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The Meek Inherit the Earth

Celebrating the End of American Power in *Mars Attacks!*

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"They blew up Congress!" exclaims a sprightly old woman, dissolving into paroxysms of throaty laughter. Martians have invaded Earth and are beginning to lay waste to the icons of American power. The White House is breached and set aflame, the First Lady crushed by a chandelier, the President pierced by a diabolical alien probe. Presently, the Washington Monument collapses atop a group of hapless boy scouts. And it is all tremendously funny. *Mars Attacks!* (Burton, 1996) invites us to cackle along with its anarchic octogenarian and take as much joy as she does in the systematic decimation of the United States. This dark satire presents an America so infested with corrupt institutions and repellent people that it fully deserves the punishment it receives at the spindly hands of gleefully malevolent aliens. Indeed, the film mischievously hints that the fall of the U.S. would be no tragedy, but an occasion for celebration.

In 1996, the year of the film's release, this open revelry in America's destruction certainly raised a few eyebrows. One waggish critic (Nelson, 1996) noted "in the 50s, *Mars Attacks!* would have been politically alien enough to put its maker on trial for subversion." But since Joseph McCarthy was long gone, the movie was generally accepted as nothing more than an absurdist tribute to 1950s science fiction cinema. Most commentators focused on director Tim Burton's love for mid-century alien invasion films. "They meant every-

thing to me…. They're like a collective, primal, modern fairytale," he gushed (Stark, 1996). In 2011, as *Mars Attacks!* is revivified by its release on Blu-ray and reintroduced to a post-9/11 viewership, it seems less a simple homage than a work of exhilarating radicalism.

Subverting Hollywood

While *Mars Attacks!* celebrates the aesthetic of alien invasion films — presenting us with hordes of bug-eyed, skeletal aliens and a veritable armada of flying saucers — it refuses their generally pro-American tone. Most Hollywood movies belonging to this group, even those of a more recent vintage, demonstrate U.S. strength and ingenuity, implying that the nation can win any battle, however awesome the adversary. Indeed, because alien invasion films are popular around the world — *Independence Day* (Emmerich, 1996), for instance, was an international hit, accruing $306,169,268 in the "foreign markets" (www.boxofficemojo.com, 2010) — they are global purveyors of the idea that the United States is a force to be reckoned with. Since such films have, for more than half a century, rationalized America's superpower status, they may even be regarded as a significant aspect of American foreign policy. *Mars Attacks!* goes against the grain by foregrounding America's weaknesses and disseminating the notion that the U.S., in its current form, should cease to exist.

Before 9/11, *Mars Attacks!* might simply have offered an opportunity for Americans to laugh at themselves and their movies. Today, though Burton's film is certainly capable of providing such an experience, it has taken on a newly subversive potential. In the wake of 9/11, there has been much soul-searching in the U.S. about the reasons for the attack. The question of why jihadists harbor such hatred for America is regularly debated. One way to answer the question is to study the edicts of Osama bin Laden. His fatwā (PBS, 1996) regarding America's presence in the Middle East points to those who view "wealth as loot," commit acts of "aggression [and] injustice," and obsess over "power and power accruing." *Mars Attacks!* makes a remarkably similar criticism of the U.S., vilifying the aggressive desire for possessions and power and implying that these are grounds for the country's fiery end. Of course, most Americans will never read bin Laden's words. But many will see *Mars Attacks!* The movie is, therefore, a work of enormous potential influence.

To many Americans it might provide one of the few arenas in which they contemplate an alternative view of their society and their nation's place in the world.

A History of Resistance

The U.S. became obsessed with interplanetary enemies in the 1950s, a decade that saw countless images of flying saucers, fleeing pedestrians, and grotesque alien creatures. The ostensible focus of mid-century films like *The War of the Worlds* (Haskin, 1953), *Invaders From Mars* (Cameron Menzies, 1953), and *It Conquered the World* (Corman, 1956) is the plight of humanity. To this end, they often include a montage sequence in which earth's major cities suffer bombardment and ruin. *Earth vs the Flying Saucers* (Sears, 1956), for example, makes sure to present attacks on London, Paris, and Moscow. But though the films may briefly acknowledge a global struggle, their true agenda is an assertion of American fortitude. Lucanio (1987, p.26) points out that 1950s alien invasion movies "usually end with scenes in which "the invader is repelled (usually destroyed)." Significantly, it is America, not humanity as a whole, which repels the alien threat.

The motif of U.S. victory is unsurprising since this was an era of intense Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union. Defending America, and its supposedly superior way of life, against an outside threat was popularly considered to be of paramount importance. Indeed, as many scholars have pointed out, the aliens that became a ubiquitous presence on the movie screen can be regarded as nightmarish manifestations of the communist enemy. Kaveney (2005, p. 39) notes in her discussion of *The War of the Worlds*, "Fifties America is smashed by a mighty war machine which happens, in this instance to come from space, but which clearly stands for the might of Soviet Russia." So psychically burdened were American citizens by the looming Stalinist hordes, that they found comfort in obsessively revisiting the narrative of alien invasion, a realm in which any attack could be repulsed. The movies offered a therapeutic ninety minutes in which the enemy could be discovered, fought, and neutralized.

Even when there were no more communists to fear, Hollywood continued to offer the alien invasion movie as a comforting talisman of American strength. The aforementioned 1996 blockbuster *Independence Day* is replete with so much flag-waving sentiment

that it caused one British reviewer (Smith, 1996) to chuckle about "good old Uncle Sam and his can-do spirit." Earth has been attacked by an enemy of unimagined technological superiority, tentacular warriors who can vaporize skyscrapers with a single blast fired from mile-wide interstellar vehicles. As America fights back, we are offered a parade of model citizens. Heroic, cigar-chomping, fighter pilot Steven Hiller (Will Smith) demonstrates that "our boys" are a match for any foe. American scientific expertise is represented by MIT-educated David Levinson (Jeff Goldblum), who not only discovers the alien threat but is also able to create a computer virus to help destroy it. President Thomas J. Whitmore (Bill Pullman) is a resolutely iron-jawed father figure, able to rally his beleaguered forces with stirring rhetoric and possessed of such nobly democratic character that he chooses to pilot a jetfighter into battle against the alien menace. It is people like these, the movie strongly suggests, that make America great.

The action of the alien invasion movie — a largely admirable group of citizens come together to do battle and claim victory against a seemingly invincible enemy — is enough to imply that America deserves to survive. Sometimes, however, dialogue is enlisted to plainly assert that preserving the United States is of paramount importance. In *Independence Day* President Whitmore gives a speech supposedly directed at a global audience but, since his on-screen audience is entirely made up of Americans, it would be reasonable to assume that his words relate more specifically to his fellow countrymen. "We're fighting for our right to live. To exist," he tells them. "We're going to live on. We're going to survive." Many critics were amazed by the jingoistic and exclusionary tone of this oration, not least Smith (1996) who poured scorn on "a Fourth of July speech that must surely win the prize for the most jaw-droppingly pompous soliloquy ever delivered in a mainstream Hollywood movie."

America's Failings

Mars Attacks! stands out as a uniquely seditious work in the long history of alien invasion movies since it neither celebrates American strength nor insists upon the nation's survival. The film's contrarian tone is established by its opening scene. We are in Lockjaw, Kentucky, a fictional location whose name can only suggest back-

wardness and disease. Two farmers note that an unusual odor pervades the air. As they speculate upon its origin, they are shocked to see a herd of cattle, engulfed in flame, stampeding toward them. This startling moment seems an attack on one of the most emblematic American images. The herd of cattle, driven through the western plains by heroic cowboys, is often presented an embodiment of the nation's energy and pioneering spirit. Here, the cowboys are absent and the herd is out of control. In a final anarchic flourish, the animals are put to the torch.

Unlike the stalwart defenders of democracy that we find in *Independence Day*, most of the Americans we meet in *Mars Attacks!* are reprehensible human beings. One such individual is President Dale (Jack Nicholson) who, after viewing photographs of the approaching Martian armada, quickly becomes concerned with how the visitation will affect his approval rating. The only member of the presidential team who correctly surmises that the aliens have aggressive intentions is the psychotically violent General Decker (Rod Steiger), a fuming, unstable individual who should never have been given jurisdiction over nuclear weaponry. As the film whisks us from Washington D.C. to Las Vegas, Nevada we meet businessman Art Land (Nicholson, again) who is busily planning a casino named The Galaxy. If the Martians' evil is embodied in their desire to take over the galaxy, surely this man harbors similarly acquisitive intentions.

This rogues gallery is soon augmented by two vacuous TV personalities. One is Natalie Lake (Sarah Jessica Parker), host of *Today in Fashion*, the other is Jason Stone (Michael J. Fox), reporter for news network GNN. Though they apparently work in disparate arenas — entertainment and hard news — both are driven by a desire for high ratings, celebrity guests, and perfection in personal appearance. Natalie flicks a scintilla of lipstick from the corner of her mouth. "The hair looks good," Jason assures himself as he preens before the camera. Natalie and Jason are presented as proof that each branch of the media has melded into one undifferentiated source of populist entertainment. This point is made even clearer by the fact the pair are lovers. The news and entertainment are literally and figuratively in bed together.

It is not only the political and media elite who are held up to ridicule. Ordinary folk are just as worthy of our contempt. In Kan-

sas, we meet the Norris family, whose gun-toting patriarch (Joe Don Baker) is a sweating, guffawing redneck given to knee-jerk xenophobia ("I'm gonna kick their butts!" he says of the Martians).

In presenting such characters, *Mars Attacks!* rebukes all those alien invasion films that argue for America's preservation. As Schickel (1996) notes, "The earthlings… are presented as entirely worthy of zapping; they are all either too dumb or too self-absorbed to warrant salvation." So convinced is the movie that America should be dissolved that even its characters propound this theory. Barbara Land (Annette Benning), wife of Art, muses, "Maybe we should all be destroyed. The human race doesn't deserve to live." As we might expect, the film's more noxious characters are thrown into the path of the alien war machine: Mr. Norris's home is picked up and tossed aside by an enormous Martian robot; Jason Stone is vaporized by raygun and reduced to a neon green skeleton; Natalie Lake is decapitated and her head grafted onto the body of her beloved dog; Art Land is entombed in the wreckage of his Galaxy casino.

Mars Attacks! is teeming with deeply flawed individuals. And the more we see of the film's characters, the more they come to represent a failed society that worships possessions and power.

Most characters in the film are obsessed with property. Even though Marsha Dale (Glenn Close), the First Lady, is reminded by her daughter Taffy (Natalie Portman) that she does not own the White House, she embarks upon a feverish decorating project because, as she says, "The Roosevelts were too fond of chintz." Mrs. Dale's reverence for "the Van Buren china" means that she refuses to allow any alien guest to eat from it. Art Land is so consumed with the task of constructing his casino that he is able to dismiss the Martian threat, remaining convinced that the aliens will see capitalistic sense and patronize The Galaxy ("They'll need a place to stay, just like anybody else"). The Norris family, who live in a trailer park, prepare to defend their more meager possessions with an impressive commitment. "I'll tell you one thing," the father of the family bellows, "they're not gettin' the T.V!" Soon after this outburst, he admonishes his least favorite son to "stay here and defend this trailer!"

The movie suggests that even those of us who try to reject the stuff of consumer capitalism will ultimately yield to its siren song. For instance, Barbara Land complains to her husband, "All this

greed, this money system, you're destroying everything," but is swiftly silenced when Arts suggests she play some roulette. As he places a stack of chips in her hand, her eyes twinkle with excitement.

Earthly power in *Mars Attacks!* is in the hands of America's government, military, and scientific community. These groups comprise a military-industrial complex that is laughably corrupt and inept.

The film wastes no time in comparing the seat of U.S government, Washington D.C., to the home of all that is fake, Las Vegas, Nevada. Both cities are represented by image-conscious men. In the nation's capitol resides President Dale who is deeply concerned with presentation ("I'll wear my blue Cerruti suit and, Jerry, I'll need a good speech. Abraham Lincoln meets *Leave it to Beaver*, you know the sort of thing"). In Las Vegas, power lies in the hands of Art Land, whose colorful suits and ten-gallon hats glitter with rhinestones. The preservation of his public image is of such importance to him that he tries to control a potentially embarrassing public outburst by his wife. "Keep your voice down, I've got friends here," he tells her, flashing a fake smile. By employing Jack Nicholson to play both characters, Burton forces home the point that the U.S. President is as superficial as any Vegas huckster.

The President's preoccupation with his popularity rating is well illustrated by his decision to adopt a policy of appeasement. He holds out for a diplomatic agreement with the Martians, not because he is driven by pacifist convictions, but because it would be better for his image to do so. Ultimately, Dale is revealed to be nothing but a construction of his public relations team. His intellectual emptiness is symbolized by his decision to watch the coverage of the Martian landing provided by the tabloid T.V. show *Today in Fashion*, and his lack of initiative is represented by his inability to do anything in the face of defeat but spout vague platitudes. "Working together," he tells a T.V. audience, "we will soon come out at a very real outcome."

The government is advised by military leaders who are defined either by unthinking aggression or by unthinking obedience. From the moment the alien presence is known, General Decker wants to "annihilate, kill, kill, kill!" Obedience is embodied by General Casey who, after being awarded the honor of supervising the first meeting between men and Martians, tells his wife, "Didn't I tell you that if I just stayed in place and never spoke up, good things were

bound to happen." Both men prove to be highly ineffective soldiers. General Decker's bombast is efficiently squelched when the Martian's shrink him to Lilliputian size and step on him. General Casey's attempts at diplomacy end with his obliteration.

As well as lampooning the higher echelons of the military, *Mars Attacks!* spends some time satirizing the lower ranks. Billy Glenn Norris (Jack Black) is a gung-ho Private who spends his days bullying his brother, Richie (Lukas Haas), and attempting to dismantle and rebuild automatic weapons in record time. His parents value his brutishness over the sensitivity displayed by their other son, and their opinion of their children is summed up by Mr. Norris who sorrowfully notes, "We got plum lucky with Billy Glenn. We can't expect the same luck twice." Billy Glenn's story is a warning to all those who unthinkingly "support the troops." As the Martians turn a diplomatic exchange in the Nevada Desert into a battleground, Billy Glenn runs desperately through the melee. In most war movies, his lone attempt to turn the tide of battle would be presented as a heroic act. In *Mars Attacks!* the would-be hero is a shambling oaf barely capable of keeping his trousers up. All his martial preparation comes to nothing because as he aims his gun at the enemy it falls apart, leaving him defenseless. Grabbing a nearby American flag, he utters a weak "I surrender" before being vaporized. Rather than a salt-of-the-earth hero, Billy Glenn is an ignoble klutz.

America's overconfidence in its scientific community is as misplaced as its faith in the military. Dr. Kessler (Pierce Brosnan), the chief scientific consultant to the President, is a smooth-talking buffoon who argues that the Martians' technological advancement "suggests, very rightfully so, that they're peaceful" and that "an advanced civilization is, by definition, not barbaric." Of course, events prove Kessler to be hopelessly wrong.

The technology in which the scientific community places so much faith is as suspect as its inventors. A "translating machine" is used to communicate with the Martians. However, it is never certain if the machine is accurately translating the Martian and English languages. What is certain is that those who use the machine are massively overconfident of its powers. One of the first communications from the Martians is translated as, "For dark is the swathe that mows like a harvest." On hearing this poetic nonsense, Dr. Kessler nods sagely, arrogantly assuming that he understands the message.

At the first meeting between human and Martian, the translating machine is utilized again. General Casey, America's representative, extends his hand saying, "On behalf of the people of Earth, welcome." After the translating machine has done its work, the angry facial expression of the alien ambassador suggests that Casey's words have not been translated accurately. Even though mistranslation has almost certainly occurred, Casey remains beatifically confident. After a few more miscommunications, the Martians let their rayguns do the talking.

Throughout the movie, America's technology is shown to have meager capabilities. For instance, the Martians easily take over the television airwaves, and phone lines are efficiently disabled. The United States' most awesome technological development, nuclear weaponry, proves useless against the Martians. A nuclear missile, launched as a last ditch defensive measure, is intercepted by Martian spaceship and its contents playfully inhaled by one of the crew.

The Pleasure of Annihilation

Because *Mars Attacks!* does not focus on American strength — indeed, it takes every opportunity to catalog the nation's shortcomings — the film is, in many ways, an anomalous member of Hollywood's alien invasion genre. However, it is very similar to its generic brethren in one significant way: it presents the spectacle of large-scale annihilation. And it is this spectacle that has always been the chief attraction of the invasion film. As Sontag (1965, p.44) theorizes: "the science fiction film…is concerned with the aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess. And it is in the imagery of destruction that the core of a good science fiction film lies." Moreover, it is specifically the destruction of America that has proved perennially popular. Danielsen (2008) reminds us that, "The spectacle of N.Y. landmarks (the Brooklyn Bridge, the Flatiron Building) being totaled is as much a recurring obsession for American filmmakers as among the higher echelons of al-Qaida. I can't recall another culture - even the Sumerians, no strangers to fatalism — which has rehearsed its own extinction with such apparent relish."

America's attraction to the aesthetics of destruction may stem from anxiety concerning how much it has to lose. Perhaps its citizens must see the nation crumble before their eyes in order to truly

appreciate its worth. Sontag (p.44) discerns a masochistic element in the desire to witness the sci-fi apocalypse, arguing that invasion films provide "the fantasy of living through one's own death and more, the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself." It may also be that watching the fabric of American life torn asunder is a natural urge for those who live in a culture that has consistently placed such a premium on preservation. The America of the 1950s that created the first alien invasion films was eager to protect its borders from the communist threat, its people from the atomic bomb, and the fabric of American life from so-called Un-American activities. This was also a time when the lines of gender, race, and sexuality were carefully policed. There existed enormous social pressure to maintain borders of all kinds, to demarcate the shape of American life.

In 2011, America is again living in a time of heightened anxiety regarding its preservation. Following the 9/11 attacks, the need to maintain the nation's borders against terrorist groups has been greatly emphasized. This is the era of "homeland security" and color-coded terror levels that inform citizens just how afraid they should be of myriad outside threats. And there is a renewed vilification of the Un-American, exemplified by the recent Arizona immigration law that allows police to engage in racial profiling; the appearance of armed vigilante groups, such as the Minutemen, whose members attempt to hunt down illegal immigrants; and renewed debate over the efficacy of building a fortified wall separating the U.S. and Mexico. For a nation that has been so consistently informed of the need to protect, maintain, and preserve aspects of its culture, the alien invasion film must surely offer a strange kind of relief. In watching the United States go down in flames, Americans can experience a temporary respite from the task of constant vigilance. They can fantasize about the pleasures of letting go of everything they have tried to hold on to.

Revelry in destruction is usually a surreptitious pleasure rarely admitted to among critics and commentators. Jonathan Gems, screenwriter for *Mars Attacks!*, is in the minority when he opines, "I loved the blowing up of Manhattan" in *Independence Day* (Szebin and Biodrowski, 1997). It is more common to claim bemusement by the sci-fi blockbuster's obsessive decimation of American landmarks. Sterritt (1996), for instance, notes a distasteful one-

upmanship in the genre: "*Independence Day* blew up the White House, so *Mars Attacks*! blows up Capitol Hill, a high-population target producing even more smithereens to bounce around the screen. Is the Supreme Court on Hollywood's hitlist for 1997?" *Mars Attacks!* has the temerity to bring our taste for destruction into the open. As Frazer (1996) notes: "the movie's wicked charm is dependent on our ability to take this invasion partly as a wish-fulfillment fantasy." The film asks us to admit our enjoyment of the American apocalypse and, by making this request, reveals a desire at the heart of all Hollywood's alien invasion movies.

The Meek Inherit the Earth

Mars Attacks! playfully calls for an end to America and asks its audience to openly revel in the nation's destruction. But it does not suggest that the U.S. is completely bereft of heroes. After the Martian threat has been accidentally neutralized and we have witnessed the death of the movie's most egregious characters, the task of rebuilding the nation is handed to a most unlikely group. Throughout the movie we have met characters that represent a minority voice, struggling to be heard. It is these people — possessing no stake in the culture of greed and power — that will lead America into the future. Truly, the meek have inherited the earth.

As Washington lies in ruins, unlikely figureheads emerge from the rubble. The nation's premier is now Taffy Dale, the teenage daughter of the dead President. We have watched her admonish her mother for her arrogant annexation of the White House ("Mother, this isn't your house") and read a book on Buddhism (a work that suggests the rejection of her parent's superficial, acquisitive ways). Now she stands before a ragtag audience pinning the Medal of Honor on Florence Norris, the old lady who laughed at the immolation of the legislative branch of American government. Florence has accidently saved the world by discovering that Martians can be killed by country music. Standing next to her is Richie Norris, the gawky teenager who was bullied by the more brutish members of his family. "I wanna thank my grandma for always being so good to me and for helping to save the world and everything," he offers shyly. Tim Burton explained to an interviewer (Stark, 1996) his affection for these outsiders: "People who don't look like heroes, who are maybe not that smart or even motivated, are pretty much dismissed," he

argues. "But, yes, I care for the boy Lukas plays. Absolutely. A lot of the one's that live… I care about."

Conclusion

This unusual collection of heroes, along with the film's other unconventional aspects, apparently proved too much for many audience members. *Mars Attacks!* fared poorly at the US box office. Costing $80 million to make, it grossed just $37 million (www.boxofficemojo.com, 2010). The movie was attacked as misanthropic and unpatriotic. "Better to ignore the tinhorn misanthropy," cautioned one critic (Addiego, 1996). Another (Nelson 1996) pointed out, "If *Mars Attacks!* fails to recoup Warner Bros.'s $80 million investment, it would be because the multiplex kids, consciously or not, have found its lack of patriotism disconcerting."

Though the movie was a financial failure, it is remarkable for the ways in which it willfully subverts its genre. Usually, the alien invasion movie globally disseminates the idea that America is a strong nation that should be preserved at all costs. In contrast, *Mars Attacks!* asks us to think through the nation's shortcomings and reevaluate its right to exist. This was radical filmmaking in 1996, but seems even more transgressive in 2011. Today, it is highly unlikely that such a film would be made at all. While it is true that tales of apocalyptic destruction are wildly popular, none embrace destruction as Tim Burton's film does. Hollywood has returned to making alien invasion films that portray a viable America in need of preservation. *Skyline* (Strause, 2010) built its U.S. advertizing campaign around the importance of national survival. T.V. spots for the movie include very few audible words, but place great stress on a character intoning "we need to survive!" as he looks out over a burning cityscape. *Battle: Los Angeles* (Liebesman, 2011) centers on the gung-ho patriotism of heroic military personnel bent on protecting their city. It would seem that a United States threatened by al-Qaeda and economic collapse yearns once again to see itself fighting back from the brink of annihilation. In this environment of renewed artistic conservatism, *Mars Attacks!* deserves to be screened more than ever. It provides an important challenge to Hollywood's consistent pro-Americanism and is the rare product of popular culture that encourages contemplation of the most pressing post-9/11 question, "why do they hate us?"

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