

Bird Box and *Hold the Dark*: Looking at things in the face or not

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Bird Box, directed by Susanne Bier, screenplay by Eric Heisserer, based on the novel by Josh Malerman; *Hold the Dark*, directed by Jeremy Saulnier, screenplay by Macon Blair, based on the novel by William Giraldi

Bird Box

Bird Box, directed by Susanne Bier, is an apocalyptic science fiction film based on the 2014 novel of the same name by Josh Malerman.

Netflix began streaming the film on December 21 and, a week later, reported that *Bird Box* had the largest seven-day viewership, 45 million accounts, of any of its original productions. The company later said that Bier's film had been viewed by some 80 million households in the month following its release. The movie, in other words, with a good deal of media and corporate encouragement, has become something of a "phenomenon."

In *Bird Box*'s opening sequence, Malorie (Sandra Bullock), blindfolded, is rowing a boat down a river with two small children, whose eyes are also covered.

The film then jumps back five years. A sullenly pregnant Malorie and her sister Jessica (Sarah Paulson) listen to the news, which informs them that the "streets are crowded with people escaping cities by car and on foot as witnesses report unexplained mass suicides. First recorded in Romania, there's now an alarming spread of incidents into Europe and Siberia." (In contemporary Hollywood's "shorthand," it might be noted in passing, eastern Europe and Russia have now become the source of virtually all evil.)

Soon the terror becomes global. Apparently, we learn later, some alien entity has invaded Earth. Gazing at the mysterious, all-pervasive being is lethal for both mind and body, driving most victims to kill themselves.

Jessica falls prey to the aliens, but Malorie is saved when she lands on the doorstep of the darkened home belonging to Greg (B.D. Wong). Other survivors include the misanthropic Douglas (John Malkovich) and the handsome voice of reason, Tom (Trevante Rhodes). Birds, like the proverbial canaries in the coal mine, are the first to feel the danger.

In the present again, we see Malorie still feverishly paddling

down an eerie river with the two children she calls Boy and Girl—apparently indicative of her "unmaternal" inability to bond. A blindfold is a must for all occasions, including while bobbing and tumbling through the rapids and avoiding the siren call of those falsely telling you it is safe to uncover your eyes. There are some casualties who don't kill themselves, but merely kill others. Sight is death, blindness is survival.

Bird Box is tense throughout and mildly intriguing. Bullock and Rhodes (*Moonlight*) are interesting actors, as are Malkovich and Tom Hollander, who plays a lunatic in the grip of the evil forces. The movie's basic motif is anxiety. At a time of government shutdowns, endless wars and ecological disasters, *Bird Box* may be popular because it taps into a certain social unease. A sense of impending disaster is certainly not foreign to many people at the moment. But this may give the film more credit than it deserves. Its success seems largely accidental, a phenomenon that has become famous for being famous.

Bier is a Danish film director known for *Open Hearts* (2002), *Brothers* (2004), *After the Wedding* (2006), *In a Better World* (2010) and the miniseries based on the 1993 John le Carré novel, *The Night Manager* (2016). Early in her career, she was associated, somewhat loosely, with the Dogme 95 group of Lars von Trier and others, who vowed to rescue cinema from bombast and revive "chaste," i.e., purer, and more minimalistic artistic means.

Overall, Scandinavian directors have not investigated the tumultuous course of recent decades in a profound way. Reflecting the opinions and feelings of the more affluent social layers in the region, they have tended to react to world events—including the lurch to the right by the various Social Democratic parties—with panic and even hysteria (von Trier) or with gender-obsessed, self-absorbed trivia (many others).

Bier (born 1960 in Copenhagen) has taken something of a middle, "moderate" course and has now made an international film career for herself. She seems pleasant and intelligent, but without a great deal to say. One comment notes that her films "often deal with the traditional family framework, with the collapse of the bourgeois middle class under the pressure of globalization, terrorism, and war, and the way in which people deal with a disaster or a formative event outside their lives." *Bird Box* fits this characterization only in an indirect and murky manner.

The filmmaker's Jewish father left Germany after Hitler came to

power. In 1943, Bier's family (her mother was also Jewish) fled Denmark to Sweden to escape deportation by the occupying Nazis. She told one interviewer, from NCPR, "I'm Jewish, and my family is Jewish, and I've always had a very distinct recognition of war being an imminent catastrophe, of being a real thing."

Asked by an interviewer from the *Express* whether the evil menace of the entity in *Bird Box* was a metaphor for the Nazi regime, Bier responded, somewhat light-mindedly, "The fun of making a movie like this is that people can interpret the unseen evil in any way they wish," adding, however, "Sandra [Bullock] and I looked at this seven years ago but at the time it wasn't right. Now the time feels right."

In 2003, we commented, in regard to her *Open Hearts*, that Bier's method—and the method of the Dogme filmmakers in general—was "to ignore causality, i.e., history (the infamous 'whole'), and concentrate entirely on the immediacy of disaster. If a bomb is thrown into a crowd, they ask, how will X, Y or Z react? In this the element of accident and chance does play a larger role, demonstrating the relatively arbitrary character of the circumstances. Minor artists concern themselves exclusively with such problems."

Howard Hawks' 1951 science fiction classic, *The Thing From Another World* (officially credited to Christian Nyby), and the 1956 version of the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* directed by Don Siegel, among others, were suggestive, disturbing movies that effectively captured the angst of the postwar period, including the Cold War and the McCarthyite witch-hunts. The filmmakers were obliged by the political climate of the time to be roundabout.

Ironically, and almost certainly without intending to, *Bird Box* does give visual and dramatic life to a fairly widespread conviction at present in certain upper middle class circles, in Hollywood and elsewhere: that it is better to proceed blindly, or at least that one should learn how to adapt oneself to blindness, rather than confront the onslaught of monsters, societal or otherwise, with open eyes.

Hold the Dark

Other films try to look things more honestly in the face, even if it's painful.

Directed by Jeremy Saulnier, *Hold the Dark*, based on the 2014 novel by William Giraldi, is an absorbing movie that deals, if only obliquely, with American capitalism's historic crimes against indigenous peoples and, more recently, the Iraqi population.

As quoted by Giraldi, an Eskimo shaman told legendary Greenlandic-Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen, "We fear the cold and the things we do not understand. But most of all we fear the doings of the heedless ones among ourselves."

In December 2004, Russell Core (Jeffrey Wright), an author and expert on the behavior of wolves, is asked to come to the small, poverty-stricken village of Keelut, Alaska by Medora Sloane (Riley Keough). Her six-year-old son Bailey is apparently the third child in the village to be taken by wolves.

Medora's husband Vernon (Alexander Skarsgård), is fighting at the time in Fallujah, Iraq, where he brutally slaughters anti-American militants. Fellow US troops sadistically take selfies of the carnage. But when Vernon catches an American soldier in the process of raping an Iraqi woman, he stabs the man and leaves his knife for the woman to finish off her attacker.

Meanwhile, Core finds the Sloane's dead child, actually strangled by Medora, in the basement of the family's shack. When Vernon, who is wounded in Iraq, returns home, he and his friend Cheeon (Julian Black Antelope), steal Bailey's body from the morgue, killing several police officers in the process. Vernon starts tracking Medora, and Cheeon machine-guns the squadron of officers sent to arrest him. Fallujah is again mentioned in a news broadcast.

There are suggestive elements in the movie. For example, when police chief Donald Marium (James Badge Dale) goes to arrest Cheeon, he tells the latter that "we got two dead cops in town," to which Cheeon replies: "Oh, yeah? Around here, a couple of dead cops is cause for a party."

Marium: "We came out here, we helped put you guys on the grid a few years back. We got you plumbing, we got you electric..."

Cheeon: "Now you want a trophy for letting these folks take a shit in their own houses?"

Later on Cheeon tells Marium: "When we're killed, the past is killed. When kids are killed ... that's different. When kids are killed, the future dies. There's no life without a future."

Core sums up one of the movie's central concerns. Speaking about Medora's murder of her son, he laments: "It's like she wanted to fix him. Save him. I don't know. Save him by destroying. It happens in medicine. Chemotherapy. Save him from what? Darkness. In her. In him. Outside her window. She told me about it, but ... I wasn't listening. I think that's why she wrote me. She wanted a witness to tell her story. And ... to be punished."

There's a decidedly bleak element here, but *Hold the Dark* also seems to want to say, or at least hint at, something interesting about American society's past wrongdoings, against the Inuit, African Americans, Iraqis and nature itself, and how those crimes inevitably come back to haunt you, how they never, in fact, entirely go away.



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