

Film Reviews

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Independence Day by Ronald Emmerich, USA 1996.

In 1956 a film redefined an entire genre. Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* challenged the formulaic impetus of the science fiction B-flic which tended to play on the audience's fears during the Cold War Era. At first glance, Siegel's film did not appear to be too different. It was shot in black and white with a cast of unknowns, and it continued to portray aliens as malignant aggressors. However, Siegel introduced a totally new subtext to the genre by changing the concept of the alien itself. In the course of the film, his "bodysnatchers" become more and more identifiable with the next door neighbor who is being transformed into a cold and soulless entity. Thus, Siegel's film shows a mirror to a ruthless consumer society; it functions as a sci-fi parable.

Science fiction continued to be a genre in which America took a critical look at itself. *Barbarella* (1966) dealt with the sexual revolution; the cold, widescreen images of Kubrick's *2001 A Space Odyssey* (1967) invited the audience to a philosophical voyage to the beginning and the end of civilization; Douglas Trumbull's *Silent Running* (1971) presented an earth without flowers or trees, thus making it the first ecological science fiction movie; Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) warned against the dangers of gene technology; E.T. was an implicit commentary on the apparently joyless childhood of the 1980s; and even Roland Emmerich's own *Moon 44* (1987) could be interpreted as a plea for ethnic tolerance.

Independence Day, on the other hand, has hardly any subtext. It is *War of the Worlds* beyond a prewar context, or *Close Encounters* in reverse; it is pre-Siegel B-movie aesthetics on a blockbuster budget, or the return of science fiction to the concept of the screen as *lanterna magica*. Emmerich, not unlike Kevin Costner in *Waterworld* (1995), recycles an entire universe in order to blow it up to preposterous dimensions. It is true that the film's special effects (which were created by a team of experts from Munich where Emmerich started his directorial career) are outstanding. His aliens are "real" aliens in the sense that they look very alien indeed. His images of destruction are "real" in the sense that they follow each other in a manner of ever-growing hyperbolic succession; the White House, the

Eiffel Tower and St. Paul's Cathedral all blow up in the first 30 minutes of the film. Emmerich's visual stab at a global inferno offers good value for the producer's money (which is partly his own, actually). His aliens are "useful" intergalactic parasites who only convey one important message to the film's bewildered "earthlings": "No peace." Only global solidarity can help against them so that the 4th of July 1996 (the day the film opened in the States) turned into a symbolic "Independence Day." Even the "Clintonesque" American president (Jeff Daniels) proves a good "global player" by boarding a fighter plane, and some poor aborigines are allowed to join the celebrations of the inevitable victory of the good guys against the forces of evil (needless to say that they were neither able nor allowed to participate in the combat). The new, universal type of patriotism celebrates American superiority to a degree that many European critics felt offended. Indeed, the new "War of Independence" relies almost entirely on American technical intelligence; no European plane or pilot seems to participate in the final combat so that the 4th of July remains an all-American event. So the film does have a certain subtext, but it is entirely on the affirmative side of life. *Independence Day* is a celebration of good old American frontier values which are reinforced through the help of America's High-Tech potential. The film is a one-nation-show which openly reaffirms America's position as the leading superpower both by its plot and by its expensive computer images which only Hollywood can afford to produce.

Unfortunately, Emmerich relies almost entirely on the FX section. His "artistic strategy" of typecasting his actors (Jeff Goldblum as the eccentric scientist or Randy "1941," Quaid as the alcoholic pilot) plays it safe right from the beginning. The result is a formulaic type of humor which Americans have obviously learnt to appreciate. As far as I am concerned, I must confess that I only smiled once during the entire movie. 10 or 15 minutes into the film someone plays REM's "It's the end of the world as we know it" on the radio, thus creating a nice example of dramatic irony. Apart from that, *Independence Day* is a good FX guide with a very empty script which, as far as the science fiction genre is concerned, takes three steps back simultaneously.

Kids by Larry Clark, USA 1996.

Kids presents itself as a notorious journey into the 1990s teenager psyche. It stars two real-life Beavis and Butthead skatepunks, Telly (Leo Fitzpatrick) and Casper (Justin Pierce), who boast of devirginalizing pubescent girls in New York's downtown teen scene. The time between conquests is spent in smoking dope with equally moronic multi-racial peers, talking sexist bullshit in that "gangsta rappa style," and beating up strangers. However, an angel of vengeance is stalking around in the form of the Aids virus. After the night she sleeps with Telly, Jenny (Chloe Sevigny) tests HIV positive though it has been her first sexual encounter. Seeking

Telly at a party, she falls into a coma caused by drugs and is raped by Telly's silent friend Casper while she is still under the spell of the drugs.

Larry Clark, the film's director, had previously been known for his autobiographical photo book *Tulsa* (1971), which presents a grim and documentary approach to his youth. *Tulsa* invites us into a world of male and female prostitutes, rape scenes, onanism, and young guys with guns or their privates hanging out. For Clark, making a movie came as a logical extension of his work as a photographer. Indeed, the film transposes Clark's grimy documentary style onto the screen in *cinéma vérité* type of fashion. Clark's kids perform like laboratory rats captured by a creepy camera which continues the "prurient gaze elicited by *Tulsa*" (*New Music Express* interview with Larry Clark, 18.5.96). The result is the ultimate anti-teensploitation flick which presents the young as offspring of nihilism (amoral and aimless). Rejecting conventional Hollywood aesthetics, however, does not necessarily make a great movie, and *Kids* is certainly not a great film. Nobody minds documentary approaches to the screen, but it is especially the film's blatant safer sex moral which patronizes the audience and sits "uncomfortably with the film's otherwise blank tone" (Stephan Dalton in the *New Music Express* 18.5.96). *Kids* will be remembered primarily for Harmony Korine's sparkling dialogue which shines through with breathing energy and humor, and certain rides on a skateboard shot by a hand camera. Otherwise, the film's one and only saving grace is the soundtrack which consists of booming rap crisscrossed with Lou Barlow's superb lo-fi recordings. There is far more life in the music than in Clark's drab and dreary ride into an anti-teenmovie void.

Things To Do in Denver When You're Dead by Gary Fleder, USA 1996.

Jimmy the Saint (Andy Garcia) is a retired gangster who runs a dubious kind of video service that records parting words of advice from the soon to be deceased. He is hauled in by his former boss, The Man With The Plan (Christopher Walken), to perform one last job for him. So Jimmy gathers his former cronies, all of whom are reformed mobsters trying to go straight. Franchise (William Forsythe) manages a trailer park, Critical Bill (Treat Williams) prepares cadavers at a cemetery, Easy Wind (Bill Nunn) works as a pest controller, and Pieces (Christopher Lloyd) is a projectionist at a porno cinema. However, their job goes seriously wrong, and contracts are put out on the whole team. The gang find themselves followed all over Denver by The Man's hired assassin, Mr Shhh (Steve Buscemi), an all-seeing angel of death. The threat hanging over their heads is called "Buckwheat." According to Jimmy the Saint, "Buckwheat" means "an invitation you can't refuse," but actually it points to a particularly unpleasant manner of dying--(like having a couple of bullets shot up one's buttocks). The tragedy in Jimmy's life is twofold. Walking around in Gucci suits, he recalls the tradition of the gentleman gangster who gets entrapped in a scheme (or plot) that is clearly not his own idea. Still even

worse, the events hit him after falling in love with the girl of his dreams, the "drop dead gorgeous" Gabrielle Anwar (Michael Bonner in the *Melody Maker*, May 4 1996).

All characters in the film try to stay alive against all odds. Since the entire action is retold by a chorus figure (Jack Warden), the futility of their enterprise is clear right from the start. In this manner, *Denver* turns into a kind of philosophical gangster movie which serves both as a metaphorical and metonymical extension of a striking autobiographical experience. As scriptwriter Stuart Rosenberg revealed in an interview with the *Melody Maker*: "I lost my father after a three-year battle with cancer. Rather than writing directly about that experience, I decided *Denver* would be a metaphor for terminal disease. It's like, 30 minutes in, these guys have seen 'a doctor', and he's told them they've got days to live" (May 4, 96). Thus, the film invites us into a kind of parallel narrative universe in which spooky nocturnal streets, funeral parlors, and strikingly empty diners convey a general atmosphere of loneliness and despair. The result is a highly stylized movie in which the gangsters cast the same long shadow as every elegiac Western hero from *The Man From Laramie* to *Unforgiven*.