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*Alien Corn: The War of the Worlds, Independence Day, and the Limits of the Global Imagination*

WHEN THE TIME COMES to write the political history of the twentieth century as a Gothic tale—not so hard a task, perhaps—one would have to assign the role of the vampire to the idea of nationhood. No matter how often its death is confidently announced, it invariably rises from its dusty resting place after a short respite, pale and insatiable as ever, and ready for further adventures. This may seem something of a paradox, at a time when, as analysts from virtually all positions on the political spectrum agree, the monorail of history is accelerating towards a global economic and social integration of a hitherto unprecedented degree. Speed is always exhilarating, even intoxicating, and it is not surprising that the pace of globalization has been, if anything, surpassed by that of theories of globalization. In the most optimistic versions, the prospect is one of a new age of autonomy and emancipation, whether expressed in the relatively restrained form of David Held's "cosmopolitan democracy" or in the more overtly utopian visions of David Hardt and Antonio Negri's improbable bestseller *Empire*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Held, *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000). I cannot forbear to remark that it seems a sign of the strangeness of our times when a 500 page neo-Marxist tome by a professor of comparative literature at Duke and an Italian political scientist, currently resident in Rome's Rebibbia Prison, should have become required reading.

I would suggest, however, that these generally upbeat prognostications leave out of their calculations two fundamental problems. First, while the effective economic and political power of the sovereign state may be in decline, the significance of the nation as an *imaginative* structure is in many ways as strong as ever. Second, there is the problem of the enduringly exceptional status of the United States, the synecdochic double logic of American national identity that allows the only remaining nation whose actions have a truly global influence, to affirm its sovereign autonomy as one nation among others, at the same time as it asserts a special status as the one nation that somehow represents or contains all others, an aleph-like part that contains the whole. Until these issues are brought to the surface, I would argue, the globalist future will remain fraught with contradictions.

I want to focus here on one particular aspect of the difficulties created by the uneven development of globalization: the continuing problem of realizing any truly consequential response to the ongoing degradation of the global environment. By definition, ecological problems are transnational in scope; jurisdictional borders are as irrelevant to, say, the circulation of acid-rain as anatomical divisions are to the spread of cancer. Environmentalism in one country is an almost meaningless notion, and any hope of, for example, reversing the process of ozone depletion will require the agreement on some sort of collective responsibility and internationally co-ordinated policy. But that agreement seems as distant now as it has ever been; repeated failures, like the American rejection of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, serve as constant reminders of how absent it continues to be. While lip-service is paid to the notion of a shared fate, few countries, even those in the best economic position to do so, have shown much willingness to make any real sacrifice for the sake of a putative common welfare.

This situation can be described as a failure of political will, but it is equally important to understand it as a failure of political imagination. That is, the problem is not simply that national governments are unwilling to carry through initiatives in their own long-term best interests, but that it seems extremely difficult for people to conceive of those interests outside of the imaginative structure provided by the nation-state. The sovereign nation continues to be, for all practical purposes, the only effective "imagined community," to use Benedict Anderson's apt term, whereas any effective ecological policy requires the positing of a collectivity

that is transnational in scope. With only slight modification, one could adapt Fredric Jameson's arguments concerning the cognitive "gap" that has opened up in the late twentieth century between the individual's subjective sense of the world, and the reality of a global economic system, a structure that seems to evade the possibility of direct representation. For Jameson, the problem is that we simply cannot *see* the world system that, nonetheless, determines our lives in very real ways.<sup>2</sup> I would propose that the ecological crisis is in large part also a problem of representation. Despite the rhetoric of concern, we cannot really envision what is necessarily a global emergency because we have no form for representing collective crisis or conceiving of common purpose other than the nation. Environmental threats are thus translated into national terms, a distortion which may lead to local and short-term successes, but which must inevitably be disastrously counter-productive insofar as it generates fantasies of splendid biological isolation, or of repelling an invading alien horde of ecological barbarians.

I want now to take a look at a specific example of this problem in representation, the 1996 blockbuster film *Independence Day*. This may seem like rather a surprising choice at first, for to judge from most reviews, the film was not generally classified as belonging to the natural disaster genre. To see the movie in proper perspective, it is necessary to consider the work on which it is based, and to which it pays explicit homage, H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*.

### *Red Planets and Red Plants*

Wells's short novel is not only the initiator of the alien invasion story; it is the defining model, providing the images, motifs, and narratological elements that will compose the grammar for all subsequent science fictional examples of the genre. It is important to remember, however, that the immediate context of the novel is not simply the heady atmosphere of nineteenth-century scientific speculation, but the real world of late Victorian power politics. *The War of the Worlds* needs to be seen as a variation of a literary form that enjoyed an extraordinary popular vogue in the last decades of the century, the imaginary invasion story. Inaugurated by the English-

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<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991) 410ff.

man George Chesney's novella, *The Battle of Dorking*, and imitated by numerous Jeremiahs in other countries, the imaginary invasion story had as its plot the unexpected and generally successful assault of a hostile power on the national homeland, and as its purpose the demonstration of the woeful state of military preparedness of the particular nation in question. The message is invariably based on a kind of political Darwinism, which proclaims that only the strongest nation can survive, and that military complacency is a form of "race suicide." But if Wells's work invokes this genre, it does so in order to invert all its nationalistic assumptions.

For Wells, the implication of taking Darwin seriously is not to begin strenuously girding one's loins for the coming struggle for world military supremacy, but to recognize the challenge that evolution poses to *any* claim to ultimate superiority, even that of humanity over nature. The most effective way that he emphasizes this point is by the recurrent rhetorical schema of figuring the relation between the Martians and the humans in the traditional terms of the relation between men and animals. The famous opening paragraph is only the most memorable example:

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 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 scrutinize the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. With infinite complacency, men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter. It is possible that the infusorians under the microscope do the same.<sup>5</sup>

The delirious dislocation of perspective offered here, shifting from the telescopic to the microscopic in the course of a single sen-

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<sup>5</sup> H. G. Wells, *A Critical Edition of The War of the Worlds*, ed. David Y. Hughes and Harry M. Geduld (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993) 51. Subsequent references are to this edition.

tence, figures formally a sense of existential displacement that will be elaborated over the course of the narrative. The implications of the arrival of the Martians for the status of humanity go far beyond the merely physical destruction that they wreak upon human beings; invasion amounts to what the narrator describes as a “dethronement,” similar, perhaps, to that which Wells’s contemporary, Freud, was claiming to effect with regard to “His majesty, the Ego”: “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” (165).

The radical relativism caused by this dislocation, by finding oneself to be only an animal among the animals, has some curious results, including, at moments, flashes of sympathetic identification with the invaders, who, after all, are only behaving in the same fashion that human beings so often have in comparable situations. At one point, wandering on the brink of a positively Nietzschean moral abyss, the narrator muses that

we men, the creatures who inhabit this earth, must be to them [the Martians] at least as alien and lowly as are the monkeys and lemurs to us.... And before we judge them 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 own 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 as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit? (52)

Wells’s interpretation of Darwinism thus produces something quite different from the standard nineteenth-century self-congratulatory story of evolutionary progress, a story of which the narrator, who at the beginning of the book is “busy upon a series of papers discussing the probable developments of moral ideas as civilization progressed and matured” (55), was clearly himself once an ardent proponent.

The reference in this passage to the extinction of the dodo and the bison bring into sight another issue which Wells does not quite specify, but which we would describe as ecological. For the invasion of the Martians, as it unfolds, looks increasingly less like a military campaign than an environmental disaster. An alien species introduced into a biosystem in which they have no natural predators, they spread at a seemingly uncontrollable rate, and like rabbits in Australia, rapidly begin to destroy the very environment they depend on. The strange red plants they have brought with them are a kind of botanical equivalent of the Martians themselves, and their disastrous proliferation (and subsequent die-off) is a miniaturized version of the fate of the Martians, as well as an uncanny premonition of certain recent examples of imperialistic flora, like the kudzu vine. The narrator is surprised to come upon a "broad sheet of flowing shallow water, where meadows used to be" until he realizes that it was

caused by the tropical exuberance of the red weed. Directly this extraordinary growth encountered water, it became gigantic and of unparalleled fecundity. Its seeds were simply poured down into the water of the Wey and the Thames, and its swiftly growing and Titanic water fronds speedily choked up both these rivers. (166)

Though the alien invasion tale has not received much attention from ecocritics, an argument could be made that no nineteenth-century novel addresses so directly as *The War of the Worlds* the biological implications of the unlimited drive to subject the natural world to technological control. For what the Martians ultimately represent is the separation of mind and matter, culture and nature, carried to a symbolic extreme. When they finally emerge from their ships, the narrator is astonished to discover that they seem to be all brain, their bodies withered away to insignificance: "Strange as it may seem to a human being, all the complex apparatus of digestion, which makes up the bulk of our bodies, did not exist in the Martians. They were heads—merely heads. Entrails they had none" (149). The place of their organic bodies is taken by machines, within which, the narrator speculates, the Martians sit, "ruling, directing, using, much as the human brain sits in and rules the body" (88).

The Martians, then, are idealists who have effected a thorough separation from the material world. Or from an ecocritical perspective, they are creatures who have broken any connection with nature, aspiring to recreate it according to their own designs. But as Wells makes clear at various points, just as the Martians are not so different from the humans in their treatment of lesser species, so in this regard as well, they represent essentially the fulfillment of certain tendencies already evident in contemporary human history. After describing the peculiar physiognomy of the foreigners, the narrator breaks off to note that “a certain speculative writer of quasi-scientific repute [Wells himself, in fact] ... forecast for man a final structure not unlike the actual Martian condition”:

He pointed out—writing in a foolish, facetious tone—that the perfection of mechanical appliances must ultimately supersede limbs, and 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.

The Martians, he concludes, represent the “actual accomplishment of such a suppression of the animal side of the organism by the intelligence” (151). And so the enemy turns out to be us; the inhuman invaders reveal themselves to be the culmination of humanity’s own project of the division of the world into ideal and material, and the subjection of the latter to the former.

Wells figures this project within the novel in the narrator’s encounters with two characters who seem to embody all-too-allegorically the opposite sides of this division: a curate and an artilleryman. The first is a physically feeble figure—his face “a fair weakness, his chin retreated and his hair lying in crisp, almost flaxen curls on his low forehead” (103)—who is wholly debilitated by the arrival of the Martians. His only response is an intellectual one, an attempt to fit the invaders into some meaningful theological scheme: “Why are these things permitted? What sins have we done? ... This must be the beginning of the end.... The end! The great and terrible day of the Lord!” (103–4). So powerfully does his

religious interpretation tyrannize his mind that he becomes convinced the disaster is the just punishment for his moral laxity, and marches forth to martyrdom with the thrilling chords of his own righteousness sounding in his ears.

If, for the curate, the world is nothing but the drama of the ideal, for the artilleryman the success of the invaders reveals it to be wholly matter. Having “thought it out” he concludes that “we’ve got to fix ourselves up according to the new state of affairs.... It isn’t quite according to what a man wants for his species, but it’s about what the facts point to.... Cities, nations, civilization, progress—it’s all over. That game’s up” (173). Appropriately, his philosophy leads downward, literally into the earth—an excremental vision to match the curate’s sacramental rapture: “You see, how I mean to live is underground. I’ve been thinking about the drains” (175). The highest hope to which his imagination rises is the possibility of seizing one of the Martians’ own machines, and turning it against them: “Fancy having one of them lovely things, with its Heat-Ray wide and free! Fancy having it in control ... *swish* comes the Heat-Ray, and behold! man has come back into his own” (176).

Needless to say, the artilleryman’s grand visions prove to be as futile as those of the curate; precisely by identifying himself with matter, he is reconfirming the fatal division that is, in the logic of the novel, the very problem. Salvation, when it comes, will arrive from a wholly unanticipated direction. If the Martians have forgotten about nature, it has not forgotten about them. Succumbing to the omnipresent bacteria against which they have developed no biological resistance, they are wiped out by the very ecological processes that they imagined they had separated themselves from. The Martians are defeated not as a result of any mental ingenuity on the part of humankind, but by the simple consequence of the fact that, over the course of millennia and without any conscious intent, *homo sapiens* has become adapted to an environment that proves rapidly fatal to the outsiders. The salvation lies not in what sets us apart from the “transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water,” but in what those creatures, humankind, and the extraterrestrial monstrosities ultimately have in common.

### *One Planet Under God*

If unearthing the ecological subtext in *The War of the Worlds* requires the deployment of a vocabulary which would have been somewhat foreign to Wells, *Independence Day* presents what might



seem at first an even greater challenge to an ecocritical reading. The blockbuster, to be sure, displays nothing like Wells's subtly ironic use of evolutionary concepts. Yet the film, as any viewer quickly observes, is a systematic rewriting of the earlier work, and so it should not surprise us if here as well it is possible to disentangle a subthematic focus on the question of proper relations with the natural environment. To cite one early minor example: the character of the alcoholic pilot, Russell Case (Randy Quaid) first makes his appearance in a crop duster, streaming clouds of pesticide over a green field. The temptation to read this episode as an allegory of technology recklessly out of control is hard to resist: not only is the pilot drunk, but he is dumping his load of poison on the wrong field! Case, that is, is a case, and his redemption will only come when he takes a double pledge—ceasing to pollute any longer either his own body with alcohol or the body of the earth with equally addictive and more destructive substances, and trading in his crop dusting plane for a fighter whose target is not natural creatures as before, but the very unnatural ones who have recently arrived from outer space.

It is the character of David Levinson, however, the computer whiz played by Jeff Goldblum, who carries the weight of the ecological thematics. David, it is probably fair to say, is the most central figure in the film, although it is important to note that he is not much more central than the other three main characters—Case, the hotshot fighter pilot Capt. Steven Hiller (Will Smith), and President Thomas Whitmore (Bill Pullman)—since the logic of the movie as a whole is to generate a collective hero, a racially and socially diverse band of brothers that is the metaphor for a Re-United States. In David's initial scene, in what are almost his first lines, he scolds his father for using a styrofoam coffee cup. Shortly afterwards, there follows a diegetically irrelevant exchange with co-worker Harvey Feierstein over the latter's failure to make use of a recycling bin. Still later, when David has the inspiration that will lead to the defeat of the invaders, it will come in the course of a seemingly unrelated tirade against industrialism's dire consequences for the planet.

But it will be President Whitmore who is given the key to the connection between the invasion and the dangers of environmental abuse, in the course of a painful telepathic episode with a captured alien. He is the first to recognize the invaders for what they really are: not, as in Wells's tale, simple blood-drinking space

creatures looking for a new home and supply of sustenance—brains in search of brunch—but eco-criminals. They do not intend to use the earth, but to waste it, to exhaust its resources as, it appears, they have exhausted those of many planets before and will exhaust as many more as they can find. In short, they are cosmic clear cutters, indifferent to the wisdom of sustainable development, embarked on an enterprise of intergalactic destruction that would beggar even the most fevered fantasies of a James Watt.

If what the invasion really represents is a displaced response to the intimation of environmental catastrophe, it makes perfect sense that the earthlings must return to the land to find the resources to triumph. The alien spaceships, on arrival, immediately park themselves over the great cities of the world, including New York, Los Angeles, and Washington. Indeed, they are themselves parallel cities, fifteen miles across. On a prearranged signal, they obliterate the urban spaces below, raining down a fireblast of biblical proportions. This is not the end of the story, however, but the beginning. Some reviews expressed surprise at the cheerful mood of the movie's conclusion, considering that in the course of the struggle most of the world's major cities and their populations have been destroyed. In fact, the logic of the film implies that this needs to be seen as a beneficial destruction by a purifying fire, the necessary beginning of a redemptive pilgrimage for all the main characters, and by extension, for humanity as a whole. Three of them start out in the cities slated for destruction—David in New York, Capt. Hiller in Los Angeles, and President Whitmore in Washington—and all are driven out by the conflagration on journeys that finally converge in the Nevada desert, where they meet up with Case, who has by now joined a crowd of trailer vans moving across the wilderness like the wandering Israelites (or their nineteenth-century American counterparts, the Mormons). The cities of America, it appears, are as irredeemably sinful as the cities of the plain to which the curate in *The War of the Worlds* at one point alludes. Los Angeles, in particular, is represented by a mob of mindless hedonists who greet the arrival of the aliens as an occasion for a wild party, and who get exactly what they deserve when they disappear into a spectacular special effect. The characters who leave the city, on the other hand, return to themselves. No sooner is President Whitmore, for example, taken out of the Beltway, than the Beltway is taken out of him, and he becomes again the virile fighter pilot he had been before he was unmanned by devious Washington ways.

The final triumph of the saving remnant seems to be made possible by their stripping away of the artificial trappings of civilization and their journeying into a desert that is as much a metaphor for spiritual purification as it is a physical location. Only here do the four heroes find the strength to confront the invaders. But this is only a part of the moral renovation that each undergoes. Emerson, in "The Young American," declared that "The land is the appointed remedy for whatever is false and fantastic in our culture," and that it would "bring us into just relations with men and things."<sup>4</sup> Here the land also seems to restore "just relations": David is reunited with his estranged wife, no longer seduced by ambitious careerism, Capt. Hiller marries his ex-stripper girlfriend, and Case gives up his drinking and becomes a suitable father-figure for his brood of neglected children.

To some extent, then, it might appear that *Independence Day* does indeed replicate the ecological thematics of *The War of the Worlds*, and that, like Wells's novel, the film is fundamentally concerned with the need for man to find his place in nature. But in fact, the movie invokes the themes of its precursor only to turn them inside out, or more accurately to nationalize them, transforming what for Wells was a fable of global biological survival into an American national success story. "In the beginning, all the world was America," declared John Locke; in the course of *Independence Day* it goes far to becoming so again. The title begins a process of merging the cause of the earth with the cause of the United States, until it becomes hardly possible to distinguish between the two. Take for instance the opening scene of the movie, which is a kind of cinematic equivalent of the first paragraph of Wells's novel, placing us in the perspective of distant intelligences who have the earth in their cross-hairs. We begin on the moon, the scene of man's greatest scientific triumph. But this is very much a red-white-and-blue moon—the most prominent object is the American flag still stretched out in the imaginary wind. As if to underline the point, the camera focuses on the plaque left by the astronauts, grandly declaring that their national mission was in fact taken on behalf of all humankind.

As the story unfolds, we do get occasional shots of action in other parts of the world to remind us that this is a world-wide

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<sup>4</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Young American," in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983) 214, 216–17.

assault, but these incidents are really only aspects of the attack on America. Significantly, one spot returned to repeatedly is Kuwait, where US troops are still stationed, offering a pointed reminder of another military confrontation which was theoretically an international affair, but which was for all practical purposes an American show. (It was in this war that President Whitmore participated as fighter pilot.) The point at which this process reaches its height is no doubt the President's speech to the assembled flyers before he leads them into battle on the Fourth of July:

Mankind—the word should have a new meaning for all of us today. We can't be consumed by our petty differences any more. We will be united in our common interest. Perhaps it's fate that today is the Fourth of July, and you will once again be fighting for our freedom.... And should we win the day, the Fourth of July will no longer be known as an American holiday, but as the day when the world declared in one voice, "We will not go quietly into the night.... We're going to survive. Today we celebrate our Independence Day."

The process of identifying humanity with the United States of America, one would think, could not go much further.

At one level this all seems, and is, a harmless enough exploitation of an ever profitable appeal to patriotism. But it hardly requires much research to confirm that *Independence Day* is only one of a large number of examples of a current fixation on alien invasion in the popular imagination. The alien menace has provided material for a veritable starfleet of major Hollywood productions in recent years, ranging from Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* to Tim Burton's *Mars Attacks*; on television, the inescapable "X-files" regularly showcased unearthly visitors, and the "ExtraTERROrestrial Alien Encounter" has become one of Disney World's most popular attractions. It is difficult not to feel that this obsession with threatening aliens has something to do with the popular fear, occasionally reaching hysterical proportions, that the United States is in danger from aliens of a more mundane kind, foreigners who are pouring across American borders, threatening to submerge the nation in a storm surge of suspicious strangers.

And indeed, one could imagine at times that *Independence Day* was a propaganda film designed to illustrate the folly of open door policies, such as in the scene, suggestively set in California, in which foolish Angelenos greet the arriving star ship with open arms, one of them holding up a sign declaring “Make yourselves at home”—needless to say, the reward for their reckless generosity is instant obliteration. Capt. Hiller, on the other hand, displays a somewhat less tolerant response to unwanted visitors: opening the hatch of a downed alien craft, he announces “Welcome to Earth” before landing a haymaker on the intergalactic wetback’s jaw.

But what I want to emphasize are the implications of this obsession with the defense of national borders for the prospects of an environmental imagination. Insofar as *Independence Day* identifies the alien invasion as an ecological threat, it reinforces an imaginative logic that defines environmental danger as something that comes from the outside, something caused by “aliens.” I do not, of course, mean to suggest that this is a way of thinking that began with *Independence Day*; one would need to take into account the long tradition, discussed by Perry Miller and Roderick Nash, for example, that posited a special connection between America and pristine nature, that defined America as “nature’s nation.” We should also remember Edward Abbey’s controversial arguments for radically restricting immigration to the US on environmental grounds.<sup>5</sup> The danger of nationalizing nature in this manner is that it produces a collective fantasy according to which threats to the environment can be stopped at the border, and leads to a failure to co-operate with the rest of the world in what can only be a common effort to preserve the earth. So long as the nation remains our largest imagined community, the struggle to save the environment will be series of phony campaigns. Wells declared that *The War of the Worlds* was intended as an “assault on human self-satisfaction”;<sup>6</sup> *Independence Day* reverses the message of its great predecessor, reinforcing a national self-satisfaction which is in effect waging war on its own world.

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<sup>5</sup> Perry Miller, “Nature and the National Ego,” rpt. in *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1956) 204–16; Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1967); for Abbey see George Bradford, *How Deep is Deep Ecology?* (Ojai, CA: Times Change Press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Frank McConnell, *The Science Fiction of H. G. Wells*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1981) 131.

One might leave the matter here, but to do so would be to neglect a final complication of the national idea hinted at by the movie, one which will be increasingly significant for the shape taken by the new global order. It is not enough to say that *Independence Day* is simply the expression of a defensive American nationalism, because the United States has never seen itself, and so has never been, simply one nation among others. Instead, by an irreducibly paradoxical logic, it is the one nation that *is* all others, that contains what all others really are and ultimately will be—whose particularity is that it has no particularity. It is precisely this peculiar nature which enables the claim on the plaque left on the moon—“we came in peace for all mankind”—and likewise President Whitmore’s declaration of independence on behalf of the world. America, that is, is the ideal synecdochic point in the world that contains the world, where the part and whole are finally reconciled.<sup>7</sup>

Another way of describing the difference between the part and the whole, the particular and the universal, is as the division between matter and mind—precisely the division that is so crucial to *The War of the Worlds*. But where Wells postulates that division as the problem, *Independence Day*, like America, proposes to solve it by passing beyond into what we might call a transcendental integration. This is, it seems to me, the significance of the resolution of the movie, which is brought about not by a single hero, but by the pair of David and Capt. Hiller who climb into a captured Martian craft *together* to head off on the final stage of their mission. For the two are really versions of the characters of the curate and the artilleryman in Wells’s novel. Between them, the computer scientist and airman divide the functions of mind and matter, and sometimes they seem connected to their antecedents by direct allusion—David rants like the curate about the end of the world brought on by man’s abuses (and gives his father a Bible just before flying off on his final mission), and where the artilleryman dreams of attacking the aliens in one of their own machines, Hiller actually does so. Thus the alliance of David and Hiller, ‘puter nerd and fighter jock,

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<sup>7</sup> For a classic study of this theme, see Ernest L. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1968). A more recent and subtle analysis is undertaken by Sacvan Bercovitch in *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1978) and *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), esp. chs. 3 and 5.

can be read as the integration of mind and body, idea and matter. The only really successful reconciliation of this sort that is recorded is the case of a figure known as the saviour, "salvator mundi," and it is not by the way that David reminds his wife, just before his departure, that his real ambition had always been "to save the planet." David's namesake, of course, was the ancestor of the Messiah, the word that became flesh in order to bring salvation for all—the same Messiah with whom the more enthusiastic celebrants of America's national mission occasionally identified the nation itself.<sup>8</sup>

But perhaps even more important is the means by which this salvation is ultimately effected. In what was generally regarded as one of the most inspired revisions of Wells, the aliens are defeated not by biological infection, but by a computer virus which David manages to introduce into their system, thus subverting their electronic defences and allowing conventional American weaponry to carry the day in a triumphant shootout. The implications of this revision, however, are wide-reaching. In Wells's story, technology does not just fail humanity; it is the very attempt to control the world by technology that is exposed as the source of the problem. But in *Independence Day* what allows the technology to succeed is that it is a wholly new *kind* of technology—the computer. For the computer is not just a more powerful machine for the subjection of nature to human purposes; instead, it *replaces* nature with a substitute of wholly human design. A computer virus, unlike a "real" one, is an entity of human construction, which functions, however, just like its eponym—and it is very difficult to know how to refute the claim that it is just as "alive" as its biological counterpart, or the conclusion that the computer realizes the alchemical ambition of creating a life form—although that form is now ideal and informational, rather than material and sensible.

The true significance of the computer, a significance that becomes clear in *Independence Day*, is that it promises the final reconciliation of mind and matter—a reconciliation which is con-

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<sup>8</sup> E.g. Herman Melville, in *White-Jacket*: "we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time.... Long enough have we been skeptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in *us*, if we would but give utterance to his promptings." *Redburn, White-Jacket and Moby-Dick*, ed. G. Thomas Tanselle (New York: Library of America, 1982) 1307.

summed by the translation of matter into and replacement by its mental substitute. The projections of cyber-millennarians are instructively replete with projections of the end of the body.<sup>9</sup> It does not seem quite correct to call these projections simply fantasies of disembodiment, however; what they really imagine is the synecdochic replacement of the whole by a part that can contain the whole, or the reduction of the human being to the brain. Even the famous proposal of Hans Moravec that the complete contents of a human consciousness be downloaded into a computer's memory banks, and the residual body discarded,<sup>10</sup> retains the material substrate of the computer itself. The computer that is, is also an aleph, a fragment of the world which aspires to offer a representation of it all. The implications of this are not changed when the computer undergoes its own transnational expansion, in the form of the Internet, downloading planetary consciousness into a fully integrated circuit to produce a "global nervous system, a global brain"<sup>11</sup>—the lobal gone global, as it were. But as in the case of Moravec's disembodied individual consciousness, what is left out of this supranational vision is the materiality of the machinery itself, firmly located in a very particular national place. The supposedly decentred global brain, the Internet, is all too clearly centred in the material and cultural space of the United States, which in-

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<sup>9</sup> As an early issue of the would-be cutting edge magazine *Mondo 2000* put it: "Nothing could be more disembodied or insensate than ... cyberspace. It's like having had your everything amputated." Quoted in Vivian Sobchack, "New Age Mutant Ninja Hackers: Reading *Mondo 2000*," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery, (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995) 21. See also Mark Dery, *Escape Velocity: CyberCulture at the End of the Century* (New York: Grove, 1996), and N. Katherine Hayles, "The Posthuman Body: Inscription and Incorporation in Galatea 2.2 and Snow Crash," *Configurations* 5.2 (1997): 241–66.

<sup>10</sup> Hans Moravec, *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988) 109–10.

<sup>11</sup> The quotation is from R. U. Sirius, quondam editor-in-chief of *Mondo 2000*. Ironically, H. G. Wells had himself advocated the establishment of a "world brain," an information storage and retrieval system that would spread "like a nervous network, a system of mental control throughout the globe," at once integrating and synthesizing all knowledge and overcoming (as President Whitmore would say) "petty differences"—"dissolving human conflict into unity." H. G. Wells, *World Brain* (London: Methuen, 1938) 23, 62. Claims that the Internet is the fulfilment of Wells's project have become common; see, for example, the article by Lorraine Kennedy on the EMC corporate website: <[http://www.emc.com/news/in\\_depth\\_archive/09112000\\_digital\\_lib.jsp](http://www.emc.com/news/in_depth_archive/09112000_digital_lib.jsp)>.



creasingly provides the form and content of the consciousness of the globe. In this sense, the Internet in effect represents the culmination of the synecdochic double logic of America, its self-appointed mission from the beginning. The computer, in other words, is America.

The prospect is sublime, a combination of Heaven's Gate and Gates's Heaven. What is left behind after this technological rapture, of course, is the body of the earth, without which even the most transcendental machine must come to a stop. A global brain, without a global ecological imagination, the capacity to comprehend and accept the responsibilities implied by a shared global fate, without the willingness to transcend the mere transcendence of petty differences in the conversion of the world into America in broadband, threatens to become the most monstrous and pitiless of the earth's enemies.

