

Hollywood and the Rhetoric of Panic:



The Popular Genres of Action and Fantasy in the Wake of the 9/11 Attacks

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Abstract: Modern terrorism and disaster film share a common emotional strategy: the dramatic impact on audiences through formulas of panic, *phobos* in classical tragedy. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Hollywood has experienced a new refurbishment of popular genres, especially of the traditional master plots of invasion and catastrophe in action, science fiction, and fantasy. This phenomenon has allowed directors and screenwriters to develop themes on latent social fear between 2001 and 2008 and its connections with issues such as the conflict between national security and civil liberties, the risk of xenophobia and entrenchment, or the consequences of preventive war.

Keywords: Hollywood, 9/11, popular genres, security, social trauma, terrorism

The attack at the Munich Olympics in 1972, transmitted by television via satellite to the world, was the first example of a terrorist act providing the rhetoric of a show for the masses. The tactic involved creating a dramatic effect that operated directly on each spectator. In appealing to the “gods of television,” as was revealed in a later communication (Dobson and Paine, qtd. in Weimann 69), the terrorists were following the strategy of the tragic genre established by Aristotle twenty-three centuries ago in *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, as valid in classical theater as it is in cinema. The strategy consists in the catharsis or purification of the audience through a double feeling of panic (*phobos*) and compassion (*eleos*) when faced with the fate of the story’s protagonists.

On 11 September 2001, this symbiosis between terrorism and visual spectacle was reproduced, this time with greater dimensions, in the real settings of New York City and Washington, D.C. Madrid and London had a similar experience with the attacks of 3/11 2004 and 7/7 2005. For American and European citizens, who were only accustomed to

From *War of the Worlds* (Stephen Spielberg, 2005).

perceiving catastrophe through the media or as a viewer of entertainment, the intrusion of terror into their everyday world broke the barriers between fiction and real life to introduce *phobos* as a fruit of a tangible threat.

In the course of the subsequent debate over the cinematic treatment of 9/11, Robert Thompson, director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University, defends the thesis that a filmic re-creation of the tragedy would provoke a positive effect of catharsis on the audience and would reflect the heroic part of the population. At the same time, it would open a route of reflection on the political reaction after the attacks, with particular reference to the war in Iraq. “In some ways—explains Thompson—these movies are reflecting a need to look back at why these other events started, to show American history in a more heroic light when it looks quite dark now” (Harris and O’Keeffe 34).

Fiction Genres in Cinematography

However, with the exception of productions such as *United 93* or *World Trade Center*, from Paul Greengrass and Oliver Stone, cinematic reconstructions of 9/11, 3/11, and 7/7 have not proliferated between 2001 and 2009. Moreover, in 2006, the year when Greengrass and Stone released their films, a *USA Today*/Gallup Poll revealed that roughly one in three Americans said they were likely to see films depicting events based on 9/11, five years after the attacks (Carroll 42).

In the face of scarce treatment through dramatic re-creations, Hollywood seemed to opt for fiction when tackling the questions posed by Thompson through popular genres such as the science fiction thriller, fantasy, or even dramas on historic scenarios prior to 9/11. In these fictional works, though direct references to the tragic day are avoided, there is a hypothetical discourse of contribution to the political debate, and often solutions are suggested to alleviate the social fractures, but always in the guise of entertainment. In an article appeared in 2004 about Hollywood and 9/11, David Puttnam made a bitter denunciation:

Too often over the past 20-odd years, film-makers have failed to tap the emotional power of their medium, especially its ability to portray the world around us—either as it is, or as it has been. For the most part it fails to offer us any useful lessons. After 11 September, a number of writers noted that the dreadful images witnessed that day seemed to have more in common with a contemporary movie than any imagined reality. (38)

Nevertheless, action and fantasy should have become valid genres in an effort to depict the “real world” after 2001 and its human and social conflicts, also demonstrating that “the most important role of the film-maker is to help

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explain the ambiguities and complexities of life” (Puttnam 38), as the British producer reminded.

Between 2001 and 2008, Steven Spielberg shapes up as one of the most sensitized Hollywood directors to the social fault lines caused by 9/11 and has proved this in four feature films belonging to popular genres of fiction: *Minority Report* (2002), *The Terminal* (2004), *War of the Worlds* (2005), and *Munich* (2006). In offering his reflections on American society post-9/11, Spielberg has remained in the field of creative fiction and has kept away from settings like Manhattan’s Ground Zero or the Pentagon building, unlike directors such as Greengrass, Stone, or Michael Moore in the terrain of documentary (*Bowling for Columbine*, 2002, and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, 2004).

Independent of the diversity of plots, genres, and settings, Spielberg’s hypo-



From *World Trade Center* (dir. Oliver Stone, 2006).

thetical discourse can be summed up in five proposals for reflection: the controversy between national security and civil liberties; the risk of xenophobia and entrenchment in North American society; the self-destructive effect derived from a situation of permanent panic in the face of external threats; the implications of a preventative war on both a national and international level and in the familiar and social levels, and finally, the human and social cost of the spiral of violence-vengeance.

Taking the Spielberg titles as a reference, one could trace a study of social panic as a dramatic element and key for reflection within the popular cinematic genres between 2001 and 2009.

National Security versus Civil Liberties

The conflict between national security and civil liberties is one of the underlying themes in *Minority Report*. This science fiction thriller, based on a story by Philip K. Dick published in

1956, recounts the efforts of John Anderton, a Washington, D.C., cop in the mid-twenty-first century, to avoid future crimes thanks to the visions of three oracles installed in sophisticated quarters of the State Department. This is under the umbrella of a project called Pre-Crime, which is considered infallible, and enables the arrest of future convicts who are then given life sentences and reduced to unconscious vegetables, while images of their uncommitted crimes are played to them in the form of induced dreams. The system's efficiency has meant that crime has fallen to such an extent as to have almost disappeared, and as a consequence, society enjoys a state of permanent safety. However, the members of this community are constantly watched, they lack privacy, and the presumption of innocence has disappeared from the legal system forever.

Spielberg filmed *Minority Report* one year after the Patriot Act became law. The act was driven by the Attorney General John Ashcroft at the request of President George W. Bush to avoid a new 9/11 and extended the national struggle against terrorism outside the country's borders. As Ashcroft himself repeated in a conference seven years later, "Liberty is the central premise. Security for liberty" (Tam). For his part, the director made the following reflection the same year his film came out, months after the attacks:

Right now, people are willing to give away a lot of their freedoms in order to feel safe. They're willing to give the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. far-reaching powers to, as George W. Bush often says, root out those individuals who are a danger to our way of living. I am on the president's side in this instance. I am willing to give up some of my personal freedoms in order to stop 9/11 from ever happening again. But the question is, Where do you draw the line? How much freedom are you willing to give up? That is what this movie is about. (Lyman 17)

The question of prevention of terror for the protection of the nation and the associated risk to basic rights was precisely the one Dick denounced in his story in the mid-1950s, right in the middle of Cold War paranoia, the nuclear threat derived from the Korean

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conflict, and the witch hunt undertaken by Senator McCarthy. Unlike Dick's story, Spielberg's film ends with the destruction of Pre-Crime and the absolution of those punished for crimes that, in reality, they had never committed. The awakening of the prisoners in the film refers to the liberty obtained by Segismundo at the end of *Life Is a Dream*. In Pedro Calderón de la Barca's drama, a prince is condemned to spend his life in a dungeon, drugged and incapable of distinguishing dream from wakefulness, to avoid the fulfillment of a terrible horoscope. In both the play and the film, the theme of individual liberty as a basic right, based on personal dignity and as a key to social relations, is discussed.

Another idea expressed in *Minority Report* consists of the deterioration of social and state structures in the face of the restriction of liberties, motivated by a legislation that is alienated by the prevention of crime: the Pre-Crime department based all of its legality on *pre-judgements*. The film shows a dystopian future marked by the asphyxia of a police state, in the strict sense of the term, and reigned over by an abusive authority. In Spielberg's film, the fate of society and the agent himself runs parallel toward liberation, symbolized in the opening of eyes and becoming aware of reality.

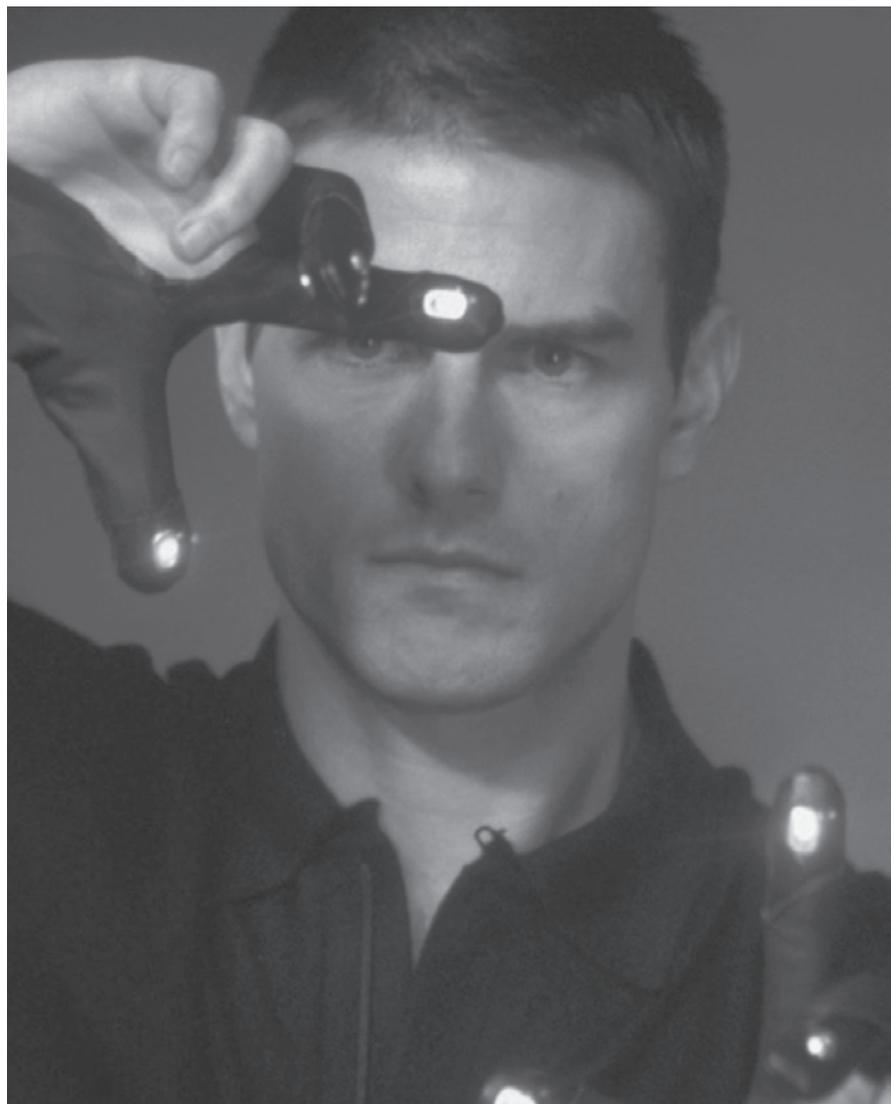
Anderton, who has become a fugitive and victim of the system, has an eye transplant to change his identity and elude its controls: a sign of the new vision that he acquires on the immorality

of Pre-Crime but also the change that takes place in his hopeful manner of facing life. In *Minority Report* there is a use of the eyes and vision as thematic symbols that emphasize the ideas of seeing, observing, watching, and foreseeing. To begin with, the oracles are seers at the service of a police state. Anderton subjects himself to an eye transplant, and his practically nonexistent privacy is reduced to the compulsive viewing of holographic videos of a lost son; the punishment of the condemned by the state consists in the repetition of the images of their crimes. A drug trafficker lacking eyeballs says ironically to Anderton that "in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is King."

Of all the sight-related metaphors in the film, perhaps the most significant is that introduced in the first sequence. It shows a child doing schoolwork and cutting out a mask with the face of Abraham Lincoln at the precise moment that he takes his scissors to the eyes of the symbolic North American president, champion of the abolitionist movement.

The Internal Threat in 1990s Cinema

The inefficiency of the authorities in the prevention of terrorism (the opposite of the case contemplated by Spielberg) is a theme that is dealt with frequently in Hollywood productions throughout the 1990s. Society's psychosis of insecurity



From *Minority Report* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2002).

city, lack of protection, and uncertainty were the object of reflection of many film plots in which the threat does not come from external agents but from the very heart of society, either through terrorist sleeper cells among the population or uncontrolled factions of the administration itself, a favorite in conspiracy theories.

Arlington Road (1999), which came out in the United States with the eloquent subtitle “Your Paranoia is Real,” presents an atmosphere of mistrust, insecurity, and latent danger, in which the immediate threat comes not from outside agents but dwells within the borders of the country. At the same time, the film flags the official versions as yet another element of the ceremony of confusion in conspiracy theories.

The attack on the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995 had drawn the attention of Hollywood from the external threat to the interior one. However, titles like *The Siege* (1998) and *Path to Paradise* (1997) highlighted Islamic terrorism, sparking even more protest from the Muslim communities in the United States against a stereotype that had been overexploited by action films since the 1980s. As Phillip Jenkins explains, the film studios attempted to show a profile of a terrorist villain that would not attract the fury of active national groups:

One safe course was to choose groups with no obvious ideology or ethnic affiliation, generic “mad bombers” like in *Speed*, or the hijackers in *Passenger 57*. In the 1996 film *Independence Day*, we see scenes of mass destruction in New York and Washington that, in retrospect, uncomfortably foreshadowed September 11; but these fictional attacks were launched by aliens from another planet. (160)

Hollywood had also diverted its attention at that time to villains proceeding from the state apparatus itself, typical of conspiracy theories. This common ground—which arose in the 1970s during the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the Brezhnev era—was better suited to the liberal cliché of the threat coming from state sources, intelligence agencies, or military commanders, and proliferated for three decades through productions such as *Three Days*

of the Condor (1975), *The Parallax View* (1974), or more recently, *Wag the Dog* (1997) and *Conspiracy Theory* (1997). On the other hand, in films such as *Under Siege* (1992), *The Rock* (1996), and *Broken Arrow* (1996), the villains took the form of CIA agents, members of military intelligence, and high-ranking renegade officials who were capable of committing terrorist acts against the civilian population.

The image of the federal building in Oklahoma came to inspire a similar catastrophe in *The X Files* (1998), the plot of which presents a threat from paranormal sources. Even so, the final words of *Path to Paradise*, a re-creation of the failed 1993 attack on the World Trade Center, conclude with a phrase of worrying verisimilitude pronounced by the terrorist Ramzi Youssef while he diverts his gaze toward the Twin Towers: “Next time, we will bring them both down.”

Xenophobia and Entrenchment

In the wake of 9/11, the public’s fear was turned necessarily to the exterior and showed the risks of xenophobia and entrenchment in certain sectors of the North American population.

Thus, Peter Stearnes points out the fear of invasion and the foreign threat as one of the specific indications of endemic American fear (74).

In October 2001, following the passing of the Patriot Act, the American Civil Liberties Union denounced the possible injury caused to foreign citizens: “The legislation includes clauses which could allow the mistreatment of immigrants, the suppression of criticism and investigation, and the surveillance of completely innocent citizens” (“ACLU”). The deterioration of values of social coexistence between different ethnic groups had already been warned of in productions such as *Falling Down* (1993), *Grand Canyon* (1991), *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *Forrest Gump* (1994), and *The End of Violence* (1997), which denounced individualism, fear, and hostility as reactions to racial, ethnic, and religious otherness. In the wake of the attacks, this Hollywood trend continues to develop an integral focus thorough titles such as *Crash* (2006) or *Freedom*

Writers (2008): two stories that take place in one city, Los Angeles, considered a paradigm of the socially deconstructed North American metropolis, where cultures collide rather than meet.

Again, in an allegorical tone, in *The Terminal* (2004) Spielberg deals with the North American reaction to otherness as a consequence of the latent fear sparked by 9/11 and translated into legal terms. The film tells the surreal story of Viktor Navorski, subject of the imaginary republic of Krakozhia, who disembarks at one of the terminals of John F. Kennedy International Airport. Bewilderingly, the authorities deny him entry to the United States to visit Manhattan. “America is closed,” insists Frank Dixon, second-in-command of customs and zealous observer of international bylaws. Far from becoming fearful in the face of his misfortune, Navorski decides to wait for his luck to change and in the meantime makes his home in the premises of JFK airport.

In this melodrama, Spielberg denounces the legal barriers faced by foreigners trying to fit into North American society in the wake of 9/11. On the other hand, the director presents Navorski as a sort of anonymous hero, bearer of human and social values in which North America no longer seems to believe.

Through the thriller genre, [*The Village*] draws an allegory of American society entrenched within its own borders, dominated by a culture of panic that has ended up transplanting its fear of otherness to the legal plane.

If *Minority Report* moved in the pessimistic terrain of a dystopian future, *The Terminal* strikes a Capraesque tone in pointing out the beneficial contribution of the immigrant. The alien Navorski makes an effort to integrate in his juridical limbo, learns English, and strikes up relationships with other employees in the building, foreigners like him, who become his true family.

Alongside this social aspect of the script, Spielberg also develops a legal aspect through the steadfastness that the stranger maintains against the new U.S. legislation. Here we find the second element of connection with Frank Capra's titles during the optimism of the New Deal, particularly *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. If Smith managed to paralyze the entire legislative machine of the Capitol with a simple strategy at the same time as teaching us a lesson about the true values of citizenship; Navorski manages to make fun of the new spirit of the Patriot Act to teach citizens who live on the other side of customs principles of coexistence that had been lost long before 9/11. Roger Ebert describes the protagonist of *The Terminal* as a guy who does not correspond to the image of the invader shaped by the collective imagination and established by the preventative law:

Navorski is a man unlike any Dixon has ever encountered—a man who is exactly who he seems to be and claims to be. He has no guile, no hidden motives, no suspicion of others. He trusts. The airport, and indeed the American legal system, has no way of dealing with him because Viktor does not do, or fail to do, any of the things the system is set up to prevent him from doing, or not doing. He has slipped through a perfect logical loophole. *The Terminal* is like a sunny Kafka story in which it is the citizen persecutes the bureaucracy.

The Segregated Community

M. Night Shyamalan deals with this theme of social self-defense in *The Village* (2004), a thriller about a small, isolated community in a hamlet completely disconnected from the outside world and surrounded by a wood inhabited by ferocious creatures of superhuman nature: “Those We Do Not Speak Of.” The governing council of elders main-



From *The Village* (dir. M. Night Shyamalan, 2004).

tains a culture of fear among the inhabitants, aiming to safeguard their authority, guarantee security, and protect their isolation. The terror keeps the community united, even though it is based on deception. As we discover at the end of the film, the council of elders is made up of heads of families from urban nuclei who, having endured violence in the past, decided to create an isolated community in which they might live in peace. Even if they had achieved relative stability and happiness, the creation of a perfect, safe society through a culture of terror is revealed to be unsustainable, since the survival of the community depends on outside help.

The 9/11 metaphor is obvious in this tale by Shyamalan. Through the thriller

genre, the director draws an allegory of American society entrenched within its own borders, dominated by a culture of panic that has ended up transplanting its fear of otherness to the legal plane. The director also warns of the anachronism of this approach, which can cause North Americans to regress to the seventeenth century. At that time, European colonists such as the *Mayflower's* pilgrim fathers were establishing themselves on the East Coast to flee from persecution: a heroic deed of foundation in a new world where they could start a perfect civilization, even if the fear of the indigenous peoples or their own slaves would eventually mean the failure of the idyll. This phenomenon is also analyzed by Moore in *Bowling for Columbine*.

In another of his films, *Lady in the Water* (2006), Shyamalan tells a fairy tale in which the lead role is the warden of a community of neighbors in Philadelphia that gives shelter to a nymph from an aquatic world. The magical character has been sent to deliver a message to one of the neighbors, a writer, which is vital to human happiness. In the film, the community in the block comes to represent American society itself, made up of people of different races and cultures (Hispanic, Anglo-Saxon, African American, Eastern, and Asian), and all of them will become involved in the nymph's mission. In allegorical tone, at the end of his film Shyamalan shows a community that cooperates as one to build a promising future. In fact, the nymph is welcomed by a man, the warden, who lost his family to violence in an assault. At the same time, in the background of the film, the media makes constant allusions to the war in Iraq in a clear contrast with the message the magical person brings as well as with the attitude of the protagonist, which is neither hostile nor insecure.

Both the warden in *Lady in the Water* and the members of the council of elders in *The Village* have suffered attacks. One of the council elders asserts that "fear protects," but this posture turns out to be unworkable. In his fairytale, Shyamalan takes a step further and brings a valid response to the question of trauma, consisting in the reinforcement of social links.

Invasion and Preventative War

Four years after the attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., Spielberg revisited the theme of the threat to the citizenry in his film *War of the Worlds*. This involved taking up the plot of the novel of the same name by H. G. Wells, written in 1898, which tells of a Martian invasion of British territory. In 1953, Hollywood produced a first cinematic version directed by Byron Haskins, the plot of which centered on Los Angeles, although the collective lead role showed simultaneous lines of action in various locations on the planet. Spielberg's remake would place the epicenter and the invasion in New

Jersey, on the other side of the Hudson River: the same setting chosen by Orson Welles in the famous radio version of October 1938.

The image that stands out in my mind the most—explained Spielberg—was the image of everybody in Manhattan fleeing across the George Washington Bridge in the shadow of 9/11, which is something that was a searing image that I haven't been able to get out of my head. This is partially about the American refugee experience because it's certainly about Americans fleeing for their lives after being attacked for no reason, having no idea why they're being attacked and who is attacking them. (Aames)

In his third film after the attacks, the director dealt with the question of social panic directly, through a science fiction thriller of catastrophic proportions, in which the choice of an area close to New York City established an immediate relationship with that day in 2001. In fact, the most emblematic image of 9/11, the New York skyline with the Twin Towers burning, had been taken from the opposite side of the Hudson in New Jersey.

The new Spielberg title also makes an obligatory reference to the 1953 production, an era marked by society's psychosis in the face of threats against security and liberties: from the dangers of the Cold War, the infiltration of the Eisenhower administration by Soviet agents, and the Nazi Fifth Column in the Capitol, to the McCarthy witch hunts, the revelation of secrets of nuclear technology, and the launch of Sputnik in 1957. The director found a political and social climate similar to that which had played out half a century earlier, and the choice of the emblematic title *War of the Worlds* would not correspond to a simple re-creation of a fictional plot, particularly in a dramatic setting touched by a genuine catastrophe.

The *War of the Worlds* script, written by Josh Friedman and David Koepp, tells of the exploits of Ray Ferrier, a stevedore on the New Jersey docks who tries to save the lives of his two children on the weekend an extraterrestrial invasion takes place. The civil population's panic is shown in various dramatized images that are both spectacular

and apocalyptic: a terrific storm, the eruption of an alien tripod in an urban square, the fragment of a downed plane, corpses floating on a river, hysterical crowds, a burning train flashing past, the deadly pursuit of the extraterrestrials, and so forth.

In his study of the fantastical cinema of Spielberg, Andrew Gordon associates various situations of panic from *War of the Worlds* with the events of 9/11 (261). Thus, the continual flight of citizens is a reflection of the crowd that dispersed through the streets of Manhattan; the ashes of the humans touched by the extraterrestrials' rays fall on the protagonist, reminiscent of the images of New Yorkers covered in dust from the fallen towers; the remains of the crashed jet call to mind the falling of the United flight over Pennsylvania; the photos of the disappeared and the candles of homage to the victims remind us of the civilians killed in the attacks; and the decision of the young Robbie to join the army that is repelling the invasion is a similar gesture to that made by the thousands of adolescents who went to the enrollment offices to defend their country in 2001.

But more than a reflection of popular panic, Spielberg's version presents a meditation on the assault of a people, the North Americans, who had never before experienced one. The script allows various readings: "You can read our movie several ways. It could be straight 9/11 paranoia. Or it could be about how US military interventionism abroad is doomed by insurgency, just the way an alien invasion might be" (Barboza, qtd. in Gordon 261). This interpretation of the extraterrestrial invasion as a reflection of the invasions among human civilizations was already explicit in the Wells novel, through a reference to the destructive actions of the British Empire toward other peoples of the Earth.

In 2005, the occupying forces of the U.S. army remained in Iraq and unleashed a struggle against very disparate resistance forces. Despite the official stabilization of the country and the installation of a new government, the war continued on Iraqi soil, transforming it into a bloodbath of terrorist attacks and clashes with guerrillas. Meanwhile,

the civilians suffered the awful consequences of the social and economic change. Through a narrative allegory, the war in Iraq was incorporated into Spielberg's filmography as another element of reflection surrounding 9/11, using a popular genre like science fiction. According to Jason Vest, "The result is a film that dares to criticize subtly but surely, the patriotic fervor that has characterized the United States in recent years" (67).

Renewal of the Subgenre of Invasion and Catastrophe

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the critical possibilities of the subgenre of invasion and catastrophe reappeared with renewed vigor while the traditional dramatic schemes forged during the

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1940s and 1950s remained unchanged. The allusions, explicit or implicit, to the tragic day in 2001 would be inevitable when re-creating a tragedy on U.S. soil since, over half a century, the hypothetical threat had changed into the perpetration of a concrete disaster. In this

respect, beyond artistic values, the 2005 version of *War of the Worlds* stands as a reference for successive productions in this new stage of the subgenre, for both its historical and political implications as well as for its metafilmic dimension.

Among the key changes contributed by the Spielberg film, the critical position toward the war in Iraq particularly stands out. This factor determines the victimhood of U.S. society that, matched with Iraqi society, has suffered a real invasion. The catastrophe also highlights nuclear aspects of the social reality of the United States, such as its capacity to react to a collapse of the system and the direct consequences for families themselves.

In the case of *War of the Worlds*, this institutional and social reflection is marked by pessimism and thus warns of citizens' hysteria during the extraterrestrial attacks. Although occasions of heroism or solidarity are underlined, panic is the tone of the plot, and certain scenes reveal a Hobbesian view of society, whose members are capable of murdering others in their desire to survive. The question of panic as a threat against a society under attack is one of the warnings of Wells's novel. Spielberg merges two original characters, an artilleryman and a vicar destabilized by the horror, into the character of Ogilvy the sniper. Ray and his daughter take shelter in a basement where Ogilvy, entrenched, fires on the extraterrestrials and proclaims fanatically that, as the story demonstrates, America cannot be invaded. Ogilvy, victim of paranoia and fanaticism, ends up posing a mortal danger to the father and daughter, imprisoned in the same mousehole as he is. Ray ends up killing him.



From *The Mist* (dir. Frank Darabont, 2007).

Another significant note of pessimism appears in the story's ending. Ray finally arrives in Boston and leaves his little girl with his exwife, but he is not invited into the home despite the fact that he has fulfilled his duty as a father: looking after his child during his weekend visitation. This ending contrasts with the typical final reconstruction in the endings of the subgenre, expressed in social and familial reunions after the disaster. Family reunions of survivors occur in classic-style films such as *Independence Day* and *Deep Impact* and even in the farce *Mars Attacks!*

Let us turn to examine the impact of the catastrophe on the social and familial links in three films that followed 9/11 and were produced in 2008: *The Mist*, *Cloverfield*, and *The Happening*.

In the denouement of *The Mist*, director Frank Darabont takes the social pessimism of *War of the Worlds* even further. Using Stephen King's plot, Darabont tells the story, in apocalyptic tone, of an invasion by fantastical monsters who provoke panic among the inhabitants of an eastern town. In *The Mist*, the ghost of the war is also present through the army's responsibility for the disaster, which is unleashed by a scientific experiment. In this case, the theme of social disintegration is approached from the point of self-destruction: violence by humans themselves—the product of panic—or the recourse to suicide become as overwhelming as the threat of the monsters.

The allusion to social disintegration becomes patent in Darabont's film from the moment a group of civilians take refuge in a supermarket while fleeing from danger. During the siege, a visionary passes on her fanaticism to some of the terrorized survivors. The paradigm of the entrenched paranoid, which also finds its archetype in Ogilvy, is reproduced in this film with deadly consequences for his companions in misfortune.

The recourse to suicide, the second sign of social self-destruction, is set out in the ending of the script. After the murder of the visionary in self-defense, an end identical to that of Ogilvy, the protagonist flees in an automobile with a painter who is travelling with his



From *Cloverfield* (dir. Matt Reeves, 2008).

young son, a woman, and two elderly people. On their adventure to nowhere, the group is horrified by the devastation of the country. When the vehicle runs out of fuel, the nearby presence of the monsters leads the adult survivors to make a terrible decision. The painter kills his son and three companions to save them from an even more terrible death, but he does not manage to end his own life. The tragic *fatum* of the protagonist reaches the point of cruelty when, moments later, the mist dissipates and he discovers that the army has finally managed to control the situation.

As in Spielberg's film, in *The Mist* the army plays the inverted part of a defensive force against the invaders but, at the

same time, causes catastrophe. Given the situation, the panic of the population under threat is unleashed, and they worsen the crisis with their own tensions, mistrust, and superstitions. If Spielberg rebuilt the family element to a certain extent at the end of *War of the Worlds*, Darabont's film frustrates the heroic possibilities of the protagonist, also a father, and concludes in the crudest nihilism. Desperation, in summary, is the high price paid by the citizen in the face of the senselessness of a military power conceived to defend and not to attack.

Cloverfield follows a similar plot to *The Mist*. The setting this time is a New York City punished by the hounding of

two gigantic beasts, one monster and offspring, of unknown origin. Not as sharp in reflections as the previous productions, this film creates an atmosphere of urban panic that directly recalls 9/11. To the visual realism, a resource with pretensions of verisimilitude is added, since at the beginning of the film the spectator is told that the images of the film come from a video with the notice “tape found in an area previously known as Central Park.”

The plot of *Cloverfield* also descends to the plane of social and emotional links, since it focuses on a couple who revives their relationship in the midst of the attack, during the course of their escape through Manhattan. The action, which combines rescue and chase from an epic perspective, concludes with the explosion of a nuclear bomb in Central Park that puts an end to the beasts but also wipes out the fugitive couple. Once more, the role of the army is controversial in a story of invasion and catastrophe that is far removed from the Godzilla tapes, which were an immediate reference for *Cloverfield*. As in *The Mist*, the leading role falls on the fugitives who are trying to rebuild their links in the middle of the chaos, only to finally see their hopes frustrated in a crushing way.

The Contribution of Shyamalan

With *The Happening*, Shyamalan deals once more with the question of a social threat, this time through a catastrophe. The action begins symptomatically in New York’s Central Park; throughout the city, strange mass suicides of the most atrocious kind have begun to occur. When the plague spreads to other Eastern cities, the people are in no doubt that they are dealing with a sophisti-

cated terrorist attack and flee to rural areas, unsure of their destination. Elliot, a secondary school teacher whose marriage is about to break up, also escapes with his wife Alma and Jess, a friend’s young daughter. During their flight, the protagonist discovers that humanity is suffering from an unusual attack from the vegetable kingdom through a toxin that induces fatal self-harm: it is a defense mechanism against human beings, the only species on Earth that threatens to make other living things extinct.

Shyamalan follows the *threat-catastrophe-survival* pattern under the shadow of terrorist aggression, since the toxin released by the plants recalls the psychosis of an anthrax attack days after 9/11. However, the approach is turned on its head when we learn that humans themselves are “a threat to this planet,” as a scientist explains at the end of the film, and that the phenomenon has been simply a warning or prelude. In *The Happening*, the director takes the idea of the citizen as an agent of panic and cause of his or her own destruction and raises it to bioecological proportions that are beyond political considerations. In fact, the latter only appear to exist as a common ground in the subgenre via references to the conspiracy theory and the atmosphere of apprehension generated in the wake of the attacks in 2001.

The notion of humanity as the most dangerous species on the planet is expressed in the film’s social plane. Human institutions and the administration, particularly the army, turn out to be completely inefficient at facing up to the danger. This becomes clear in the scene in which a soldier gives useless instructions that the survivors remain in groups while he establishes a hypothetical “attack zone” and “safety zone.”

In both *The Happening* and *War of the Worlds*, British society of 1898 and North American society of 2005 or 2008 see their roles transformed and go from being collective aggressors to collective victims of attack. Shyamalan was aware that this inversion of roles may not be welcomed favorably by the audience: “Now I’m not telling them the story that they want to hear, I’m telling them the story that I want to tell. People want to hear that the human is master over all, that humans are divine, always correct, always right” (Pickard).

The idea of a lack of communication across different human levels, dealt with by Shyamalan in stories as different from each other as *The Sixth Sense* and *The Village*, moves to the social and familial circles in *The Happening*. The introduction to the scene in which two teenagers are murdered by a group of the entrenched when they ask for shelter in a rural property belongs to the first category. This is the only explicit violent attack in the whole film, and it reveals once more the archetype of deeply entrenched North Americans who defend their lands from intruders and constitute a more dangerous threat for the fleeing group. The ending turns once more to the pattern of the entrenched through the character of Mrs. Jones, a mad elderly lady who is isolated in her farm and shows her hostility to the surviving trio.

The Happening’s ending contrasts with that of *War of the Worlds*, *Cloverfield*, and *The Mist* in the familial aspect of the script, since Shyamalan presents a true and complete rebuilding of the relationship between Elliot and his wife. This is expressed in the climax of the film, when the teacher conquers his fears, and exposing himself to the lethal danger of the toxin, decides to abandon his shelter to be reunited with Alma. The scene is a double triumph for the protagonist: first, he has avoided danger, and second, he has reestablished his union with his wife. The possible family restitution insinuated in *The Mist*, which would include an adoptive mother for the small surviving child, is frustrated by desperation and death. In *The Happening*, however, Elliot and Alma survive the threat and welcome Jess into their house (she had been orphaned by

As in *The Mist*, the leading role [in *Cloverfield*] falls on the fugitives who are trying to rebuild their links in the middle of the chaos, only to finally see their hopes frustrated in a crushing way.

the catastrophe), and they await the birth of their first child.

As do *Unbreakable*, *Signs*, and *The Sixth Sense*—previous films by Shyamalan—*The Happening* deals with the restitution or reinforcement of the family union as a premise with which to tackle the problems of other human and social spheres. In the drama genre, in *Munich* (2005), Spielberg also deals with questions of family reunion and the dehumanization resulting from the counterterrorist spiral, according to a dual perspective—the family and social sphere—which are also dealt with by Shyamalan and Darabont. Panic and anguish are the result of a vicious circle of fear and violence that, beyond social and political structures, ends up undermining the home, the place of intimacy. The last shot of *Munich* proves very eloquent in reflecting this double fracture on the group and individual levels: after refusing the traditional Hebrew hospitality, the chief of Mossad says goodbye to Avner in front of the Manhattan skyline, where the recently built Twin Towers stand out.

Revitalized Creative Formulas

To certain critics, invasion and catastrophe are fictional genres that lack the dramatic quality necessary to offer social proposals or reflections. However, leaving this prejudice of the genre aside, the allegory present in fantasy, mystery, or science fiction can be, on occasion, more efficient than in dramas when it comes to portraying human conflicts realistically. Spielberg, Shyamalan, and Darabont are three examples of current Hollywood directors who, through popular genres, set out a similar vision to that of directors like Paul Haggis, Oliver Stone, and Michael Moore, who are closer to the categories of drama or documentary. The question of dehumanization provoked by fear and lack of communication, the true threat that arose over the course of 9/11, is a sub-

ject that preoccupies Haggis in his film *In the Valley of Elah* as well as Shyamalan in *The Happening* and Spielberg in *Minority Report*. In Spielberg's case, his versatility in the use of genres is demonstrated when employing the rhetoric of panic according to dramatic mechanisms provided by the drama, melodrama, or science fiction thriller.

On the other hand, in the wake of 9/11, there has been a revival of emotional strategies of *phobos* in the popular fiction genres, which contrasts with the repeated abuse of the dramatic formulae of the 1980s and, above all, the 1990s. The continual references of critics and analysts to the 1950s are evidence of the return of these genres to the intensity of their beginnings. Philip French's account of *The Village* and the defense of domestic territory fits in this context: "Horror films traditionally feed on current anxieties, and one supposes that *The Village* is a fable about a post-9/11 America obsessed with unseen foreign terrorists, a subject to which Shyamalan must be particularly sensitive as an American of Indian origin. His film is to the new age what *The Crucible* was to the McCarthy era" (8).

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