind in order to serve as a tool for denouncing several mistakes of modern society. In this section, I will describe how the alien, the “other,” is used to personify “us,” with our faults.

Therefore, musical comedies provide a powerful medium to transmit these messages. When Starkid decided to combine it with science fiction in *The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals*¹ and *Black Friday*,² they were able to judge the US from different perspectives. The accessibility of these plays, their modernity and the popularity of this company³ are part of what makes both of them so interesting for analysis. They complete each other and, together, create an apocalyptic caricature of America where the alien is not so strange, but we are still terrified of *them* being *among us*.

¹ Sometimes, it will be written as *The Guy* or *TG*.

² Sometimes, it will be written as *BF*.

³ Starkid uploads their musical comedies on YouTube.

1. American Musical Theatre: More than Entertainment

[NICK (spoken)]
What the hell are musicals?
[NOSTRADAMUS (spoken)]
It appears to be a play where the dialog stops and the plot is conveyed through song.
[NICK (spoken)]
Through song?
[NOSTRADAMUS (spoken)]
Yes.
[NICK (spoken)]
Wait, wait, wait, so an actor is saying his lines and then out of nowhere he just starts singing?
[NOSTRADAMUS (spoken)]
Yes.
[NICK (spoken)]
Well that is the—
(sung)
Stupidest thing that I have ever heard.

(from the musical *Something Rotten*)⁴

Despite Nick’s ironical scepticism, musicals are a historically popular form of art with the power to symbolize, influence and critique society. Expanding Nostradamus’ definition, John Kenrick explains that the main technical elements of musicals are the songs, the book, the dance, the staging and the physical production, and the “audience excitement” generated by having brains, heart and courage to create something new (Kenrick 15-16). Thomas Riis questions when and where the American musical was born, since Native Americans had religious performances including music and dances (411). Ethan Mordden explains that John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728), which is arguably the first musical ever created, was in fact a satirical “ballad opera” (3-4).

Arthur Sullivan and W. S. Gilbert introduced, from 1871 to 1896, the Savoy Operas, one of the most influential English-speaking musicals. The connection between music and text visible in *The Beggar’s Opera* is also present here, where the music was a source of *decorum* for the characters (Mordden 4-5). Gilbert and Sullivan were part of a “European invasion” of

⁴ “*Something Rotten* Performance Tony Awards 2015” (00:00-00:31).

the American stage, where genres like the minstrel show (where the performers also did blackface) were in decline (Riis 412). On this new American stage, Gilbert and Sullivan brought up topics of their time to their “comic operas,” where they satirised socio-political themes (Mordden 28-29). In plays like *The Mikado*, they also combined a Japanese style of performance (Seeley 454-455) with English types (Fischler 829). Therefore, we can see how, from the first popular musicals, the satire is portrayed through some “otherness,” a separated world which represents the audience.

Towards the end of the 19th century, genres started to change and develop at a faster pace. Although pantomime was popular in the sixties (Riis 415), it quickly disappeared, which was probably motivated by the expensive production costs. Burlesque was less unattainable, but it was not as easy to stage as farce, which was the most affordable genre since it did not even need a score (Mordden 23). Riis argues that farce-comedy is a precursor of the musical comedy (417)⁵. By the end of the 19th century a new genre emerged: “extravaganza,” a type of family-friendly “fairy-tale” spectacle, with examples like *The Wizard of Oz* that start to resemble the modern idea of a musical (Mordden 41). The end of the century was also the time of *The Black Crook* (1866), which is, for some authors, the first American musical⁶; however, the first famous American musical was *Evangeline* (1874), which offered a sense of escapism and nostalgia (Riis 419-420).

By the beginning of the 20th century, while English musicals took the American stage, American authors rejected the European models (Mordden 57-59). One example of this was George Michael Cohan, who also included socio-political matters in his work (63). At this moment, ethnic representation was a topic for debate. On the one hand, some authors claim that

⁵ Harrigan and Hart’s partnership constituted a highlight in the musical farce, with plays defined as “local comedy” or “local play” introducing the immigrant life of New York and dealing with its “evolving ethnicity” (Mordden 26-27).

⁶ Some authors disagree (Mordden 13-16). *The Black Crook* as an innovative work that also allowed post-Civil War Americans a source of distancing (Riis 414-415).

American musicals mocked minorities through stereotypical numbers (Mordden 66); on the other hand, authors such as Riis argue that “Ethnic caricature was less dominant in the period than were attempts to create obvious ‘American’ types of characters” (422). For Carey Wall (25), musicals intended to portray and explore American symbols of identity. In the 1900s, new talents that had come from abroad (Al Jonson, for instance) took the stages, offering a realistic interpretation of America from the perspective of the outsider (Mordden 68).

The early 1900s was the age of burlesque, a type of comedic variety show in which lower class young women dominated the stage (Mordden 19), and which introduced more elaborate stages (Riis 412).⁷ Burlesque evolved, being absorbed into musical theatre as the century went on (Mordden 39) or creating a neo-burlesque that questioned “female spectacle and power” (Dodds 78). Although it would later be censored, during the Depression era (Friedman 203-204), some variety shows directed to family audiences managed to survive, running circuits through different cities (Riis 416-417).

One musical form that shone in the 1920s but quickly disappeared was the revue, which commented on recent events. One example of this was Florenz Ziegfeld’s *Follies of 1907*, where the author combined characters of different ethnicities, portraying the immigration that was taking place at the time, and adding improvisation. In a way, Ziegfeld can be considered the precursor of ethnic integration in Broadway. By the 20s New York had become the centre of American theatre (Mordden 99-106), although it had started to gain prominence in the 1860s, a time in which theatre was also diversified thanks to the great influx of immigrants (Riis 421). Ziegfeld is also credited with devising the figure of the “American Show Girl,” which glorified

⁷ Mordden highlights the 19th century development from burlesque to musical comedy and from comic opera to the operetta, even though plays blended the genres and the limits between them were not clear (51). Burlesque was popularized in the US by Lydia Thompson and her troupe of British Blondes (Wollman 14), a group of women who, in revealing attires, portrayed men and mocked New York’s society (Dodds 77).

a certain type of American femininity (Lasser 441–448). Besides, actors were now stars cast for their individual improvisation, rather than as singers (Mordden 117).⁸

When Depression arrived, in the 1930s, musicals served mainly as a source of escapism (Mordden 131), even though some shows were satirical (Riis 436)⁹. The Depression also hit Broadway, which, as a business, was affected, but Hollywood took interest in musical films, luring writers and composers to the big screen (Riis 435). In the 1940s there was a recovery, as theatres were attended by servicemen, causing a rebirth of the industry (Degen 419). By then, authors like Rogers and Hammerstein reflected a new trend that paid attention to social, political and racial topics (Degen 422).

The 1950s was a better time for musicals than the 40s (Mordden 194). Although they lost social relevance (Degen 429), there was a general experimentation with formal conventions (Mordden 188), and black performers finally got some of the main roles—an important change motivated by the Civil Rights movement (Lawson-Peebles 2). A musical that can be considered innovative is *West Side Story* (1957), as the directors cast performers who mastered *both* singing and acting (Mordden 197). Stephen Sondheim, the author of this play, is one of the most important names in American musical theatre, and *West Side Story* was an example of blending all the musical theatre elements: score, script and dance (Degen 430-431).

In the 1960s, Off-Broadway musicals rose “as an alternative to Broadway commercialism” (Degen 439). The smaller investment involved—and, consequently, the smaller economic risk—allowed artistic experimentation to take place, while it also brought some revivals (439-440). By the end of the decade, American society became more divided, a

⁸ In the 20s, as has been mentioned, there were also operettas, which, as Mordden (120-122) explains, differed from musical comedies in the setting—more exotic—, the weight of comedy, or the target—operetta was directed to highly educated audiences. Mordden questions if *Show Boat* is an operetta or a musical comedy, but he highlights the complexity of characters’ relationships. This play is considered an “artistic revolution,” as it provides a look at the American show business and to America itself, as an “observant” of its society (125-129).

⁹ One exception of this escapism was Kurt Weill, although he was not as political as Brecht (Mordden 146).

fact that affected Broadway, which saw its successful plays diminish (442-443). Therefore, Broadway had to change its sound, literally so; this meant the emergence of rock musicals, like *Hair*, (Mordden 229).¹⁰ The 1960s also left us *Cabaret*, a musical that combines humour with criticism, historical events, and complex, imperfect characters (Mordden 222). Pop operas were also a success from the 60s until the 80s (230). Progressively, musicals start to include more LGBT characters, until works like *Falsettos* (1992) come to the stage.

In the 1970s, many musicals relied the feeling of nostalgia (Mordden 235). Rock musicals continued, with works like *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Degen 445) and the hit *Grease* (Kenrick 323). The black musical also became popular (Degen 449), with pop-rock sounds (Kenrick 232). A star that shone in the 1970s was Bob Fosse (Kenrick 330), one of the authors of *Chicago*, a play where the space is defined by the actions of the characters, deconstructing the traditional stage and script (Mordden 237). This decade also popularized the revival, which became its own genre (247) and sparked the debate between fidelity and revision, and the problem of adaptation (249-255).

In the 1970s tickets' prices started to rise exponentially, driven mostly by production costs (Mordden 235). As a result, by the 1980s musicals were no longer for the masses, not just because they had become pricey, but also because some of them required higher knowledge to be understood (243). They also became less experimental and tended to exploit nostalgia (Degen 454).¹¹ Because of the economic situation, talents often emerged or developed in non-profit theatres and professional seminars (Degen 458). In the 1990s, these tendencies continued: prices rose, and revivals continued to be popular (458-459).

¹⁰ *Hair* premiered on 1967 and was later revised for on 1968 (Mordden 229). It is a musical that influenced the development of three genres: "rock musicals, nude musicals, and minority musicals" (Degen 444), as well as the 1970s' "concept musicals" (447).

¹¹ Besides, popular musicals were now imported from London, and a name stood out among all the authors: Andrew Lloyd Webber (Degen 457, Riis 442).

In the 21st century, musical theatre offers a wide range of genres (Mordden 277), although critics like Kenrick are sceptical about American musicals' future (Kenrick 377-379). According to him, what dominated the 2000s stage was the "American-made musical comedy," a way to deal with dark times (371-372). 21st century musical theatre has also introduced and played with the new technologies of the Digital Age (Hillman-McCord 1-3). In fact, one of the ways in which ICTs have influenced contemporary musical plays regards their accessibility: the new technologies allow creators to make their plays available on the Internet, as happens with Starkid's musicals.

From this summary of the history of the American musical, we can draw the conclusion that musicals have proven to be a business, a means of artistic representation (from stereotypes to visibility), an instrument for social and political debate, while also an escape from that reprehensible world. Therefore, this is the aspect I want to highlight: musical theatre not only provides entertainment but also wields socio-political power, an important element of musicals almost since the beginning, with Gilbert and Sullivan (Henshaw 4). As Carmen Häisan argues, "arts," including musical theatre, "can provide an alternative to violence, represent an opportunity for the oppressed to express" (178). In fact, as we have seen, ethnoracial minorities, who had first been used as comical relief, soon took the stages and became serious protagonists, while they also became a target audience (Henshaw 27). If art has a social role, the ability to change society and provide alternatives to its reality (Häisan 180), or if poetry, to echo Celaya's words, "es un arma cargada de future," musicals are likewise powerful as "a forum for political expression" (Richards 3).

These multiple, new forms of creativity are found in independent theatre, which also question the institutions (Schneider 577-578). In addition, the fact that theatre can easily adapt to different spaces and be combined with other forms of art makes it an even more powerful tool, a symbol of a democratic society (Häisan 180). Much like what happened with opera in

earlier centuries, the songs in musicals stick to people's heads, their scenography remains in their minds, and their musical numbers convey important meanings that stay in the audience's consciousness: "Music can ... incite action because it activates the motor system, and when channelled into serving a propagandistic aim, it can promote action in the direction that has been cued. Because music entrains people rhythmically, it motivates acting in tandem, potentially fostering unquestioning allegiance to a cause" (Higgins 1).

In this vein, some scholars have defended the importance of integrating culture in our lives, especially the younger generations' (Schneider 581-583). Even though we are far away from the democratization of the arts and the "culture of all" espoused by Schneider (587), initiatives to upload plays onto the internet for free, as Starkid does, helps to promote and "democratize" musical theatre. During the months of lockdown in 2020, online theatre also became a source of accessible culture and a re-popularization of this art. In this way, theatre adapts and changes, but it never dies, since there are always new meanings and stories to share with society.

2. The “Alien” in Literature: The Metaphor and the Critique

Sailors fighting in the dance hall
Oh, man, look at those cavemen go
It's the freakiest show
Take a look at the lawman
Beating up the wrong guy
Oh, man, wonder if he'll ever know
He's in the best-selling show
Is there life on Mars?

(from David Bowie's musical *Lazarus*)¹²

Some nights, people like Bowie look at the stars, wondering what secrets outer space holds for humanity, even wondering if there is some type of hope for us out there or if some “other” creature is looking back at us, as if the night sky was a mirror. Aliens have been used in science fiction or horror to mirror and criticise humanity from the perspective of the “other.” Although these questions already appeared in several mythologies, with “strange” beings such as fairies (Csicsery-Ronay 1), the aftermath of European colonialism introduced a new element: the racialization of people deriving from visible differences like skin colour.¹³

Nowadays, conspiracies like the existence of aliens help create an American identity in a postnationalist, globalized world, while keeping the fear that *they* are “among us” without people knowing: “the far more scary anxiety that we can no longer tell the difference between Them and Us” (Knight 5). In this way, by associating the non-human with extraterrestrial space (Clarke 146), humanity has created separate species that also mirror our own.

Therefore, the presence of aliens may be prompted by our need to define humanity, defining “us” by describing and opposing the “other.” This necessity has been motivated by globalization and the rise of new technologies (Thompson 186). Nayar explains how

¹² “Life on Mars” from *Lazarus Musical* (0:49-1:25)

¹³ Tok Thompson (187-193) explains how folklore tried to define “humanity.” While folklore is connected to the Earth, aliens come from outer space, from beyond, which is also connected to religion. However, alien's base is science and material evolution (Csicsery-Ronay 1, 6).

posthumanism and science fiction have tried to define humanity by separating us from animals (93-94); this may be the reason why aliens are often portrayed as insects (Linton 183), as one of Starkid's plays, *Starship*, has done. Besides, in our modernized society, aliens seem to be more connected to nature (Csicsery-Ronay 6).

This alien posthumanity has also been used for social critique (Rabinowitz 97). As “posthuman bodies ... are bodies living outside national, sexual, economic borders” (Rabinowitz 98), the alien erases the differences between the individuals and creates a collective image. Cecilia Åsberg and Rosi Braidotti (5) explain how alliances with aliens question the norms, while also highlighting that it must be taken into account who defines the “other,” since this critique is usually made by privileged groups. Other authors, like Kelly Hurley (206-208), consider that this representation of the “other,” which represents a minority, is only allowed in this monster form. Still, aliens and horror can still be revolutionary. Finally, aliens symbolize some parts of humanity, neither too different from us nor too similar, and can help authors show the flaws of the *homo sapiens* (Csicsery-Ronay 2-3), and even present the possibility of identifying ourselves with the alien or becoming them (Hedgecock 105-106).

This “otherness” of the alien is related to postnationalism and the notions of citizenship, belonging and the fear of invasion. “Monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations,” as Donna Haraway claims (37). Aliens, I would argue, also fall outside those borders. Colonialism, as has been mentioned, is a key theme in alien fiction. The alien is a “foreigner” in intergalactic terms (Thompson 190), but it is not naturalized *yet* (Csicsery-Ronay 1).¹⁴ The alien races are thus opposed to human races, which now become a whole, a single entity (Thompson 191).

¹⁴ However, some authors question whether the alien can become a citizen (Nayar 137-138).

Besides, science-fiction scholars like Istvan Csicsery-Ronay (4) mention the fear of the unexpected invasion as crucial when analysing the figure of the alien, e. g. in works like *War of the Worlds* (Clarke 146), which have been read as an allegory of the “Red Scare” during the Cold War. Similarly, Liz Hedgecock relates the fear of the Martian invasion to imperialism and the use of mass media (104-113). Therefore, there is the risk of a physical and a mental invasion, as a consequence of the development of technologies and communications that is portrayed in works as Carpenter’s *They Live!*, where the capitalist society is represented through some reptilian beings, who are hidden among us, pretending to be our neighbours while we remain unaware (Žižek 7), and take over our minds through TV or newspapers. This is related to the fear not only of thinking of *them* as *us*, but also of being attracted to them, even sexually (Linton 176)¹⁵. Capitalism alienates society as they consume physically (buying) and mentally (assimilating, but not rationalizing the message of the aliens) its products; however, it is possible to see through this façade, even if we have to create some lens to filter “humanity” and, as in *They Live!*, use some sunglasses (Žižek 11). Since aliens are a consequence of evolution or development, the current humanity can be interpreted as a pre-state of the alien.

Related to this scientific and economic development, there is an important connection between aliens and the science of reproduction. By the 19th century, with scientific progress, rose the preoccupation surrounding sexuality and reproduction; science and technology allowed the creation of new humans and, in this way, “reproductive technologies” were perceived as capable of “producing the posthuman” (Squier 113). The fetus was separated from the mother’s body: “Posthuman bodies were never in the womb. Bodies are determined and operated by systems whose reproduction is –sometimes partially but always irreducibly– asexual: capitalism, culture, professions, and institutions, are in fact sexuality itself” (Halberstam and Livingston 17). In addition to that, the image of the pregnant male was also proposed (Squier

¹⁵ This also happens by the end of *They Live!*, where a woman finds out that she is making love to a reptilian.

114), a fact anticipated in Victor Frankenstein's creation of a monster (an "alien") in Mary Shelley's homonymous novel, where the male birth is shown as monstrous in a reproductive critique (Squier 116). In that way, the male takes, as a creator, a father or a pregnant body, both the role of the father and the mother (Squier 117). With the development of the in-vitro fertilization some fears were taken to the extreme, and abduction narratives started to describe these invasions of the human body (Brown 119): "Accounts of abduction are, in contrast, expressive of anxieties about the mass management and manipulation of creation, specifically the management of one of the most intimate and heretofore seemingly "natural" human functions, reproduction" (Brown 109).

The main victim of this invasion was the female body, since it becomes industrialised, seen as a vessel for the baby, and the male is sometimes the colonizer of the female body and the one who can control life, now that life creation can be perfected (Brown 112-113). This image is related to the anxiety over "choice" politics, and it has been used to put into question reproductive rights, debating what the normal behaviour is for the male and the female body (Brown 122-123). With the possibility of epigenesis, childbirth was perceived as a mechanical process, as part of the industrial system, and the female body was seen as a tool (Squier 116-117). The fetus is a key theme here, for aliens have also presented children as a minority, as victims... as part of the "others" (Csicsery-Ronay 12). One example could be *E.T.*, where the alien blends among children, has difficulties communicating while learning how to talk, just like a child.

Still, mothers and motherhood, related to the female perspective, are a very important part the aliens' imaginary. The combination of posthumanism and feminism have claimed the humanity of the female identity, of women's experience.¹⁶ In *Alien* there is a depiction of the

¹⁶ Rabinowitz brings this back to Virginia Woolf's questioning the connection between the ideas of *human* and *women* (Rabinowitz 97-98).

monstrous feminine body but also the “heartless computer named Mother” (Hurley 208-209). This computer motherhood is a symbol of the technological industrialization and the materialism associated with the female body. Even in Starkid’s *Starship* the alien queen evokes, jokingly, the image of a vagina. In Shelley’s *Frankenstein* the male creature (the “other”) longs for motherhood (Linton 180); the mother, in this way, is the source of the feeling of belonging in an unknown world.

The Mother also appears as one of the characters of the illustration book *Barlowe’s Guide to Extraterrestrials*, where it explains that “All Mothers are immobile and female”: therefore, the female mother is another vessel for the reproduction, and has a “conception spot” used by the male which later consumes him (Barlowe, Meacham and Summers 64-65). This image of the dangerous female sexuality also appears in *Starship*, where the insect mother’s cavity devours other aliens or people. However, in *Alien: Resurrection*, the human females also take the roles of mothers (Linton 180); women are, then, alien to the male characters, as they take certain roles that differentiate the two biological sexes in these narratives. Still, the matriarch has a powerful role, which is only acquired in these alien societies, distant (in space and characteristics) from the ones on Earth. Roberts explains how female aliens have been used to present this dangerous femininity that males fear, and he argues that these creatures are based both in the hypothetical companion for Frankenstein’s creature and mythical creatures like Medusa (40-46).¹⁷

These paragraphs bring the idea of the relationship between the “alien,” sexuality and the notion of hybridity. The alien falls outside the “normal” conventions, since it is formed by the “others”; it is the strange, the one that defies the norm. In terms of sex and sexuality, aliens often break human binarism or challenge these types of opposition (Squier 113, 119). In this

¹⁷ Medusa is a great image of the reptile, the portrayal of the dangers of female sexuality, and hybridity.

way, they can also be metamorphic, becoming “more or less human,” or their genitalia can present both male and female attributes (Hurley 210-211); since they do not have these binary oppositions (Hurley 211), they seem not to fit the category of “human.” Similarly, they can lack sexual desire (Hedgecock 106), which also separates them from the concept of “humanity.” Conversely, they can be a manifestation of pleasure (Csicsery-Ronay 14), which may be threatening to the human body. Both lack and excess of sexual drives seem to “alienate” aliens from humans.

In conclusion, there are different models of aliens, and they can be used to both symbolize and oppose the very concept of humanity. Aliens are seen through a subjective human perspective as a metaphor, and they take the roles of mediators to face the demons of humanity. They can take the form of the “Abject Threat” or the “Beautiful Benefactor” (Csicsery-Ronay 16-17) to make us realize things about ourselves as a society; therefore, they come back to its mythological origins, as they can be seen as either demons or angels, and are used to teach society a lesson. In this way, we are still connecting dots in the stars, trying to see images of “something more” in the sky and creating stories that explain our own history.

3. Analysis of Starkid's Plays: Criticising America's Alien-Nation

3.1 – Becoming the Alien

Two of Starkid's musicals, *The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals* and *Black Friday*¹⁸, as anticipated in the introduction, combine musical comedy with horror. They both narrate some type of alien invasion,¹⁹ which they will use to criticise American society, as I argue in this BA thesis.

The alien is often visibly different from the human: the popular image is the green-skinned being we are all familiar with (Thompson 185). Both *The Guy* and *Black Friday* use the colour green, especially the latter, where the central object of desire, Wiggly, is a green doll (see Fig. 1 in Appendix). This colour is also employed in the scenography and the lights. Another colour associated with the alien is blue²⁰, particularly in *The Guy*, where some "blue goo" invades people's brains: "That's not his brain! It's blue!" (39:57). Another element used in both plays is the lighting effects: in particular, the quick bright shock that comes from the sky represents the alien, and is reminiscent of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: "and so soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump" (Shelley, chapter 1).

¹⁸ Plot summaries of each musical are provided in Appendix 1.

¹⁹ This mixture of genres has also been done before, in plays like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or *Little Shop of Horrors*.

²⁰ For instance, with blue aliens as the ones in *Avatar*, *The Fifth Element* (Diva Plavalaguna), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Yondu, Nebula or Drax)...

As discussed in previous chapters, the alien is a foreigner (Thompson 190), the epitome of what is unknown and different: the “other.” In both plays, the alien appears in its literal form, as some being from outside planet Earth. In *The Guy*, it comes from a meteor, and in *Black Friday*, Wiggly is described as “an underwater creature from outta this world” (00:53). Besides being from outside this planet, it is an “underwater creature.” Therefore, it is linked to Earth, while being from the most mysterious and unknown part of it, which still has to be fully explored.

Alienness can spread as a sickness, physically: people inhale “alien” spores, eat it... There is a physical invasion, both of the planet and the human body: “Let me puke in your mouth, Em!” (*TG* 00:47:07). This leads to a mental invasion: “It's worse than you could imagine. Not sex and not drugs, just alien invading minds” (*TG* 01:08:48). In *Black Friday*, there are several references to this loss of human consciousness, of “losing your mind” or becoming “crazy” as a consequence of Wiggly’s influence: “Lose your mind!,” “Crazy!” (03:23-03:36). In this way, the alien corrupts human nature, depriving them of individual consciousness. One example of this is the song “Not Your Seed,” where Bill’s (one of the co-workers of the protagonist, Paul) daughter, Alice, explains how she is not his girl any more: “I'm not your girl anymore / I'm not that tween that you drove here for / I'm not your girl anymore / I overtook her body with an infectious spore” (*TG*, 01:08:22-01:08:40). In fact, this lack of individuality is portrayed as part of a collective mind: “What we're dealing with here is a collective consciousness. On one level, they are individuals, but on another they are all appendages of a much larger organism all connected by a central brain” (*TG*, 01:13:52-01:14:07). The alien provides the promise of a united world, but this “union” is a consequence of being blindly controlled by it.

In both plays, the image of the unconscious zombie is repeated. The characters die, resurrecting as aliens, or become mindless followers of the alien: “You're gonna run and gun

your way through a city of singing zombie motherfuckers” (*TG*, 01:03:48). This killing of the human, replaced by an alien mind, is part of the fear of aliens: the fear of them being “among us,” wearing human skins and camouflaging, as in *They Live!*. There is a fear of being colonised from the inside, of being corrupted from within, without even realising it (Knight 5): the planet, the neighbourhood and, finally, the mind.

However, the alien does not always have to invade the human violently. Sometimes, characters are lured by it and become “traitors” to humanity. In *The Guy*, Professor Hidgens (a Biology professor who, at first, seemed to help the protagonists) confesses to be attracted by the idea of the world becoming a musical and decides to let the aliens inside the building (01:20:59-01:22:25). In *Black Friday*, another way of luring adults is through the doll, related to children and infancy (the alien even uses a childish language), and sometimes referred to as “cute.” Nevertheless, the alien attracts with bigger promises, since it takes advantage of fears, desires and faith by embodying them; in short, they take advantage of human emotions. Wanting and needing is a motif repeated in both plays: the alien raises the question of the true desires of the characters, promising freedom through consumption (understanding consumption both as ‘eating’ and ‘buying’). Aliens reveal the secret parts of humanity (Csicsery-Ronay 2-3), and resisting it could be fighting true human needs or resisting the evil alienation forced upon humanity:

ALIEN.- We’re happy now! We got what we wanted!

...

PAUL.- It doesn't matter what I want.

ALIEN.- We think it does, Paul. And we wanna hear about it. In fact, we think there's a song in you yet!

...

PAUL.- (Singing) I've never been happy

Wouldn't that be nice?

Is this the secret?

Singing and dancing through life?

Is my integrity worth anything at all?

But happiness can't come before its fall? (*TG*, 01:38:13-01:41:21)

Aliens promise world peace, a united population... They promise hope. As happens with Wiggly, a doll that comes inside a box (“You went and opened the box / And then He came,” *BF*, 01:40:10-01:40:15), humans opened the box out of curiosity, bringing chaos upon the world, Pandora-like. Still, as will be explained, hope remains.

The alien is a foreigner, the absolute “other” created to define “us,” humankind, while it is also identified our faults or virtues. Although the alien is often considered a monster, both plays use the word “monster” to refer to humans too; thus, the line between *them* and *us* can be blurred. The following sections will focus on the ways in which Starkid’s musicals use the figure of the alien in order to critique America’s alien-nation.

3.2 – American Policies and Politicians

What does it mean to be “American”? Starkid’s productions have often challenged America’s identity.²¹ In *The Guy* and *Black Friday*, America is questioned not only through its citizens, but also as a system. Its policies—regarding housing or the educational system—are shown to be corrupt. Lex, Ethan and Hannah, three young characters who dropped out of school, have problems shown through their language, as their grammar and spelling are far from perfect:

²¹ One example is the number “The American Way” in *Holy Musical B@man!* (Appendix 3. 3.)

“L-I-E-R” (*BF* 25:59), “badder” and “more bad” (48:00-48:09). They are children left behind by a failing system.

Similarly, politicians are portrayed negatively. Before being corrupted by Wiggly’s influence, they have already planned to attack with drone strikes as an answer to the revolts at the mall (*BF* 54:10-54:12). Later, influenced by the alien doll, these threats will only be amplified: “Back off or I will send a laser-guided, ballistic missile to your house in Denver! You’ll be scraping off what’s left of your kids off the fuckin’ pavement!” (*BF* 56:39-56:47). In *Black Friday*, the president is presented as a coward who initially wants to put his safety before that of his country (01:21:13). However, he will enter the Black and White, trying to negotiate with Wiggly, since he is, as his surname indicates, a “Goodman.” Still, he explains that “Foreign policy was never my strong suit” (01:35:58). In fact, he will fail when negotiating with the alien, while also ignoring that the Russians had another portal. Just as Wiggly or the meteor, if the head of the country fails, the entire population is doomed. At the end, the mistake made by the president leads to global disaster.

In *The Guy* the representation of the political situation has a real referent: Trump’s policies. Set and performed in 2018, this musical takes place during the second year of Donald Trump’s presidency, and it is very critical of its ideology. The reference is very direct, since it mentions that “America’s great again” (01:31:35) after it has become literally alien-ated: the military, led by General McNamara, are now possessed by the alien, and they are attacking civilians. There is a repression of liberty, embodied by the aliens: “I don’t know what you’ve been told, / but Americans should fit a mould. There’s a war to be fought in this country / against those that are far too bold” (01:31:07-01:31:19). As will be explained, both musicals also show how human conflicts. Besides, this number includes the idea of the closed borders, of isolation (“Cause our borders are closed,” 01:31:59), which also brings up the image of Trump’s wall project, which tried to separate the United States and Mexico (even more than they already

are).²² General McNamara is left alone on the stage, repeating “We’re great again, no answers to be found” (01:32:51-01:33:10). Once the alien, which conveys Trump’s ideas, takes over America, there are “no answers to be found”; therefore, no questions can be made and the individual inquiries are silenced by the collective mind.

This song is led by General McNamara. The military are shown as brutal and violent. This violence is part of the “terror” genre of these plays, while it also represents the consequences of war on human beings: Tom is a veteran who suffers from PTSD (*BF* 32:29). Sam, Charlotte’s husband, is both a corrupt cop who does not hesitate to bring out his gun before and after being alienated: “No way! You got 'em!?! I never miss a musical at the Starlight. And if anyone thinks that makes me less of a man, they can talk to my fucking gun!” (*TG* 15:24-15:33). McNamara is an exception to this corrupt system, even though he authorises Paul and Hannah to use his gun; still, this can be read as a “lending” of his power. He leads a fight against the evil forces. He is a martyr, and even an angel, as he appears after his death to help Lex (one of the heroines of *BF*); after this, an eagle screech is played, and McNamara is never seen again. He personifies the faith in America’s goodness, a hope/character that dies or is corrupted at the hands of an alienated society.

This general is also part of the P.E.I.P., a secret organization similar to the “Men in Black” in the mystery that surrounds it. They share the function of protecting the Earth from the unknown invasion of the aliens. Common people are not allowed to see through this “veil.” However, they are also alienated, as has been shown, and will also betray the characters by the end of *The Guy*, where the military turn out to be aliens. However, some authors, such as Redfern (9), introduce the question of whether the Men in Black can be aliens themselves. In

²² Again, this is connected to the theme of colonization (Csicsery-Ronay 3; Thompson 187; it is also one of the main themes of Harrison’s “A Cyborg Manifesto”)

this way, there is an expression of fear, not only of the process of alienation, but of being already invaded from the core of the system.

3.3 – “Money Makes the World Go Around”

America is one of the strongest economic countries of the 21st century. It has become a symbol of capitalism, and the social problems that this system carries have already been portrayed in earlier musicals, e.g. *West Side Story*, as seen in Chapter 1. While most of the characters in *The Guy* and *Black Friday* are workers, it is probably *Black Friday* that offers the harshest critique of (consumer) capitalism, and the title itself brings attention to this matter. As mentioned in previous chapters, science fiction and alien discourses are closely connected to a capitalist globalization (Higgins 370). Wiggly, the alien doll, is a product, and when the humans “consume” it, it also “consumes” the humans, as it takes over their minds. He is a symbol of capitalism; after all, the colour green is not only associated with the alien, but also with the (*doll-ar*) bills, the visible image of money.

The number “Made in America” (*BF* 01:39:51-01:44:11) summarizes this liberal capitalist criticism and uses the doll as its leitmotif.²³ Incredible though it may seem, Wiggly

²³ The doll, which is slightly anthropomorphic, is also a connection with childhood: several characters are parents whose desire is to reconnect with their children, buying their love by giving them this Wiggly doll. The main inspiration for this doll seems to be Tickle Me Elmo and the craze that surrounded its selling on Thanksgiving, as the star of the Black Friday (Huffman), as happens in *Black Friday*. Parents tried to buy the dolls for their children, who, after all of that effort, did not care about the doll, while these products were resold for thousands of dollars by the adults. Anthony Ramirez’s 1996 article “Waiting for Elmo” describes how the craze was lived on toyshops, where parents became violent in order to obtain a Tickle Me Elmo. Wiggly also shares characteristics with Lovecraft’s monster Cthulhu: “He’s an underwater creature from outta this world” (*BF* 00:00:53), “I suppose that only a single mountain-top, the hideous monolith-crowned citadel whereon great Cthulhu was buried, actually emerged from the waters” (Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu”). The doll also shares some physical attributes, as the tentacles (Lovecraft describes a “pulpy, tentacled head”).

seems to offer hope for humanity. The reason why the perfect product had to be a doll is that people do not believe in governments any more, as they have failed them. They feel abandoned by “everything except products.” The president tries to deny it, but he is Wiggly’s biggest ally: he is, therefore, the reason behind this capital liberalism and the downfall of America itself. America is described as the ideal place for Wiggly to take root, and it is also criticised by its “big fat butts” and the “valley of silicon,”²⁴ portraying a stereotypical image of the consequences of the consumerist society, where people are fed by artificial foods and human bodies turn into artificial beings inside and out. Before the alien, the human body had already been invaded by the artificial. In this way, society was alienated from before, and human nature was corrupted by materialism and the constant need of products.

Products, commodities are at the core of America: they have become Americans’ needs. Lex needs Wiggly to survive, since she has to take care of her little sister while working on the toy shop. Once she has an offer for a Wiggly doll of 7000 dollars, the future seems “priceless” for her (*BF* 24:30). Ironically, money is what allows her to have a future. Money can also be used to compensate past mistakes, as Tom tries to get a doll for his son, in order to make up for his wife’s death. Feeling guilty and blameful, he feels the need to pay, economically and morally, for that accident. However, money also takes human consciousness away from the characters. It is a source of alienation, of an “insanity” that also deprives human beings of their moral compass: “It’s insanity! / Do we have any morality?” (*BF* 38:20-38:24). Capitalist liberalism brings injustice, justified by the rule of supply and demand, which leads people to take things by force:

WORKER.- This ain't right, I lost my job when the plant closed! I can't afford three, \$500 for a doll! A Wiggly is 49.95!

²⁴ This is also a pun with Silicon Valley, a rich and high-tech region of California, besides a reference to plastic surgery.

PRICELY.- Sorry, pal, the price just went up! Supply and demand is a wonderful thing! Whoever pays the most for a Wiggly, gets a Wiggly!

WORKER.- Well, if you're not gonna sell me that doll, then I guess I'm just gonna have to take it! (*BF* 41:56-42:25)

Money alienates humans, turning them into animals (non-human), an intuition confirmed when they violently surround or attack the manager of the store. In the song “Feast or Famine,” the necessity of possession is portrayed through the repetition of the possessives “mine” and “my,” and verbs such as “need” or “take.” Capitalism implies a Darwinian fight in which only the fittest and the strongest can survive, stepping over the weakest:²⁵ “There’s always a line to be cut / and someone to barrel though / And if you should find that you’re / about to get the short of the stick / Take what you want, return what you get” (*BF* 43:20-43:31). Consequently, people are their own predators, and the “apex predator” is Linda Moore²⁶.

In this system, consumerism turns into a religion: Black Friday is defined as the “holiest day in America” (*BF* 18:32). Religion is, in this way, replaced by a commodified, alienated replica. Frank Pricely, Lex’s boss at Toy Zone (the toy shop), sings a Carol tune, changing its lyrics and talking about money. Money, embodied in Wiggly, is where the faith of this new religion lies. When the toy shop opens a celestial music is played, as if they were the gates to Heaven opening, and Pricely is, in this Paradise of consumption, a Saint Peter that decides who can take the doll. Besides, the alien is often connected to the Christian religion, a strange angel that comes from the sky (Thompson 193-194).

According to that religious interpretation, it is no wonder that, from time to time, Wiggly’s doll may be identified with Jesus: “Glory to a newborn king. A fucking furry little monster. That's gonna make me a pile of cash” (*BF* 16:55-17:06). As Jesus, the doll’s birthday

²⁵ Clarke explains the influence of Darwinism on Posthumanism (145)

²⁶ Linda is a rich woman who could be compared to *Mean Girl’s* Regina George: “She's the queen of the beasts / She can smell your fear / In this biosphere / She's the apex predator” (“Apex Predator,” 0:46-0:56)

is on Christmas Day (*BF* 01:41:58-01:42:08). Constantly, the characters explain that Wiggly is a god, the “head,” reminiscent of Christian theology: “The doll’s only part of it. What, you don’t remember your Catechism class? The father’s the son, the son’s the father. Wiggly rules on high in the Black and White, but he also is the dolls” (01:19:47-01:19:59). He is also omnipotent and omnipresent, as he knows everything about Linda and the entirety of Hatcherfield (*BF* 51:01-51:17).

Losing faith in a spiritual God who seems to have failed his people (“If there's a god, my god, can you see what you've made,” *BF* 12:19-12:24) leads to the creation of a cult surrounding the product, the capitalist commodity, where humanity is, apparently, united as “brothers and sisters” (*BF* 01:26:26). Linda is the prophet and the mother of this cult, while she also takes the role of a god(dess); she is a source of creation, the image of Mary bringing her God’s child into the earth, but she is also capable of destruction: “I will destroy everything” (*BF* 01:27:51). In America, where there is a culture of violence, destruction is the basis of the new religion.

3.4. Sexuality, Reproduction and Family

The alien lures and invades the human in different ways. Charlotte, for instance, is lured by her husband, Sam, through emotional blackmail and sex appeal (*TG* 48:35-52:33). Two characters in *Back Friday* want Wiggly to be their boyfriend (*BF* 43:04), as the alien also expresses strange sexualities and hidden desires (Csicsery-Ronay 14). Willingly or not, the alien invades the planet, the bodies and the minds of the humans.

Maternal symbols abound in these plays about alien invasion. The meteor is described as the head of the aliens, the “mothership” (*TG* 01:13:45). In *Black Friday*, Linda Monroe is

not only the prophet, she is also the matriarch: “The prophet, the mother, mommy! Mother, mother, mother!” (*BF* 01:23:59-01:24:06). Besides being the mother of four children, she is also the leader of Wiggly’s cult. Her role is to bring Wiggly’s child into this planet: “Oh, it’s my, my job to prepare for his birth” (*BF* 02:06:39). In order to fulfil this, she needs a model, one of the dolls. Therefore, sexuality and reproduction are alienated, corrupted by capitalism (Brown 110-116): Linda becomes a source of commodities, her function is to produce and reproduce. The male alien, Wiggly, invades her body, and she is sexually colonised by the male alien. In this way, she becomes part of the industrial system. However, by producing this new being, she feels in possession of him: “Oh, he’s *mine, mine, mine* to follow his orders / Oh, it’s *my, my, my* monument to build” (02:05:36-02:05:50). However, she is still working for Wiggly, playing the role of a step in the process of his cloning. She is only another “birth canal,” another “portal” built for him (*BF* 01:21:29). Therefore, Linda is identified with an instrument or item, in an evident process of objectification.

As glimpsed in previous descriptions of the characters, the American family portrayed in *Black Friday* is far from perfect. Becky, like Charlotte, had been abused by her partner, and, in order to survive, she felt compelled to destroy her family: “You say you killed your family? I hope I killed mine” (*BF* 01:13:13 -01:13:24). Linda desires to be adored, which leads her to have children with different men.²⁷ Lex has to be the maternal figure for her little sister, Hannah, since her mother was absent. Tom, an absent father who ignores his family (he only talks to his sister Emma because he needs her to babysit his son), and leaves his home in order to buy a Wiggly. Money, in this way, is a promise of love, a reconstruction of the family based on production and consumption: “Did you know that if you spend money / Your kids will love you maybe” (*BF* 36:05-36:11). While the characters are fighting for the Wiggly, exclaiming why

²⁷ This aspect of her personality could also be related to Starkid’s critique of both infidelity and general lack of loyalty (characters betray each other in both plays). Again, there is a representation of the human that turns against another human, even in the most private of spheres: the family.

they want it, several say “My family will love me” (*BF* 44:00). In an isolated world, the alien promises to be united: it promises a global family.

3.5 – Time and the Apocalypse

The fact that time is running out is key in both plays. *The Guy* is set in 2018, and *Black Friday* has references to fashionable trends at the moment of its premiere, 2020: “They're all into *Fortnite*, dude” (*BF* 01:55:20). Therefore, they mirror our contemporary society with a twist: there is an impending possibility of change due to an unexpected invasion (Csicsery-Ronay 4), while both plays are set in a “none-too-distant future” (Åsberg & Braidotti 5).²⁸ Even though “musicals tell the impossible” (*TG* 00:36), just like fiction, they also portray real aspects of society. However, due to the alien invasion, the world is put on a countdown. The impending proximity of the end is repeated through both plays: “The last remaining story to tell!” (*TG* 00:50); “It’s the end of the world” (*TG* 02:06); “Now the end is nigh / The apocalypse here” (*BF* 01:40:23-01:40:26)...

The characters themselves are conscious of this importance of time: “GENERAL MCNAMARA.- Time is a precious thread in the fabric of the universe. It deserves its own tool of measurement!” (*TG* 01:17:29-01:17:37). Professor Hidgens also refers to “humanity's eleventh hour” (*TG* 01:22:10), the final hour before the end of the day. The final countdown is also reproduced through the sound of a ticking clock in *Black Friday*, and it opens and closes

²⁸ Peter Stockwell develops more this idea of time in science-fiction (36-39). He explains that sci-fi novels often use the past tense when referring to this future; this could be compared to how theatre uses the present tense, since it is a live performance.

the musical. This classical topos, *tempus fugit*, is also present in and developed through the characters' inner struggles: Bill wishes not to have argued with his daughter, Alice, during her last moments alive; Tom wishes he was not driving when he had the accident, causing his wife's death, and Tom and Becky sing about their past together, wanting to come back. Before this moment, humans were unaware of the passing of time: "Well, we thought it'd be forever" (*BF* 01:09:00). They need to face the present actively, as time is not infinite for them. For humankind, time is ephemeral ("Join the only fight that's left," *BF* 01:00:58), while the alien is immortal and, therefore, atemporal ("he'll come immortal," *BF* 02:07:53).

The present slips through the character's fingers, and the future has only two options: survival or extinction, both as individuals and as species. In this way, by the end of *Black Friday*, we are left with a countdown, raising the question of "What if tomorrow comes?" (02:12:53). The end of the day leads to the night, to darkness, which could be the unknown or death: "And turn the light off" (*BF* 02:13:11). There is a dichotomy between hope and fear, as the future may bring light to this darkness: "What if tomorrow comes / To break the dawn / And take the night away" (02:13:54- 02:14:04).

The future, however, seems to have already been predestined. Hannah is a child that talks about "Webby," a spider on her mind that tells her parts of the future. Thanks to this divinatory ability, Hannah knows that things will only get worse (*BF* 48:00). There is a sense of the inescapability of fate, as they sing by the end of *The Guy*: "It was inevitable. Inevitable! Inevitable!" (01:47:56- 01:48:05). The reason behind this is human nature itself: "Is a charted course on the winds of our own evolution," "a predestined self-destruction" (*TG* 01:32:20- 01:32:30). *The Guy* ends with Emma being surrounded by the aliens, screaming, and the audience knows that there is no hope for her, in a comic ending where the characters bow and say goodbye to the audience. Emma, the only one unaware of being inside a musical, remains terrified until the end (see Fig. 2). Similarly, *Black Friday* ends with the sound of something

flying, which could be a meteor or a missile. After this, the play ends. In both cases, there is a glimmer of hope: Emma is still human in *The Guy*, and in *Black Friday* there are still a few people who continue to resist. Nevertheless, this idea of the “inevitable” is often repeated, and the future for the Earth does not seem so bright any more.

3.6 – *U.S. vs T.H.E.M.: Recognising and Resisting the Alien*

Both *The Guy* and *Black Friday* present dualities, most prominent among them, the opposition between the alien and the human. For instance, by the end of *The Guy*, Paul is split into two personalities, the alienated and the human.²⁹ In that musical, the meteor is the physical source of this influence. In *Black Friday*, the characters can also be alienated, and the dolls are the shape that the alien takes. Besides, there is a dichotomy between black and white, especially in *Black Friday*. Darkness is associated with the alien, the unknown that remains in the night sky and the end of humanity, while light stands for hope and goodness. Wiggly is also referred to as a “Dark God” (*BF* 01:24:31). Blackness consumes every other colour, and it consumes people too (*BF* 17:32-17:55). This darkness is what brings the Wiggly dolls and the disaster. Light is also a reflection of the past that has been lost, an idealized memory (*BF* 01:14:54-01:15:02). The loss of hope also means the loss of light: “The light has left your eyes” (*BF* 01:15:24).

However, to defeat the dark you have to face it: “Sometimes you gotta step into the black and white / And face the very thing you dread” (*BF* 59:39-59:43). The Black and White, resembling the yin yang, connects both worlds: “a place outside all dimensions. A swirling sea

²⁹ In the number “Let It Out” (*TG* 01:38:49-01:42:20), Paul’s personality splits, similarly to the internal debate between Gollum and Sméagol in *The Lord of the Rings*, and fights against the alien within himself: “Just stop it, I’m split in two / Is this me or is this you?” (*TG* 01:40:12-01:40:17).

of psychic energy we call the Black and White” (*BF* 01:19:29-01:19:38): Therefore, there is a place where both colours are connected. There is a grey area and drawing the line between the concepts of black and white can be difficult. The same thing happens between the alien and the human, between *them* and *us*.

Times of crisis, like the world’s apocalypse, can bring the best (light) or the worst (darkness) in humans. Attacked by the aliens, some characters choose to resist and oppose this alienation, as mentioned earlier. In *The Guy Who Didn’t Like Musicals*, the title itself portrays this opposition to the musical “alien.” Here, as we saw in Carpenter’s *They Live*, the characters must be able to identify the alien in order to oppose it. In this darkness, the world that seemed familiar is no longer a place of comfort, since *they* could be “among us,” and the characters will have to question whether their friends and colleagues are truly human or alien.³⁰ Thus, the Aristotelian concept of anagnorisis is key in order for the heroes to survive. In *Black Friday*, Wiggly’s spell, which only affects adults, can be broken. Still, some characters remain alienated until their end, as Wiggly’s followers, willing to die for/with it (*BF* 02:10:09). Without this recognition or anagnorisis, the alien’s “colonization of the mind” will not be overcome, and humans will remain in the darkness.

However, as has been explained throughout the chapter, it is true that the society presented in these plays was corrupt way before the aliens invaded the planet. Humankind already had this darkness or corruption, which comes back to the image of the yin yang. The aliens merely fed on pre-existing desires, needs, fears, faith... While the alien showed another type of monster, one with a green or blue skin, human skin had hidden monsters underneath long before the arrival of alien monstrosity: Stanley, Becky’s abusive husband, is also called “monster” (*BF* 30:59), not unlike Wiggly. Drug problems, police brutality, dysfunctional

³⁰ For instance, in *The Guy*, professor Hidgens tests whether the survivors are aliens or not by asking them to sing the beginning of *Moana* (01:01:38-01:02:11).

families... They all existed before the arrival of the aliens, and this violent part of humanity is only laid bare or emphasized by that arrival. The world is not doomed by *them*, but by *us*. The apocalypse is a consequence of the actions of the humankind:

EMMA.- No Professor! The fences are the only things protecting us!

PROFFESOR HIDGENS.- Protecting us from what, Emma? From the end of the world? What's protecting us from nuclear Holocaust climate change? Overpopulation? Emma... The world was already doomed. Not by them, but by us. (*TG* 01:19:16- 01:19:39).

The duality of monster and men is blurred; a grey area emerges, where humans can be monsters and must also fight their inner demons: “And there are monsters and there are men. / There are monsters that live in your head. / There are monsters that we all should dread” (*BF* 59:54- 01:00:10). However, once united, “It is the monsters who shall live in dread” (*BF* 01:02:48). The human is not so different from the alien, and that is the reason why they are attracted to each other. Lex is a child planning to “migrate,” looking for hope “outside,” in California, where she wishes to find a better place for her, Ethan and Hannah (her family). Sometimes humans will commit treason against humanity, deciding to side with *them*, as professor Hidgens or General McNamara’s mentor do.³¹

The crucial conclusion suggested by the two musicals is that recognizing or “realizing” who is an alien means realizing what is wrong. In both plays the characters insist on discerning between these concepts of good and evil: “The truly good versus the truly bad. / Ha, you better learn to discern it quickly, boys / It’s the only chance we have” (*BF* 01:00:42-01:00:52). The fight against the alien is, therefore, a fight against humanity, something emphasised by the end of *Black Friday*, where the outbreak of World War III takes place. In this internal conflict of

³¹ “My mentor, Wilbur Cross, stepped through that portal and came out a raving lunatic. He pledged his loyalties to the forces within and disappeared soon after” (*BF* 01:20:40-01:20:53)

humanity, people are isolated, alone in the cosmos, and there is no help from the outside. This feeling of isolation is repeated in both musicals: the closed borders or the closed fort in *The Guy*, or the mall in *Black Friday*. By the end of both musicals, there are no answers: Emma asks for a phone, wanting to call to the outside, but there is no salvation on the outside. We are alone, after all, with our own monsters, our alienated society. Over all the individualities, there is a universal dimension: “GENERAL MCNAMARA.- I love my country, I do, but the experiences I've accrued throughout my tenure with this organization have given me a deeper understanding of the cosmos and our place in it” (*TG* 01:16:41-01:16:53). Society has to take responsibility as a small part of the cosmos, facing the consequences of the future together. The last number in *Black Friday* presents a crowd waiting to see if light or darkness wins, facing the future, or the lack of it, together (see Fig. 3). By the end, they become united by the alien, even if it is through the fear of it.

Conclusions

The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals and *Black Friday* are examples of how musical theatre is, once again, used as an instrument to satirise America. The humorous position adopted by Starkid makes these messages more accessible for the audience. Mixed with some catchy tunes, references to popular culture, choreographed numbers, and some heart-warming moments, the audience is involved with the peripetia that the protagonists go through. The Starkid collective has chosen to bring their art to every type of audience through YouTube, making their work accessible and, therefore, democratizing the arts. Under the video screen, the comment section becomes a social forum open to discussion and reflection on the topics of the plays, in the same way that the audience would discuss it after the curtain falls on a theatre.

As I have attempted to prove in this BA thesis, the alien has been used in different ways in fiction, mostly to represent and judge humankind. *The Guy* and *Black Friday* are no exception: they combine the alien with musical comedy and terror. The alien, in the form of “natural” spores or (deceptively) attractive products to be consumed, spreads as a pandemic and impedes people’s consciousness. This is part of the portrayal of repressive policies, in a system that has failed its civilians, either by ignoring them—Lex, Ethan and Nathan are teenagers forgotten by the education system, carrying economic and emotional problems—or by openly attacking them—police brutality or military aggressiveness. America turns into the capital of capitalism, but this culture of consumption turns against them, as this compulsive shopping is what allows Wiggly to enter the US and what alienates its citizens:

UNCLE WILEY.- - Only in America could Wiggly take root! [...] You think that in the Netherlands they'd give a shit about some toy? No, they're too busy on their paid vacation, and

the free healthcare! You [the president of the US] empowered Wiggly, you invited him in! (*BF* 01:39:25-01:39:42)

Money turns into a religion, and the alien promises a united world just by accepting being controlled by a collective mind. In this way, aliens take advantage of the fact that the population has been abandoned by the government and need something to believe in. The alien is appealing, even sexually so, and manipulates the human while turning us into an object of consumption.

In this immediate future, where the fate of the heroes remains unclear, the lines between the alien and the human are blurred. When people realize the characteristics of the alien they see their own flaws mirrored. We were the ones who, prior to their arrival, had already destroyed the Earth, and now it turns against us. Green and blue are two colours that dominate the scenography, and they are also the colours that identify the planet Earth. This may suggest that the alien not only acquires an earthly existence but it also conjures up the planet Earth itself. However, this “earth” is now objectified, particularly in the image of the Wiggly doll. Nature has been capital-ized, commodified, turned into an object of consumption, and humankind must pay for their behaviour—the alien embodies the retribution for our hubris.

Starkid’s type of musical theatre offers a live performance, in which the audience is more involved with the story. The characters walk among the members of the audience and interact with them (*TG* 01:48:27; *BF* 01:39:30). In this way, the audience is able to empathise with the story portrayed on the stage. The “other” is, for us, the story we are being told, which is “unreal.” However, it is made more “human” when it is performed and (a)live and, especially, when it appeals physically to us, just as the alien does in these particular musicals. Humans can become alien(ated) to/from one another and, through these performances, characters become mirrors of humanity’s actions. Musical theatre is the strange “other,” and as we consume it—

as we buy Wiggly or inhale the “musical” spores of the meteor—, we can access a new perspective of our own history. Finally, we must be our own hero(in)es and become aware of our own alienation, if possible, with some jazz hands and a “catchy” tune.

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APPENDIX 1 – Summaries

1 – The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals

The play opens with a musical number that introduces us to the main character, Paul, who works in an office with some colleagues and has a romantic interest on a barista, Emma. From the beginning, one thing is clear: he hates musicals. However, a meteor falls and brings a musical pandemic. Paul, next to his colleagues (Bill, Charlotte and Ted) and Emma, tries to escape this situation, but they are faced with some violent cops whose minds have been “taken” by the aliens. They capture one, Sam, who is Charlotte’s husband, and they discover a blue alien substance on his brain. Despite having marital problems, Sam lures Charlotte into letting him escape, and he kills her and turns her into an alien.

After this, Emma suggests going to Professor Hidgens’ house. Here, the human survivors separate, as Bill and Paul go to find Alice, Bill’s daughter, who is surrounded by the aliens, while Emma, Ted and the professor stay to investigate the alien. However, Hidgens finds the alien fascinating, a source of world peace, and he is lured and killed by the aliens, so Ted and Emma have to flee. In the meantime, alien creatures trap and kill Bill—as he was looking for his daughter, who has become (literally) alienated—, while Paul is saved by the military, and he is introduced by General McNamara to the PEIP, a secret agency that deals with these types of situations.

Paul, determined to save the planet, is reunited with Emma and Ted. However, Ted leaves them and, when he meets the military, they kill them—they, too, had been possessed by the alien. Paul decides to destroy the meteor on his own; once there, he is tempted to take part in this musical. He refuses, and it seems that Emma and Paul finally reunite by the end of the play. However, just as the curtain is about to fall, Paul starts singing and dancing and is joined

by all the other characters, while Emma is surrounded, asking for help from the audience. The End.

2 – Black Friday

Black Friday is set in the same universe as *The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals*, and it has some references to the first play, including the presence of characters from the earlier musical (Paul, Emma, or General McNamara). This play opens with a commercial for Wiggly's doll. After that, we learn that this doll is all the rage in America. Everybody wants to buy one, as Tom wants to buy it for his son Tim, after losing his wife (Tim's mother). However, there is a problem: everybody wants a Wiggly. At the toy store, Tom meets Lex, a former student who dropped out of school because of economic and familiar problems—her mother was an alcoholic. Her dream is to go to California with her younger sister, Hannah, and her boyfriend, Ethan. That dream seems quite real when they get a deal for a stolen Wiggly doll. Still, Hannah vaticinates the apocalypse, as she perceives the future through the voice of a spider, Webby, in her mind.

Things start to get complicated once people are in line for the Wiggly doll. Infuriated, since everyone wants to have one, they fight against each other, obsessed with and alienated by the product. Now, chaos reigns. Wiggly turns into a type of god, and its prophet is Linda Moore, a wealthy woman whose mission is to bring Wiggly's child to life. In this chaos, Tom reunites with Becky, his high school love, and they fall in love once again. She confesses that her husband was abusive, and she had to kill him to survive.

We also see the Oval Office meeting, where the president, Howard Goodman, meets General McNamara, and is led to the PEIP in order to face Wiggly. With an astronaut suit, he enters the Black and White, an interdimensional space, and meets Wiggly. After losing contact, McNamara enters too, and rushes to save the president, who has now discovered that America's

capitalist policies were what lured Wiggly and allowed it to take root. The military, who sent a bomb to the portal to end Wiggly, discover that there is another portal in Russia, and the World War III begins.

In the meantime, Ethan is killed by the aliens, but Lex and Hannah are able to reunite and make the adults realize that Wiggly is alienating them, literally and figuratively. Becky shoots Linda, killing the prophet of Wiggly's cult, and the human characters who resisted the alien reunite at the end of the play, in a countdown waiting for the Black Friday to end. The play closes with the sound of something flying over the heads of these characters.

APPENDIX 2 – Stills

Figure 1 – Wiggly, the doll (*Black Friday*, 00:45)



Figure 2 – The end of *The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals* (01:47:43, 01:48:50)



Figure 3 – The end of *Black Friday* (02:15:31)

