



Independence Day. 20th Century Fox.

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Aliens 'R' Us: A Critique of ID4

It did not take people long to realize that *Independence Day* would be the hit movie of the summer. It earned \$100-million in only six days, surpassing the nine-day record set by *Jurassic Park* in 1993. Since then, commentators have been trying to explain its popularity. Some have attributed its success to the perfect opening-day timing and the shrewd marketing campaign; others to the way it satisfies the public's supposed deep-rooted desire to unite against a common enemy. In a variation on this latter point, many people I have talked to have called it jingoistic, mere propaganda for the "New World Order," and have objected to its stereotyped portrayal of women, Jews, and gays. Others, though, have praised its multicultural vision, pointing to the featured roles it gives to minorities. There is clearly truth in all of these takes on the movie. But I don't think any one of them satisfactorily explains why the film is so popular. Why has it struck such a chord with the public at this time? I'd like to try my hand at answering this question. I confess to having cheered involuntarily on a number of occasions during the film, so if nothing else, the following can be considered an attempt at self-analysis. This movie has appeared at a moment of widespread anxiety about job security in a culture in which downward mobility is experienced, particularly by men, as personal failure and impotence. The male characters introduced in the opening scenes all speak to this anxiety. There is Jeff Goldblum as David, an MIT-educated satellite technician whose former girlfriend Constance (Margaret Colin), fed up with his lack of ambition, has left him to become an adviser to the President. There is Randy Quaid as Russell, a boozy former Vietnam pilot now working as a crop-duster and suffering mental problems since he was abducted and molested by aliens. And finally there is Will Smith as Capt. Steven Hiller, an Marine pilot who has failed to realize his dream of becoming an astronaut. He is in a relationship with Jasmine (Vivica Fox), a black, single mother who works as a stripper (apparently the

only job left for Hollywood working-class moms!). His fellow pilot tells him, "Now you're never gonna get to fly the space shuttle if you marry a stripper!" Even President Whitmore (Bill Pullman) is worrying if he has the right stuff. The press accuse him of being too boyish to stand up to Congress. The arrival of the aliens sets a plot in motion in which all the above characters will eventually triumph over their inadequacies. At first, however, the alien invasion only exacerbates their sense of impotence, rendering the nation powerless at the hands of an inscrutable force. Breaking off from their "mother ship," the alien crafts descend from the moon, vast, dark ovals which spread out across the globe, taking up positions over all the major world capitals and hijacking the global satellite system to coordinate their attack. All human efforts to establish contact with the aliens fail. On cue they commence destroying cities, moving from one to another, blasting them with a ray from the underbelly of the craft. Their sole governing purpose, we learn, is to travel from one planet to another, consuming all available resources. I think this vision generates such an effective sense of dread because of the strong element of paranoia in it. In a state of paranoia we invest the external world with all our worst tendencies and qualities to maintain the fiction of our own wholeness and perfection. In this movie the aliens are a paranoid projection of the nation's destructive and threatening aspects. In their blind pursuit of self-interest, their global reach and control of satellite communication, their capacity to paralyze nation states, and their environmental destructiveness, the alien crafts bear an uncanny resemblance to multinational corporations (which include Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, which owns Fox, which made the movie). I am not saying that the filmmakers, Dean Devlin and Roland Emmerich, intended the aliens to stand for multinational corporations, just that they had the right instincts about how to make the aliens appear particularly menacing to a public anxious about the environment and the "global economy." To be "alienated"

in the Marxian sense is to experience the social world, which our own social labor creates, as a force independent of us. In this state of alienation, we perceive the market, its laws, and the acquisitive behavior it encourages as “natural.” The aliens act with implacable greed, darkly mirroring our own behavior. This projection of capitalist behavior onto the universe implies that capitalism is the horizon beyond which we cannot go. The film in fact mocks those who think otherwise. The only ones in the movie foolish enough to imagine that the aliens will be beneficent are a few hippie-like intellectuals and “UFO fanatics.” I winced when the aliens annihilated these last of the flower-children. Their great sin was supposing nature might not be entirely red in tooth and claw. <p> It was not long, however, before I was back with the rest of the cheering audience identifying with the national self so radiantly imaged on the screen. While the aliens appear largely as faceless and genderless drones obeying anonymous dictates, the human world is the opposite. All the characters introduced in the opening scenes miraculously end up at “Area 51,” a secret facility in Nevada for studying aliens. This installation serves as a base from which the counterattack is organized. Here we find a tight-knit face-to-face world where individual heroism promises to solve the world’s problems. We are treated to a wish-fulfilling dream of the powerless achieving power: immigrant workers, Jews, African-Americans, and downsized professionals take center stage, their individual merit at last receiving due social recognition and reward. This all occurs under the paternal direction of the President, a modern-day Prince Hal, who, in the final act, leads his own forces into battle (no wonder Clinton was reported to have loved the film when he saw it at a special White House screening). <p> In this vision of communal wholeness restored, classes, races, and nationalities reconcile and cooperate. All the nations of the world turn gratefully to the U.S. for leadership (even Iraq!). Before the final battle, the republican ideal of civic participation and civilian militias—the ideal that informs populist hatred of big government—becomes reality as ordinary citizen-volunteers “man” F-

16’s. Technology no longer appears alien and threatening but humanly manageable (even the Unabomber might be pleased). And government itself appears under popular control (earlier we were purged of our rage against government when the aliens pulled an Oklahoma City on the White House). The two groups excluded from this newfound autonomy are women and gay men. The fight is truly on behalf of a heterosexual “Mankind,” as the President declares. The First Lady, who “fails to come home,” dies apologizing for her sin. The two other stereotyped women characters recognize the error of their independent ways and get married. The one gay character in the movie is literally left behind, never making it out of a traffic jam. <p> A fantasy of male power restored is at the heart of the film. In the grand finale, David and Captain Hiller insert their alien craft deep into the “mother ship,” associated with the feminine moon, and plant a phallic nuclear weapon. Just before this phallic bomb destroys the ship, our heroes escape out a long vagina-like passage whose closing doorway nearly traps them. On their return they brandish victory cigars. Meanwhile, the aliens on earth are destroyed by another male in a similar act of virile self-overcoming. Seeking revenge for his sexual humiliation ten years earlier, Russell flies his aircraft up the central shaft of the alien ship, shouting “Up yours!” as he plunges his nose cone into the orifice. <p> As a paranoid fantasy in which threats to male power are externalized and then destroyed, Independence Day offers, especially to white- and blue-collar heterosexual men, a powerful—if fleeting—emotional release. While its popularity indicates what a high level of social frustration exists out there, the movie largely exploits this frustration in the service of sexism and nationalism. The challenge for critics of popular culture is to expose these pernicious ideological strategies while respecting the experiences and anxieties they manipulate, which we all share as members of this society. This kind of critique should avoid condescension and open a space for all of us to reflect on more constructive ways to channel our utopian desires. <p>

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