

Rereading Posthumanism in *The War of the Worlds* and *Independence Day*

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Science Fiction as the Discovery of the Future

In a 1902 presentation to the Royal Institution on ‘The Discovery of the Future,’ H.G. Wells contrasted two types of mind: the legal or submissive type, and the creative or legislative.¹ The former, which predominates in society, is retrospective, fatalistically understanding the present in terms of precedent. The more modern, creative type ‘sees the world as one great workshop, and the present no more than material for the future’ (Wells 1989, p.19) and is implicitly associated with the writer of science fiction (or the scientific romance, as then known). Given our acquaintance with Wells’ descendents like Isaac Asimov or Arthur C. Clarke, this seems fairly uncontentious. However, in a climate of postmodern relativism we may be less comfortable with the way in which Wells went on to formalise the relationship between present and future. He compared the creative predictions of the future to those analyses of distant prehistory made by the relatively recent sciences of geology and archaeology, and contended that it ought to be possible to produce a long term portrait of the future as has been done with the ancient ‘inductive past’ (1989, p.27). Though many prominent science fiction writers assert that science fiction is the reasonable extrapolation of present

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trends, they would not claim such strong predictive validity for their work. For example, in his non-fictional *Profiles of the Future* (1962), Clarke notes his success in anticipating the use of communication satellites, but also acknowledges that the science fiction writer has only to get lucky once in order to appear remarkably prophetic. Any of the wilder speculations that have not been realised are elided, with the most memorable predictions, and hence often the most memorable fictions, being those which appear to have been accomplished.

Like all cultural productions, science fiction is always interpreted in ways that relate to the climate of its contemporary audience. Thus science fiction seems to predict the future primarily because the future is always the standpoint from which we read and (re)interpret it. To choose a vernacular example, the *Star Trek* communicator device first witnessed in the 1960s was experienced with a futuristic phenomenology, and today the existence of the mobile phone can create the uncanny feeling that the television series somehow knew this personal communications device would become omnipresent. However, on reflection, it is not at all surprising that the communicator seems to have predicted the mobile phone, since new technology will be understood and accommodated according to its imaginative predecessors. Rather than with Wells' strong claim to literary induction, we may tend to side with Frederic Jameson's view that science fiction is ironic, managing 'to demonstrate and to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future' (1982, p.153), succeeding by its necessary failure. In this essay, I want to show that it is impossible to get outside a science fiction's relationship to the subsequent future it predicts, and to read and analyse its narratives from the point of view of a historical nowhere. I will argue this

through focusing on a trope that seems to be identified with science and technology when read as a prediction, and with social impulses when read on reflection: the posthuman.

The Social and the Technological in Constructions of the Posthuman

Posthumanism describes the possibility that mankind can be transformed by scientific and political advances to transcend the biological and ideological pressures under which the race suffers at the present. In posthumanist thought, Enlightenment rationality provides the model for both scientific and social development in which the ultimate aim is to uphold the rights of the individual human subject. In its political inflection, the posthumanist state is featured prominently in Francis Fukuyama's thesis of the 'last man' at the end of history. Posthumanism is achieved when this model has triumphed over alternatives, such as mysticism or totalitarianism (1992). Fukuyama claims that, with the end of the Cold War, there is no longer any dialectical tension to act as the Marxist engine of history, so the dream of a global democracy of free human subjects is surely about to be realised. The problem with Fukuyama's theory is that science is continually changing the nature of the human body which is the fundamental particle of society, something Fukuyama subsequently acknowledged in *Our Posthuman Future* (2002). This technological iteration of posthumanism is associated with biotechnology and cybernetics. As Allucquère Rosanne Stone notes in her survey of cyborgs, 'social beings, people, exist by virtue of possessing biological bodies through which their existence is warranted in the body politic' (1995, p.63). But what about artificial intelligences or genetic hybrids, which are not bound to such social

or ideological markers as race or sex? Changing technologies of the individual body will also change the nature of the wider political body of which they form part, and definitions of the posthuman seem destined to fall to one side of the balance, the technological or the social.

The epistemological difficulty in reading science fiction as a predictive truth correlates with the posthuman's continual shape-shifting. Read as a plausible extrapolation of the future based on present trends, science fiction might appear to focus on imagining our posthuman futures in an evolutionary or technological sense. However, read with hindsight in more polemical terms, science fiction might simply use technology to draw attention to the failure of political humanism. After all, if the society in which science fiction was produced was truly utopian, what need would there be for its envisioning of alternatives through the genre?

These two poles are evident in two paradigmatic fictions, one of which is itself posterior to the other. In H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, first published in 1898, Wells imagines a posthuman future in which the apotheosis – or triumphal 'end of history' – that is Victorian civilisation is superseded by more advanced and evolved aliens. Read in the twenty-first century, the novel seems to have been remarkably prescient in predicting the fall of empire due to its internal contradictions with regards to race and class – that is to say, the way in which empire was construed as a civilising force of benefit to all mankind whilst actually being predicated on the exploitation of colonial peoples and the labour of the industrial classes. The aliens and their dominant technologies are simply a narrative device to draw attention to the fact that Victorian society could not continue forever, founded as it was on an ethics of

dominating the others. However, contemporary reviewers for whom the publication was set in the future of the early twentieth century, seem to have focused intently on Wells' technological prospecting, and ignored the social structures of the present which this speculation seems to have been intended to elucidate and critique, according to Wells' own writings about the novel, which I examine later.

The second fiction I examine is *Independence Day*, a loose reworking of Wells' original. First screened in 1996, after the end of the Cold War, this seems to validate the technologically-equipped posthuman as having transcended the petty geopolitics of the post-war period. The battle is no longer for territory or ideology, but for humanity as a whole. Viewed after September 11th, however, the film appears uneasy about the ability of technology to unify humankind behind a common goal and ideology; with a prophetic quality that is hard to resist, it seems instead to anticipate the moment when the universal democratic project would be challenged by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. By recruiting the body as a weapon, the suicide bomber challenges the possibility of non-violent, information warfare, and watching *Independence Day* within this framework, we cannot help but notice that the ultimate hero of *Independence Day* is not only a cyborg pilot but a kamikaze bomber. These relativistic switches in perspective thus indicate the instability of using science fiction as a predictor of the future, and imply the corresponding difficulty in predicting the nature of the posthuman.

The Technical and the Social in *The War of the Worlds*

Towards the end of *The War of the Worlds*, the narrator is held in a state of inertia by the aliens nesting outside his collapsed cellar. Peeping through a hole in the rubble, once he overcomes his initial

nausea he observes them to be essentially heads without bodies and with tentacles instead of limbs; worse, they lack any digestive system, instead injecting themselves directly with blood sucked from their human victims. The narrator goes on to remark that ‘a certain speculative writer of quasi-scientific repute, writing long before the Martian invasion, did forecast for man a final structure not unlike the actual Martian condition’ (Wells 2003, p.146). This writer is actually Wells himself, who made such an evolutionary prediction in ‘The Man of the Year Million,’ published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1893 (Wells 2003, p.203-206). Though this essay is based on a valid understanding of evolution, Wells’ tone is teasing and precocious. The essay is written in the style of Thomas Carlyle, and purports to be a review of a ‘great unwritten volume’ of Professor Holzkopf, of Weissnichtwo University, which argues that man who once evolved from shapeless protoplasm is bound to undergo a similar metamorphosis in the future, with his intelligence improving at the expense of his body (Wells 2005, p.75). The review does not go down well with the novel’s narrator:

He pointed out – writing in a foolish, facetious tone – that the perfection of mechanical appliances must ultimately supersede limbs; the perfection of chemical devices, digestion; that such organs as hair, external nose, teeth, ears, and chin were no longer essential parts of the human being, and that the tendency of natural selection would lie in the direction of their steady diminution through the coming ages. The brain alone remained a cardinal necessity. (Wells 2003, p.146)

But, faced with precisely such evolved forms in the aliens, the narrator concedes that ‘there is many a true word written in jest’ and that it is ‘quite credible’ that the Martians have developed from an initially humanoid form to become essentially all brain (Wells 2003,

p. 146). Though the narrator is justified in highlighting the facetious style of the essay, the hard empirical core of the predictions of this 'speculative writer' (the creative, legislative type of mind) is very valid in relation to evolutionary theory (Wells had been taught by T.H. Huxley), and is given added credence in a modern age when posthumanists such as Ray Kurzweil are predicting the demise of the body in favour of cyborg consciousnesses wired directly into machines or existing solely as information on computers (Kurzweil 1999). So what is Wells doing here, by interpolating a real-life satirical review of an unwritten book into a fictional novel? As do the novel's references to real newspapers and real places in and around London, the interjection of (partial) fact into fiction naturally heightens the dramatic realism. But it also performs a parodic function, distancing the inductive writer producing fiction in accordance with science, from his narrator who, apparently possessed of a more 'submissive' and historical type of mentality, provides the mouthpiece for the civilisation of the moment. The separation of narratorial and authorial voices here marks a comparable separation in ways of reading the novel and its imagination of a posthuman future from scientific and social points of view.

Whereas Wells' 1895 novel *The Time Machine* (2002) concludes with a vision of animals flapping aimlessly on a beach, and his 1896 novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1993) moralises about the dangers of tampering with species, in *The War of the Worlds* the clumsiness of the alien bodies marks the height of their mind. Unlike Wells' other works, this is not primarily an account of degeneration, but of the supersession of one human species by another alien one, and the failure of the former's institutions to react flexibly to the latter. As later commentators have argued, and Wells himself suggested in a

subsequent preface to his book (see citations later in this essay), *The War of the Worlds* is not just a scientific hypothesis about the existence of hyper-evolved aliens, but is rather a cultural critique of his contemporary moment. In achieving the latter, Wells deploys individual bodies in the manner of Hobbes' *Leviathan*, as synecdoches for political bodies (1651). For example, in the cellar scene the narrator's violent murder of the curate with whom he is imprisoned may be seen to stand more generally for the overturning of the unimpeachable Church. Or, as the narrator notes in his opening chapter, when the aliens suck the blood of middle-class Englanders this mimics their imperialistic domination of the other races, particularly the Tasmanians who were wiped out by European immigrants in just fifty years (Wells 2003, p.43). Whilst Wells was heavily influenced by Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, he was critical of Gibbon's argument that Rome fell because of barbarian outsiders, arguing instead that it was due to Rome's internal inequality and 'crude and gross plutocracy' (Wells 1920, p.447). Working this view into *War of the Worlds*, the alien outsiders' metamorphosis from bodies to brains also symbolises the juvenile and contradictory nature of a political system that restricts the rights of certain races or classes based on their bodily characteristics, such as skin colour.

Oddly, the aim of liberal humanism should be to deprecate the importance of embodiment, so that individual corporeal characteristics – such as skin colour – are ignored; instead, liberal humanists emphasise the common humanity beneath the skin, particularly in terms of universal values, emotions and ideas. Similarly, technological posthumanism sees biological or cybernetic evolution as being a way of allowing humans to transcend their

embodied state and become purely cognitive entities, without the corporeal markers by which racial, gendered or class differences can be constructed (for more on these affinities between liberal humanism and posthumanism, see Hayles 1999, p.4).

The fact that the Victorians, at the supposed apotheosis of civilisation, are repelled by the vision of purely brained aliens shows that in practice they accord more status to the body rather than to the mind and its transcendental, and hence universal, nature. Thus the narrator's revulsion draws attention to the ongoing racial, sexual and class differences which deny the universal equality of human beings in the late nineteenth century. The dramatic power of *War of the Worlds* lies in the recognition that what appear to be individual bodies or voices that bear the hallmarks of class or race from within Victorian civilisation as portrayed from the narrator's point of view are, from the objective perspective of the aliens, simply one body for appropriation as food or slave labour. Just as we scrutinise the 'transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water' at the end of our microscopes (Wells 2003, p.41), so from the aliens' telescopic point of view there is nothing to differentiate one human from another, and colonial or class hierarchies are arbitrary constructions. The interjection of fact into fiction in the cellar scene, with the evolutionary facts pointing towards the dominance of mind at the expense of body whilst the fictional narrator rebels against such an evolutionary vision, adds to this juxtaposition of perspectives. Choosing which perspective – fact or fiction, objective or subjective, scientific or social – we are going to occupy is then partly a problem of our view of posthumanism. Here the question of whether posthumanism signifies political or technological evolution depends

on whether we read the fiction from a contemporary perspective or retrospectively.

The Technological Focus of Nineteenth-Century Responses to *The War of the Worlds*

Reviews in Wells' time focused intently on his technically rigorous extrapolation of evolutionary science as it might have played out on another world whose beings then come to Earth to be confronted with our own microorganisms. But in the spirit of Wells' narrator, reviewers downplayed the socio-historic significances of that scientific prospect, the way in which the technological future of giant alien brains acts as a critique of the moral contradictions of class and race embedded within Victorian society of 1898. For them, the grotesqueness of the alien bodies was an imaginative feat hermetically contained within a self-justifying work of fiction, rather than a view of the posthuman future that connected to empirical reality, as represented by the 'Man of the Year Million' which used Darwinian science rationally to imagine what humans might become. They failed to see that the apocalyptic end of London in the novel brought about through technology also implied that Victorian civilisation was not the climax of history, but would itself have to change because of its internally contradictory prejudices about racially or class-marked bodies.

Reviewing the novel for *Nature* soon after it was published, R.A. Gregory suggested that:

'Upon a groundwork of scientific fact, his vivid imagination and exceptional powers of description enable him to erect a structure which intellectual readers can find pleasure in contemplating' (Wells 2003, p.230)

Gregory particularly noted the ingenuity of the aliens' being destroyed by micro-organisms foreign to them. John Strachey in *The Spectator* of January 1898 remarked that:

'He brings the awful creatures of another sphere to Woking junction, and places them, with all their abhorred dexterity, in the most homely and familiar surroundings. A Martian dropped in the centre of Africa would be comparatively endurable' (Wells 2003, p.224).

Wells' novel is remarkable for two features, the first being the imagining of the Martians in accordance with scientific opinion, and the second being his description of 'the moral effects produced on a great city' (p.226). However, far more sensational is the account of how the Martians deployed their heat ray, how they fed themselves by sucking blood, how they threw their canisters of black smoke, how they were killed by bacteria. The fact that the Martians landed on London is a comparable aesthetic effect, designed to horrify readers in a way that would not have happened had the locale been Africa. What Strachey overlooks, however, is that it is precisely the alien's ignorance of local differences from their outside perspective that makes the novel a political critique, because it draws attention to the way humans remain focused on individual bodily characteristics, whether those of the alien or the real racial other, rather than acknowledging the universal and objective nature intrinsic to humanist theory. Typically, these reviews emphasise the effective causality of action rather than the morality of social politics, the technical how rather than the ideological why.

The Political Focus of Modern Criticism

Contemporary reviewers missed the socially 'legislative' effect this inductive fiction ultimately has. Through undercutting his narrator at the moment in the cellar, Wells articulates the view that scientific advances cannot be realised without corresponding change in society. This is because the adaptations in physical nature produced by evolution might expose the inconsistency of a civilisation which felt its own makeup was immemorial, and which therefore refused to acknowledge that the civilised could easily become the very degenerate or alien identity (such as the colonised Tasmanian) it defined itself against. Wells' 1920 interview about *War of the Worlds* indicates that he intended the novel primarily as a social critique performed through science, rather than an empirical imagination in its own right. Here, Wells critiques the perception that history can ever reach a point of equilibrium:

In those days the conviction that history had settled down to a sort of jog-trot comedy was very widespread indeed. Tragedy, people thought, had gone out of human life forever. A few of us were trying to point out the obvious possibilities of flying, of great guns, of poison gas, and so forth in presently making life uncomfortable if some sort of world peace was not assured, but the books we wrote were regarded as the silliest of imaginative gymnastics. Well, the world knows better now. (Wells 2003, p.193)

Guided by Wells' own views, it is possible to read his posthumanism as not so much about the technological as the social interpretation, as it is revealed through imagining the imposition of highly evolved but superficially grotesque alien minds upon the superficially civilised but unconsciously undemocratic social body. Unlike the contemporary reviews, the social appears to bear much of the emphasis in modern

criticism. Isaac Asimov's afterword to the Signet edition read the book as 'poetic justice,' demonstrating the evils of colonialism to its most powerful perpetrators at the close of the nineteenth century (1986, p.206). Patrick Parrinder also frames the novel in terms of imperial decline rather than as a mere technological thriller (1995, p.65-79). But whilst undoubtedly legitimate, there seems to be a risk of perpetuating this sort of reading above others. Contemporary reviewers focused on the technical and elided the social, but do we today attend to the social too much because the scientific posthuman future has, by the twenty-first century, become a very familiar discourse?

A century later, knowing the veracity of the transience of Empire, the use of poison gas in World War One, and the effects of accelerated evolution in genetic engineering, the aliens seem hardly facetious but rather factual. History allows us to pass over the horrific surface of the alien bodies and the novelty of their technologies to see what they symbolise about the body politic of Victorian England. Contemporary reviewers saw *The War of the Worlds*' posthumanism as quantitative, projecting a Hegelian future of technological development based on Wells' present scientific knowledge. Modern readers may well see his posthumanism as qualitative, signifying a shift from one version of liberal humanism grounded on bodily characteristics (with all the racial prejudice entailed) to one grounded on mentality and, therefore, to equality. Such a sociological reading of Wells seems legitimate, given that it is the sort of interpretation Wells himself advocated in his 1920 interview and accords with his later non-fictional works which looked towards a utopian brotherhood of all nations. The construction of the posthuman in *The War of the Worlds* therefore appears inherently unstable and

relative to our historical position. But is the posthuman always destined to oscillate between being conceptualised as a political entity and a technological one? Is it legitimate always to conduct readings of technological science fiction through the lens of socio-historical hindsight? This is the issue I want press to its elastic limits in relation to *Independence Day*, where the moment it was produced is uncomfortably close to our present day.

***Independence Day* as Technological Triumph**

At first glance, *Independence Day* (1996) contains few tensions between technology and political history. Its opening image is of an American flag on the moon and the accompanying plaque: 'We came in peace for all mankind.' Since the lunar landings treated science as the engine of political progress, the plaque legitimates the predictive validity of Kennedy's speech which set space as the benchmark test for Communism and capitalism. Memorialising the triumph of liberal democracy after the demise of the former, the frame is metonymic for the film as a whole, which reworks the first Independence Day against English tyranny as an emblematic victory against alien domination. However, victory is achieved not through the brutally oppositional tactics of mutually assured destruction. Notably, nuclear weapons fail to defeat the aliens, blooming harmlessly against their shields, and the outmoded defence secretary is sacked for his hawkishness. Rather, it is a victory of information and global politics: a computer virus is successful at lowering their shields, signalling the prominence of the cybernetic methods of the information revolution, and the aliens are defeated by co-ordinated communication with international allies. The success of political humanism is assured by technology.

The metamorphosis of the novel into a film inspired but not dictated by it suggest that a species threatened with sub-humanity at the late nineteenth century has realised by the end of the twentieth century the triumph of mind over body predicted by Wells' novel. Most obviously, the final, damning twist of the novel is that the narrator's hunger is caused by the rotting of his food, but it is precisely the agents of rot – microscopic bacteria – that kill the aliens. In *Independence Day*, however, it is a computer virus actively constructed by scientists which defeats them. *War of the Worlds* starts in civilised irony and ends in degeneracy – the curate who has 'sunk to the level of an animal' (Wells 2003, p.214); the ideological artillery man who is exposed as a hedonist and glutton (Wells 2003, p.258) – whilst in *Independence Day* characters who seem initially like degenerates – a slobby Jewish genius, an unshaven and alcoholic Vietnam veteran, a stripper – turn out to have heroic minds beneath their appearances, reacting intelligently to an unprecedented situation. On this note, one other theme is changed. In spite of being a disaster movie, there are few images of direct personal suffering, in contrast to the skewered, shrieking or limp bodies that litter Wells. Both aliens and humans are concealed beneath the carapaces of space ships, planes and cars. Though there are many implied deaths, as when planes explode mid-air or cars flip on end, there is little of the visceral immediacy that characterises other alien films such as Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), upon which the imagery of *Independence Day* draws heavily. Fighting in the twentieth century film is conducted at a distance through communications arrays, missiles and computer screens. The indecisive artillery man of *The War of the Worlds* is substituted in *Independence Day* with the fighter pilot. Strapped into the cockpit and wired up to head up displays that stream the

experience of the film to the viewer, the fighter pilot is probably the most prominent mainstream symbol of a posthuman cyborg. Though the sanitisation of violence that results by putting man within, and fighting through, the machine is partly the product of the blockbuster's need to reach a family audience, it also makes a significant connection to the first Gulf War. Here, the smart bomb was used prominently not only as an explosive but also for its representative value as its laser-tracked camera showed to the TV news viewer that the war was not really happening in any sense of human collateral. It is not coincidental that in the film one of the spacecraft passes over the Iraqi desert, and one of the counter-strikes is co-ordinated with a British Tornado squadron. For all its eschatology, this fin-de-siècle is ultimately positive: no longer brute force but 'smart' bombs; no longer opposition but coalition; no longer historical conflicts, but the end of history.

However, raising the epistemological dilemma of how technological views are modified by hindsight, let us read this technologised warfare retrospectively, within the stress and tragedy of real history. After September 11th, it is possible to see *Independence Day* not as a uniform work which reconciles the technological and historical narratives of the posthuman after Cold War triumph, but one that – like Wells' original – inscribes a tension between the two. It is uneasy about the status of technology in a homogeneous society, and foresees the repressed internal conflicts of that society that are exposed by the terrorist who is anti-technological. Read through the current lens of terrorism rather than the intended one of democracy's Cold War victory, the film recognises that technology is reliant upon the human body.

***Independence Day* as Social Critique**

The concept of the war of pure information has been deconstructed by the suicide bomber who exposes the tactical limits of air strikes, and shows the body as still the prime medium for symbolic violence. Now viewing the film from this angle, it seems highly significant that it is only when the missiles of the fighter jets jam that they are forced to confront the aliens directly, achieving victory ironically through the failure of their technologies of distance warfare; ripping off his face mask, the once cyborg pilot becomes a suicide bomber, as the Vietnam veteran flies into the underbelly of the alien spaceship. Similarly, whilst initially the concept of the computer virus seems to suggest the power of the code over the biological, in fact it has to be delivered directly through an umbilical cable rather than a remote upload, with the two heroes snaking through the gut-like passageways of the mothership. Finally, the global attack is co-ordinated through Morse code, more reminiscent of the Wellsian heliograph than the satellite. If the mythical narrative of liberal humanism is provided by Thomas Carlyle's 'great man' of history (Carlyle 1861), how can this fit with the posthuman, able to assume different identities through technological prosthetics? It seems that in this age, the hero remains the one who can relinquish technology and fight personally and directly. The film seems oddly both nostalgic and fearful about a war fought through the body rather than the machine, as happened in the first American Civil War and in Vietnam, and as is happening now in the War on Terror.

It is, of course, all too easy to see the iconography of September 11th in the apocalyptic imagery of *Independence Day*. As spacecraft loom above the skyscrapers of Washington, it is hard not to overlay the CGI effects with the grainy footage of airliners. Here,

indeed, is a perfect example of the way in which science fiction cannot be said to predict the future in any Nostradamic way, since the future is anyway constructed in the terms science fiction has prepared for it. It is not at all surprising that *Independence Day*, like *Godzilla* (1956) or (one for the true conspiracy theorists) Chris Carter's *The Lone Gunmen* of April 2001 (the pilot episode of which involved an unsuccessful attempt to crash a hijacked airliner into the World Trade Center), seem to predict the future in some way. For just as the innovative mobile phone was framed by the fictional communicator of *Star Trek*, the phrase used to rationalise the events of September 11th was that it was like watching a movie. And when rationalising the event in this way, our attention is naturally drawn to those fictions which seem to have greatest affinity with the actual facts.

This two-way process in which the film anticipates history and history is explained in terms of earlier fiction makes it impossible to claim any strong predictive value for narrative. Nevertheless, interpreted with the benefit of hindsight certain aspects of *Independence Day* become foregrounded in a way which suggests the film, as both product and representative of low culture, was attuned to its immanent political deficits, though these may have been overlooked by patriotic viewers in the 1990s who paid more attention on the technological celebration of its Cold War moment. In his stirring (sentimental) military speech before the final battle, the President tries simultaneously to unify mankind, whilst giving humanism an American face:

Mankind. That word should have new meaning for all of us today. We can't be consumed by our petty differences anymore. ...Perhaps it's fate that today is the Fourth of

July, and you will once again be fighting for our freedom [...] Not from tyranny, oppression, or persecution... but from annihilation....And should we win the day, the Fourth of July will no longer be known as an American holiday, but as the day the world declared in one voice: We will not go quietly into the night! We will not vanish without a fight! We're going to survive! Today we celebrate our Independence Day!

The only conclusive way in which America can assert its unique democratic triumph – and, though a global blockbuster, this was released on July 4th precisely to coincide with the day America celebrates its special freedoms – is paradoxically by asserting its cohabitation of Earth. There are uncanny parallels between this fictional speech and George Bush's rhetoric on the War on Terror, as here, on September 20th, 2001:

This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom [...] Some speak of an age of terror. I know there are struggles ahead, and dangers to face. But this country will define our times, not be defined by them. As long as the United States of America is determined and strong, this will not be an age of terror; this will be an age of liberty, here and across the world.

Both real and fictional presidents slip between presenting America as a metonym for mankind's historical need to progress as one towards universal democracy, and America as an independent nation with its own unique historical story as the leader of that drive. This doubleness maps onto the trope of the alien. On the one hand, the definition of the alien is its strangeness; as the fictional President, a Gulf War veteran, grumbles midway through the film, 'at least then we knew who the enemy was.' On the other hand, the fact that the

alien *is* alien cannot be doubted. Al Qaeda embody a comparable mixture of knowable difference that allows a double edge to be sustained in American nationalism. On the one hand, the terrorist enemy is unknown and subversive, living quietly in the suburbs of America; however, the visibility of their final attacks and posthumous statements of defiance make them the clear alter-egos of democracy.

Richard Kearney remarks that ‘aliens proliferate where anxieties loom as to who we are and how we demarcate ourselves from others’ (2001, p.103). On this model, rather than the narrative of *Independence Day* reworking the triumph of liberal democracy, the very fact that these victories have to be mapped onto the body of an imaginary space-alien evidences anxiety over the absence of a contemporary political body – such as the USSR – against which the story of nationhood – such as of the US – can produced. The lack of a contemporary alien nation manifests itself in an alienation from history, and the consequent need to invent new stories that are not limited by the politics of earth. Alien narratives in which fleshy, technological, or asteroid bodies invade from space proliferated during the 1990s: *Men in Black* (1997), *Mars Attacks!* (1996), *Alien Resurrection* (1997), *Deep Impact* (1998), *Sphere* (1998), *Contact* (1997), *Armageddon* (1998), *Starship Troopers* (1997). It might be possible to argue these were simply following a fashion for apocalypse, rather than their aliens being derived from a historically specific moment. On the other hand, Stephen Spielberg chose to narrate his interpretation of September 11th through a third reworking of *The War of the Worlds* (2005), in which the settling dust clouds and pictures of loved ones pinned to boards raises the spectre of the original footage of the event. This may imply that the alien really

does appeal to a fear of an enemy whose human face is unknown but who is definitively antagonistic to democracy, as the terrorist is.

Whilst *Independence Day* seems to tap similar fears in tying the alien to the terrorist, the question is how far we can push this social reading through hindsight? Does the film celebrate technology, or see its presence as delimiting the possibility of corporeal heroism celebrated in the original War of Independence? Do the aliens provide unproblematic bodies of alterity on which to state the unifying power of democracy, or do they provide evidence that nationalist democracy is always at risk of implosion at the absence of external enemies? As I did with *War of the Worlds*, I have offered both a technological reading in which the film celebrates the future, and a sociological one in which with hindsight the film expresses political doubts. Both readings seem – I hope – plausible. Does this finally deconstruct Wells' claim that narratives can offer a rational science of the future, just as palaeontology provides certain truths about the past? And does this mean that we can never use science fiction to determine the nature of the posthuman to come?

Conclusion

Though relativism is an allegedly devious occupation when terrorism is concerned (for example, Amis 2008), it seems impossible to read science fiction apocalypse in any absolute way. The science fiction writer tries to imagine a technological or scientific potential, and to show how that potential informs social history. However, because the vehicle is fiction set in the future, read from the present as a prospective imagining we may tend to focus on the technical aspect, evading questions as to what that science signifies for society of the now. On the other hand, once we read historically, after the

moment the fiction imagines has been (or appears to have been) realised, and with the benefit of hindsight, we stress the social at the expense of the now-familiar technical. This is certainly what happens in relation to *The War of the Worlds*. But if the retrospective social reading of *War of the Worlds* is acceptable – indeed, is now a fairly conventional one – why might I feel less comfortable with my comparable re-evaluation of the film? Partly it is because I overstate the importance of *Independence Day*, which is aesthetically another run-of-the-mill blockbuster but which receives intellectual credit only because of subsequent events. Additionally, my argument edges close to suggesting that the film predicts September 11th in a strong sense, with the sort of empirical reliability Wells claims for science fiction as a discovery of the future. Rather than answering these criticisms, their existence is precisely the point. In this essay, I have sought to show that constructions of the posthuman depend on the way in which that trope is understood and reinterpreted based on earlier narratives that could not possibly have predicted its developments precisely.

Spielberg's recent iteration aptly renders the commingling of fascination and panic that characterised responses to September 11th. But whilst this seems to be the prominent relationship in the film as viewed at the present time, a film which inverts a science fictional future to become a determinate historical interpretation of the early twenty-first century, one wonders how future audiences will perceive it. With greater hindsight, might, for example, climate change be seen as the predominant anxiety expressed? Though the aliens cover the world with rapacious red weed in Wells' original, it is there for biological authenticity; in Spielberg's version, the weed is far more prominent as a key source of the horror. The possibility of

alternative readings through the (dubious?) benefit of hindsight offers a critical dilemma when applied to a genre that by its nature looks forwards. Science fiction, then, provides stark evidence of the postmodern condition, which is that we must acknowledge the relativity of all our reading from a particular encultured standpoint. The only thing that appears to be certain about predicting posthumanism is that the posthuman is the child of the postmodern age, in which no knowledge can be final: our definitions of the 'post' or 'last' man will undergo perpetual redefinition according to the way our present rereads our earlier narrative predictions.

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