Ambivalence, unease and discomfort—but not enough

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War of the Worlds, *directed by Steven Spielberg, screenplay by Josh Friedman and David Koepp, based on the novel by H.G. Wells*

Whatever commentary it may be on the present state of American studio filmmaking, Steven Spielberg remains one of its more skilled practitioners. He is one of the few capable of organizing script, actors, camera and effects in such a fashion that his concerns are communicated in an entertaining fashion to large numbers of people. Unfortunately, he is not burdened with great or important ideas, so that while the undertaking is often successful in the more immediate sense, it generally fails to perform the larger tasks confronting art and filmmaking. One knows, more or less, what to expect.

If there has been a darkening in Spielberg's films recently, with *Artificial Intelligence*, *Minority Report* and now, *War of the Worlds*, this must be attributed to growing concerns within certain social layers about the state and direction of American society. All is clearly not well. Again, however, the gloomier vein has not yet yielded extraordinary insights. The filmmaker always seems, in the end, too complacent and too canny to make the kind of effort it takes to get to the bottom of things.

Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* is loosely based on the 1898 science fiction novel by H.G. Wells (1866-1946) about a remorseless attack by Martian invaders on the Earth's population. Wells, author of *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897) and *The First Men in the Moon* (1901), apparently had several, perhaps conflicting concerns in mind with his *The War of the Worlds*.

On the one hand, the author, an evolutionary socialist, identifies the English victims of the alien invasion with animal species, "such as the bison and the dodo," upon which the human race has wrought "ruthless and utter destruction," as well as the "inferior races," such as the Tasmanian aboriginals, "entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years."

On the other, Wells's *The War of the Worlds* clearly takes its place within the "invasion literature" that flourished in Britain in the decades following the unification of Germany and its growth as a major rival to the Empire. This literature, which commenced with George Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* in 1871, envisioned a coming European war and warned against supposed British complacency. (There are passing references to these matters in Wells's book. The landing of the Martian "cylinder," is described as not having made "the sensation that an ultimatum to Germany would have done," and one character is said, only half-seriously, to "imagine that the French and the Martians might prove very similar.")

This ambiguity—are the invaders a monstrous "Them," or are they, in fact, a no less monstrous "Us"?—hardly finds a place in Orson Welles's notorious 1938 radio version, which resonated with the rise of Nazism, or the Byron Haskins-George Pal 1953 film featuring Gene Barry and Ann Robinson (who have cameo roles in Spielberg's work). The latter, quite spectacular and entertaining in its own way, has Cold War and religious overtones.

In the newest rendition of Wells's story, in my view, the degree to which that ambiguity is treated or neglected largely determines the success or failure of the work.

Screenwriter David Koepp and Spielberg have transposed the drama to contemporary America. Ray Ferrier (Tom Cruise) is a New Jersey dockworker, divorced, with two children. In a rather clichéd fashion, the filmmakers portray Ferrier as an irresponsible soul, perhaps more attached to his automobile than his offspring. Predictably, events will put him to the test and "family values" will triumph.

Alien fighting machines, newly activated, come out of the ground, where they have been stored for eons. They immediately wreak devastating havoc. With one of the few working automobiles, Ferrier heads for his ex-wife's house in the suburbs and, when she proves to have left for her parents' home, eventually for Boston, several hundred miles away. En route, Ferrier, his young daughter (Dakota Fanning) and recalcitrant teenage son (Justin Chatwin) encounter, along with the general population, more than their share of terrors and horrors. The intruders from another planet are intent on exterminating Earth's population or breeding them for feeding purposes (the vampirish element is present in Wells's original book). In the end, the aliens succumb, as they do in the previous versions of the story, to a surprising nemesis.

The initial scenes, of Ferrier and his family fleeing incomprehensible death and destruction, are affecting. The attempt to recreate something of the impact of the September 11 attacks on the lives of ordinary people is a legitimate one. Spielberg is someone who can do this sort of thing. The sight of the Bayonne Bridge collapsing in the background or bits of clothes and body parts floating through the air is disturbing and frightening. Effective as well are the sequences of refugees trudging down roads and highways, desperately seizing Ferrier's car, fighting for a place on a doomed ferry.

At the same time as the Americans are victims, along with the (unseen) rest of the world's population, there are hints of other realities. Ferrier's son is writing a paper on the French in Algeria; a sinister survivalist (Tim Robbins) tells Ferrier, "Occupations never work. History has taught us that a thousand times." The disproportion between the military might of the invaders and that of the humans suggests nothing so much as the present situation in Iraq or Afghanistan, with Cruise attempting at one point to become a "suicide

bomber."

These hints are clearly intentional. Spielberg told a press conference: "But I just felt that this movie is a reflection and there are all sorts of metaphors that you can certainly divine from this story...this movie I was hoping would be more like a prism. Everybody could see in a facet of the prism what they choose to take from the experience of seeing *War of the Worlds*, so I tried to make it as open for interpretation as possible, without having anybody coming out with a huge political polemic in the second act of the movie."

As opposed to Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day*, which borrows much of the structure of Wells's novel, but transforms it into a rousing tribute to American militarism and chauvinism, Spielberg and Koepp have kept the jingoism to a relative minimum. The latter told a reporter, "People might use this version of *War of the Worlds* as a mirror to reflect what they already believe. Some people will look at it and say it's clearly about post-9/11 American paranoia: terrorism and our fear of terrorism, sleeper cells waiting to be activated. Some people will feel that because Americans already feel victimized and threatened. People elsewhere in the world, who also feel victimized and threatened, might say it's about Iraq and their fear of an American invasion."

The notion that Americans can be both victims and victimizers is perhaps not the alpha and omega of political understanding, but it might be the starting point for critical thought.

The film's ambiguities are enough to have earned the wrath of the extreme right. A "left-wing propaganda piece against the war on terror" is what one hostile commentator terms it.

And these ambiguities could not slip past the ever-vigilant Edward Rothstein, "culture critic-at-large" for the *New York Times*, who can generally be counted upon to contribute his rather filthy two cents. Rothstein compares Spielberg's effort unfavorably with Wells's, remarking that "there is a strange ambivalence in the film, as if the issues surrounding responses to such [terrorist] attacks made Mr. Spielberg uneasy.... The movie also keeps trying to ward off the spirit of militarism the situation elsewhere requires. Mr. Robbins's character is a twisted militant, hapless, disturbed and dangerous. Tom Cruise's advice against attacking a Martian in a basement is just common sense, but when, near the movie's end, he urges a soldier not to shoot, it seems as if some other message were being italicized."

Rothstein goes on to register other, perhaps more burning concerns: "Some of this may be related to the movie Mr. Spielberg interrupted to make *War of the Worlds*. It is said to begin with the murders of Israeli Olympic athletes by Palestinian terrorists in 1972—an attack Martian-like in its ambitions. But the analogy, Mr. Spielberg's comments suggest, will be undermined: injustices suffered by the attackers will need to be understood and their victims' tactics questioned." The *Times* columnist adds, "Perhaps that idea of terrorists with a cause and defenders with doubts influenced the discomfort felt in the current film as well."

Spielberg's "strange ambivalence," uneasiness and "discomfort" to which Rothstein refers contemptuously (with implications that the filmmaker is "soft" on terrorism) make up the strongest element of *War of the Worlds*, the most human element. That Rothstein praises the "spirit of militarism" and disdains the protagonist's urging of a soldier *not to shoot* is a commentary on the generally brutalized mentality of the erstwhile American liberal intelligentsia.

Contrary to Rothstein, the great weakness, ultimately, of the film is that its ambivalence, unease and discomfort about American realities in general and the "war on terror" in particular are not *placed in the*

forefront, developed or worked through to the end.

In fact, the artistic and dramatic failings of the work are to a certain extent, perhaps largely, traceable to Spielberg's (and presumably Koepp's) tentativeness and timidity in regard to these critical questions.

Having established, in a relatively artistic and potentially rewarding manner, a connection, a resonance between the re-imagined episodes of Wells's novel and contemporary events (Americans "under attack," refugees in their own country), the filmmakers largely fail to follow up on their accomplishment. Admittedly, the task was somewhat challenging: how to remain faithful (at least in spirit) to the original story, while continuing to hint at parallels between the science fiction narrative and our reality. Well, something could have been done. As it is, the film largely stops in its tracks, or goes off in an entirely wrong direction.

Oddly enough, adherence to the original, more or less, proves to be the means by which the filmmakers manifest their inability or unwillingness to treat *concretely* the more controversial and complex aspects of the present situation—in other words, precisely to advance their own ambivalence, uneasiness and discomfort. In this case, such adherence proves to be the line of least resistance. (Fidelity to Wells's tale, which in any event is not such an imperishable classic, would seem to be a secondary matter.)

As a consequence, the characters' plight becomes entirely abstract (more and more divorced from any present-day reverberations) and the film turns into a rather conventional, if exceptionally macabre, horror-science fiction film. The promising hints and ambiguities are largely abandoned.

As happens far too often these days, having reached an artistic or intellectual impasse, Spielberg and Koepp rely on the monstrous, the morbid, the grotesque (or special effects). Latter portions of the film are simply distasteful without adding any particular insight. One is left disturbed by the film, with a bad taste in one's mouth, but not necessarily for the right reasons, or about the right things. And that was not inevitable.