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"A Nightmare on the Brain of the Living": Messianic Historicity, Alienations, and *Independence Day*

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This paper explores the political pedagogical work that popular cultural texts perform in the United States today. Focusing on Roland Emmerich's film *Independence Day* (1996), I investigate some of the resonances between the diagnosis in this film of the present moment and that offered in contemporary theoretical discourses, both within and outside the problematic of contemporary Marxism. Most centrally, I suggest that the film offers a condensed narrative figuration that makes visible, or "accessible to our imagination" (Jameson 1990, 38), political anxieties plaguing our present, as well as a "messianic" historicity whose most effective recent theoretical elaboration is to be found in Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994). If works like Derrida's offer a *theoretical* description of these contemporary formations, popular cultural texts like *Independence Day* provide a more immediate sense of the way they are *lived*. Moreover, in illuminating the affective hold these apparently rarefied theoretical concepts and debates have on a vast popular audience, the film also suggests ways they might be mobilized in, as Derrida himself suggests, a Marxist project of political transformation.

At the same time, a reading of this film enables us to grasp some of the potential limits to the way these issues have been theorized. We can do so because of another set of educational operations that takes place within the film, or what Antonio Gramsci would describe as the *work* of hegemonic formation. No hegemony, Gramsci maintained, is ever either completely stable or guaranteed; thus, it is always already involved in an unceasing process of re-legitimation. As he wrote,

“Every relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily an educational relationship,” taking place on a number of levels (local, national, and international) and involving a wide range of cultural institutions and practices (1971, 350). Or, as Raymond Williams usefully argued:

A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits. In practice, that is, hegemony can never be singular. Its internal structures are highly complex, as can readily be seen in any concrete analysis. Moreover (and this is crucial, reminding us of the necessary thrust of the concept), it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own. (1977, 112)

The political, economic, and cultural changes that are currently under way in our own present have made necessary a reeducation of the American public in both the skills and dispositions, or what Gramsci calls the “common sense,” needed to inhabit a dramatically transformed landscape. Thus, to make the contours of this particular film’s lesson plan more explicit is also to engage in the work of counterpedagogy. Before we can even begin to exert “pressures,” as Williams puts it, against the new realities and common sense that are currently in formation, and then to imagine the strategies and tactics that will most effectively enable us to resist and finally to alter the forms of life to which they give rise, we need to grasp the nature of what is being taught.

I want to begin, however, by invoking another set of instructive aliens: Kang and Kodos, the drooling, one-eyed, tentacled space invaders who dutifully make a bid for the takeover of the earth each year on a Halloween special of television’s *The Simpsons*. In the 1996 installment, first appearing a few months after the theatrical release of *Independence Day* and only weeks before the last U.S. presidential election, the pair hit upon a brilliant plan: kidnap then-presidential candidates Bob Dole and Bill Clinton and take their place on the campaign trail, thereby assuring that regardless which one of them gets elected, they both will end up in control. Although people do note some oddities during the campaign (e.g., the two major party candidates are seen repeatedly in each other’s company, often holding hands [to exchange protein strings, they inform us]), all goes according to plan until Homer Simpson stumbles upon their interstellar ship. After inadvertently jettisoning the real Clinton and Dole into outer space, Homer turns up and exposes the plot. However, the unmasked aliens gleefully declare that his efforts have been to no avail: after all, given our two-party system, we have no choice but to vote for one of them. When someone in the gathered crowd suggests that he might vote for a third party candidate, Kang, echoing election-year sentiments of pundits on both the left and the right, says, “Go ahead, throw your vote away” (at the announcement of which we cut to an angry Ross Perot seen punching his fist through his campaign hat). The final scene of the episode is set sometime after the election, which has installed the Dole-substitute Kang

in the White House. The invaders are shown herding about an enslaved human population, forcing them to construct a giant cannon aimed at a planet of which Homer's wife Marge confesses she has "never even heard." To this, Homer replies, "Don't blame me—I voted for Kodos." (A similar line, interestingly enough, appears in *Independence Day*, when one character informs the wife of the president that she "voted for the other guy.")

The paranoid fear that aliens may in fact control the world's governments is an old standby of science fiction narratives. Indeed, Philip K. Dick derived a good deal of his prolific output from what was, in his case, as much an article of faith as a simple literary device (for one especially effective example, see his "Faith of Our Fathers" [1975]). However, the *Simpsons* episode also marvelously captures one of the central anxieties that is at the heart of much of contemporary critical theory and that also, as I will suggest momentarily, serves as a fundamental motivation for the fantasy scenario of *Independence Day*. What this episode highlights is a current widespread sense, at once cynical and despairing, of political paralysis—of our collective inability to do anything that might transform the social, cultural, and political landscape. As Fredric Jameson puts it, "there can have been few moments of modern social history in which people in general have felt more powerless: few moments in which the complexity of the social order can have seemed so forbidding and so inaccessible, and in which existent society, at the same time that it is seized in ever swifter change, has seemed endowed with such massive permanence" (1996, 38). Or, to translate all this into a different theoretical language, *The Simpsons* episode models what Jean Baudrillard describes as the binarization of power (Democrat and Republican, Kang and Kodos) and its relocation into an infinitely mobile circuitry that makes it impossible to locate, and thus finally to challenge in any substantive way. This is one of the signature events of what Baudrillard calls the implosion of the real and, with it, the emergence of an endlessly self-replicating, posthistorical, simulacral social universe (1988, 166–206).

The cultural critic Meaghan Morris has shown in an important series of essays (1988, 1992) precisely how these kinds of critical analysis themselves quickly dissolve into their own form of "banal" repetition: if such an apocalypse already has occurred (decidedly without much of a bang), then what is the point of continuously restaging its scene, except perhaps as an affirmation of the critic's own power (by saying it, we can make it so)? Nevertheless, there is a certain therapeutic value in the sheer and unrelenting negativity of Baudrillard's critical intervention, especially when it is set against another, currently prominent form of apocalyptic discourse: the conservative assertion of the end of the cold war and the final worldwide triumph of free-market capitalism and liberal democracy, events that apparently mark the "end of history" itself, at least according to Francis Fukuyama in an essay and book that have given the repetitious discourse of the "end of history/end of ideology" (Karl Mannheim begets Daniel Bell begets . . .) its current cachet (1989, 1989/90, 1992).

It is precisely this latter form of conservative apocalyptic discourse that Derrida confronts head on in *Specters of Marx*, a work whose significance lies not least in

the conversation it has sparked, providing an opportunity for statements on the contemporary state of the Marxist problematic by, among others, Jameson (1995), Aijaz Ahmad (1994), J. K. Gibson-Graham (1996), Gayatri Spivak (1995), Ernesto Laclau (1995), Tom Lewis (1996/97), and Peter Hitchcock (1999). In what might be taken as a rebuke to the apocalypticism of Baudrillard as much as to that of Fukuyama, Derrida maintains (not unlike Morris) that such ritualized invocations of the end are forms of “conjurations,” “exorcisms” that consist “in repeating in the mode of an incantation that the dead man is really dead” (1994, 48). Beginning with the “holy alliance” Marx envisioned in the opening pages of *The Communist Manifesto* and extending up through its descendants in contemporary neoconservatism, the purveyors of these various forms of teleological narratives—with their vision of an end at which history must arrive or perhaps already has arrived (the full and total victory of global capitalism)—betray a desire for ontological purity, for the full self-presence of a present purged of any ghosts that might haunt it, including (and most important in this case) the horizons of radical otherness represented by the specters of Marx.

Thus, in place of these ontological visions of the present, Derrida offers what he describes as a “hauntology” (1994, 51) that emphasizes, as do the significant interventions of Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) and Slavoj Žižek (1993), the irreducible antagonisms and contradictions that constitute any historical present. Choosing among the multiplicity of Marxisms he sees as now being made available after the collapse of the institutional state and party orthodoxies, yet refusing the depoliticization of Marx’s work that follows in the wake of some of its academic institutionalizations, Derrida invokes the vital Marxist specter of a very different vision of history. Such a historical sensibility finds its roots in the later work of Walter Benjamin, perhaps currently the single most influential Marxist critic of the ontologies of teleological, progressivist, and Hegelian “bad side of history” dialectics. This alternative Marxist vision of history incorporates what Benjamin calls a “weak messianic power,” the understanding that *every* present moment (*Jetztzeit*) contains within it the explosive possibility of a radically other future (1969, 254); or, as Derrida describes it, the faith in “the coming of the other, the absolute and unpredictable singularity of the *arrivant as justice*” (1994, 28).

Derrida’s conceptualization of the messianic, as well as Benjamin’s earlier formulation, serves not only as a critical tool to be deployed against conservative “end-of-history” narratives, but also as an invitation to reimagine the entire Marxist problematic. Derrida does not dispense with the Marxist concept of revolutionary rupture—“the messianic, including its revolutionary forms (and the messianic is always revolutionary, it has to be)” (168)—but rather, with two aspects of what he takes to be Marxism’s own historical ontology. Derrida’s work is thus fundamentally concerned with the politics of representation, of the consequence of certain ways of imagining history and the present—something that, as we shall see momentarily, also is central in *Independence Day*. On the one hand, Derrida’s work can be understood as an extension of Louis Althusser’s project (to which Derrida refers [89–90]), with its aims of purging Marx-

ism of any residual Hegelian teleologism (of a universal goal toward which history moves), of mechanistic determinism (of a necessary set of stages through which we must pass on the way toward that goal), and of progressivism (the “bad side” dialectics that I will discuss shortly). For Derrida, this lingering Hegelianism has had the effect of canceling the materiality of history itself.¹ However, unlike certain strands of structuralist Marxism emerging out of Althusser’s work, Derrida offers the messianic as “another historicity . . . another opening of event-ness as historicity that permitted one not to renounce, but on the contrary to open up access to an affirmative thinking of the messianic and emancipatory promise as promise: as *promise* and not as onto-theological or teleo-eschatological program or design” (74–5). For Derrida, then, it is not only the “figure of the *arrivant*,” the future, or what had been labeled socialism or communism by classical Marxism that must not be “pre-determined, prefigured, or even pre-named: (168) (and in this Derrida reiterates the classical Marxist resistance to the thoroughly utopian idealist project of representing a new social order before its actual material achievement, a ban beginning with Marx and Engels and finding its fullest expression in the work of the Frankfurt School theorists, to which Derrida’s argument often bears a striking resemblance), but also the nature of the historical process that will produce a situation of revolutionary struggle as, for example, in Marx’s influential formulation in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in which a conflict between the development of “the material productive forces of society” and “the existing relations of production” is understood necessarily to open up onto an “era of revolution” (Marx 1970, 21). Derrida, on the other hand, maintains: “This future is not described, it is not foreseen in the constative mode; it is announced, promised, called for in a performative mode” (1994, 103).

While such an emphasis on the performative realization of the future finds its deepest resonance with the work of Benjamin, there is also a striking similarity between Derrida’s argument and that advanced in the late 1950s by Roland Barthes in his classic work of ideological semiology, *Mythologies*. If the fundamental work of what Barthes describes as myth is to naturalize and universalize a certain (bourgeois) historical reality and, in so doing, to mask the political aims of such a pedagogical process, then the one kind of language that by definition cannot be mythical is that of revolution: “Revolution is defined as a cathartic act meant to reveal the political load of the world: it *makes* the world; and its language, all of it, is functionally absorbed in this making . . . revolution announces itself openly as revolution and thereby abolishes myth” (Barthes 1972, 146). However, Barthes goes on to argue that to the degree the “Left is not revolution” (that is, in its distance from the active, performative making of the world), it becomes more and more susceptible to the process of mythologization. In consequence, certain dimensions of the left project (its parties, statist bureaucracies, historical teleologies, ideologies, and so forth) become reified institutions and orthodoxies that, in turn, mark any questioning or challenge to its now fixed “universal” truths with the sign of “deviations” (146–7).

1. See Derrida (1993) for his thinking on Althusser’s work.

In a crucial way, then, the “deviant” projects of Benjamin, Barthes, and Derrida all converge in their goal of restoring to Marxism its revolutionary energies. However, while Benjamin critically invokes this revolutionary historicity in opposition to 1930s and early 1940s Stalinist orthodoxy and Barthes against the institutional rigidity of the midcentury French Communist party, Derrida takes advantage of the historical opportunity made available by the collapse of these older orthodoxies, states, and parties to issue a call for a “New International.” Cautious of “totalizing in advance” (1994, 37) and thereby transforming the performance of the New International into its own orthodoxy or myth, Derrida defines this “link of affinity, suffering, and hope” largely in terms of what it will be without: “without status, without title, and without name, barely public even if it is not clandestine, without contract, ‘out of joint,’ without coordination, without party, without country, without national community (International before, across, and beyond any national determination), without co-citizenship, without common belonging to a class” (85). The alliance that will then emerge he describes only as “a kind of counter-conjuration,” unified “in the (theoretical and practical) critique of the state of international law, the concepts of State and nation, and so forth: in order to renew this critique, and especially to radicalize it” (86).

That such a conjuration of the messianic in response to the “state of emergency” of the present is not limited to theoretical texts like Derrida’s *Specters* is made evident by films like *Independence Day*. The film opens by invoking the same “post-historical” malaise located by *The Simpsons* episode, Baudrillard, and Fukuyama, and to which Derrida responds in *Specters*. Each of the film’s four central characters, representatives of a cross-section of contemporary American masculinity, appears trapped in his own form of paralytic stasis, inhabiting a twilight region where any form of effective and decisive action seems inconceivable. Indeed, it is precisely contemporary *masculine* anxieties about social positioning and political agency that serve as a motor for both the narrative and pedagogical movement of the film.² In the opening scenes, we are first introduced to U.S. President Thomas J. Whitmore (Bill Pullman), a former Gulf War fighter pilot faced with a plummeting approval rating and an inability to pass his legislative agenda—the consequence, as his press secretary (appropriately enough), informs us, of his “message” getting “lost” amid “too much politics, too much compromise.” Later, we meet David Levinson (Jeff Goldblum), a Jewish cable repairman in New York City—a brilliant former MIT student who has accomplished little in life and who appears to invest a disproportionate amount of his energy in pining for his estranged wife (he still wears his wedding ring four years after their separation); she is now the above-mentioned press secretary to the president. Next to appear on screen is Captain Steven Hiller (Will Smith), an African American fighter pilot not coincidentally based in Los Angeles

2. A similar gendered anxiety is evident in Benjamin’s “Theses”: “The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called ‘Once upon a time’ in historicism’s bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history” (1969, 262).

who is caught in the double bind of being forced to choose between his professional dream of becoming a member of the U.S. Space Program and his commitment to his girlfriend, a single mother and exotic dancer (another pilot informs him that there is no way the United States will accept a shuttle pilot who is married to a stripper). Finally, we encounter Russell Casse (Randy Quaid), a Vietnam veteran and self-proclaimed alien abductee, now reduced to the pathetic life of an alcoholic, trailer park-inhabiting crop duster living in the desert of Southern California's Imperial Valley (the film's Baudrillardian representation of rural middle America). As the film presents it, the current problem of historical and political stasis has shaken masculine identity, irrespective of class or race positioning, to its very foundations. All that will change with the appearance of aliens, who force these men out of their paralyzed existences and ultimately enable them to reclaim control over their destinies.

If these men embody a lived sense of historical paralysis, it will be the film's alien invaders who offer a dramatic figuration of Derrida's and Benjamin's messianic. Thus, what Derrida describes as the "coming of the other" and an "absolute and unpredictable singularity," one of the characters in the film labels an "historic and unprecedented event"—one that will blow to pieces the stasis of the present and free it from what Benjamin would term the homogenous "continuum of history" (1969, 261). As in both Derrida's and Benjamin's analyses, the film shows that any substantive change in the present can come about only through a dramatic revolutionary rupture in the temporal-historical continuum.

The messianic aliens accomplish this unsticking of the energies of history by destroying the world's great urban centers: we witness the apocalyptic destruction of New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, and we are told the same thing has occurred in Chicago, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Paris, London, Berlin, Moscow, and Bombay. There is something deeply shocking in the contemplation of these casual images of the destruction of the world's cities, and not simply because of the staggering loss of life it would entail. What the film implies is the near total eradication of a worldwide archive of the cultural heritage, stored in the urban centers as a consequence of the histories of production and accumulation, imperial or otherwise. At the same time, however, there is an undeniable libidinal charge that accompanies such an image of purifying destruction (even more anarchistic and joyfully apparent in Tim Burton's *Mars Attacks!*) for it is precisely that cultural heritage—Benjamin's famous "documents of civilization" that are always already "documents of barbarism"—that stands as the material embodiment of the accumulated dead weight of history that has rendered any real change impossible. Marx calls this heritage the "nightmare on the brain of the living" that continuously thwarts every effort to create "something that has never yet existed" (1963, 15); Benjamin describes it as the "pile of debris" endlessly growing skyward, produced by the "single catastrophe," the storm blowing from paradise that "we call progress" (1969, 258). Freeing us from this catastrophe and awakening us from this nightmare, the alien attack—here nothing less than a figure of the revolution itself—finally enables the long-dreamt-of new beginning.

It comes as no surprise that Derrida's invocation of the messianic looks back to Benjamin's work (and Barthes's to Brecht's): for while the vision of posthistory is part of the cultural baggage of our postmodern present, this idea of a revolutionary temporal rupture might more properly be described as a central dimension of the *modernist* past. Indeed, the conviction that the obliteration of the urban cultural heritage is necessary to free the energies of change is given voice in another central document of the modernist moment, the Italian "Futurist Manifesto": "So let them come, the gay incendiaries with charred fingers! Here they are! Here they are! . . . Come on! set fire to the library shelves! Turn aside the canals to flood the museums! . . . Oh, the joy of seeing the glorious old canvasses bobbing adrift on those waters, discolored and shredded! . . . Take up your pickaxes, your axes and hammers, and wreck, wreck the venerable cities, pitilessly!" (Marinetti 1972, 43). Like Marinetti's "gay incendiaries," the equally pitiless aliens in the film will accomplish their messianic rupture through the use of a cleansing fire that envelops the cores of the great cities in a visually spectacular wave of rolling flame. The "independence" celebrated in the film thus comes as much from the aliens' arrival as from their ultimate defeat.

In suggesting these parallels, my intent is not to trivialize the importance of the "weak messianic power" articulated by Derrida and Benjamin. I take it as, in Benjamin's words, a force that can fan "the spark of hope" in moments of the dimmest political possibility, such as our own, where at every turn it appears that the "enemy has not ceased to be victorious" (1969, 255). Moreover, it has long been a central part of the heritage of Marxist cultural criticism to illuminate the spectral traces of this power in all kinds of cultural documents and forms, as well as to make us aware of the constitutive unevenness (*ungleichzeitigkeit*) of history—what Derrida labels the hauntology disrupting the desire for ontology. In addition to the work of Benjamin and Derrida, I would point to the related texts of Louis Marin (1984, 1993), Jameson (1981, 1984, 1988a, 1988b, 1994) and, most important of all, Ernst Bloch (1986, 1988). With these critics I mean to emphasize exactly how widely felt in the present are the desires that Derrida and Benjamin label the messianic. The power of the film—something misunderstood, or perhaps unconsciously too well understood, by many reviewers who sneered at its trivialities and plot flaws—arises precisely to the degree that it is able to tap into contemporary desires for a radical change of affairs.

However, messianic historicity, as it is articulated in the work of Benjamin and Derrida, gives rise to its own set of dilemmas that we as politically engaged intellectuals need to take into careful consideration. The significance of Benjamin's messianic historicity similarly has been stressed by Étienne Balibar in his invaluable recent book *The Philosophy of Marx*. Balibar points out that Benjamin's intervention is aimed at what was in the late 1930s the doctrinaire acceptance of the Hegelian "dialectic of the bad side" embodied in Soviet proletarian ideology: the understanding that history steadily and necessarily progresses by way of what appear on the surface to be a sequence of struggles, clashes, conflicts, and even catastrophes. It is in opposition to this way of thinking that Benjamin offers his famous angel of history who critically suggests, as Balibar puts it, that "History not only advances 'by

its bad side,' but also to *the bad side*, the side of domination and ruin"—to Fascism, but also to Stalin's show trials and the gulag (Balibar 1995, 99). Benjamin's goal, then, is nothing less than the complete dismantling of any remnants of the myth of history as progress, whether expressed in its bourgeois, Hegelian, or Marxist form.

However, Balibar goes on to point out the tremendous price to be paid for this critical stance: for Benjamin's weak messianic thought, the *faith* that the future is immanent in every moment of the present represents "a prospect which still presents itself as revolutionary but not as dialectical, primarily in that it radically disqualifies the idea of practice, or of liberation as transformation by one's own labors" (1995, 99). In other words, while offering an indispensable critical refusal of both historical determinist self-confidence and the posthistorical sensibility of any form of ontological history, weak messianic thought ends up continually deferring an engagement with vexed questions concerning the formation of the concrete and particular collective political agency that will usher in such a future. Although Benjamin's unfortunate death shortly after completing the "Theses" meant that he never had the opportunity to address this dilemma, we find the full realization of the logic implicit in his "Theses" in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a text deeply influenced by Benjamin's final work: "It is not the portrayal of reality as hell on earth but the slick challenge to break out of it that is suspect. If there is anyone today to whom we can pass the responsibilities for the message, we bequeath it not to the 'masses,' and not to the individual (who is powerless), but to an imaginary witness—lest it perish with us" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, 256). Derrida's list of "withouts" similarly fills the place of political agency with such an "imaginary witness," the ultimate consequences of which have been pointed out by Gayatri Spivak: "Is it at all possible to be so crude as to say that *Specters* . . . is a transformation of militancy into religion?" (1995, 71).³

Earlier in his discussion, Balibar also reminds us of the deep influence that the Hegelian critique of religion, first articulated by Ludwig Feuerbach, had on the early work of Marx. Feuerbach maintains that it is through religion that real, sensuous human beings project their "essences," their potential for self-creation in this world, into another supersensuous domain. These potentialities then come back to them in the form of an other, or an alien—and religion for Feuerbach is the most fully realized form of alienation (Balibar 1995, 15). I would argue that similarly, the messianic invaders in *Independence Day*, along with the "imaginary witness" invoked by Derrida, Benjamin, and the Frankfurt School, express the depths in our present (as well as the past of the 1950s—another moment, as Derrida points out, when the death of Marxism, the end of ideology, and the end of history itself were proclaimed [1994, 14]) of what we might call *political* alienation: the radical sense of otherness too many

3. Of Benjamin's last work, Susan Buck-Morss similarly argues, "During this period he wrote the *Geschichtphilosophische Thesen*, eighteen theses on the concept of history which marked a retreat from political commitment and a return to the language of theology as the only remaining refuge for the ideal of the revolution" (1977, 162).

feel when faced with the prospects of their own potential for action.⁴ Thus, at once the sign of the inextinguishable desire for historical rupture *and* the necessary impossibility of consciously—that is, politically—acting in a way that might bring it about, the aliens in the film inhabit the same contradictory and impossible space as Benjamin's angel: "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward" (Benjamin 1969, 257–8).⁵ The question of what the angel himself might do to break free of such an irresistible force, and thus embark on a historical path that would enable him to accomplish his intended task of awakening the dead, remains one that the messianic vision of history cannot answer.

These visions of the coming of the messianic other mark out a more fundamental existential anxiety as well, one experienced in the present by contemporary left intellectuals and the larger populace alike. There is comfort to be found in ontological, deterministic, apocalyptic, and even alienated messianic narratives of history, for all of them legitimate what Erich Fromm (1941) long ago described as the "flight from freedom." In any free collective action, in any radical project of actively remaking history, lies the terrible possibility that things may turn out badly, a lesson the events of our century bring home again and again: the messianic rupture may open up onto paradise or the abyss and, as Derrida's and Benjamin's works forcefully demonstrate, there is no a priori guarantee as to where we will arrive. A similar sense of historical contingency marks the alienated political agency we see in *Independence Day*, a certain frisson and cinematic suspense arising from the possibility that the aliens may in fact succeed in wiping us out. But of course, as the existentialists also remind us, inactivity is itself a form of action, enabling the continuation of a status quo that all these narratives I have touched on suggest is unbearable; indeed, as in the parables of Kafka, these narratives give substance to the sense that sometimes "the worst thing is better than nothing at all" (Jameson 1991, 309). Caught between the Scylla of the fear of political catastrophe and the Charybdis of inactivity, both the intellectual and the public turn toward the only avenue of possibility that appears to remain avail-

4. Barthes too emphasizes the alienation experienced by the critic of myth: "This harmony justifies the mythologist but does not fulfill him: his status still remains basically one of being excluded. Justified by the political dimension, the mythologist is still at a distance from it. His speech is a metalanguage, it 'acts' nothing; at the most it unveils—or does it? To whom? His task always remains ambiguous, hampered by its ethical origins" (1972, 156).

5. I would suggest a similar bind is present in another recent science fiction film, *Star Trek: First Contact*, which could be read as an endorsement of the vision of a socialist utopia. Indeed, it carefully works to distinguish its ideal of future postcapitalist collectivities from cold war fantasies of the totalitarian menace, embodied in the terrifying Borg. However, the film introduces so many messianic caesuras (an early twenty-first-century war in which, as in *Independence Day*, all the old cities are destroyed; the crew of the Enterprise; the angelic Vulcans who arrive in the film's waning moments; and even the Borg themselves), each of which appears as an apparently indispensable midwife to such a future, that the passage from our world into the new place occurs seemingly without, and indeed almost in spite of, the actions of people living and acting in the present.

able: the affirmation of the messianic, of the *potentiality* of otherness in history. However, as figures for an alienated political agency, the film aliens offer another resolution to these various existential dilemmas: they at once rupture the terrible continuum of history, goad the collective into action and, conveniently, bear the burden of responsibility for any ill consequences (wide-scale suffering, death, violence, and destruction) that arise during the moment of transition.

The appearance of the aliens also provides a magical solution to another pressing political question of our present, one that similarly cannot be answered by an appeal to a messianic historicity: how to forge, and even more important, *sustain* a political bloc from the fragmented interests and competing microgroups currently inhabiting the political landscape? The film's vision of the global collective unity that arises in response to the invasion is represented in a number of ways: first, in a fleeting but crucial image of what are identified as Arab and Israeli fighter pilots now forged into an alliance (the film's almost obsessive references to the Middle East [indeed, the first appearance of the alien ships is over northern Iraq] perhaps betray an awareness that in this region, unlike in the United States, history still appears very much to be possible); second, in the opening lines of a speech by the president in the moments before the climactic counterattack on the aliens ("Mankind—that word should have new meaning for all of us today. We can't be consumed by our petty differences anymore. We will be united in our common interests"); and finally and most obviously, in the heroic pairing of a Jew, Levinson, and an African American, Hiller, ascending to the alien ship and symbolically transcending Crown Heights in order to save the planet.

The process by which this unification comes about offers a textbook illustration of Laclau and Mouffe's claim that all collective political agency is fundamentally constituted in negativity: the aliens in the film present us with the one form of the antagonistic Other big enough to subsume all the peoples of the earth into a collective whole (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 128). (This device is an old one in the traditions of science fiction literature. It is no coincidence that H. G. Wells's great catastrophic works, such as "The Star" and *The War of the Worlds*, precede his later imagining of "modern utopias" of global harmony. In Wells's vision, too, the invasion of the "alien" enables the formation of a new global collectivity.) In the film, it is the alien's own voice that marks it as this kind of Other. During the film only one alien ever has the opportunity to "speak" or, more precisely, to communicate telepathically (a plot device beautifully parodied in the more recent, antijingoistic science fiction film *Starship Troopers*). When the President asks this alien what his species wants "us" to do, the alien chants simply, "Die, die." In this way, the aliens become the very embodiment of the death drive.

The literary critic Lee Edelman has argued provocatively that the political symbolic logic of the mainstream fetishizes the image of the child as the reproduction of the present in the future: "the child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and been enshrined as the figure for whom that order must be held in perpetual trust" (1998, 21). By contrast, he says, it is the queer subject position that embodies

for that order the death drive, “rupturing . . . Our foundational faith in the reproduction of futurity” (23). Following Edelman’s lead, we might read the aliens in the film as figures for this queer subjectivity as well, giving a new resonance to Marinetti’s phrase “gay incendiaries.” A similar logic is evident in the monstrous alien figures of Ridley Scott’s *Aliens* and *The X-Files: Fight the Future*. In both films, their respective aliens’ menace arises from a “queer” asexual reproduction (using “human” bodies as incubators) that threatens to demolish the dominant symbolic order. Edelman goes on to speculate on the potentialities opened up by a queer politics that embraces this imaginary, and I would extend his insight to all politics that take themselves to be radical, for what is the messianic in relationship to the contemporary symbolic order if not the death drive? As Derrida notes, “Some, and I do not exclude myself, will find this despairing ‘messianism’ has a curious taste, a taste of death” (1994, 169).

Crucially, however, it is exactly this “curious taste” that *Independence Day* ultimately rejects as it begins to rechannel the radical desires to which it has given cinematic expression into some very different directions. The film begins this recontaining operation by placing the death-driven aliens in direct opposition to a “human” desire for life. Late in his climactic speech, the president tells the assembled troops, “You will once again be fighting for our freedom. Not from tyranny, oppression, or persecution, but from annihilation. We are fighting for our right to live.” The aliens thus serve as a “vanishing mediator” (Jameson 1988b; Žižek 1993, 226–37) between the fragmentary, alienated condition of our own present and the state of collective unity the film invites us to imagine will exist after they have been vanquished, a unity that will continue if in nothing else in the concerted global Marshall Plan that will be required to clean up the mess created by this intergalactic war. That is, once they have performed the task of dissolving the unbearable stasis of the past, the aliens, along with the threatening open-ended messianic possibilities they embody, must disappear. In their place, a new world symbolic order emerges. But what exactly is it that the film imagines will “live”?

These political alienations are not the only ones imagined to be overcome by the radical singularity of the attack. I have already pointed out the similarity between the fantasy of urban cultural destruction found in *Independence Day* and that expressed in such quintessentially modernist works as Marinetti’s “Futurist Manifesto.”⁶ But there is another striking resonance between the futurist vision and that offered by the film: both appear to embrace the transformative possibilities of modern technological warfare, again as a way of effecting a break with the dead weight of the

6. I would like briefly to point out an additional level of mediation that takes place by way of the film’s vision of the destruction of U.S. metropolitan centers. In the science fiction imaginary, the trope of the blasted urban landscape has long served as a figure for white middle-class anxieties about what are understood to be the irredeemable “race capitals” of the inner cities (see Ross 1991, 146). By clearing away these zones of “obsolescence,” to deploy the figure developed by Evan Watkins (1993), the film imaginatively sets free an African American middle class, represented here by Smith’s character Steven Hiller, from its traditional bonds to this population. Thus, as I noted earlier, the film’s placement of Hiller in Los Angeles is no coincidence for, in so doing the film neatly dissolves any cultural link between the “rising” middle class and the “anarchic” forces of the 1992 uprising.

past. Among its other aspects, Marinetti writes, “War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metalization of the human body” (quoted in Benjamin 1969, 241). A similar image of a metalized body appears in the film; however, here it takes the form of the terrible figure of the alien Other, sheathed in what we are told is “biomechanical” armor.

Thus, at this central narrative juncture, the film’s vision effects a crucial departure from the ideologies of modernism. After Hiller captures a downed alien pilot, a secret xenobiological research team opens up the armor. The head of the team (Brent Spiner, the actor who also played the beloved android Data in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) observes that these entities are “not all that dissimilar to us”; in order to realize this, all you have to do is “get through their technology.” The doctor pays for this misreading with his life—the entire medical staff is slaughtered by the freed alien—and we learn in this brief moment of cross-cultural contact just how savagely different they are from us. Crucially, this difference is presented as being a consequence of their total “enframing” (*Ge-stell*), to use Martin Heidegger’s (1977) complex term, by technology—a fate that the film, making evident its soft environmentalist agenda, warns may await us as well. In the modernist moment, marked as in the case of the futurists’ twentieth-century Italy by a sputtering and frustratingly incomplete technological modernization, this total enframing appeared as a utopian possibility; however, in our fully modernized world, the same vision comes back to us as a figure of a potential apocalyptic catastrophe, technology itself now embodying the alien Other that menaces the human. (Of course, this anxiety, too, has long been an important dimension of the science fiction imaginary, from E. M. Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops,” Yevgeny Zamyatin’s novel *We*, and Karl Capek’s drama *R.U.R.*, through the cold war short stories of Cordwainer Smith and Harlan Ellison’s sixties classic “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream” [the basis for the *Terminator* diptych], to the Borg nightmare of recent *Star Trek* frame.) The aliens in the film appear as a technological “return of the repressed,” invading our world, as we learn, in order to strip it of all its natural resources. In a vision that harks back to the first *Terminator*, even our machines seem early on in the film to have turned against us, as our enframing global web of communication satellites is used by the invaders to coordinate their initial attack.

Independence Day is hardly alone in offering this type of critical vision of contemporary technological alienation—something also at play, for example, in John Carpenter’s *Escape from LA*. However, there are some crucial differences between these two narratives that are worth emphasizing as well. In the conclusion of the Carpenter film, protagonist Snake Pliskin (Kurt Russell), having been forced into another irresolvable political bind (where the only choices are a decadent out-of-control consumerism, the “senseless” violence of Third World revolution, and religious fundamentalist totalitarianism), ends up literally pulling the plug on modernity (by turning off the planetary power grid) in a messianic gesture that, as one character in the film observes, wipes out five hundred years of Western modernity’s “achievements.” *Independence Day*, on the other hand, ultimately presents a much

less apocalyptic fantasy, calling not for the total rollback of technological modernization, but rather for what we might call its de-alienation. (The shift in vision that occurs as we move from *Escape from LA* to *Independence Day* resembles that which occurs between the two *Terminator* films as the apparently unstoppable, death-dealing technological menace of the first film—a figure for what many were then convinced was the inescapable nuclear catastrophe of the Reagan era—is rewritten as the kindly and child-loving war machine of the post-cold war sequel.⁷) Understanding how such a de-alienation unfolds in terms of the film's narrative is thus crucial for grasping its ultimate political content.

The film presents three distinct stages in the human counteroffensive against the technologically figured menace. The first, coming immediately on the heels of the destruction of the world's major cities, takes the form of a massive wave of U.S. military aircraft sent to blow an alien ship near Los Angeles out of the sky. This fails because, as we soon learn, the alien craft are protected by an impenetrable force field, with the result that most of the U.S. planes are destroyed. The second counterattack follows the revelation of the invader's ultimate agenda ("Die, die"), which leads the president to consent to a nuclear strike against another of their ships. This effort fails as well and, in fact, does the aliens' work for them by obliterating the city of Houston. However, in the third and finally successful counterattack, the humans follow a very different strategy. Hiller pilots a salvaged alien scout vehicle (apparently the very ship taken from the infamous Roswell, New Mexico, crash site of the 1950s) into the core of the orbiting mother ship where Levinson introduces a virus into the aliens' computer system. This momentarily shuts down the force fields (apparently the hubris of the invaders made them forget to install a backup system), thereby enabling a carefully coordinated, *worldwide* strike by the surviving military forces. They succeed and, in the process, enable the heroic redemption of Vietnam veteran Russell Casse who, in what appears to be an unironic reprisal of Slim Pickens's famous nuclear missile ride in *Dr. Strangelove*, flies his fighter plane into the heart of one of the ships. Meanwhile, Hiller and Levinson guarantee that the alien forces will not have any opportunity to regroup by spectacularly blowing up their interstellar mother ship with a nuclear bomb.

Many critics complained about the implausibility of this resolution, and it does seem pretty tenuous to assume that human and alien computer technologies would be able to interface given the difficulties of getting even IBM and Macintosh machines to work together. However, to simply reject this narrative climax as silly is to miss the more significant pedagogical work that is being performed by it for, finally, the film suggests that it is only old-style, big industrial technology that is the inhuman, alien Other. Whatever form it takes (the unrestrained use of military hardware, the bomb, or even the alien ships themselves), this technology is revealed to be both a threat to human existence and, ultimately, a failure. Over and against this form of technology, however, the film offers a redeemed image of another kind of technol-

7. For another useful discussion of the politics of the second *Terminator* film, see Pfeil (1993).

ogy: a friendly, user-based one of smart, “clean” information machines like the personal computer. Indeed, even the *ur*-form of clean, electric information technology, the telegraph, plays a key role in the film’s reassertion of the human, enabling a global communications network to spring up that the aliens are unable to detect. Moreover, this same lesson is reiterated in the making of the film itself, involving as it did groundbreaking computer-simulation technologies that replace cumbersome and costly physical stagings of the battle sequences.

Here, then, we can see how the messianic narrative structure of the film, playing upon some of the deepest utopian and radical political desires at work in our present, gradually turns over into an ideological one, ultimately performing the crucial work of culturally hegemonic pedagogy in reinforcing a series of notions about technology (including the idea that there is a qualitative difference between dirty and clean technologies) that are central to our post-Fordist and information-based economies. Moreover, the film teaches us that success comes to those who have mastered the skills and ideals necessary to flourish in these emergent realities: the film’s heroes are those who combine a performative flexibility and skill in informational technologies with a soft environmentalism (one of the first appearances of Levinson on screen shows him picking aluminum cans out of an office trash barrel and throwing them into a nearby recycling bin) and a vaguely global sensibility. Thus, it should come as no surprise that what begins as an allegorical vision of revolutionary rupture folds back over the course of the film into an extended advertisement for Macintosh computers, the very folks who broke the ground for this recoding strategy with their now legendary use of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* for their initial marketing salvo for the Apple computer line. This can occur because finally there is no real contradiction between the corporate ideologies of Macintosh and those of the film.

The truly pressing questions concerning the new information technologies are those that the film cannot even begin to bring into view, and have nothing to do with some ideological vision of the cleanness of information technologies versus the dirtiness of older industrial forms (although we would do well to reexamine the reifications implicit even in this opposition, haunting those forms of environmental politics that view the “second wave” industrial economies of the various third worlds as the greatest menaces to the planetary ecosystem). Technology is, from the Marxist perspective, always already “a figure for something else” (Jameson 1991, 35). Likewise, I would argue that the more fundamental issues about the new information technologies concern the role they will play in the organization and maintenance of a worldwide corporate capitalist marketplace, a marketplace that itself has helped produce in the first place the sense of posthistorical malaise to which the film represents a response as well as who will and (equally significantly) who will *not* have access to these technologies (the latter being what Jean François Lyotard famously calls postmodern forms of “proletarianization” [1984]).⁸

8. A similar silence haunts Derrida’s (1994, 169) brief conjuring of spectral information technologies late in his work.

This ideological vision of technology similarly points toward another narrative operation of redemption at work in the film. The sequence of three counterattacks offers a thumbnail sketch of changes in U.S. military philosophy following World War II. In the first assault, we see the outmoded military thinking operative in the Vietnam War, an attempt to overwhelm the enemy with a sheer volume of technological overkill—with, not surprisingly, the same humiliating results. The second attack represents the obviously self-destructive bankruptcies of any nuclear exchange; indeed, at one point Levinson reminds us that even if an all-out nuclear attack destroyed the aliens, the subsequent fallout and nuclear winter would render the planet uninhabitable and thus effectively “end life as we know it.” By the time of the third attack, the lessons of these earlier failures have been assimilated. In the last attack we see the combination of smart, information-based stealth technologies with old-fashioned military gumption, and the multinational nature of the strike force is repeatedly driven home by the film. Such a strategy then resembles nothing less than that employed in the real-world U.S. “victory” over what has been presented to us again and again as another expansionist, death-obsessed, antienvironmental, and world-threatening alien: Sadaam Hussein. Moreover, the heroic redemption of Vietnam War veteran Casse reinforces the widely shared belief that the Gulf War was somehow a similar redemption of Vietnam; even the destruction of the mother ship offers a fantasy scenario of what should have been the conclusion of the Gulf conflict. The film’s ideological vision of the Gulf War is perhaps best summarized by President Whitmore (who, remember, is himself a hero of that war) in the moments of tense immobility between the aliens’ arrival and their first attack on our cities: “In the Gulf War we knew what we had to do. It’s not that simple anymore.” The film, then, harks back to what have already become for many the nostalgically longed for “simpler” days of the Gulf War—before, one imagines, the opening of the new-old quagmires of Somalia and Bosnia, for it is the Gulf War that represents the film’s model of a workable political mobilization in the new world.

This, then, suggests the ultimate work of ideological recontainment performed by the film. Earlier in this essay, I pointed out that the political paralysis experienced by President Whitmore was presented as a consequence of his vision getting lost in the haze of “politics” and “compromise.” The aliens provide a mechanism for getting us beyond these messy complications of a democratic form of government: we are informed that the aliens have killed the vice president and the cabinet, and we can be assured that the destruction of Washington has wiped out both the legislative and judicial checks on presidential power. Moreover, later in the film we see Whitmore fire his secretary of state, who we learn had formerly been the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, the organization that has become a key figure in the current popular cultural imagination of an unaccountable, out-of-control, “big” government. Indeed, the film goes out of its way to inform its viewers of what most of them probably already know: the Central Intelligence Agency long has been involved in the illegal appropriation of U.S. funds to finance covert operations like the base in Nevada where the alien wreckage recovered at the Roswell crash site had been stored for

more than four decades (as one character rhetorically asks, you don't think they actually spend twenty thousand dollars on a hammer or thirty thousand dollars on a toilet seat?). However, the film also suggests that neither the president nor the "legitimate" military leadership has any inkling of these practices—granting both of them, as the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency tells us, "plausible deniability." Thus, in what can only be viewed as a deft political balancing act, the film manages to redeem the images of both George Bush, the heroic and decisive leader of the Gulf War, and Bill Clinton, the idealistic young president whose agenda is undermined by Beltway politics. It is not our leaders, the film suggests, but the system in which they are forced to work that needs to be disposed of—something the current crop of space invaders in Congress appears bent on accomplishing.

The alien invasion in the film allows a similar operation of political simplification to take place on the global level as well. The president's stirring speech before the final victory is revealing in this regard. While he invokes a new form of global community, it is one in which the United States, as in the planning and staging of the counterassault itself, remains decidedly in control. The president asserts that it is "fate" that the final battle happens to fall on 4 July; henceforth, he tells the assembled throng, the day will "no longer be known as an American holiday" but instead will commemorate the birth of a brave new world order. Crucially, however, it is a globe remade in the image of the United States, where all the world's interests and values are subsumed under ours and where we still get to call all the shots. We even get to make up the holidays.

In other words, in this film one of the great dangers Derrida's work so carefully guards against in fact comes to pass: the messianic desire becomes embodied in an "identifiable messiah," a figure that takes the form of recentered and deeply patriarchal U.S. leadership. Significantly, none of the three major women characters in the film (the current, former, and future wives of Whitmore, Levinson, and Hiller, respectively) plays any real role in the victory over the aliens save that of being well-springs of support for their mates. The longed-for restoration of masculine political authority, the film teaches us, is contingent on the return to "traditional" gender divisions of labor. Indeed, by the end of the film, all three women have been decisively removed from the public spheres in which they circulated at the beginning (as press secretary, stripper, and political leader) and either killed off or reinserted in their "proper" domestic settings. On both the East and West Coasts, the African American and Jewish yuppie households are restored; meanwhile, the career-minded and child-abandoning Hillary Clintonsque wife of President Whitmore (the latter shown in the opening of the film gently caring for their daughter as his wife attends a political meeting in Los Angeles) is made to confess her sins on her deathbed: "I'm so sorry I didn't come home when you asked me to." "We're going to live on; we're going to survive," Whitmore declares in what can now be read as the chilling conclusion to his speech for, in the narrative construction of the film, this "we" takes on a decidedly American and patriarchal hue.

Thus in the end, the film follows a narrative parabola not unlike that found in Fritz Lang's classic *Metropolis*, as the latter was first so brilliantly described by Siegfried

Kracauer: "The whole composition denotes that the industrialist acknowledges the heart for the purpose of manipulating it; that he does not give up his power, but will expand it over a realm not yet annexed—the realm of the collective soul. Freder's rebellion results in the establishment of totalitarian authority, and he considers this result a victory" (1947, 164). Bringing into the light of day the frustrated political desires and messianic energies of our moment, *Independence Day* similarly provides a narrative mechanism for their rechanneling into support for currently emerging hegemonies.

For politically engaged intellectuals, there are a number of important lessons to be gathered from this tracing of the film's narrative trajectory. However indispensable the critical recovery of the messianic specters haunting the closure of our own present, such an endeavor always must be accompanied by a concrete and specific reimagining of the formation and mobilization of collective political agencies—a question that is also too often rapidly passed over in cultural studies celebrations of populist oppositionality to "bourgeois" values.⁹ In response to Derrida's invocation of the "imaginary witness" of the specter of a New International, Spivak writes, "In a world where nonalignment is no longer possible as a collective position, what good is such anonymous internationality? and how will it come to pass? Never mind. We don't like totalitarianism, and we are unsympathetic with the labor movement" (1995, 69). What seems to be the unspoken assumption, if not the desperate hope, of many invocations of both messianic and populist oppositionalities is that they will somehow in and of themselves give rise to political forms and goals that are amenable to the project of creating a new *and better* society.

This also gives voice to a specific anxiety on the part of contemporary left intellectuals: our fear, given the lessons of the preceding century, of taking a leading role both in the formation of new revolutionary movements and in shaping the long-term goals of such movements. Once again, we have much to learn in this regard from Gramsci. Everyone is an intellectual, as he famously maintains; however, he goes on to point out that there nevertheless must exist a specific social group that takes up the "professional" role of intellectuals (1971, 9). Such a stratum is, in Gramsci's vision, indispensable for any political, economic, social, and cultural transformation to occur.

Critical self-consciousness means, historically and politically, the creation of an *élite* of intellectuals. A human mass does not "distinguish" itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organizing itself; and there is no organization without intellectuals, that is without organizers and leaders, in other words, without the theoretical aspect of the theory-practice nexus being distinguished concretely by the existence of a group of people "specialized" in conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas. (334)

The "elitism" and "specialization" that Gramsci speaks of are first and foremost a privilege: an allocation of social resources necessary to engage in this complex, time-

9. See, for example, the much discussed essay by Kipnis (1993). However, she does acknowledge the problems of the politics that arise from *Hustler*'s populist transgressiveness.

consuming, and vital work. Moreover, such an activity never takes place in isolation, but is part of a constant dialogue and pedagogical exchange with the “masses” (and here too Derrida’s reminders of the dangers of premature totalization are indispensable). However, these privileges also entail significant responsibilities, including the formulation of new political strategies and alternative visions of the future, education of the public in the steps necessary to begin to realize these goals, and finally, giving a specific direction to these movements. “The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, ‘permanent persuader’ and not just a simple orator” (Gramsci 1971, 10). Such a work of “persuasion” is as indispensable today as it was in Gramsci’s moment for, as *Independence Day* shows us, just as there is no determinate connection between a moment of revolutionary temporal rupture and the social organization that will follow it (something of which Marx himself was clearly aware in his later writings),¹⁰ so too there is no necessary relationship between the critical energies of messianic historicity and any specific form of political action. Rather, political organization and mobilization come about only through a difficult, painful, and gradual process of education. What this film also shows us is that if we do not undertake this arduous labor, if we leave the question of political agency hanging in the air for too long, we can rest assured that others will take up the task in our stead, filling the placeholder of the messianic with a content very different from what we might desire.

The importance of Derrida’s book, and no less that of the rekindled interest in Benjamin’s writings and the cultural studies examinations of popular culture, lie in the invitations they make to us for precisely these kinds of critical dialogue. And while the preceding engagement with this film represents another avenue for doing this work, there is also a way in which the film “recognizes” this possibility and attempts to short-circuit it in advance. This occurs by way of one additional “philosophy of history” that appears in the film, which unfolds on the level of filmic and narrative form itself. As any viewer of the film who has indulged in the sheer enjoyment of science fiction film will already realize, *Independence Day* is a veritable compendium of scenes, references, devices, and motifs from a host of earlier works, including *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *War of the Worlds*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Planet of the Apes*, *Star Wars*, *Return of the Jedi*, *ET*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Alien*, a horde of 1950s monster and alien-invader B-movies, and even the comedy *Airplane* (“I picked a hell of a day to quit drinking”). (I have two favorites from the later moments of the film. When Levinson first switches on his personal computer on board the alien craft, it greets him with “Good morning, Dave”—a reference to another classic film narrative about technological alienation whose deep pessimism was, perhaps not surprisingly, also rewritten into a much more upbeat vision in the

10. For some important recent discussions of this aspect of Marx’s later work, see Balibar (1995, especially chap. 4), Ross (1988, 21–5), and Dunayevskaya (1991).

1980s “sequel” *2010*. Later, we see Hiller and Levinson walking unscathed across the desert floor, the wreck of the alien ship burning in the background, in a direct quotation from the film adaptation of Tom Wolfe’s *The Right Stuff*.) In this way, *Independence Day* becomes an example of that most deeply postmodern of gestures, a pastiche of earlier cultural documents: a form that Jameson famously reads as “an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way” (1991, 21). Indeed, the very form of the narrative in this film would make it an excellent example of Jameson’s privileged generic expression of pastiche, the nostalgia film. Presenting itself as nothing more than a “film about film” and simple entertainment, *Independence Day* refuses any reading that would try to take its political contents seriously, and many of the film’s original reviewers followed suit. All the messages I have enumerated only seem to vanish like so many mirages in the shimmering heat of its “fun,” summer-movie, roller-coastering narrative form. Perhaps, to extend Marx’s emendation of Hegel even further, all historical events now occur three times: “the first time as tragedy, the second as farce,” and the third as style (1963, 18). In this way, the film comes to seem as much a manifestation of the posthistorical sensibility as the work of Baudrillard or Fukuyama.

Finally, however, this mirage effect also needs to be understood as a crucial dimension of the political educational work that the film undertakes. It provides for a “distracted” reception of the film’s contents, inducing a state of passive consumption that, as Benjamin long ago taught us, best suits the hegemonic pedagogy in which these forms of popular cultural texts engage (1969, 239–40). As political critics, then, it is our job in turn to refuse these distractions: to bring squarely into the center of our field of vision precisely the lessons being taught. In this way, we might at least begin to think of how to put “the content . . . beyond the phrase.”

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