Alien Terrorists: Public Discourse on 9/11 and the American Science Fiction Film

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I

At the beginning of October 2001, a little less than a month after the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, DC, the news broke that 'government intelligence specialists ha[d] been secretly soliciting terrorist scenarios from top Hollywood filmmakers and writers' (Brodesser 2001). In several meetings held at the University of South California Institute for Creative Technology – a research institute founded in 1999 to develop virtual environment training software for US soldiers – army officials sought the imaginative expertise of a varied group of people, none of whom had any specialised knowledge of either Middle Eastern history or the strategies and ideologies of Islamist terrorism. Among the participants were screenwriter Steven E. de Souza, of *Die Hard* fame, as well as B-movie director Joseph Zito, whose works include the Chuck Norris vehicle *Invasion U.S.A.* According to a brief report published by *Variety*, the official aim of the meetings, which involved teleconferences with the Pentagon, was 'to brainstorm about possible terrorist targets and schemes in America and to offer solutions to those threats' (Brodesser 2001).

On one level, the US government's recourse to the creative powers of Hollywood constitutes a particularly striking example of what social anthropologist Joseba Zulaika has described as the 'crisis of knowledge' (2009: 2) in counterterrorism. For Zulaika, the shortcomings of counterterrorism stem from the self-referentiality of its discourse, which is predicated on a 'faulty epistemology – beginning with the placement of the entire phenomenon [of terrorism] in a context of taboo and the willful ignorance of the political subjectivities of the terrorists' (2009: 2; see also Zulaika and Douglass 1996). From such a perspective, the decision to generate possible threat scenarios with the help of members of the film entertainment industry may be taken to indicate a reluctance to engage with the real circumstances of terrorism – the political, cultural, and ideological factors that constitute the root of the problem. At any rate, the secret meetings at USC illustrate the point made by sociologist Frank Furedi that after 11 September 2001, '[i]magining evil [was] presented as the medium through which understanding of the terrorist threat may be gained' (2007: xxvi). Citing the *9/11 Commission Report* as the most salient example, Furedi demonstrates that the limitations of counterterrorist intelligence were frequently described 'as a problem of imagination rather than of information' (2007: xxiv). Consequently, imaginative speculation soon became an official means of complementing – and, if necessary, substituting for – observation and analysis, making the line between fact and fiction increasingly difficult to draw.

Read at another level, the idea of tapping into the creativity of screenwriters and directors seems like a logical consequence of the common notion that the attacks themselves appeared to have sprung from Hollywood films. Statements to the effect that the events in New York had seemed 'like a movie' may be found in countless eyewitness accounts, and the cinematic analogy was immediately taken up by journalists, writers, and scholars. Always quick off the mark, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek and French sociologist Jean Baudrillard were among the first internationally renowned theorists to bring their particular approaches to bear on the events of 9/11. As different as their essays were, they both addressed the resemblances between the New York disaster and earlier fictional movie scenarios in an attempt to explain the '*jouissance*' (Žižek 2002: 12) afforded by the images of

the collapsing Twin Towers.[1] Despite their different emphases and conclusions, these and many other commentaries have at least one thing in common: they are based on the unquestioned assumption that the (real) happenings of 11 September were so similar to (fictional) filmic images that this uncanny correspondence must be considered one of the essential characteristics of the event.

This chapter asks how and for what reasons Hollywood movies have so persistently served as a frame of reference for representations of 9/11. In doing so, it does not seek to provide another confirmation of the common understanding that 9/11 has had an inherently – and disturbingly – cinematic quality. On the contrary, it starts from the assumption that the Hollywood analogy is not as self-evident as may be supposed at first sight. Bernd Scheffer reminds us that 'although seeming identities, or at least striking similarities between Hollywood movies and real events in the USA ... do exist, a closer look will reveal no real and especially no complete agreement, only some misleading, albeit frequent, superficial likenesses' (2003). While Scheffer mainly thinks of differences in content, formal discrepancies are just as significant. Geoff King persuasively argues that the images shown in the early phases of the 11 September broadcast news coverage contained several 'modality markers' that clearly framed them as a '"breaking" live news event' (2005: 49), most importantly, the quality and quantity of the available images. The cinematic analogy, then, was not simply 'there'. Rather, it was the result of a particular perception of the event. While spontaneous references to Hollywood movies among witnesses on the scene of the disaster are one thing, the perpetuation of the cinematic analogy in the weeks, months, and years after the event is quite another. As I shall argue, it may best be understood with reference to a larger discourse, which is responsible for a specific conception of the attacks, their perpetrators, and Islamist terrorism in general, a conception to which the consideration of 9/11 through the prism of Western mainstream cinema has contributed its share.

The following discussion is indebted to the field of Critical Terrorism Studies inaugurated by political scientist Richard Jackson (Jackson 2005; Jackson, Smith and Grunning 2009). In his 2005 study *Writing the War on Terrorism*, Jackson reads post-9/11 statements by members of the Bush administration as part of a

political narrative created to generate public support for an unprecedented counterterrorist campaign – both at home (the USA Patriot Act and its incursions into civil rights) and abroad (the various battlefields of the war on terrorism). Such measures, Jackson argues, require a large degree of consensus. The war on terrorism, therefore, had to be normalised – something that the discourse implemented by the Bush administration achieved to great effect. According to Jackson, the most important features of this discourse are the interpretation of the terrorist attacks as an 'act of war' necessitating a military response, the legitimisation of this response as a battle between good versus evil (and, hence, a just war), as well as the ensuing demonisation and dehumanisation of the enemy. Jackson also emphasises the exaggeration of the threat of terrorism and the idea of an entirely new kind of war, to which old rules no longer apply. This war, one may add, is represented not as a clash of civilisations (in the plural), but as a clash between civilisation (in the singular) and anti-civilisation, a global conflict in which people of all freedom-loving nations stand together against those who have perverted their faith out of sheer hatred for Western democratic values and ways of life. Excluded from this dominant narrative are explanations implicating American foreign policy, an effect reinforced by the positioning of 9/11 as a radical rupture (see Jarvis 2008), which separates the event from its roots in earlier political conflicts and thus entails a de-historicisation.

Against this backdrop, the following discussion will focus on the role of one particular film genre in the representation of 9/11: science fiction. When witnesses on the scene of the attacks in Manhattan stated that the event had seemed 'like a movie', Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* was among the most frequently mentioned films. The perceived analogy between the incidents of 9/11 and the alien invasion genre not only concerned the affected targets – American landmark buildings – but also the perpetrators, whose 'alienness' was greatly emphasised by the Bush administration. Considering the discourse-historical trajectory of the 'alien terrorist' metaphor, it seems significant that one of the first high-budget Hollywood productions that was explicitly marketed as a post-9/11 film chose the alien invasion genre to reflect the anxieties of present-day America: before the release of *War of the Worlds* (2005), Steven Spielberg and his screenwrit-

ers repeatedly underlined that their adaptation of H.G. Wells's novel was a deliberate evocation of the New York City attacks. Taking this kind of allegorisation for granted entails the risk of ignoring the significant political implications involved in such a representation of the event. It is these implications that the present chapter will attempt to demonstrate.

II

'The building began to disintegrate', Wall Street analyst Ron Insana reported one hour after having seen the south tower of the World Trade Center collapse, his clothes still covered in dust: 'And we heard it and looked up and started to see elements of the building coming down and we ran. And honestly, it was like a scene out of *Independence Day*' (quoted in Monahan 2010: 60). CNBC financial expert Insana was only one of numerous witnesses on the scene of the 11 September 2001 attacks who drew on disaster and science fiction movies to describe their impressions. References to such blockbusters were so remarkably frequent that they almost immediately prompted responses from critics, scholars, and members of the film business.

Among the issues addressed by the earliest discussions of the phenomenon was the question of how it was possible that the worst terrorist incident in history had elicited so many references to shallow entertainments, even among people who had followed events in 'unmediated' form (that is, unframed by television screens and unaccompanied by movie poster-like captions such as 'America Under Attack')? *New York Times* writer Michiko Kakutani was one of the first commentators to attempt an explanation. In an article published on 13 September, she argued that the recourse to cinema offered a means of coping with an otherwise incomprehensible occurrence: 'It may seem trivializing – even obscene – to talk about movies in the same breath as this week's tragedy, but the fact that so many people did was a symptom of our inability to get our minds around this disaster, our inability to find real-life precedents, real-life analogies for what happened in the morning hours of Sept. 11' (2001). According to this line of argument, Hollywood's rich repertoire of images provided a readily accessible frame of reference to process and to communicate an experience for which no analogy existed in the

historical memory of the American nation. 'Is this method of pop cultural compensation a bad thing?' cultural critic Bernie Heidkamp asked himself on the day of the event; and he replied with another rhetorical question: 'Is there any other way for us to begin to grasp – or describe – the enormity of the attacks? Ours is, after all, a country that has not been damaged, in our lifetime, by war or natural catastrophe on the level we are now witnessing' (2001).

While this suggests a successful assimilation of the event, a coming to terms *with* it by finding terms *for* it, other commentators emphasised that references to Hollywood films were often accompanied by expressions of disbelief. Among the witnesses who made statements to this effect was an unidentified woman in New York: 'This is very surreal. Well, it's out of a bad sci-fi film, but every morning we wake up and you're like it wasn't a dream. It actually happened' (quoted in Nacos 2002: 35). For Richard Jackson, such statements testify to a 'deep confusion and a genuine sense of epistemic anxiety', caused by 'the blurring of the lines between the virtual and the real world' (2005: 30). This would contradict the more optimistic approach according to which cinematic analogies gave shocked and bewildered witnesses cognitive support (and, hence, relief), suggesting instead that the perceived correspondences were an essential part of the *horror* of the situation. If this is correct, then the uncanny effects were certainly increased by the fact that, of all cinematic forms, it was the most outrageous science fiction that came closest to the reality of 9/11.

In 1996, gigantic saucer-shaped spacecraft hovering above American landmark buildings signalled the return of the alien invader to the cinema screen. Despite its stereotypical characterisation, questionable plot turns, and undisguised jingoism, Roland Emmerich's heavily marketed *Independence Day* became the highest-grossing film of the year. Strongly derivative in nature, it uses elements of several classic B-movies. From the George Pal-produced *The War of the Worlds* (1953), it borrows the device (originating in Wells's novel) of making the otherwise invincible invaders susceptible to infection – though in this case, it is a computer virus rather than bacteria that vanquishes the aliens. Even more notable is a reference to a lesser-known classic of the alien-invasion genre, Fred F. Sears's *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (1956). During that film's climactic battle scene – graced by Ray Har-

ryhausen's pioneering stop-motion animation – the aliens fire their ray guns and crash their saucers into several symbols of democracy in Washington, DC, including the Capitol dome. *Independence Day* transformed this groundbreaking sequence into the simultaneous attack on three American cities, each time beginning with the destruction of one iconic edifice. The explosion of the White House in particular has left a lasting imprint on the cinematic memory, not least because it was featured in the film's famous teaser trailer, first shown – to great effect – during the Superbowl.

Independence Day was the first in a whole series of science fiction films that combined 1950s plot elements with post-*Jurassic Park* digital wonders: *Deep Impact*, *Godzilla*, and *Armageddon*, all of which premiered in 1998, equally borrowed their premises from 1950s models, using updated versions of familiar plots as vehicles for state-of-the-art special effects. The close of the twentieth century thus saw the revival of three seemingly obsolete science fiction subgenres, which had previously been linked by film historians to specific Cold War interests and concerns: the alien invasion film, the monster movie (or creature feature), and the end-of-the-world picture. All three share a strong emphasis on the theme of urban disaster. In what remains one of the most perceptive studies of the topic, Susan Sontag recognised as early as 1961 that 'the science fiction film ... is concerned with the aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess' (1967: 213). The late-1990s representatives of the genre renewed and reinforced that motif, showing a conspicuous preference for downtown New York and its iconic structures. Again and again, the Empire State Building, the Chrysler building, and the towers of the World Trade Center were either severely damaged or completely demolished, burying streets, cars, and people beneath them. In a tacit competition among studios over the most jaw-dropping devastation scene, every film attempted to outdo its predecessors in the sheer magnitude of the destruction displayed – and in the technological sophistication of its visual effects.

If the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon put a – temporary – end to this competition, they did so by apparently following a very similar logic of outbidding. As film critic Neal Gabler wrote a few days after 9/11:

In a sense, this was the terrorists' own real-life disaster movie – bigger than 'Independence Day' or 'Godzilla' or 'Armageddon', and in the bizarre competition among terrorists, bigger even than Timothy J. McVeigh's own real-life horror film in Oklahoma City, heretofore the standard. You have to believe at some level it was their rebuff to Hollywood as well as their triumph over it – they could out-Hollywood Hollywood.

(2001)

Three years previously, Gabler had set out to demonstrate in *Life: The Movie* 'how entertainment conquered reality', putting forth the thesis that Americans increasingly perceive and fashion the world according to the familiar patterns of movie entertainment (1998). His own statement on the 11 September attacks could be taken as an illustration of this thesis: while viewing the event through the lens of Hollywood 'entertainment', Gabler does not consider the possibility that there may be a more multi-faceted 'reality' beyond his necessarily limited vision. Because they are so obvious to him, he assumes – or rather postulates – that the filmic analogies were meticulously planned by the attackers and their co-conspirators in all their dramatic detail (although the terrible outcome of the plane crashes, the unprecedented collapse of two entire skyscrapers, could hardly have been foreseen and had not apparently been part of the plan). What Gabler disregards is that all inferences in this matter can only be tentative: film critics who can authoritatively discuss cinematic analogies to 9/11 cannot automatically claim insight into the minds of those who devised and executed the attacks.

Interestingly, even authors who are more qualified to make such assertions have come to the conclusion that the filmic dimension of 9/11 was deliberately achieved. In his February 2002 essay 'Roots of Terror', Iranian-German writer and Islamic scholar Navid Kermani argues that the ideological basis of the attacks drew from various heterogeneous sources, Islamic as well as non-Islamic. He describes the terrorists' agenda as 'a mixture incorporating anti-capitalism, the cult of martyrdom, Third World rhetoric, totalitarian ideology and science fiction'. Although he only incidentally touches upon the topic, Kermani too conjectures that the corresponding 'tales of science fiction' were 'probably familiar to the attackers' (2002). Following from there, Albrecht Koschorke calls for a 'political

analysis of the images of September 11', adding that 'despite all the analyses that have been accomplished in the meantime', such an investigation 'still has to allow itself to be unsettled by the fact that Islamic terror and Hollywood could meet in exactly the same symbolic field' (2005: 96, my translation). One part of this field, according to Koschorke, consists of shared traditions of anti-urbanism (2005: 99-101). It would be too short-sighted, though, to consider the cinematic destruction of metropolises only in terms of latent hostility to cities and their lifestyles. For such scenes greatly contributed to the symbolic over-determination and fetishisation of American cityscapes by directing the viewers' attention again and again to particular landmarks of economic and political power. In this sense at least, there can be little doubt that there is indeed a connection between Hollywood films and the attacks of 11 September 2001. For, as Heidkamp noted on the day of the attacks, 'it is, in part, the pop cultural representations that have made buildings such as the World Trade Center and the Pentagon iconic symbols of America' (2001).

III

Significantly, however, the cinematic analogy was not only applied to the *targets* of the attacks and the *scene* of the disaster, but also to the *hijackers* themselves, even if this latter dimension of the analogy was not always as obvious as the former. As David Simpson remarks at the beginning of his study *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, the events of that day 'looked to many of us … like the work of agents so unfamiliar as to seem almost like aliens' (2006: 6). It was precisely in this sense that the attacks and their perpetrators were represented in official discourse. In their early public declarations, President Bush and his administration strongly reinforced the impression of 'alienness' by emphasising the radical alterity of the attackers. Jackson has meticulously reconstructed the various tropes used by government officials to describe the terrorists. As he demonstrates, the opponents in the 'war on terrorism' were conceived as evil and inhuman barbarians, leading a parasitical existence and being driven by an irrational hatred for 'civilisation', that is, Western democratic freedoms as epitomised by American society (Jackson 2005). Most relevant for the present discussion, the cinematic analogy soon ex-

tended to the domain of real politics, both in the construction of the enemy and in the political narratives that accompanied the war on terrorism.

There is general agreement among film historians that American science fiction subgenres such as the alien invasion film 'became popular entertainment during crisis moments' (Matthews 2007: 3). It is not difficult to establish such a connection for the first boom of the genre in the 1950s: the anti-Communist hysteria fuelled by Senator McCarthy's 'witch-hunts' and the omnipresent nuclear threat make it plausible to explain early Cold War scenarios of alien invasion with reference to contemporary fears (see, for example, Biskind 1983: 101-159). In this context, the anthropomorphic alien functioned as an allegorical substitute for real-life foes. But how are we to explain the fact that, after a relative absence of more than twenty years, the figure of the evil space invader came back just in time for the turn of the millennium? In a pre-9/11 study on the topic, Markus Koch considers 1990s alien invasion films as a response to the fundamentally changed geopolitical situation after the end of the Cold War, when political and cultural boundaries had to be newly defined and demarcated (2002). *Independence Day*, he argues, resonated with the vision of a 'new world order' – a vision made famous by George H.W. Bush on 11 September 1990, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, when the American president called for all nations of the earth to defend their interest in Persian Gulf oil together (Bush 1990). Emmerich's film takes this vision one step further by making Iraqi fighter pilots part of the force assembled to battle the aliens. The scene in the Iraqi desert in which British, Israeli, and Iraqi troops await American commands presents a *new* new world order – in which all mankind is united against an entirely different type of foe.

Accordingly, Koschorke suggests that films such as *Independence Day* have to be read as reflections of a 'political imaginary', through which America projected enemy figures and adjusted itself to a new, yet undefined threat. Emmerich's film, he argues, indicates that 'long before the [9/11] attacks, this country had been preparing itself for a faceless enemy, and that is to say: for a discourse of total othering' (2004: 104, my translation). In a sense, this 'faceless enemy' materialised on 9/11. The foreignness and alterity of the terrorists and their supporters were immediately underlined in political and legal discourse. On 29 October 2001,

three days after he had signed into law the USA Patriot Act, President George W. Bush directed the establishment of a Foreign Terrorist Tracking Task Force, which was to consist of members of various federal agencies and be headed by the Attorney General (see US Department of Homeland Security 2001). Two days later, Attorney General John Ashcroft informed the American public about his Department's preparations in this matter: '[A]s September the 11th vividly illustrates', he declared, 'aliens also come to our country with the intent to do great evil' (US Department of Justice 2001). While reading Ashcroft's speech, one cannot help noticing that, although the phrase used in the title of the task force is 'foreign terrorist', Ashcroft chooses the word 'alien' whenever he speaks of foreigners who threaten domestic security. The word appears no less than 23 times in the short text.

As legal scholar David Cole has demonstrated in his important book on the subject, 'terrorist alien' is the latest variation of the legal category of the 'enemy alien', whose genealogy can be traced to the time of the French Revolution (Cole 2003). At the outset of the undeclared naval war between the USA and France in the years 1798-1800, Federalist-controlled Congress passed a series of four laws designed to prevent 'alien' radicalism from spreading over to the United States and infecting the polity there. The fourth of these laws determined that in cases of war, 'all natives, citizens, denizens, or subjects of the hostile nation or government, being males of the age of fourteen years and upwards, shall be liable to be apprehended, restrained, secured and removed, as alien enemies' – for the sole reason of their nationality. Known as the Alien Enemies Act, this law is still in effect today (as Chapter 3 of Title 50 of the United States Code). It has repeatedly been invoked during wartime, most notoriously during World War Two: after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the category of the 'enemy alien' was extended to encompass all people of Japanese descent, including those who had already been naturalised, leading to mass internments of Japanese nationals as well as Japanese-Americans on purely ethnic grounds (Cole 2003: 91-100). In a parallel development, the category of the 'enemy alien' was redefined in such a way that it could also be applied in peacetime. This practice began after the anarchist bombings of 1919, during the so-called Palmer Raids, when thousands of suspected 'alien radi-

cals' were arrested and hundreds were deported (Cole 2003: 116-28). Cole mentions this and other controversial episodes in American legal history to make the point that the double standard implied in laws aimed exclusively at non-citizens is inconsistent with – and, indeed, a danger to – America's fundamental constitutional principles.

For Cole, the fact that detention and deportation have repeatedly been used against 'enemy aliens' is related to a long and persistent tradition of American nativism (2003: 90). As Richard Jackson emphasises, however, John Ashcroft's scenario of aliens 'com[ing] to our country with the intent to do great evil' does more than evoke xenophobic responses: it exploits the unavoidable ambiguity of the term 'alien' (2005: 71). This ambiguity has also been noticed by self-styled 'video-remixer' TV Sheriff, who used it for comic effect in a short clip released on YouTube (see TV Sheriff Channel 2006) and later included on the artist's first DVD. Leaving Ashcroft's statement unchanged, TV Sheriff modified the caption to 'America's New War: Ashcroft announces new measures against alien space-people' and added appropriate illustrations of various extraterrestrials – supposedly showing the different types of 'aliens' mentioned by the Attorney General. This satirical response seems to corroborate Jackson's contention that:

> American officials cannot use the term 'alien' without their listeners recalling – at least at a subconscious level – hundreds of movies, television programmes, comics, novels and radio broadcasts (such as *War of the Worlds*) where space aliens attacked, invaded or subverted society from within. In a society immersed in the movie mythology of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Alien*, *Predator*, *Independence Day* and *The X-Files*, the meaning of the term 'alien terrorist' oscillates between 'extra-terrestrial parasite' and 'foreign enemy' without any sense of the absurd.
>
> (2005: 71)

The most important aspect of the political narrativisation of the 11 September attacks was their interpretation as acts of war rather than crimes that could be prosecuted within the framework of international law. Some film critics have contended that this interpretation was not simply imposed upon the American public

by pro-war propaganda (as Jackson seems to suggest), but that there was a general disposition to accept the readings offered by Bush, Ashcroft, and other government officials. In the words of one critic, it was 'American blockbuster movies [that] laid the groundwork for the public's response to the event as the beginning of war' (Bell-Metereau 2003: 143-44). This would imply that the interpretation of 9/11 in terms of conventional warfare followed the logic of an already established cinematic analogy – and that the narrative pattern was thus predefined.

What is certain, in any case, is that the official responses to the attacks reinforced the perceived cinematic analogy (whether deliberately or not) and that the cinematographic subtext remained an essential part of how the war on terrorism was represented. From a discourse analytical perspective, the alien invasion motif seems particularly well suited for post-9/11 counterterrorism discourse, and it is therefore not surprising that it has been incorporated – in various ways – into the different narratives developed to create support for the government's measures. Sontag's reflections on early Cold War science fiction are once more instructive here. 'Again and again', she writes in her 1961 essay, 'one detects [in these films] the hunger for a "good war," which poses no moral problems, admits of no moral qualifications' (1967: 219). In Byron Haskin's *The War of the Worlds* (1953), the prototypical alien invasion film, America is attacked on its own soil, without provocation and without forewarning, by a faceless enemy who wreaks havoc on defenceless civilians. Against such an antagonist, all military measures are permissible. The US Army may even drop an 'A-bomb', less than ten years after Hiroshima. Whereas the genre's 'ur-text', Wells's Victorian novel *The War of the Worlds*, compared the Martian incursion with the extermination of the native Tasmanians (see Wells 2005: 9), casting the aliens as a distorted mirror image of European industrial powers in the period of high imperialism, most alien invasion films are unequivocal about the absolute otherness of the antagonist. As director Paul Verhoeven succinctly phrased it: 'Alien sci-fi films give us a terrifying enemy that's politically correct. They're bad. They're evil. And they're not even human' (quoted in Corliss 1996). Accordingly, there is no doubt in these films about the legitimacy of retaliation.

In *Independence Day*, US President Thomas Whitmore – a former Gulf War pilot – initially refuses to resort to the atomic option. He soon realises, however, that all attempts at diplomacy fall on deaf ears. Connecting itself to the body of a murdered scientist to express itself in human language, a captured alien categorically rejects the President's peace offer. When asked 'What is it you want us to do?', it twice replies 'Die.' At this point, communication continues in telepathic – and hence inaudible – form, as the alien forcefully enters the President's mind. Like the characters in the film, the viewer depends entirely on the reliability of the President, who offers the following summary of his insights:

> I saw his thoughts. I saw what they're planning to do. They're like locusts. They're moving from planet to planet. Their whole civilization. After they've consumed every natural resource they move on. And we're next.

Following this epiphanic realisation, the President loses his scruples concerning the use of nuclear weapons: 'Nuke 'em. Let's nuke the bastards'. On 11 September 2001, it was similarly the President who first claimed insight into the minds of the attackers. No declaration of responsibility had been issued, but Bush knew exactly what the principal target of the attack had been: the American 'way of life, our very freedom' (2001a). When enemies neither show their face nor declare their political goals, negotiations are out of the question. In such cases, warfare is the only viable option, as Bush immediately made clear: 'Our military is powerful, and it's prepared' (2001a). Unlike his fictional counterpart in *Independence Day*, Bush the former F-101 jet pilot never flew a mission against the enemy. But on 1 May 2003 he notoriously landed in the co-pilot seat of an S-3B Viking on the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln* (CNN 2003). His dramatic tailhook landing, his emergence from the cockpit in flying gear, and his speech under the banner 'Mission Accomplished' were nationally televised.

As Susan Sontag notes, even the most bellicose alien invasion film usually combines the 'hunger for a "good war"' with a 'yearning for peace, or for at least peaceful coexistence'. The theme of interplanetary warfare then goes hand in hand with what she terms a 'UN fantasy, a fantasy of united warfare', in which 'the war-

ring nations of the earth come to their senses and suspend their own conflicts' (1967: 219-20). Once again, Sontag's analysis of 1950s B-movies reads like a description of *Independence Day*, albeit with one import important exception: in Emmerich's film, there is no need for time-consuming UN diplomacy. All nations of the earth quickly unite under American leadership – even Arabs and Israelis overcome their enmity and fight side by side – prompting the American President to declare a world-wide Independence Day. Is 'Operation Infinite Justice', as it was initially called, not a very similar fantasy?

<div align="center">IV</div>

In his review of Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*, British film critic Kevin Maher remarks that 'there is something fundamentally paradoxical, and frankly odd, about Spielberg employing the very genre that he helped to establish and that supposedly contributed to 9/11 in an attempt to explain the meaning of 9/11 itself' (2005). I would make the opposite argument: whereas Spielberg's choice of genre is quite consistent with public discourse on 9/11, it in no way endeavours to 'explain the meaning' of the event – if by 'meaning' we understand its causes, contexts, and aims.

The film's release was accompanied by numerous press conferences and interviews in which the director and his screenwriters emphasised their deliberate evocation of post-9/11 fears. On one of these occasions, before the film's premiere in Tokyo, Spielberg stated that his version of Wells's novel intended to reflect America's deep 'unease' following the 11 September attacks (quoted in *Tonight* 2005). This, he continued, was not the first time that Wells's original story had been updated to speak to contemporary issues. In 1938, Orson Welles famously caused panic across the US when radio listeners mistook his dramatisation of *The War of the Worlds* for an authentic news report about an ongoing Martian invasion of central New Jersey and New York City (Cantril 2005). 'The radio show happened just before World War Two', Spielberg commented: 'Everybody in America was nervous about Hitler and what was happening in Eastern Europe.' Similarly, he added that when George Pal turned *The War of the Worlds* into a

movie, his film reflected anxieties over the Cold War. Accordingly, both Welles's radio play and Pal's film are 'relevant because they've occurred at a time of history when there was great unease in the world' (quoted in *Tonight* 2005). As Spielberg implies, the same also holds for his own 2005 film.

The film's references to the events of 11 September 2001 take two forms, occurring either at the level of plot or at the level of imagery. The visual references are both more numerous and more striking. As several critics have noted, images that have engrained themselves in the minds of television viewers all over the world recur in the film, sometimes as 'almost literal visual quotes' (Wolff 2008: 189; see also Gordon 2007: 260-62; Thompson 2007: 146-48.). If it was not for the presence of actor Tom Cruise in the frame, the shot of a wall plastered with home-made missing person posters could hardly be distinguished from authentic New York footage from the days after the attacks. Other references are more indirect. At the beginning of the alien attack, a panicked crowd runs away from the tripod's heat-ray, bringing to mind images of New Yorkers fleeing from the rubble of the collapsing towers. When Spielberg's protagonist comes home, he is covered in the ashes of the victims who were incinerated around him – a somewhat macabre reminder of the dust-covered people who emerged from the debris cloud in lower Manhattan. In a similar fashion, the shot of clothes floating from the sky recalls the moment after the World Trade Center had been hit, when office paper filled the air and people trapped in the upper floors fell or jumped to their deaths. In an earlier scene, a Boeing 747 crashes into the neighbourhood in which the protagonist and his two children have found refuge. The site of the disaster – a roofless and shattered plane amidst the rubble of destroyed houses – restages the smouldering ruins at Ground Zero with their twisted metal beams and broken slabs of concrete.

At the story level, the film makes some important modifications to Wells's original invasion scenario. In the 1898 novel, the Martians are shot to Earth in huge cylinders and it is in the pits caused by the impact that they begin to assemble their tripods. Although the Martian fighting-machines eventually emerge from below the ground, the incursion is conceived as an attack from 'above.' The science fiction films of the 1950s further accentuated this theme, which resonated

with both a growing belief in UFOs and the very real threat of enemy missiles. One of the earliest representatives of the genre, 1951's *The Thing from Another World*, famously ended with a warning to the 'world' (both inside and outside of the film): 'Tell this to everybody wherever they are: Watch the skies. Everywhere. Keep looking. Keep watching the skies' (quoted in Matthews 2007: 14).

Spielberg's film shows signs of a different kind of paranoia. In this post-9/11 version of Wells's tale, the alien machines are already on Earth, '"sleeper" tripods' waiting to be activated when the time is ripe (Thompson 2007: 147). When the aliens finally 'come down' during a lightning storm, they merely continue an invasion that might have been planned 'for a million years', the machines having been buried 'before the first people were here' (Friedman and Koepp 2005: sc. 58A and sc. 188). Accordingly, one of the taglines used to advertise the film was 'They're already here.' Designed to evoke post-9/11 fears of terrorist sleeper cells, this teaser signalled the advent of a new type of enemy: one who comes from outside, but who, in a sense, is already among us. The introduction of this new type of antagonist is clearly related to the fact that prior to the September 2001 attacks, all four pilots had lived and received flight training in the US. Where the 1953 film linked the alien invasion to apprehensions of a Soviet 'sneak attack', Spielberg's 2005 *War of the Worlds* is set in an America whose citizens live in fearful expectation of the next terrorist bombing. After a tripod has risen up from beneath the streets of Bayonne, New Jersey, and begun to wreak havoc on the town, the protagonist's eleven-year-old daughter inquires: 'Is it the terrorists?!' (Friedman and Koepp 2005: sc. 43), the definite article indicating a real-life referent. The following exchange between the protagonist, Ray, and his son Robbie situates the film's action in a new global geopolitical environment:

Robbie: ... *Is* it terrorists?
Ray: No. This came from some place else.
Robbie: What do you mean, like, Europe?

<div align="right">(Friedman and Koepp 2005: sc. 46)</div>

As outrageous as the notion of giant war machines from outer space may be, the children's responses suggest that the destruction of American cityscapes no longer belongs to the realm of filmic extravaganza: similar things have really happened. On 11 September 2001, television viewers all over the world had seen what authentic footage from a site of disaster looked like; and it is this footage that the film deliberately calls to mind. To enhance this effect, Spielberg's cinematographer repeatedly uses hand-held cameras, emulating the shaky camcorder footage from the scene of the 9/11 bombings. One shot shows the incineration of a victim on the LCD screen of an abandoned camcorder.

It has been suggested that Spielberg's film places American citizens in the position of the Iraqi population during the 2003 'shock and awe' bombings of Baghdad (Friedman 2006: 159). Even if such readings are explicitly supported by screenwriter David Koepp (see Feld 2005: 142), the film's primary purpose is clearly to re-enact a specifically American experience: the historically unprecedented attack against US civilians on US territory on 11 September 2001. The figure of the alien invader is by definition over-determined (partly due to the 'memory' of the genre, which necessarily evokes earlier uses of that figure). To cast the aliens as both terrorists and American invaders, however, illustrates the dilemmas of what David Holloway characterises as 'Hollywood allegory lite': 'a commercial aesthetic so packed with different hooks pitched at different audience groups that a degree of aesthetic and narrative fragmentation has become intrinsic to the way Hollywood tells its stories today, particularly the blockbuster'. Holloway continues:

> In Hollywood allegory lite, controversial issues can be safely addressed because they must be 'read off' other stories by the viewer; while the 'allegory' is sufficiently loose or 'lite', and the other attractions on offer are sufficiently compelling or diverse, that viewers can enjoy the film without needing to engage at all with the risky 'other story' it tells.
>
> (2008: 83)

Summoning the image of New Yorkers 'fleeing across the George Washington Bridge in the shadow of 9/11', Spielberg himself explained that his film was

'about Americans fleeing for their lives, being attacked for no reason, having no idea why they are being attacked and who is attacking them' (quoted in Chau 2005). It is notable that this explanation fails to mention either the perpetrators or their possible motives, echoing – and, implicitly, affirming – a particular kind of discourse on the attacks of 9/11: because America is literally attacked out of the blue (and 'for no reason'), there is no need for reconsidering the country's military and political entanglements in the Middle East. And the same is true for *War of the Worlds*, in which the causes of the invasion remain completely obscure.

In the wake of 9/11, the question arose as to whether the perceived similarities between the scenes of that day and Hollywood imagery were perhaps not accidental. Five weeks after the incident, veteran director Robert Altman exhorted his fellow filmmakers to reconsider their routine indulgence in violence and mass destruction. Drawing a direct connection between the attacks and American blockbusters, Altman asserted that the latter had clearly served as a template and inspiration for the former: 'Nobody would have thought to commit an atrocity like that unless they'd seen it in a movie. [...] The movies set the pattern, and these people have copied the movies' (quoted in BBC 2001c). Film critic Richard von Busack even went so far as to speculate about a possible paradigm shift in Hollywood: 'Maybe the attack will knock an entire moviemaking style out of existence. It would be no loss: action movies are decadent and baroque now, in need of some clever new approach' (Busack 2001).

As we know today, the expectation that Hollywood film would undergo a radical change was to be short-lived. Like several other prognostications made in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, it over-estimated the cultural impact of the event. There was a brief period in which releases were postponed on thematic grounds – Arnold Schwarzenegger's skirmish with Colombian terrorists in *Collateral Damage* providing the most famous example – and in which re-shoots and re-edits were made for New York-set films showing the Twin Towers, such as *Men in Black II* (Hoberman 2001), but it only took four years for the alien invader to return to the cinema screen. And, what is more, it was a film of this very genre that was marketed and received as 'the first genuine post-9/11 blockbuster' (Maher 2005). In some ways, Spielberg's film marked a return to business

as usual. Far from renouncing the representation of disaster, as some critics had prophesied, Hollywood did what it had always done: it adapted popular genres to the needs of the moment. Thus, *War of the Worlds* showed computer-generated scenes of urban devastation, even if it purposely avoided the 'destruction of famous landmarks'. According to co-writer David Koepp, this was one of the things he and director Steven Spielberg felt they 'shouldn't have in the movie'; it was also agreed that the film would not feature any 'shots of Manhattan getting the crap kicked out of it'.[2]

Although it relocates the disaster to suburban New Jersey, however, Spielberg's film still makes ample use of 9/11 imagery. As Holloway observes, 'the extent to which it force[s] audiences to re-experience 9/11 empathetically through encounters with that imagery, ma[kes] it much harder to concentrate on other aspects of the film' (2008: 92). At the same time – and more problematically – *War of the Worlds* echoes the political construction of America's new enemy within the generic code of alien invasion. In doing so, it does not bluntly equate aliens and terrorists; yet it nevertheless presupposes that the experience of 9/11 can be evoked by means of the space invader metaphor. While the film may be said to critique certain aspects of post-9/11 counterterrorism policies by emphasising the futility of military intervention, its critical stance is undercut by the fact that it reproduces one basic premise of official counterterrorism discourse: the radical othering of the enemy. This othering is based on a refusal to look beyond the 'alienness' of terrorists at the complicated connections that tie 'us' to 'them' and that make the post-9/11 present part of a longer history – a history, it should be noted, that happens outside of movie theatres.

Notes

1 In the online version of his essay, which appeared only four days after the attacks, Žižek read pre-9/11 disaster films in terms of an imaginary anticipation – and libidinal investment – of America's forced awakening to the 'desert of the Real'. His main argument (which was much elaborated for the now better-known printed version of the essay) was that the movie-like images of 9/11 had penetrated and shattered a First-World conception of reality based on the system of 'VIRTUAL

capitalism' (epitomised by the Twin Towers), a system which had thought itself insulated from the Third-World 'sphere of material production' (2001). Baudrillard, for his part, considered disaster movies as an indication that the catastrophe had been secretly wished for, 'because no one can avoid dreaming of the destruction of any power that has become hegemonic to this degree' (2003: 5).

[2] See 'Production Notes: *War of the Worlds*', 2005, www.waroftheworld.com/productionnotes/index.html.