

Surfing with the aliens

Henry Gee

Independence Day. A Roland Emmerich film. *Twentieth Century Fox: 1996.*

MANY of the household names in science fiction cut their teeth in the pulp magazines that flourished in the 1930s and 1940s, immediately before the 'Golden Age' of science-fiction fandom. Back then, pulp science-fiction stories were often no more than Westerns set in space, and appealed to an audience of teenage boys (many of whom became well-known authors in their own right). As a genre, science fiction has moved on, propelled by an increasing literary sensibility. Sadly, many film-makers (and most literary critics) have missed this, and disparage science fiction as juvenilia. This treatment is no longer warranted, and the popularity of films such as *Independence Day* won't help.

Here's the plot. On 2 July of a year in the near future, enormous spacecraft appear over the Earth's major cities. (By 'the Earth', I mean, of course, 'the United States', with exceptions.) The spacecraft destroy the cities systematically, starting with Los Angeles, demonstrating that whatever their other failings, aliens have a keen sense of the aesthetic value of proper town-planning. The beleaguered US president (Bill Pullman), a former fighter-pilot, learns that the famous Roswell flying saucer recovered in New Mexico, and supposedly hushed up by the government, really exists. He gets to meet the aliens face to face, revealing them to be interstellar asset-strippers, interested only in plunder. The president and his bedraggled entourage use the Roswell flying saucer to spearhead a counter-attack against the aliens' mothership. The rest of the strike-force consist of anyone left in the world capable of flying a plane. Just two days later, on 4 July, humanity wins. The immense technology of intellects vast, cool and unsympathetic is soundly squashed by motherhood and apple pie. It's pure pulp, the only concession to the 1990s being that the two intrepid pilots of the requisitioned saucer aren't All-American WASPs, but a Jew from New York (Jeff Goldblum) and a black from Los Angeles (Will Smith).

The stars in this old-fashioned romp are the special effects, which are fantastic, and the film is enjoyable enough provided that one checks in one's brain at the cinema door. The trouble is that the plot hangs on several key improbabilities that one is asked to accept at face value.

How is it, for example, that Goldblum and Smith can fly the product of an alien technology with no more trouble than if it

were an unfamiliar rental car? How, exactly, can one disable the force-field screens of an alien spacecraft by 'infecting' it with a computer virus? How is it that Goldblum (a humble television technician) discovers this simple trick, when a team of dedicated government scientists had somehow overlooked it for 40 years? And how did the courageous mother

transcendent Overmind, a fate which it is their own tragedy not to share. Where is the film version of this mind-boggling tale? Again, one is reminded (inevitably) of *The War of the Worlds*. How much more satisfying it is for humanity to be helpless before the marauding Martians, who are destroyed by earthly bacteria rather than an addled old crop-duster pilot (Randy Quaid) let loose in an F-18.

Of course, the concept of huge alien spaceships was lampooned by Douglas Adams in *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, in which the members of the alien fleet seem to hang in the air in the same way "that brick's don't". The fleet belongs to the Vogons, a heartless race charged

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A scene from every Montana survivalist's dreams.

(Vivica Fox) manage a trek through the smoking ruins of Los Angeles without even once chipping her nail polish?

In *Jurassic Park*, at least, the science is explained just enough to give one a sense that events are controlled by a technology tantalizingly just beyond one's grasp. This is part of the fun, of course, and aids the suspension of disbelief necessary for any science-fiction story (or, indeed, any kind of story) to work.

Independence Day seems familiar because it wears borrowed clothes. It plays like one of those ensemble 'disaster' movies of the 1970s, such as *Towering Inferno* or *Poseidon Adventure*. The aliens come from the standard 'squishy horrible aliens' cupboard already much used by Ridley Scott in *Alien*. And there are playful references to *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

While watching *Independence Day*, I was reminded of another Clarke story, published in 1954. *Childhood's End* begins in much the same way, with alien spacecraft hovering over the world's cities. After that, it's completely different. The aliens, complex characters in themselves, have the interests of humanity at heart, but they are not omnipotent. Their task is to shepherd humanity to a point at which it can join in

with demolishing the Earth to make way for an intergalactic freeway.

As Brian Aldiss and David Wingrove point out in *Trillion Year Spree*, a history of science fiction, it is a shame that most film-makers seem capable only of producing worn-out pulp re-treads such as *Independence Day* when there is so much that is good and filmable in the science-fiction canon. Where is the film of Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* or Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker*? If modern authors such as Stephen King reach the screen, what about Iain M. Banks's *Consider Phlebas* or Greg Bear's *Eon*? Now, *there's* space opera for you.

There are plenty of exceptions, of course, such as *Blade Runner* and *Total Recall* (borrowings from Philip K. Dick) as well as *2001*. Perhaps most famously, *Forbidden Planet* is an unearthly reading of *The Tempest*. But *Independence Day* exists in a cosy pre-Golden-Age world of Hugo Gernsback pulp magazines, comfort-viewing for the millions who believe that flying saucers really exist, Elvis was abducted by aliens and the *X Files* is a documentary series. If so, *Independence Day* is pandering to the lowest common denominator, and its success suggests that we get the films we deserve. □

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