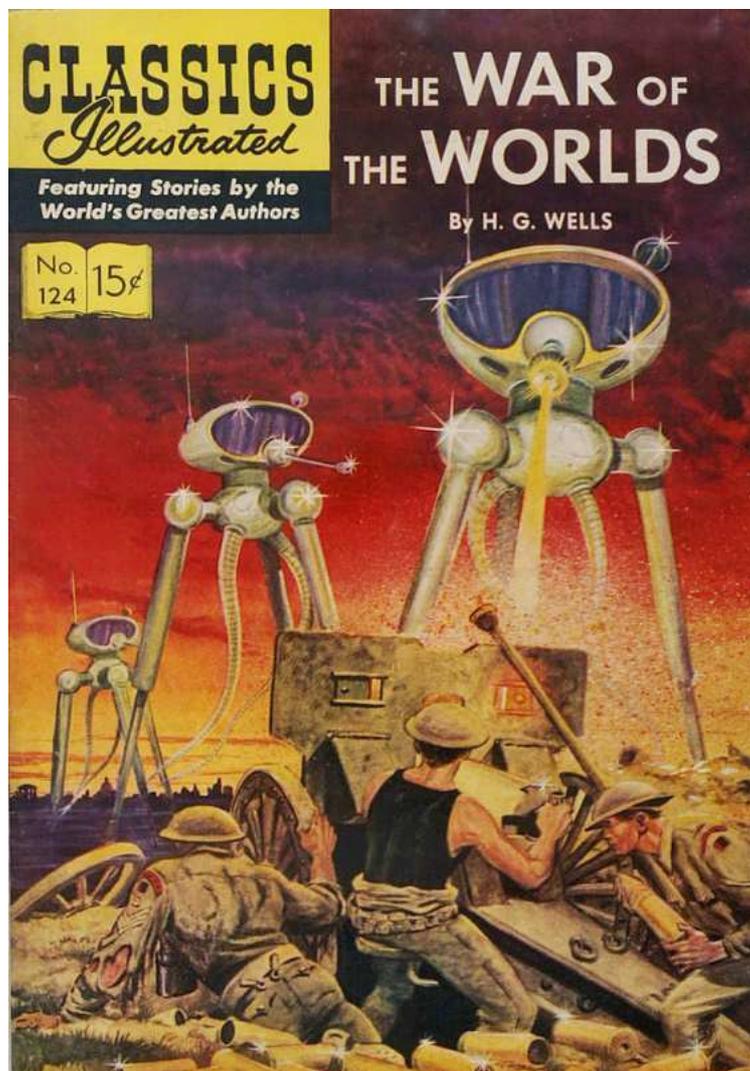


The War of the Worlds

Postcolonialism, Americanism, and Terrorism in Modern Science Fiction Film

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And this Thing I saw! How can I describe it? A monstrous tripod, higher than many houses, striding over the young pine trees, and smashing them aside in its career; a walking engine of glittering metal, reeling now across the heather, articulate ropes of steel dangling from it, and the clattering tumult of its passage mingling with the riot of the thunder. A flash, and it came out vividly, heeling over one way with two feet in the air, to vanish and reappear almost instantly, as it seemed with the next flash, a hundred yards nearer.

- H.G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds*

But who shall dwell in these worlds if they be inhabited? . . . Are we or they Lords of the World? . . . And how are all things made for man?

- Kepler

In our obsession with antagonisms of the moment, we often forget how much unites all the members of humanity. Perhaps we need some outside, universal threat to make us recognize this common bond. I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world.

- Ronald Reagan

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Abstract

H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* has been adapted many times into different media. Film adaptations of the book have seen a resurgence in the past decades, which coincides with new astrophysical discoveries and continued (perceived) threats to America. While the renewed fascination with space began well before the new millennium, thanks to exploration of Mars and the discovery of extrasolar planets, fuelling new adaptations of Wells' work, the heightened fear of terrorism after 9/11 has coloured these adaptations, projecting renewed fears of the Other onto these later films. The aim of my research is to answer the following question: how do *Independence Day* (1996) and Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (2005) react to and expand on H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, and how do these adaptations explore fears of epidemics, terrorism and invasion? I will attempt to answer these questions by comparing and contrasting two recent films with the book, and finding parallels with current-day events in America.

Keywords: *The War of the Worlds*; *War of the Worlds* (2005 film); *Independence Day* (1996 film); H.G. Wells; Roland Emmerich; Steven Spielberg; Mars; Martians; Aliens; Invasion; Colonialism; Epidemic; Evolution; Science Fiction; Disaster Movie, 9/11, terrorism.

Introduction

The War of the Worlds, Wells' science fiction story about a Martian invasion ultimately thwarted by a virus to which the Martians have no immunity, has been adapted many times in the twentieth century, perhaps most famously in the radio adaptation that according to urban legend caused national panic in America. Many film adaptations were created, ranging from relatively obscure remakes, to homages, to summer blockbusters from well-known directors. In recent decades, there has been an increased interest in adaptations of the novel, including blockbusters like *Independence Day* (summer 1996) and Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (summer 2005).

Film adaptation offers interesting insights on how film versions of literature reshape themes and motives from written literature, and how their adaptation into new media reflects on contemporary and present cultures. Science fiction is an excellent topic for this area of research, since science fiction often aims to forecast the future, or provide insight in new developments in the present, by building on old or new inventions, or exploring fantastic scenarios, creating something that rises above the mundane present to show glimpses of hitherto unimagined possibilities. These explorations of what is or is not possible can inspire new developments, not only in science but also in culture, as science fiction can shed new light on existing social structures as well as on implications of new science. The past few decades have been a great time for science fiction because these have seen the exploration of Mars and other solar planets, and the discovery and beginning exploration of extra-solar planets, and with it, a renewed hope for finding extra-terrestrial life. These new possibilities, however, also bring new fears about the nature of these aliens, what their intentions might be, and how we would react to them. These fears are reflected in films like *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds*, both depicting the aliens as hostile invaders. However, these last decades have seen new threats to American culture (from which many of these adaptations arise), mainly from terrorist groups who oppose themselves to Western culture in general, best embodied in the 9/11 attacks. These decades have also seen the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as part of the War on Terror. This War on Terror has elements of the fear of invasion and the Other, as embodied in the threat of terrorism, not only from outside, but also from within. This renewed fear of terrorism has coloured science fiction, especially that involving alien

invasion. Where *Independence Day* is still very optimistic about humanity in general, and presents the aliens as a purely external threat, *War of the Worlds* is infused with fear of terrorism, distrust of strangers, and a bleak picture of humanity, while the aliens are hidden amongst humanity, becoming active only as outside threats come in action. Another fear explored in Wells' novel is the fear of epidemics; these have been around for centuries, among these cholera epidemics in the nineteenth century, flu epidemics throughout the twentieth century, and malaria. These elements can also be found in the film *War of the Worlds*, and are repurposed in the film to reflect on the uncertainties of the War on Terror. How do *Independence Day* (1996) and Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (2005) react to and expand on H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, how do these adaptations react to the American occupation of Iraq and renewed fears of terrorism, and how do these adaptations explore racial fears of the Other, and fears of epidemics and invasion?

New scientific discovery and the American political situation have fostered a demand for films reflecting on fears inherent in both developments, and Hollywood has responded by producing films that provide such reflections, providing catharsis for the audience. I will discuss the main themes of the original *The War of the Worlds*, after which I will compare and contrast two recent films, namely *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds*, and explore themes of racial fears, epidemics, invasion, and Otherness in each of these. I will also explore the impact of terrorism on the second film, and on its interpretation of the original novel.

I will also go into audience and critical response briefly, using aggregate review sites MetaCritic and Rotten Tomatoes. I expect that this analysis will show the correlation outlined in my hypothesis. I hope these findings can contribute to insight of the interaction between reality and fiction.

1: A Tale of Cephalopods and Prokaryotes

No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinized and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinise the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. With infinite complacency men went to and fro over the globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter. It is possible that the infusoria under the microscope do the same. No one gave a thought to the older worlds of space as a source of human danger, or thought of them only to dismiss the idea of life upon them as impossible or improbable. It is curious to recall some of the mental habits of those departed days. At most terrestrial man fancied there might be other men upon Mars, perhaps inferior to themselves and ready to welcome a missionary enterprise. Yet across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us. And early in the twentieth century came the great disillusionment.

- H.G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds*

1.1: Main themes

With these lines, H.G. Wells opens his great science fiction novel, *The War of the Worlds*, published in magazine form in 1897. As Robert Silverberg puts it in his introduction to *Fresh Perspectives on the H.G. Wells Classic The War of the Worlds*: “[o]f all the remarkable novels and stories that came pouring from him during the spectacular ten years when he essentially created modern science fiction, . . . *The War of the Worlds* [has had] the greatest impact on our culture” (Silverberg 6). It has inspired many books, comics, games, and films dealing with space invaders since, from the comic book adventures of Buck Rogers to films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *Star Wars*, from books like *The Day of the Triffids* to

video games like *Crysis* and *Command and Conquer*. Aside from capturing the imagination of the twentieth century, *The War of the Worlds* explores topics of colonialism, fear of the unknown, racial and fear of epidemics.

The first paragraph of the book contains, in a nutshell, the story's overarching themes, and sets up the ground-breaking premises underlying the story (the entire story is summarized in appendix A). The first important theme, introduced in the first sentence, is the Martians, described as "intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own" (Wells 17). This concept of intelligence that surpasses that of man would have been unthinkable a few centuries earlier, in a geocentric, anthropocentric world, and at the end of the nineteenth century, at the height of the British Empire, would be the only feasible threat to that Empire. The self-assuredness of man, specifically of inhabitants of the British Empire, is expressed in a following sentence: "At most terrestrial man fancied there might be other men upon Mars, perhaps inferior to themselves and ready to welcome a missionary enterprise" (Wells 17). This line evokes the sense of superiority and civilization of Empire: that if there are others out there, they will be inferior, pliant, and ready for the civilizing and Christianizing work of missionaries, not the "intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic" (Wells 17) that do not care for humanity and are more than a match for the mighty Empire. Wells does elaborate on the motives of the Martians to some extent, showing Mars as old and dying, and the Martians looking for a fresh new world, finding one in Earth, "a morning star of hope, our own warmer planet, green with vegetation and grey with water, with a cloudy atmosphere eloquent of fertility" (Wells 18). This language is evocative of that same language used for the New World, with its promises of fertile lands, untold riches, and hope. This language thus displaces the role of the colonizer to the Martians, and places humanity in the role of the colonized natives, to be displaced with military force. This is also shown in the characterization of humans as being like lowly animals to them. The last theme set up, that of epidemic and disease, is set up in a later section, where the Martians are shown to have eradicated their home world of disease, and so become susceptible to infection. This mirrors the problems colonizers have had over the centuries in faraway tropical places such as India and the Congo, where settlers often died of diseases to which the natives had much better resistance, as well as referring to the effect disease imported by Europeans had on the New World.

Luckhurst comments on the connection between the alien invasion and Victorian invasion literature:

The inversions . . . play with ideas of biological and imperial domination. The genre of alien invasion was meant to steel Victorians to a robust, re-militarized defence of the

imperial centre; in Wells's hands, it appears to become a way of undercutting British pretension. Imaginative access to the Martian perspective renders the imperial masters 'at least as alien and lowly as are the monkeys and lemurs to us'. There is no particular relief from that 'sense of dethronement, a persuasion that I was no longer a master, but an animal amongst the animals, under the Martian heel', because the Martians are eventually defeated by lowly bacteria, not the imperial might of the nation. Britain is represented by the panicking masses – crowds accelerated degenerate decline, according to late Victorian theory – and the different types of surrender embodied in the Curate and the artilleryman. (Luckhurst 39-40)

These inversions of Victorian imperialist doctrine can be seen in the colonial attitudes of the Martians, their technological superiority, evolutionary superiority of the Martians, ecological impacts of invasion by the Martians, and their ultimate defeat by microbes.

1.2: Colonialism and the Superiority of the Martians

1.2.1: Colonial Attitudes and the Martians

Colonialism is the main theme in *The War of the Worlds*, with the Martians poised to invade Earth due to the dying state of Mars (similar to how Europe was portrayed as a dying or exhausted continent by those promoting the New World), attracted by the warm climate, rich resources, and vast stores of water. The protagonist draws attention to the similarities between Martians and human colonialism, and between Martian extermination efforts and humanity's treatment of its wildlife, relativizing condemnation of the Martians:

And before we judge of [the Martians] too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit? (Wells 18-19)

The protagonist still speaks in the language of the colonizer, but reveals the irony in being treated the same way as the British Empire would treat those considered inferior, or worse, like the bison, hunted to extinction for food or sport.

Another indication of the attitude towards invasion is the reaction of the Londoners upon initial news of the Martian landings: “there was still a fixed idea [in London] that these monsters must be sluggish: ‘crawling,’ ‘creeping painfully’ – such expressions occurred in almost all the earlier reports.” (Wells 69). The general atmosphere before the attacks on London start is of annoyance at delayed trains and curiosity, with growing tension as news trickles in. The threat only becomes fully apparent to the Londoners when the Martians are already upon them. This can be compared to how postcolonial theorists like Ania Loomba have described the binary relation between European colonizers and the Other. Colonial construction of the Other consists of attributing (often contradictory and inconsistent) qualities to non-Europeans that defined Europeans through dissociation with these qualities. In this fashion, the Other could for example be characterized as innocent, living closer to a perceived Western ideal than Westerners do, but at the same time depicted as promiscuous, lazy, and aggressive, as opposed to European chastity, industriousness, and peacefulness. (Loomba 91-93). Wells’ Londoners operate on this same principle of Othering, imagining the aliens as ‘sluggish,’ ‘crawling,’ and ‘creeping,’ as opposed to the self-image of every-busy, fast-moving inhabitants of the metropole of London, capital of the world’s greatest empire.

The strongest sense of colonialist themes come at the end of the novel, when the English countryside has been overrun with red weed, and the Martians appear to have wiped out and conquered humanity:

For that moment [of observing the desolate, alien landscape] I touched an emotion beyond the common range of men, yet one that the poor brutes we dominate know only too well. I felt as a rabbit might feel returning to his burrow and suddenly confronted by the work of a dozen busy navvies digging the foundations of a house. I felt the first inkling of a thing that presently grew quite clear in my mind, that oppressed me for many days, a sense of dethronement, a persuasion that I was no longer a master, but an animal among the animals, under the Martian heel. With us it would be as with them, to lurk and watch, to run and hide; the fear and empire of man had passed away. (Wells 124)

Again the language of the colonizer, designating the Other as ‘the poor brutes we dominate’ is inverted to apply to the former colonial force. This language also ties into the theme of evolution and de-evolution, foreseeing a degeneration of humankind under the Martians (Williamson 192-193). Such theories of degeneration were already in circulation in the nineteenth century, for example those of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who argued that non-

Caucasian races were degenerations of the Caucasian race, while also proposing that rehabilitation of other races was possible (Blumenbach).

The character of the artilleryman touches upon the subject of slavery near the end of the novel, when humanity seems utterly defeated. He has observed the Martians collecting humans, similar to the scene in the collapsed house, and paints a picture of the future:

[A]t present we're caught as we're wanted. A Martian has only to go a few miles to get a crowd on the run. And I saw one . . . picking houses to pieces and routing among the wreckage. . . . So soon as they've settled all our guns and ships, and smashed our railways, and done all the things they are doing over there, they will begin catching us systematic, picking the best and storing us in cages and things. . . . They haven't begun on us yet. (Wells 131-132)

The artilleryman, not unlike the curate, interprets the situation in the worst possible way, and is quick to accept the fall of human civilization:

[I]nstead of our rushing about blind, on the howl, or getting dynamite on the chance of busting them up, we've got to fix ourselves up according to the new state of affairs. That's how I figure it out. It isn't quite according to what a man wants for his species, but it's about what the facts point to. And that's the principle I acted upon. Cities, nations, civilization, progress – it's all over. (Wells 132)

The artilleryman foresees a future where humanity is turned into livestock, pets, and hunting animals by the Martians, and foresees that most of humanity will happily assume these roles and enter into slavery under the Martians, while only the strong and wilful will fight for their freedom, living underground, at the risk of turning into savages. The artilleryman is a clear adherent of Social Darwinism, favouring the strong while wishing to exclude the weak. His grandiose ideas of an underground resistance and eventual overthrow of the Martians, however, stumble on his lack of workable plans and his lazy attitude.

1.2.2: Technological Superiority

Another aspect of the story related to imperial power is that of technological advancement. This technological superiority of the Martians mirrors that of Eurasian powers over Native American nations. In his book, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, Jared Diamond outlines five major aspects of technological advancement. The first advancement is the use of metals in military technology (mirrored in the Martians' advanced use of aluminium), as opposed to mainly

wood and stone. The second technology is the use of steel in swords and armour, alongside small guns and artillery (compare the Martians' use of Heat Rays and Black Smoke, and lightweight, bullet-resistant armour), against clubs and axes of stone, wood or copper, bows and arrows, and quilted armour. An additional advantage of the Europeans were the use of horses for military and logistical use, which the Native Americans initially had no access to (compare the Martian tripods, with much greater speed than horses). The fourth advantage came from the minor industrial revolution at the end of the Middle Ages, providing Europeans with wind and water power to replace human labour (compare the Martians' use of robotics to mine aluminium and build other machines), where Native Americans mostly used manual labour. Another advantage was the use of the wheel (compare again the Martian robotics, which use muscle-like structures for movement), which was not widely known in the Americas before the arrival of Europeans. Finally, the Europeans had access to advanced sea transport, sailing ships, and compasses (compare the Martians' attempted flying machine), where Native Americans relied on rafts and canoes (Diamond 358-359). In this way, the Martians mirror the European colonial powers, able to overwhelm the British Empire with superior materials, fire power, transportation, and production technology.

At various points in the novel, alien machines are described to great detail. Among those are tripods, three-legged fighting machines that also serve as food collectors. These fighting machines are capable of withstanding the might of the British Army, and function in a similar role tanks would play during World War II. They also capture humans for food. They have two weapons, primarily the Heat Ray, which functions like a directed energy weapon, or a laser, and is much more effective than any Victorian weapons, most notably artillery, which at the time would have been slow and inaccurate. The Martians' second weapon is poisonous gas, which functions similar to chemical weapons like chlorine, already in development thanks to modernized chemistry, but not widely used until World War I. Another machine, only briefly seen, is a flying machine. With the first experimental airplane still half a decade away, this would have given the definite military advantage over the British Empire, similar to how airplanes became an increasing decisive factor in the World Wars, and near the twenty-first century even the main means of warfare. The flying machine only appears near the end of the story, however, when defeat is already upon the Martians themselves. The last technological marvel described is a robot, described as a spider-like machine, using muscle-like structures, and capable of construction of other machinery, and mining and refining of aluminium. Needless to say, robotics would be decades more advanced than the steam powered factories of Victorian England. The process of refining aluminium

was still very labour intensive and expensive for the Victorians. Robotics like these would only appear late in the twentieth century.

While many of these advantages would be equalled or overtaken by twentieth century science, these technologies remain powerful images of the superior technology of aliens in film. The image of the flying saucer has been widely adopted in science fiction during the latter half of the twentieth century, with films like *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and is a major feature of *Independence Day*. *War of the Worlds* retains the iconic tripods of the book. Both the spaceships and tripods utilize force fields to neutralize the increased firepower, long range capability and precision of modern day armies. The Heat Ray remains in both adaptations, taking the form of a city buster in *Independence Day*, and a disintegration ray in *War of the Worlds*. Poisonous gas is not present in either film, but is compensated for by other imagery, most notably the survivors covered by ash in *War of the Worlds*. The robotics come back in *Independence Day* in the form of power armour for the aliens, while the aliens in *War of the Worlds* are noticeably lacking in any supporting technology aside from their tripods. This last discrepancy between the two films is likely due to the role the aliens play: in the first, the aliens are presented as a fully-fledged military force, while in the second film, the aliens act as solitary insurgents.

1.3: How Evolution shaped the Martians, and How Viruses Defeated Them

The last major theme of the novel is the ecological impact of the Martians, and the impact micro-organisms and disease has on the Martians. Already in the opening of the book, the role of the microscopic is foreshadowed: “as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinized and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinise the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water.” (Wells 17). The protagonist reflects at length on the biology of the Martians, and also discusses the lack of microbiology on Mars:

Micro-organisms, which cause so much disease and pain on earth, have either never appeared upon Mars or Martian sanitary science eliminated them ages ago. A hundred diseases, all the fevers and contagions of human life, consumption, cancers, tumours and such morbidities, never enter the scheme of their life. (Wells 112)

The use of microbes as the ultimate downfall of the Martians reinforces the dethronement of humanity as masters of the universe. Not only are they technologically outmatched and conquered, but the demise of the Martians comes not at the hands of man, but at that of microbes, “by the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon this earth” (Wells 143). The depiction of disease as a factor in colonialism and imperialism also mirrors historical events of colonizers bringing disease to the New World, to which the native population had no resistance, and of colonizers themselves not being resistant to disease in tropical colonies such as India.

The protagonist elaborates at length on the biology of the Martians, especially their digestive and reproductive systems. The Martians are described as evolutionary superior to humans, and the protagonist notes an article on the future evolution of humanity. It declares 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. Only one other part of the body had a strong case for survival, and that was the hand, ‘teacher and agent of the brain.’ While the rest of the body dwindled, the hands would grow larger. . . . To me it is quite credible that the Martians are descended from beings not unlike ourselves, by a gradual development of brain and hands (the latter giving rise to the two bunches of delicate tentacles at last) at the expense of the rest of the body. Without the body the brain would, of course, become a mere selfish intelligence, without any of the emotional substratum of the human being. (Wells 111)

This article, written by Wells (published in the Pall Mall Gazette on November 6, 1893, titled “The Man of the Year Million”), portrays a vision for the evolution of mankind. By linking this image to the Martians, it shows a biological and evolutionary explanation for the Martians’ behaviour: the evolution of a being of ‘mere selfish intelligence,’ without ‘the emotional substratum of the human being.’ Luckhurst comments on this vision of evolutionary development in connection with colonial ventures:

Wells compares the destruction of humanity to the eradication of the Tasmanian native population by the colonizing British. Dethroning that confidence, Wells uneasily remarks that to advanced beings, Man ‘must be to them as alien and lowly as are the monkeys and lemurs to us’. This homily on the inevitable evolutionary superstition of

man expressed the ambiguities of British Imperialism in the 1890s, which was in an expansive phase yet simultaneously gripped by anxieties of ‘sunset’ and degeneration. It is a classic fantasy of ‘reverse colonization’. (Luckhurst 56-57)

This image of evolutionary degeneration of humanity, coupled with a fear of being succeeded by others, be it races or species, is key to the central conflict in the book, by dethroning empire and decentring of humanity.

The Martians bring along with them several species of Martian vegetation, one of which turns invasive. This plant takes the form of red weed, growing rapidly especially near water (Wells 112). The red weed has a devastating impact on the English landscape, behaving similar to kudzu, displacing terrestrial vegetation and clogging up waterways, causing flooding. The red weed forms “[a] landscape, weird and lurid, of another planet” (Wells 123-125). The ecological devastation the Martians cause combine with the cratered, ruined landscape caused by battle to create an alien landscape devoid of human life. This complete displacement of the native inhabitants (both humans and human-sustaining ecology) to favour the newly arrived colonizer mirrors the way colonists, especially in the New World, displaced native populations and destroyed native cultures and economies to suit their own needs and goals. Awareness of the ecological and cultural disruption of invaders (humans as well as plants and animals) was already expressed in the opening of the story:

[W]hat ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants (Wells 18-19)

The description of an alien landscape, devoid of terrestrial life, inverts this picture, bringing the devastating effects of invasion back to the colonial power.

Humanity and Earth seem doomed, but ultimately, it is not mankind that defeats the Martians, but nature itself:

In the end the red weed succumbed almost as fast as it had spread. A cankerous disease, due, it is believed, to the action of certain bacteria, presently seized upon it. Now by the action of natural selection, all terrestrial plants have acquired a resisting power against bacterial diseases – they never succumb without a severe struggle, but the red weed rotted like a thing already dead. (Wells 125)

[T]he Martians – *dead!* – slain by the putrefactive and disease bacteria against which their systems were unprepared; slain as the red weed was being slain; slain, after all man’s devices had failed, by the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put

upon this earth. . . . But there are no bacteria in Mars, and directly these invaders arrived, directly they drank and fed, our microscopic allies began to work their overthrow. Already when I watched them they were irrevocably doomed, dying and rotting even as they went to and fro. By the toll of a billion deaths man has bought his birthright of the earth, and it is his against all comers; it would still be his were the Martians ten times as mighty as they are. For neither do men live nor die in vain.

(Wells 143-144)

This surprising ending could be criticized for breaking with dramatic conventions, and leading to an unsatisfying end for the protagonist as well as humanity in general. Jack Williamson suggests that this subversion of the classical drama, in which the conclusion must result from the actions of the protagonists, represents a reversal of the role of protagonist to the Martians: “Sanitizing Mars, wiping out the native bacteria, they display their hubris, the fatal flaw, the arrogant pride that goes before the fall. Looking at it through the eyes of the evolutionist, it is a grand panorama for the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest.” (Williamson 198). This argument fits in with the role of the Martian as imperial superpower, and the mirroring of British colonial attitudes, technological superiority, and colonial-ecological impact. Wells ends his book on a thoughtful note: that humanity is not alone in the universe after all, and that humanity can never be secure in its feeling of superiority again. This loss of security is also mirrored in history, as the Boer War would soon put the first dent into the British Empire, eventually culminating in a post-colonial world, which all people must share on equal footing, and where there is no longer a place for unquestioned feelings of superiority.

2: Of Parasites, Viruses, and America's Second Wind

'Can there be a peace between us?'

'Peace... No peace.'

'What do you want us to do?'

'Die. Die!'

- Independence Day

2.1: Main Themes

Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day*, released in 1996, is one of the iconic disaster movies of the nineties, being the highest grossing film at the box office that year, and was well received by viewers, while critics had a somewhat more mixed response (see appendix B).

The main themes of *Independence Day* are invasion, imperialism, and American nationalism. A smaller theme is that of infection, in this case digital, connecting this film back to the book. The film continues the imperialist motives of the aliens (no longer Martians, but intergalactic planet hoppers), with the aliens intending to strip Earth of its resources after exterminating humanity. The setting is moved to America, and while the aliens supposedly attack worldwide, this is restricted to Western nations, and the viewer only witnesses the attacks in the United States. The film is overtly nationalist, with a heavy emphasis on America as the only feasible defence against the aliens, and is heavily Americentric, viewing the world exclusively from an American viewpoint. The film also contains an endorsement of American foreign politics, specifically the Gulf war. The main elements linking the film back to Wells' book are the invasion concept, the design of the aliens, and the metaphorical infection of the aliens with a computer virus against which they have no resistance.

2.2: Invasion and War

Independence Day revolves around the invasion of Earth, and follows the same imperialist motives present in Wells' book. The dynamics of the conflict have changed, however. In the book, the weaponry of the Martians is still superior to that of the British forces, the advantage being mainly pinpoint accuracy over long distances, whereas British long range artillery is still inaccurate and slow. In *Independence Day*, however, the aliens are up against a modern day super power, with long distance precision strike capabilities, an effective air force, and nuclear weapons. The aliens' only advantage is force field shields capable of absorbing any attack, up to nuclear strikes. In other respects, the aliens have comparable weaponry, City Destroyers being similar to nuclear bombs, an alien air force, and laser cannons as opposed to missiles.

The motivation of the aliens is still imperialist, but the invasion now takes the form of a resource war, with the goal of extermination and resource stripping of Earth. The alien civilization is described as locust-like, moving from world to world, stripping them of resources before moving on. It becomes clear from dialogue they have no interest in peace negotiations, simply wanting to exterminate and extract resources. Mair comments that:

The film unashamedly elevates American ideology as the last bastion of universal independence, so that in one swift move America becomes both 'globo cop' and 'interstellar guardian'. . . . American foreign policy and her military presence in the Gulf are metaphorically and symbolically vindicated via the narrative of the film. . . . [The film] becomes a libratory tract emphasising the 'moral' right to obliterate 'difference' – to annihilate all that is not Western.

The film thus metaphorically depicts the desired outcome of the Gulf War – the destruction of Iraq and virtual conquering of Earth by proxy.

2.3: America Saves the World

A major theme running throughout *Independence Day* is the notion of American nationalism and exceptionalism, and to a lesser extent Western superiority. While the aliens target cities around the world, the film's action focusses exclusively on American targets and the American response to the invasion. One scene late in the film suggests that military response is entirely limited to the United States, when two British soldiers discuss the announcement of an American counteroffensive, and respond with exasperation, suggesting that other nations have been waiting for the Americans to act, and are incapable of properly defending

themselves without American planning. The presidential speech before the counteroffensive is indicative of this American nationalist self-indulgence, stating that the Fourth of July (the date of America's Declaration of Independence) will become a worldwide Independence Day. The foregrounding of Western powers at the expense of the rest of the world can also be seen by the targeting of the alien ships, which favour cities in the Northern hemisphere, as well as Western and important Asian nations. Some images in the film depict racial stereotypes, such as the Africans in traditional garb waving spears at an exploding spaceship at the end of the film.

President Whitmore also refers to the Gulf War as comparison to the alien invasion, saying: "In the Gulf War we knew what we had to do. This is just not simple anymore." (*Independence Day*). The Gulf War, lasting from 1990 to 1991, was a military response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, led by the United States. The goal of the war was the liberation of Kuwait, which was reached in 1991 with a ceasefire. Saddam Hussein was left in power, however, and relations between Iraq and the US remained tense in the following years. Whitmore's remark likely refers more to the military strategy chosen than to the political situation, however.

Jan Mair comments on how the American Dream is reshaped in this film, calling the ending, in which President Whitmore declares the Fourth of July to be a worldwide holiday henceforth, a Pax Americana (Mair 34), invoking Pax Romana, the period of peace, military and political stability in the Roman Empire, spanning several centuries. Mair states that, in contrast to older science fiction films where the aliens represent fear of destruction, "[the aliens from *Independence Day*] underline the total supremacy of America, their onslaught demonstrates the impregnability of American supremacy and its rightful leadership of the globe. In *Independence Day* the alien menace authors the ultimate feel good factor." (Mair 34). The invasion of Earth thus serves not to dethrone an empire, as it did in Wells' novel, but to reinforce that empire's status as ruler of the world.

2.4: From Immunology to Antivirus

The biological theme from Wells' work is carried over metaphorically into *Independence Day* as a computer virus infecting the alien mothership. The underlying motive of infection and lack of immunity remains intact, however. The aliens are capable of hacking into and overriding satellites, using them to coordinate their attacks. David Levinson, the film's

computer expert and environmentalist, manages to counter-hack the aliens' systems through the same satellites, and is able to write a virus that will disable the alien defence shields. The virus has to be delivered to the mainframe aboard the alien mothership orbiting the moon, using the crash-landed alien fighter recovered at Area 51. Along with the virus, Steven Hiller (Will Smith) and David deliver a nuclear bomb to the mothership. These events symbolize the biological process of infection, being similar to auto-immune diseases, where the host's defence systems are neutralized and the host is ultimately destroyed by the infection.

3: The Terror from Space

'What is it? Is it terrorists?'

'No, this came from someplace else.'

- War of the Worlds

3.1: Main Themes

Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* was released in 2005, and was the fourth highest grossing film for that year. The film did well with critics but less so with audiences (see appendix B).

In this film, humanity is shown in a much darker light, as opposed to the positive and upbeat approach of *Independence Day*. Humankind is shown to be at each other's throats as soon as disaster strikes and characters are filled with paranoia, disillusionment and distrust. A major factor in the darker, edgier characterization is the use of 9/11 imagery and the depiction of the Martians as terrorists rather than the outside military force of *Independence Day*. The film utilizes the imagery of disease as the ultimate victor against the aliens, similar to the book, as well as the ecological impact of the alien invasion.

3.2: The Dark Side of Humanity

The film sets a much darker and bleaker tone than *Independence Day*, creating troubled characters and relationships. In *Independence Day*, characters keep a generally positive outlook despite the disasters around them, never breaking down or giving up hope. At the first arrival of the aliens, reactions are generally positive and welcoming towards the spaceships. Even after the first wave of destruction, characters show little negative response and immediately know what to do in the face of disaster. Characters are also helpful and cooperative towards each other. The heroes (who are unambiguously heroic) come up with a counterattack, leaving the agency with humanity. In contrast, *War of the Worlds* depicts characters in negative tones ranging from helplessness to moral depravity. The family serving

as protagonists consist of Ray, Rachel and Robbie. Ray is a divorced father who cannot connect with his children and is too immature to take responsibility for them. Rachel is a sheltered child with many phobias who is not allowed to take care of herself by her family. Robbie is a headstrong teenager who refuses to listen to authority and rushes headlong into dangerous situations without consideration for his safety or for any consequences for his rash actions. In contrast to *Independence Day*, where every character experiences character development, these characters undergo little if any personal growth or learn anything from their actions. Especially Robbie has no negative repercussions to his rash actions, surviving somehow after rushing into an unwinnable fight, and not suffering any consequences for abandoning his family for his foolhardy cause.

Other characters in *War of the Worlds* are portrayed negatively, to the point of being villainous. Of note are the crowd of people attacking the protagonists for their car, resulting in a gun fight over it after the family abandons the car to them. Another cynical depiction of character is the news crew that scours an airplane crash for a news story, with little regard for the disaster itself or for other survivors. The culmination of this cynical depiction of human nature is Ogilvy, a combination of the curate, artilleryman, and scientist from the book. Ogilvy reflects on the nature of the conflict: “They defeated the greatest power in the world in a couple days. . . . And these are only the first. . . . This is not a war any more than there’s a war between men and maggots. This is an extermination.” (*War of the Worlds*). This is in great contrast to the message of *Independence Day*, where the alien invasion reinforced American superiority. In this film, the invasion breaks the superpower, demoralizing its people, and turning them on each other. Ogilvy’s confused message of hiding while also wishing to strike out mirrors that of the artilleryman in the book, while his negative aspects are magnified by his callousness for the safety of the protagonists, willing to put them in danger or sacrifice them in his increasingly unhinged bid for survival.

3.3: Aliens and Terrorists

The nature of the Martian threat has changed significantly in this film. In Wells’ book, the aliens presented an imperialist, colonial opponent, with superior technology and an evolutionary advantage. Their goal was to colonize Earth, displacing humanity in the process. In *Independence Day*, the aliens, while still technologically advanced, are on a comparable level of weaponry (compare the City Destroyers’ weapon with nuclear weapons), and their

initial advantage lies in the use of force field shields. Their use of information and communications technology is comparable to Earth technology, capable of interfacing with Earth satellites and overriding their programming, and conversely also capable of being infected with Earth computer viruses. This puts the aliens on technologically even footing with humanity. The war goal of the aliens has changed little, but instead of a colonial war, they wage a resource war, seeking to exterminate humanity and plunder Earth's resources.

War of the Worlds, conceived in 2002, after the September 11 attacks, borrows heavily from that event, from the imagery of people covered in human ash, to a plane crashing into a house, to the manner of the alien invasion. Unlike the two previous works, the aliens (whose origin is never revealed) have already been here, leaving behind buried tripods for a later attack. These tripods, functioning as sleeper cells, are activated by an outside force of aliens. These aliens first use an EMP weapon to cripple electronics in the area, after which they transport aliens into tripods through lightning bolts. This is similar to post-9/11 fears of terrorist sleeper cells, which could potentially lay dormant for years before being called to action by an outside terrorist network. Other imagery linking the alien attack back to 9/11 are the tripod weapon, which turns people into ash, and the resulting imagery of streets and people covered in ash, similar to how the collapse of the Twin Towers produced large dust and ash clouds, which produced images in the media of people covered in dust. The film also depicts the protagonists surviving through an airplane crashing into the house they are taking shelter in. Another more symbolic image is the toppling of a church tower when the first tripod emerges. Technologically, the aliens seem to be reduced back to those of Wells' book, with the addition of force field shields. The motive for the invasion is similar to the book, with a stronger emphasis on using humanity as food source. Lastly, the image of burning vehicles and trains moving past recurs several times throughout the film, but this imagery is not as clearly connected to that of terrorism, perhaps trying to invoke the kerosine-fueled inferno caused by the plane crashes.

3.4: Microbes and Alien Ecology

The film returns to the novel's theme of alien terraforming, but removes any mention of Mars. The same red weed as in the book is shown, but the exact nature is further worked out. The aliens are shown to harvest humans and use their blood for food, as well as turning their bodies into liquid fertilizer, which looks like blood and is copiously present around red weed.

This depiction of red weed reinforces the depiction of the aliens as ruthless invaders, looking to enslave humanity as food source.

The bacteriological images from the book are also transposed on the film, bookending it at the start and end via narration and zooming out of and into cellular life forms respectively. The narration is an adaptation of similar speeches in the book, displaced into the twenty-first century. The use of microbiology as the ultimate downfall of the aliens evokes similar themes of the helplessness of humanity against invasion as seen in the book, but is also contradicted by the final lines of the film: “By the toll of a billion deaths, man had earned his immunity, his right to survive among this planet’s infinite organisms. And that right is ours against all challengers, for neither do men live, nor die, in vain.” (*War of the Worlds*). This line, instead of humbling humanity in the face of “the humblest things that God . . . has put upon this earth” (Wells 143), puts forward the idea that humanity’s struggle against disease gives it a right to survival, and a right to existence, in spite of what man has done to injure nature or each other.

Conclusion

By the toll of a billion deaths man has bought his birthright of the earth, and it is his against all comers; it would still be his were the Martians ten times as mighty as they are. For neither do men live nor die in vain.

- War of the Worlds

H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* is one of the iconic works of science fiction of the nineteenth century, and has inspired science fiction throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Its themes of colonial and imperial power (or lack thereof), alien technology like Heat Rays and tripods, and evolutionary and biological themes have inspired adaptations ever since, as well as influencing many other works.

Wells' *The War of the Worlds* deals with colonialism and imperialism, commenting on nineteenth century colonial practices by the British Empire, while inverting the roles of Empire and Other in the Martian invasion. The examination of colonial attitudes focuses mainly on ecological effects of colonisation, commenting on extermination of both animal species and native peoples, comparing the ruthless behaviour of the Martians to that of Empire. Another aspect of colonial attitude is shown in the population of London, who at first view the alien threat as minimal, placing them as the inferior Other to their centre of civilization. London, and with them civilization, quickly crumbles under the Martian attack, tying into Victorian fears of evolutionary degeneration of humankind. The novel also touches on slavery, and speculates on the fate of humanity under Martian rule, mirroring the fate of many colonized people under Empire. The book also shows the Martians to be technologically superior, again unsettling the Victorian sense of confidence in its own power over the world. This technological superiority of the Martians proves to be difficult to maintain in future adaptations as human technology progresses throughout the twentieth century, resorting to impenetrable force field shields to keep the advantage. Evolution and disease are an important theme in the novel, mirroring fears of disease and degeneration of the Victorians. The image of a superior race displacing a degenerate humanity emphasizes the dethronement of human power in the novel. The ecological impact of colonialism is also commented upon, in the form of invasive species overtaking local nature, destroying it in the

process. The idea of Martian terraforming also shows a fear of displacement by the colonizer. Finally, the novel explores social Darwinism, where the strongest species has the right of survival, and inverses it for the colonial Empire.

Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* displaces the setting from the British Empire to the superpower of America. In doing so, it works to cement America's self-image of world leader and sole defender of freedom. The aliens are not as vastly superior as in the book, but still pose a threat. The destruction caused by the aliens, however, works to strengthen rather than dethroning Empire, showing the superiority of American ideology, and its moral right to govern the world. This is shown through rendering other nations powerless and helpless without American leadership, and by an exclusive focus on the attacks happening in America. The film also works to legitimize American military action in the Gulf War, as well as its lasting occupation. The aliens, rather than symbolize fear and helplessness, comes to symbolize American supremacy. The biological theme is also carried over metaphorically in the use of computer viruses, but still carries the original theme of infection and lack of immunity.

Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* is a more straightforward adaptation of Wells' novel, and is adapted to reflect renewed fears of terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11. The film shows pessimism over human nature in the face of crisis, depicting them as quickly descending into selfish behaviour and disregard for others. The film relies heavily on imagery of the 9/11 attacks, especially those of (human) ash, plane crashes, and burning vehicles. The aliens are also depicted as more subversive, and less as a straightforward enemy force. Tripods are buried underground, functioning as sleeper cells, to be activated by outside forces, mirroring a common fear in the period immediately following 9/11. Further, the film returns to the ecological imagery of invasive species, as well as microbiology being the cause of the demise of the aliens. Rather than emphasize the fragility of human supremacy, however, it is used to reinforce the right of survival, and the right to existence, of humanity.

Emmerich and Spielberg both use and adapt Wells' themes to their own designs, using the novel's themes of colonialism, war and ecology to comment on American military supremacism and foreign policy, and on the threat of terrorism, respectively. These two films show that the themes apparent in *The War of the Worlds* are still current today, and can be used or abused to comment on and colour events, politics and cultures of today. Wells' novel continues to be useful in exposing colonialist and imperial tendencies in today's supposedly post-colonial world.

Appendices

Appendix A: Summary of Wells' War of the Worlds

A.1: Book One: The Coming of the Martians

The story centres around four primary characters (all unnamed): the protagonist, his brother, an artilleryman, and a curate. The book is divided into two parts. In part one, the protagonist describes the arrival of the Martians in metal cylinders, conjectured by the protagonist to be shot from giant guns on Mars (similar to the canon used in Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon*). The Martians are described as tentacled monsters, who have trouble breathing in Earth's atmosphere and moving in Earth's stronger gravity. Soon, however, they construct the first of their weapons, a heat ray (which functions similar to a laser), beginning their invasion, quickly wiping out the first forces from the British army as a second cylinder arrives. After bringing his wife to relative safety, the protagonist returns, narrowly escaping the first tripod, armed with a heat ray and what later turns out to be a Black Powder cannon. Here, the protagonist briefly meets the artilleryman, before moving on in search of his wife. After being diverted by the landing of a third cylinder, and fleeing to Shepperton, the town is attacked by several tripods, during which one of the machines is destroyed by a direct artillery hit. Here, the protagonist meets the curate, a parish priest who is slowly going mad from witnessing what he believes to be the Rapture, and is the protagonist's companion throughout the rest of the story. During the tripod's next offensive, to avoid the British artillery, they employ Black Smoke, a deadly poisonous gas cloud. This use of chemical warfare is similar to the use of chlorine and other chemical weapons, already being developed in the advent of modern chemistry in the nineteenth century, which would be used to deadly effect in World War I (Croddy). This attack breaks the British Army's offensive, leaving London open for attack.

The narrative shifts to the protagonist's brother, living in London, who chronicles the increasing panic during the first attacks in the countryside, followed by the total breakdown of civilized society as the tripods approach London and a fourth cylinder lands inside the metropolis. A great exodus ensues as the tripods start laying waste to London with heat rays and Black Powder. After rescuing two women, Mrs. Elphinstone and her sister in law, they

reach the coast and get aboard a ship as part of a large naval evacuation effort across the Channel. The fleet of defenceless ships is attacked by tripods reaching the coast, but the fleet is saved by the torpedo ram HMS *Thunder Child*, who manages to sink two of the three tripods before being taken down. After this, all organized resistance ceases, and an ominous flying machine is seen hovering along the coast.

A.2: Book Two: The Earth Under the Martians

The narrative returns to the protagonist, who, while scavenging for food with the curate, witnesses a tripod harvesting human survivors in a cage on its back, suggesting the Martians have other motives than eradication. They are soon trapped inside a house when it is struck by the fifth and final cylinder, allowing them to observe the aliens up close. The protagonist elaborates on their biology, adding future knowledge (as the story is told after the fact by the protagonist). They also observe the aliens feeding upon the captured humans, injecting blood directly into their own bodies. The aliens have various mechanical equipment, what amounts to robotic exoskeletons and autonomous robots. They also mine and refine large quantities of aluminium at a great rate (a very expensive and time consuming process at the time), further demonstrating their technological superiority. The curate slowly goes mad, and the protagonist is eventually forced to knock him out, after which his body is discovered and removed by an invading tentacle, an intense scene in which the protagonist narrowly escapes detection. After hiding and starving for days, the narrator finds that the crater in which the aliens resided is deserted, and the alien red weed, previously seen sporadically growing near water, has now become a fully-fledged invasive species, similar to kudzu in behaviour, pushing out all other vegetation.

The protagonist makes his way towards London, along the way meeting the artilleryman, who regales him with grandiose tales of future underground human resistance, the inevitable enslavement of humanity as livestock, and the eventual overthrow of the tripods. The protagonist finds him to be lazy and unrealistic, however, and leaves him for London. He finds London devastated, devoid of life, and he starts to break down into madness, approaching one of the tripods that are standing still, only sounding a loud siren. The tripods, however, turn out to be inactive, their occupants dead from bacterial infections, the same infections that are now killing the red weed. The narrator, after recovering from his

nervous breakdown, reunites with his wife. The epilogue reflects on the significance of the invasion, and the sense of doubt and insecurity it has left.

Appendix B: Film Ratings

Film reception	Independence Day		War of the Worlds	
	Rotten Tomatoes	MetaCritic	Rotten Tomatoes	MetaCritic
# of critical reviews	57	19	251	40
Average critical score	6.3/10	59/100	7/10	73/100
# of viewer ratings	974,193	151	32,516,094	1262
Average viewer score	3,5/5	7.0/10	2,9/5	6,5/10
% of positive critical reviews	60 % (34/57)	9/19	74 % (186/251)	33/40
% of positive viewer reviews	75 %	29/41	42 %	318/572

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