



From Representation to Normalization: The Ideological Construction of the Global Threat in Hollywood Cinema Before September 11

Temsilden Normalleşmeye: 11 Eylül Öncesi Hollywood Sinemasında Küresel Tehdidin İdeolojik İnşası

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ÖZ

Bu makale, Hollywood sinemasında küresel tehdit anlatılarının kültürel inşasını ve ideolojik normalleşmesini, 11 Eylül 2001 saldırıları öncesindeki döneme odaklanarak incelemektedir. İdeoloji ve temsil kavramlarından yararlanan ve Christian Metz'in sinemanın göstergebilimi yaklaşımını kullanan bu çalışma, *Independence Day* (1996) filminin semiyotik bir analizini sunmakta ve filmin, Amerika ile uzaylı bir "Öteki" arasındaki çatışma hikâyesi üzerinden Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemin Doğu-Batı ikilemini yeniden kurguladığını savunmaktadır. Bulgulara göre, film, ahlaki açıdan üstün bir Amerikan kimliğine karşı irrasyonel ve yıkıcı bir uzaylı gücü tasvir ederek, ABD'nin askeri müdahalesini ve teknolojik gücünü insanlığın hayatta kalması için vazgeçilmez olarak sunmakta ve böylece ABD liderliğine dayalı tek kutuplu bir dünya düzeni kavramını normalleştirmektedir. Ayrıca, filmin saldırı ve kentsel yıkım sahneleri, 11 Eylül olaylarından önce kamu tahayyülünde büyük ölçekli felaket senaryolarının oluşmasına katkıda bulunmuştur; bu da 11 Eylül saldırılarının gerçekleştiğinde hem şok edici hem de "tanındık" görünmesine neden olmuştur. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma, eski jeopolitik düşmanların özelliklerini uzaylı bir tehdide yansıtarak, filmin ve Hollywood sinemasının ideolojik ayrımları depolitize bir şekilde yeniden ürettiğini ve aynı zamanda küresel tehdit algılarını kültürel ve ideolojik olarak şekillendirdiğini göstermektedir.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the cultural construction and ideological normalization of global threat narratives in Hollywood cinema, focusing on the period before the 11 September 2001 attacks. Drawing on the concepts of ideology and representation, and using Christian Metz's approach to semiotics of cinema, it provides an analysis of *Independence Day* (1996) and argues that, through a narrative of conflict between America and an alien "Other", the film rearticulates the East-West binaries of the post-Cold War era. According to the findings, the film portrays an irrational and destructive alien force against a morally superior American identity, which presents U.S. interventions and technological power as essential to humanity's survival, thus normalizing the conception of a unipolar world order centered on U.S. leadership. Additionally, the film's scenes of attacks and urban destruction contribute to the construction of large-scale catastrophic imaginaries in the public imagination prior to 9/11, which made the 9/11 attacks appear both shocking and "familiar" when they occurred. In conclusion, the study demonstrates that, by projecting the characteristics of former geopolitical enemies onto an extraterrestrial threat, both the film and Hollywood cinema reproduce ideological distinctions in a depoliticized manner while culturally and ideologically shaping perceptions of global threat.

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1. Introduction

On September 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked four commercial airplanes and used them as weapons against iconic sites representing the political and economic power of the United States¹: the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center (WTC) and the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD)'s headquarters in the Pentagon. As the attacks unfolded live on television, many viewers described the scenes as “like a movie.” Later, scholars suggested that the attacks seemed to imitate scenarios from Hollywood films featuring hijacked planes attacking U.S. buildings with spectacular destruction² (Žižek, 2002: 17). These observations led to claims that Hollywood had somehow “prefigured” political terrorism and helped create cultural myths about the East and West (Nelson, 2015: 150).

Rather than viewing this familiarity as evidence of cinematic prediction or prefiguration, this study considers it to be the result of a broader cultural process. Specifically, the study examines how 1990s Hollywood cinema participated in the ideological construction and normalization of the perception of a global threat prior to 9/11. By “normalization”, I refer to the process through which extraordinary violence became culturally imaginable and narratively familiar to the public, through repeated cinematic images of large-scale destruction, external enemies, and civilizational conflict. The term civilizational conflict occupies a special place in the context of the 1990s. In 1993, Samuel Huntington introduced his thesis of “clash of civilizations” and in 1996 he expanded it to offer a comprehensive account of the post-Cold War order. He suggested that this new world order was defined by cultural rather than ideological fault lines, referring to the cultural differences that, he claimed, made coexistence between Eastern and Western cultures impossible. The film analysis in this study reveals how the concept of civilization emerges in the film's dialogue as part of the construction of a global threat.

In this context, the study focuses on the film *Independence Day* (1996) to explore how the figure of the alien enemy rearticulates the East-West binary within the post-Cold War context. Through a semiotic analysis, it examines how the film portrays an alien Other that is technologically advanced yet irrational and uncivilized, contrasting it with a morally superior and globally unifying American identity. This narrative of a global threat against humanity symbolically affirms a unipolar world order centered on U.S. leadership and military power, presenting U.S. military interventions as necessary and liberating.

By focusing on the construction of global threat in the 1990s Hollywood cinema the study does not suggest that Hollywood threat narratives were specific to this period or that they were absent from earlier films about World War II and the Cold War. 1950s and 1960s films about nuclear anxiety, alien invasion, or monster attacks had long depicted fears of external annihilation (Sontag, 1965). However, what distinguishes the 1990s is that the images of the 9/11 attacks from 2001 were compared particularly with films from this decade (King, 2005), which was a period more directly engaged with Middle Eastern politics and threat narratives that were reconstructed around new figures of enmity following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, World War II films and 1990s political terrorism films had some common plots as well such as depicting American people under foreign threat and framing U.S. interventions as a moral duty to defend democracy, peace, and future generations (Boggs and Pollard, 2017). The present study traces how this longstanding narrative of American moral responsibility of fighting against an external threat was reactivated and refigured under the specific geopolitical anxieties of the post-Cold War period prior to 9/11.

In the study, Hollywood is approached not merely as an entertainment industry, but also as a site of ideological production (Comolli and Narboni, 2009). Building on Louis Althusser's (1971) concept of

¹ In the study, the United States (U.S.) is used when referring to institutional and state structures, whereas America is used when referring to cultural and ideological formations.

² One of the films that resembled 9/11 the most and turned the cursors on itself was *Executive Decision* (1996). In the film, Arab terrorists hijack an American airliner loaded with nerve gas and plan to crash it onto the Capitol Building in Washington, which is a symbolic target like the WTC. Other films with similar scenarios and produced in 1990s are *Die Hard: With a Vengeance* (1995), *Independence Day* (1996), *Executive Decision* (1996), *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), *The Peacemaker* (1997), *Enemy of the State* (1998), *The Siege* (1998).

ideological state apparatuses and engaging with Edward Said's critique of orientalism (2003), the analysis situates cinematic representations within 1990s geopolitical discourses, considering the documented collaborations between Hollywood and U.S. foreign policy institutions (Jenkins, 2012). In *Orientalism* (2003), Edward Said famously demonstrated that Western representations of the East were not reflections of reality, but rather instruments of European political domination. Said showed how the West "created" an image of the East as backward, exotic, and despotic to legitimize Western imperial authority as a "civilizing mission" for the East (Said, 2003: 172). In *Covering Islam* (1997), Said noted a shift in popular culture from exoticizing depictions of the East to representations increasingly centered on threat and violence. He argued that, by the 1990s, images of the Middle Eastern Muslims as fundamentalists and terrorists had become a recurring feature of orientalist discourse in Western popular culture. This discourse was shaped, in part, by U.S. geopolitical interests in the Middle East. These shifts in the depiction of the Eastern Other are important for understanding how a particular narrative of global threat was constructed and promoted through popular cinema in the decade before 9/11.

Here, "Eastern Other" is used as a discursive position rather than a fixed ethnic or geographic category. During the Cold War, the Eastern Other in popular cinema was primarily embodied by the Soviet/Communist adversary; as the Soviet enemy receded from the political landscape and particularly after the 1991 Gulf War it was increasingly reconfigured as an Arab or Muslim figure (Giglio, 2010; McAlister, 2001: 200; Shaheen, 2003). The study's analysis of *Independence Day* engages with both articulations to trace the portrayals of American superiority against an Eastern adversary, who may appear within Soviet/Communist- and Middle Eastern/Muslim-coded reconfigurations.

The study redefines what others see as cinematic prefiguration (Nelson, 2015) or anticipation (Žižek, 2002: 17) as aspects of ideological normalization. It argues that rather than predicting 9/11, pre-9/11 Hollywood cinema helped establish the cultural conditions through which geopolitical conflicts were imagined and circulated as disasters and catastrophes. As Jean-Michel Valantin (2005) also argued, this ideological function is central to an older Hollywood tradition of "national security cinema", which has legitimized militarization and the state's monopoly on violence from World War II to the present. Through an analysis of *Independence Day*, this study asks how that longstanding function was rearticulated in the post-Cold War and pre-9/11 era through the image of an orientalized alien enemy, as part of the normalization process of global threat ideology. In doing so, the study contributes to interdisciplinary debates in cultural studies, visual culture, and area studies concerning representation, ideology, and the political function of popular culture.

The study proceeds in three steps. First, it outlines the theoretical framework and discusses how ideology is represented and reproduced in Hollywood cinema. Next, the study introduces its methodological approach, drawing on Christian Metz's semiotics of cinema to analyze the narrative structure, character construction, and visual symbolism in *Independence Day*. Lastly, it provides an analysis of *Independence Day*, focusing on the legitimization of U.S. leadership, the representation of the alien Other, the universalization of American values, and the portrayal of large-scale destruction.

2. Ideology, Politics, and Enemies in Hollywood Narratives

Critical film theory has long viewed cinema as a medium through which dominant ideologies are reproduced and presented as reflections of reality (Comolli and Narboni, 2009: 689). As cultural and ideological products, films produce meanings about people or events and play a role in reshaping societies (Strinati, 1995: 168-169).

Within the Marxist tradition, ideology is understood as inseparable from culture and relations of power. Marx and Engels (1970: 64-65) famously argued that the ruling class controls not only material production but also the means of mental production, including the production of ideas, ensuring that its worldview appears as the common sense of the age. Althusser (1971: 136-137, 156) extended this argument by identifying cultural institutions as "ideological state apparatuses", through which dominant values and ideas are reproduced and presented as natural and universal. As a powerful cultural industry, Hollywood

functions within this framework. Even its seemingly entertaining and unpolitical narratives, such as action films, thrillers, comedies, and cartoons, carry ideological assumptions that normalize particular understandings of order, threat, and legitimacy that align with American interests (Hayward, 2000: 194).

Any film tells a story of its time (Upton, 2014: 1), and Hollywood storytelling has consistently reflected the shifting geopolitical anxieties of its era. For example, during World War II, American cinema portrayed Nazis and Japanese forces as the primary enemies, while depicting the Soviet Union as an ally (Dick, 2016: 1). However, with the onset of the Cold War, communists replaced fascists as the main antagonists (Monaco, 2000: 281). From the late 1940s through the 1980s, films framed the U.S.- Soviet conflict as a struggle between two civilizations as democracy versus authoritarianism, and capitalism versus communism (Upton, 2014: 7). Communists, who were sometimes depicted as including Cubans and Chinese in addition to Soviets, were frequently portrayed as emotionally cold, collectivist, and technologically dangerous. These portrayals often displayed fears of nuclear war and technology capable of annihilating humans (Upton, 2014: 10).

By the late 1970s and 1980s, alongside Cold War antagonisms, Arabs and Muslims had increasingly become cinematic “bad guys”, particularly in the context of the Iran Hostage Crisis of 1979-1980 and growing tensions in the Middle East (Giglio, 2010; Palmer, 1993; Secker, 2017). After the Cold War ended, this figure gained further prominence. Many 1990s thrillers and action films featured Arab terrorist groups seeking nuclear weapons or attacking U.S. institutions and cities (Nelson, 2015). These pre-9/11 cinematic portrayals were widely criticized for perpetuating prejudice through negative depictions of Arabs and Muslims (Giglio, 2010: 242; Shaheen, 2003).

Jack Shaheen (2003), in particular, demonstrated how Hollywood has vilified Muslim Arabs over the decades with degrading and dehumanizing portrayals of them as violent, uncivilized and religious fanatics. Scholars argued that the repetition of these images in films contributed to the normalization of prejudicial attitudes toward Arabs and helped generate public support for U.S.-led military and political interventions in the Middle East (Redmond, 2017; Sardar and Van Loon, 2000: 76; Shaheen, 2003; Secker and Alford 2017). More broadly, films featuring Arab characters often constructed the East as a geography of irrationality and barbarism in contrast to the culturally and morally superior West, altogether reinforcing the orientalist and racist prejudices (Aljahdali and Hakami, 2024; Moss, 2001; Shohat and Stam, 1994). In this sense, cinematic enemies were not random villains, but rather figures that reproduced the so-called geopolitical divisions.

Another question concerns the close relationship between Hollywood and state institutions. Scholars have documented collaborations between film producers, and security and intelligence agencies, such as the DoD, CIA and FBI. These collaborations included shaping Hollywood scripts and providing logistical support, such as the use of their personnel, buildings and technical equipment, in exchange for including favorable opinions and portrayals in films (Jenkins, 2012; Mirrlees, 2017; Nelson, 2015; Redmond, 2017; Shaw and Jenkins 2017). Clearly, these partnerships blur the line between Hollywood functioning as an entertainment industry and as a strategic communication platform that spreads narratives aligned with the U.S. foreign policy interests.

Ideology also operates at the level of narrative structure in films. Strinati (2000) points out that the classic “order-disorder-restoration” pattern prevalent in Hollywood films is ideological because it reinforces American and Western ideologies (Strinati, 2000: 29). In this structure, a stable social order is disrupted, often by terrorists, foreign powers, or alien invaders, and then restored through heroic intervention. The restored order is presented as desirable and legitimate, and it frequently aligns with liberal democracy and the capitalist lifestyle, and it is even portrayed as the “American dream” (Strinati, 2000: 27, 34). Furthermore, militarization is legitimized and framed as necessary for protecting Western values (Valantin, 2005). Overall, the literature shows that Hollywood has long played a role in shaping a sense of national identity and perception of enemies based on geopolitical conflicts (McLaughlin and Parry, 2006: 100).

Altogether, the conceptual perspectives introduced in this section form the analytical framework of the study. Hollywood cinema is approached as an ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 1971) that naturalizes

representations of a threatening Other based on orientalist notions (Said, 2003; Shaheen, 2003), which is organized through Hollywood's ideological narrative structure (Strinati, 2000). This threefold framework provides the conceptual basis for the semiotic reading of *Independence Day* undertaken in the following sections. Building on these insights, the analysis will demonstrate that even when the enemy appears in the seemingly apolitical form of an alien invader, the narrative remains deeply embedded in the geopolitical discourses of the time: it presents the alien invader as a displaced signifier of the post-Cold War Eastern Other, while restoring the world order under U.S. leadership as an ideological resolution.

3. Method

The study employs semiotic analysis to examine how *Independence Day* contributes to the ideological construction and normalization of global threats and American hegemony in the decade before 9/11. Rather than treating scenes of destruction in the film as a direct prefiguration of the 9/11 attacks, the analysis focuses on how recurring visual and narrative patterns – particularly the representations of American identity, the alien/Other, and large-scale destruction – contribute to the construction of a specific geopolitical imagination. These narrative elements are examined in relation to dominant post-Cold War ideologies.

Directed by Roland Emmerich and released in 1996, *Independence Day* was selected for analysis because of its central theme: a large-scale alien invasion of major U.S. cities with scenes of destruction resembling 9/11. Although there are other alien-invasion films produced by Hollywood before 2001, this film was chosen for three main reasons. First, the film was explicitly named by Žižek (2002: 15) as one of the pre-9/11 films associated with the 9/11 attacks, which constitute the pre-9/11 cinematic imagination that this study explores. Second, the film was released five years before the attacks, therefore, it can serve as evidence of pre-9/11 normalization, whereas films produced after 2001 necessarily reproduce the event rather than precede it. Finally, *Independence Day* was the highest-grossing film of 1996 (Box Office Mojo, 2026) and it reached a large audience. This fact is consistent with the study's focus on the normalization of global threat narratives, because for a narrative to contribute to the normalization process of an idea, it is important that it is widely viewed and recognized both nationally and internationally.

Although the film is framed as science fiction, it features spectacular scenes of aerial attacks, urban destruction, collapsing landmarks, civilian panic, and presidential intervention. Indeed, scholars noted that Hollywood studios have historically collaborated with U.S. defense institutions around fantasy and science fiction themes, favoring depoliticized antagonists such as extraterrestrials, monsters, or natural disasters, because this allows them to promote ideologically embedded messages without directly targeting any nation (Mirrlees, 2017; Secker and Alford, 2017). In this context, the alien invasion narrative is not politically neutral, but rather a replacement for contemporary geopolitical anxieties. The film's narrative structure – external attack, national unity, and military victory – creates the idea that a global threat can be managed through U.S.-centered intervention. The method of semiotics of cinema will be used to demonstrate this analysis below.

3.1. Semiotics of Cinema

The analysis draws on Christian Metz's (2009a; 2009b) semiotics of cinema, which builds on Ferdinand de Saussure's (1960) structuralist theory of language and Roland Barthes's (1980) approach to semiotics. Barthes adapted this approach to read the meanings of cultural objects as signs. According to this theory, any cultural object is a sign that carries and communicates meaning through two elements: the physical form (signifier) and the idea or concept (signified) that this form signifies in the real world (Hall, 1997: 31). In this approach, meaning is produced through signs that are organized in systems of difference (Hall, 1997: 32). This perspective established semiotics as a significant method for studying the production of identities in relations of difference, such as the binaries of Self and Other, East and West, which is also important for this study.

Metz (2009a; 2009b) rethought the concepts of the sign, the signifier and the signified in cinema. Instead of viewing cinema as a structured language system (*langue*) with a fixed grammar as Saussure did, Metz saw cinema as a language-like system (*langage*) in which shots are combined into sequences, or syntagmas, which are organized within the large syntagmatic category (*la grande syntagmatique*), to produce cinematic meaning (2009b: 65). Specifically, meaning emerges from the interaction between basic filmic units (image, sound/speech, montage, camera movement, framing) and narrative elements (characters, events, settings/landscapes) (Metz, 2009a: 66, 68). Metz identified basic filmic units as signifiers and narrative elements as signifieds, arguing that they should be considered together during film analysis (Metz, 2009b: 76).

Metz wrote that the arrangement of images into an understandable sequence through cutting and montage is the heart of the film's semiotic dimension (2009a: 69). Within this large syntagmatic category, he differentiated eight types of syntagma based on temporal and spatial relations between the shots composing them, ranging from a single uninterrupted shot to more complex multi-scene constructions (Harman, 2009). This study refers to two of these syntagma types in the analysis section, since the analysis focuses on the ideological work of the film rather than providing a segment-by-segment analysis. One type of syntagma is the alternating syntagma (*syntagme alterné*), which is a series of alternating shots of two or more different actions that take place in different locations but are understood by the viewer as happening simultaneously. The meaning here arises not from the individual actions, but from the relationship the editing establishes between them. The bracket syntagma (*syntagme en accolade*), by contrast, assembles a series of shots (e.g., different effects of war) associated with one another to illustrate a general idea without following a precise chronological or causal order (Harman, 2009: 80). Both configurations occur in *Independence Day*, particularly in the crisis and salvation sequences, and contribute to the film's ideological messages as will be shown in the analysis below.

Furthermore, Metz borrowed from Barthes (1980) the terms denotation and connotation to study the meanings produced by these syntagmatic organizations at two different levels. Denotation refers to basic materials of the film such as what is visibly or narratively portrayed, for example an alien spacecraft destroying a city. Connotation, on the other hand, concerns the cultural and ideological meanings produced through cinematic elements such as composition, scale, lighting, framing, and camera movements (Metz, 2009a: 67). Denotation is studied before connotation, which means that the presentation of the plot should be investigated before its symbolic or ideological meaning (Harman, 2009: 79). What distinguishes Metz's approach from Barthes is that he relocated these terms within cinema's own codes. In doing so, he suggested that connotation is not produced in a single isolated frame as in Barthes's analysis of photography, rather it is produced through the temporal and syntagmatic relations between shots and sequences described above.

Also importantly, Metz suggested that semiotic analysis interprets films from the perspective of spectators rather than filmmakers (2009a: 69). Film reading is an interpretive process not limited to one meaning, but open to multiple, contested interpretations (Hall, 1997: 9). Accordingly, the interpretation of *Independence Day* here does not offer a final reading of the film. Rather, it provides a historically situated reading informed by scholarship on ideology, orientalism, and Hollywood's geopolitical imaginaries.

3.2. Method of Analysis

This study approaches the film as a cultural text that conveys ideological meanings through its narrative structure and visual organization. The analysis focuses on representations of American identity (particularly presidential authority and military power), the alien Other, and spectacular destruction. It pays attention to how meaning is produced through differences and oppositions – Self/Other, order/chaos, and civilization/barbarism – and how these reinforce broader ideological frameworks. By tracing how threat is narrated, visualized, and resolved through U.S.-led military intervention, the analysis shows how the film portrays global threat as an ongoing yet solvable issue under a unipolar world order.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis identifies the following four interrelated themes in Independence Day: i) the legitimization of U.S. leadership and military power, ii) the portrayal of aliens as the “Eastern Other”, iii) the promotion of American values and interests as universal, and iv) the normalization of the global threat through images of fear and destruction.

4.1. The Legitimization of United States Leadership and Military Power

The film follows a classic order-disorder-restoration narrative structure (Strinati, 2000), moving from order to disruption and ultimately back to order. It begins on an ordinary summer day on July 2 and shows the main characters in moments of happiness with their families. This normalcy is suddenly interrupted by the arrival of alien spacecrafts that begin attacking major cities. After two days of conflict, the America-led fighters defeated the alien invaders and restore global order.

The opening sequence establishes the ideological tone of the narrative from the beginning. The first image shown to the audience is the U.S. flag planted on the moon, accompanied by the famous plaque that reads: “Here men from the planet Earth first set foot upon the moon, July 1969, A.D. We came in peace for all mankind.” This wording is important because although it was a U.S. achievement, it is presented as a contribution to all of humanity. Starting from this scene, the film symbolically positions the United States as a representative of humanity itself.

This message is reinforced in the following scenes. As a space lab detects a signal from the moon, the soundtrack plays the line, “it’s the end of the world as we know it”, foreshadowing the coming disruption. Right after, the U.S. President is introduced in a domestic setting as a caring husband and father, speaking to his wife on the phone while his daughter sleeps beside him. We learn he is the president when the Secretary of Defense informs him of the emerging threat. In Metz’s terms, this cut from the scientific detection of the signal to the President’s private life constitutes an alternating syntagma. Alternating shots of two different actions and spaces are constructed simultaneously, linking the emerging threat to the nation’s future commander-in-chief before the crisis becomes publicly known. But as he is positioned as the central authority responsible for responding to the crisis, the sequence also humanizes the president by showing him as a loving father.

Symbolic imagery further reinforces the sense that what is under threat is not merely territory but the ideological foundations of the United States. Dramatic music intensifies the atmosphere as the camera shows the Statue of Liberty and focuses on the inscription on the tablet: “July 4, MDCCLXXVI”. This evokes the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the ideals of freedom and sovereignty that it represents. In this context, the alien attack appears not just an invasion, but an assault on the values that the U.S. claims to represent.

Alien invasion starts as spacecrafts position themselves above the world cities. The film shows selected global locations rather than random set of places and these locations are not neutral choices. The first news reports mention sightings over Iraqi airspace and the Persian Gulf, the third one is tracked off the Californian coastline, and the fourth spacecraft approaches the Russian capital. This points to an alternating syntagma, as news reporters cut between geographically dispersed but temporally simultaneous sightings and links them to each other for a reason. During the Cold War and the Gulf War, these regions occupied central positions in the U.S. foreign policy and were frequently represented as geopolitical adversaries. By placing these sites alongside the U.S. cities under attack, the film constructs a narrative which depicts former geopolitical rivals as now equally vulnerable against an extraterrestrial power and all are implicitly dependent on the U.S. leadership. Therefore, this syntagmatic juxtaposition is important as it creates an ideological association between former Cold War and Gulf War rivals and the U.S., for the single shot of any city would not produce the same connotative meaning.

Previous studies reported a familiar pattern in post-Cold War Hollywood narratives which involved portraying the U.S. as the only actor capable of responding effectively to global threats (Editor’s

Introduction 2017). In such stories, other nations appear unable to manage the crisis without U.S. coordination and intervention, which would mostly occur in the study as an American hero coming out and defeating the enemy. *Independence Day* follows this tradition by presenting the U.S. – particularly the presidency and the military – as the organizing center of the global response. Within this narrative logic, the U.S. leadership is presented both necessary and legitimate in the face of the universal threat, which also fits with the ideology of a unipolar world order following the Cold War.

The film complicates this narrative through a failed counterattack on July 3. America launches a large-scale attack with warplanes but fails against the technologically superior alien ships. This failure is significant because it exposes American vulnerability and this vulnerability in the narrative carries an ideological function. The narrative demonstrates the limits of existing military capacity, to create a justification for the development and deployment of more advanced technological power, even nuclear weapons by the U.S.

The President, who is a fighter pilot that fought in the Gulf War, expresses this vulnerability against a new threat when he recalls the Gulf War and says: “In the Gulf War, we knew what we had to do...”, and falls silent. This line establishes a connection between the alien invasion and earlier military conflicts while highlighting the exceptional nature of the new threat. The new enemy is technologically superior, unknown, and seemingly unstoppable. The film uses this uncertainty and desperation to legitimize the possession and use of extraordinary military measures, including nuclear weapons. Ultimately, the nuclear weapon is not used, but victory is achieved through the U.S. President’s military vision and the U.S. army’s technological capacity. In these ways, the film resolves the crisis by reaffirming the legitimacy of the U.S. military power, presenting it as a force operating not only for national interests but for the protection of humanity as a whole.

4.2. The Portrayal of Aliens as Eastern Other

Although the film depicts America’s geopolitical enemies as victims of the alien attack, the aliens themselves reproduce many features associated with the earlier cinematic representations of foreign enemies. In this sense, the alien figure appears as a displaced version of the Eastern Other that had previously appeared in films featuring Cold War and Middle Eastern conflicts. Thus, this displacement operates through two registers rather than one uniform image.

Against the alien threat, the film shows Middle Eastern and Asian spectators at several points. They are depicted through reductionist orientalist signifiers, such as desert and tents, and shown watching and celebrating the U.S.-led counterattack. In Metz’s terms, these brief shots of reactions form a bracket syntagma. These scenes do not occur in the same place but together they evoke a single idea which is “the whole world” is a spectator and beneficiary of U.S.-led salvation. This also brings together Said’s definition of the two images of the Oriental Other (2003, 1997) into the picture: the passive colonial subject waiting to be rescued by the “white man”, and the dangerous Middle Eastern fanatic. The film assigns the first image to human spectators and the second to the aliens.

Another moment when the film associates aliens with the Eastern Other, this time using Soviet-oriented codes, is when the President explains the pattern of the alien attacks: “NATO and Western Allied installations were the first to be taken out. Then we were hit. They knew exactly where and how to hit us.” The lines suggest that the international institutions representing the Western coalition against the Soviet-led Eastern bloc were the targets and the enemy possesses detailed strategic knowledge of Western military infrastructure. The implication is that the traditional technological and strategic superiority of the West can no longer be taken for granted.

This constructed sense of vulnerability once again appears with ideological implications. If Western military dominance is threatened, then the global order that depends on that dominance is also at risk. By presenting the alien invasion as a challenge to Western power, the film frames the conflict as a universal threat to the stability of the entire world system. Thus, this depiction both constructs a similarity between the aliens and the old Soviet threat during the Cold War and presents America’s world leadership as inevitable.

This is not a shift to a different or competing context; rather, it is the second articulation of the “Eastern Other” position outlined in the Introduction – first Soviet-coded and now Middle Eastern-coded. In the following scenes, the portrayals of aliens show similarities with Hollywood’s typical portrayals of Middle Eastern Other. The encounter between the President and a captured alien reinforces the moral opposition between the two sides. The President attempts to communicate peacefully, asking whether “coexistence” is possible, the alien responds negatively. The President asks what they want, the alien responds with a single word: “Die.” The communication is brief but symbolically loaded. The human character represents diplomacy, rationality, and negotiation, while the alien embodies pure hostility. Its violence appears irrational and absolute, leaving no possibility for dialogue. Following the dialogue, the alien takes control of the President’s mind establishing telepathy, and so the President sees their plans: “I saw what they’re planning to do. They’re like locusts. They’re moving from planet to planet... their whole civilization... After they’ve consumed every natural resource, they move on. And we’re next”. The choice of the word civilization is important because it frames the conflict between humans and aliens as a civilizational conflict, echoing Huntington’s (1993, 1996) so-called East-West conflict. The metaphor of locust is used to emphasize destruction and greed, making sure that coexistence is impossible. Within this framework, the conflict becomes a moral struggle between a civilized humanity and an uncontrollable destructive force. So, the President decides to “nuke them”, which possibly means the end of the world, but also the only solution for the survival of the good.

As mentioned in previous studies (Aljahdali and Hakami, 2024; Shaheen, 2003), in earlier Hollywood narratives, Arab or Middle Eastern villains were frequently depicted as barbaric and violent but not necessarily technologically superior. In *Independence Day*, however, the alien enemy combines brutality with advanced technological power. This combination increases the sense of danger and once again reproduces the idea that only an equally advanced and organized military intervention, represented by the United States, can respond effectively and act as a safeguard for humanity.

4.3. Portraying American Values and Interests as Universal

The ideological climax of the film occurs on July 4, when the United States prepares a coordinated global counterattack. Communication with allied forces around the world is formed using Morse code, and military units from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia report back their support. This rapid sequence of reports from dispersed locations again forms a bracket syntagma, because in these brief, descriptive scenes no individual location is given a narrative weight, but they stand in for “the whole world”. The following scene, however, focuses on an individual voice that highlights a key theme of the film: American values as common values.

Before the attack begins, the President addresses the fighter pilots with a motivating speech, which is emotionally and ideologically the core of the film. In the speech, the meaning of the U.S. Independence Day is expanded to represent the independence of all humanity:

Mankind [sic]... 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 interest. Perhaps it’s faith that today is the 4th of July. And 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, to exist. And should we win the day, the 4th 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 will not banish without a fight! We’re going to live on. We’re going to survive. Today, we celebrate our Independence Day!

The President declares that July 4 will no longer be remembered simply as an American holiday but as the day when humanity united to defend its right to exist. Through this rhetorical move, American national symbols that July 4 represents, such as democracy, freedom and individual rights, are transformed into universal symbols. The fight for American independence becomes a fight for the survival of humanity. In this way, the speech actually collapses the distinctions between American interests and global interests and American security and global security. It suggests that the U.S. defense is equivalent to the defense of the

world itself and celebrates American interests as hallowed all around the world (King, 2000: 20). This is an obvious example of ideology: a particular national interest is presented as legitimate, universal and common sense.

Moreover, the scene reinforces the importance of the U.S. political authority. During this time of global crisis, the main actor protecting the world is not an international organization such as NATO or the United Nations but rather the U.S. presidency. The U.S. appears as the world's natural leader. Thus, although the speech emphasizes unity, it is unity under the U.S. leadership. This hierarchy is not only asserted but also implemented in the film. The narrative reduces the dispersed global voices mentioned above (bracket syntagma) and places them under the authority of a single figure who speaks on their behalf. This is how the scene's hegemonic claim is put into practice.

4.4. The Normalization of the Global Threat Through Images of Fear and Destruction

Although *Independence Day* was produced five years before the 9/11 attacks, its visual language contains scenes that strongly resemble the images of urban destruction following the attacks. In the film, alien spacecraft settles above cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Washington before attacking and destroying them. The destruction of iconic buildings such as the White House, the Empire State Building, and the Statue of Liberty creates an atmosphere of shock and vulnerability, which works like Metz's bracket syntagma. These are linked images of destruction across different cities that evoke the same sign: a deadly attack on American power, resulting in its downfall.

These scenes of destruction are significant not only for their visual spectacle but also because they are the main reason why the film was compared to 9/11. Each of these structures is a symbolic target representing a dimension of American national identity, which are political authority, economic power, and democratic ideals. Thus, their destruction represents an attack on the global order associated with American power.

It is equally important that the narrative frames the attacks as sudden and unexpected. The alien invasion occurs without warning while ordinary civilians are going about their daily lives. In the American context, a sudden, unexpected and devastating threats are often compared to the Pearl Harbor attacks of 1941, and when the 9/11 attacks occurred unpredictably, they were also compared to the fear of a "new Pearl Harbor" (Winfield et al., 2010). The shock of the film's alien violence creates a sense of existential threat and a powerful emotional response, evoking the memories of previous attacks in American history.

When the President learns about the aliens' plan to destroy humanity, he decides to use nuclear weapons. The fear of annihilation and the sense of vulnerability justify the use of such extreme defensive measures and reinforce the legitimacy of large-scale military intervention. This also reminds us of the discussions about how representing the foreign enemy as evil was used to justify U.S. interventions in the Middle East (Shaheen, 2003). In this way, the film contributes to the construction of images of destruction prior to 9/11.

Therefore, *Independence Day* is a good example to observe how Hollywood narratives shaped the cultural imagination of large-scale catastrophe. Through scenarios of sudden attacks and national vulnerability (although it results in heroic American victory), the film normalizes the idea of a global threat in late twentieth century popular culture. Altogether, the syntagmatic organization of dispersed or simultaneous destruction, the displacement of the figure of the Eastern Other with the alien, and the collapse of American values into a universal interest demonstrate how ideology, orientalist notions, and the order-disorder-restoration narrative structure operate within the film's form and content. This ideologically rich cinematic repertoire presents audiences a visual and cultural imagery that made the events of 9/11 seem familiar when they occurred.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how the 1990s Hollywood film *Independence Day* contributed to the ideological construction and normalization of the concept of a global threat, prior to the events of 9/11. The analysis reveals that the film draws heavily on the historical East-West dichotomy, reproducing ideological notions

from colonial discourse and the Cold War. By contrasting a rational, civilized, technologically capable American/Western self with an irrational, destructive alien Other, the film rearticulates the older geopolitical binaries and adversaries in a new, depoliticized form. In this sense, the alien figure operates as a reflection of earlier representations of the Eastern Other, enabling the narrative to depict existing ideological tensions without directly naming contemporary political actors. For example, the study revealed moments in the film when alien attacks were compared to America's conflicts with the Soviet Union and Middle Eastern countries. This indicates that the alien figure replaced the Eastern Other.

At the same time, the film justifies the ideologies and security politics of a unipolar world order by portraying America as fighting for universal freedom and as the world's natural savior and leader. By aligning American interests with the survival of humanity, the film universalizes America's enemies and legitimizes its military intervention as a universal obligation rather than a matter of national policy. Within this framework, the technological superiority – particularly military and nuclear capability – is subtly justified as a necessity for maintaining global order on the condition that it remains under U.S. control.

Through its visual and narrative structure, the film normalizes the idea of a large-scale, sudden, and catastrophic attack. The unexpected invasion and destruction of iconic buildings contribute to a cultural environment in which such scenarios become familiar and imaginable. Thus, *Independence Day* does not predict a specific historical event, such as 9/11, but rather participates in shaping the public's broader imagination of global threats, in line with the ideological priorities manifested through cinema, which Comolli and Narboni (2009) suggested as the main function of the cinema.

In conclusion, this study contributes to discussions on representation, ideology, politics and cinema by demonstrating how popular cinema reflects and constructs specific perceptions of threat. By examining a pre-9/11 cultural product, the study challenged the views that the familiarity of the 9/11 attacks was a form of cinematic foresight (Žižek, 2002) or prefiguration (Nelson, 2015). Instead, it demonstrated that the global threat imagined and normalized within a widely circulated Hollywood narrative was a reconfiguration of existing dominant ideologies.

Finally, the study has some limitations. First, it focuses on a single film and does not aim to make generalizable claims about all 1990s Hollywood productions. In addition, any film analysis is inherently interpretive, so different conclusions are always possible. Nevertheless, consistent with previous literature, the study illustrates how Hollywood cinema functions as a cultural and ideological apparatus that reproduces and normalizes assumptions about threat, security, and global order. By embedding these assumptions within popular narratives, films make particular political visions appear natural, inevitable, and widely shared.

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