

## **Movie:** Aliens (1986)

**Synopsis:** As homage to the Mischief (Devil's) Night classic, The War of the Worlds, we review the alien invasion movie, *Aliens*. The film begins as a continuation of the first *Alien* (1979) movie, where Ripley has been in cryogenic sleep in a shuttle from the cargo ship Nostromo. A salvage vessel intercepts her escape pod, and she is found to be alive following the battle between the crew of the Nostromo and a hostile alien species. Ripley's ordeal is not believed, and she is thought to be mentally unstable, especially because she has been in cryogenic sleep for over 50 years. She comes to learn that the planetoid on which she fought the aliens has been inhabited by "terraformers" who are trying to make the planet habitable. However, communication with the crew is lost, and the film follows Ripley and her new crew as they go to find out what happened.

### **How the Film Relates to Psychiatry**

There are deep psychiatric influences in the film, most obviously post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The diagnosis of PTSD requires that the person be exposed to a stressor, re-experience the traumatic event (nightmares, flashbacks), persistently try to avoid trauma-related stimuli which can cause distress, negative alterations in mood and cognition (memory loss, fear, guilt), and alterations in arousal and reactivity (hypervigilance, irritability) for a duration of more than one month. Ripley certainly matches these criteria for PTSD as she experiences nightmares, is hypervigilant, and becomes more secluded from her rescuers. This is understandable as she has faced a tremendous, life-threatening stress, and has lived to tell about her ordeal.

Having to face the task of going back to fight the aliens, these emotions have the potential to consume her. A diagnosis of PTSD is made when the symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. Since Ripley doesn't manifest functional impairment, instead using her fear and uses as motivation to lead the fight, she is not likely to be diagnosed as having PTSD. Her "running towards her fear" instead of avoiding it is likely due to counterphobic attitude (Otto Fenichel). Ironically, the attraction of horror movies has been theorized lie in a counterphobic attitude.

Another aspect of psychiatry that is exemplified in the film is the stigma against mental health. When Ripley is rescued and explains what has happened to her, immediately she is thought to be "crazy." While the story is hard to believe, she is a reputable woman with no external incentive to provide factitious information. However, the fear and potential to expose the risks of such journeys to space could significantly impact the income of The Company. Thus, it is simpler to just call her crazy. Ripley faces an uphill battle to recovery from the stress of her previous battle with the aliens, and she requires unconditional positive regard, underscoring the importance of social support bin protecting against the perpetuation of symptoms. *Aliens* then is a subversive commentary on our culture's treatment of the mentally ill, and the dearth of resources that support mental health and wellness.

**Key Words:** Alien, Aliens, Mischief Night, Devil's Night, The War of the Worlds, Nostromo, post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, counterphobic attitude, Otto Fenichel

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