Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

English Faculty Research and Publications   English, Department of

10-1-2014

"I'd Rather Be in Afghanistan": Antinomies of *Battle: Los Angeles*

Gerry Canavan

Marquette University, gerard.canavan@marquette.edu

"I'd Rather Be in Afghanistan": Antinomies of *Battle: Los Angeles*

Gerry Canavan

This article reads Battle: Los Angeles *(2011) against the grain to argue that the film possesses an antiwar undertow running unexpectedly counter to its surface-level pro-military politics. The article uses the antinomy structuring* Battle: Los Angeles *as the opportunity to explore the pro- and anti-war politics of science fiction alien invasion film more generally, as well as consider the role of cooperation with the military in Hollywood blockbusters. The article closes with a Jamesonian reading of "the army": as a kind of utopia as registered by mainstream cultural texts like* Battle: Los Angeles.

Introduction

"*B*attle: Los Angeles,*"* begins Roger Ebert's *Chicago Sun-Times* review of the film, "is noisy, violent, ugly, and stupid. Its manufacture is a reflection of appalling cynicism on the part of its makers, who don't even try to make it more than senseless chaos. Here's a science-fiction film that's an insult to the words 'science' and 'fiction,' and the hyphen in between them."

"When I think of the elegant construction of something like *Gunfight at the OK Corral*," Ebert goes on, "I want to rend the hair from my head and weep bitter tears of despair. Generations of filmmakers devoted their lives to perfecting techniques that a director like Jonathan Liebesman is either ignorant of, or indifferent to. Yet he is given millions of dollars to produce this assault on the attention span of a generation." One-half star.[1]

Battle: Los Angeles debuted to "mixed" critical reactions ranging from full-on Ebertian rage to sleepy apathy in March 2011.[2] The film depicts a devastating simultaneous attack on the world's major coastal cities by a previously unknown extraterrestrial force, which the film hints is interested in our planet's ample reserves of "liquid water"; over the course of the film's nearly real-time 116 minutes, the aliens completely overrun the defenses of every military on the planet until a single Marine unit, trapped behind the enemy's line of advance near Los Angeles, is able to discover the aliens' weaknesses and thereby turn the tide of battle.[3] The film ends—and here I spoil nothing but the most reliable conventions of the alien-invasion subgenre of science fiction—with Los Angeles saved but the war to save Earth only just begun.

A denunciation of the film on the level of composition more or less writes itself. What

Ebert calls "noisy, violent, ugly, and stupid" is a directorial style that simultaneously seeks to mime the visual markers of documentary and pseudo-documentary filmmaking, new media "found footage" like that found on YouTube, and first-person video-game shooters[4] alongside traditional action movie spectacle; the result is indeed a visually incoherent soup, filled with explosions and copious shouting presented in lieu of plot and character development. Dark, dusty, and tightly shot to disguise the fact that this is tax-friendly Shreveport, Louisiana, standing in for Los Angeles, the film's primary narrative investment seems to be in the fantasy of its own inevitable sequelization, with the ambition for an endless transmedia series of *Battle: New York; Battle: Paris; Battle: Tokyo,* and so on almost palpable on the part of the studio.[5]

On the surface, the film fares little better on the level of its politics; once could undoubtedly craft a passable critique of the film's propagandistic, pro-military stance simply on the basis of the poster alone. Focalized through a coalition of indefatigable soldier-heroes who are distinguishable from each other almost exclusively on the basis of their ethnic identities, the film received extensive technical support from the military, ranging from boot camp for its actors to special weapons training for its star (the "Grizzled White Guy" familiar to the war movie genre, played here by Aaron Eckhart) to supervision from military technical advisors on set.[6] But my ambition in this article is to resist this snap political judgment, or, at least, to reject it as the last and only word on the film*,* and explore instead the antiwar undertow I find running unexpectedly counter to its "obvious" pro-military politics. To what extent might films like *Battle: Los Angeles* contain complexities and contradictions that might exceed a purely symptomatic reading of these texts? To what extent might such texts speak back *against* the military-industrial-entertainment complex that helps produce and popularize them? My interest here is not to claim that the film "really" has one politics or the other; rather, I find the film exemplifies the philosophical structure of the *antinomy,* the stalled dialectic, the hopeless contradiction. I therefore argue that alongside the reading of the film that focuses on its overtly propagandistic, pro-military themes we must, against-the-grain, simultaneously recognize an *anti*-imperial politics of resistance that is implicit in the film's plot and imagery—and thereby consider the ways in which cooperation between the military and entertainment media complexes always remains fragmentary and incomplete, unable to fully or uncomplicatedly achieve the propagandistic aims it sets out for itself.

Kill Anything That's Not Human

As is typical of such films, the necessity of maximum violence is never put into question in *Battle: Los Angeles*, even for a moment—the moment of failure that tends to spark the plot in such films is always rather an initial *flinching* from commitment to total extermination (a momentary weakness that is easily corrected). Alien invasion films like *Battle: Los Angeles,* like the closely related subgenres of zombie or robot cinema, typically deploy the "otherness" of the alien to license unrestrained genocidal fantasy; here, the terms of this fantasy are made explicit in the film's early declaration of a free-fire zone in which our heroes

are authorized to "kill anything that's not human." The effect is not unlike Vivian Sobchack's reading of the ecstasy of special-effect space battles in such films as *Star Wars* and *The Last Starfighter:* "Nonphotographic and thus not existentially indexical, they don't count. They just compute, become the source of 'high scores' that elevate mortality into the astronomical abstraction of a truly new metaphyics."[7] Within the terms of the films such unflinching total violence on the part of the soldiers is always unquestionably justified: in *Battle: Los Angeles,* for instance, the aliens strike first and without warning, and as enemies are absolutely implacable, even omnicidal, with weapons surgically attached to their bodies. Any possibility of communication, much less détente, is utterly irrelevant to the plot; the film's lone gesture in this direction is put in the mouth of a naïve and terrified child. The closest we get to encountering the alien as a possible "person" (much less a potential friend) is in a lengthy torture sequence in which an injured alien is taken captive and brutally dissected (while still living), in order to determine the species's biological weak spots. On every level the alien is presented as a perfect enemy, without any redeeming features whatsoever; little surprise that the film repeatedly links this irredeemability with the memory of 9/11, including in its final shot of helicopters heading towards burning skyscrapers.

Likewise, reflecting post-9/11 ideological commitments to the figure of the soldier-as-superhero, our heroes' total dedication to a massive war effort that had begun only a few hours before knows no possible rest. Near the end of the film, after finally being picked up from the free-fire zone—having fulfilled the terms of their assignment, rescued the civilians, and gained valuable intelligence against the enemy—the surviving Marines all immediately leap out of the rescue chopper to return to the combat zone because they know they are the only ones in the area who can complete a necessary mission. Similarly, in the film's final minutes, at the new base camp, having been ordered to take some much-needed rest after having literally saved all of humanity, they instead begin rearming themselves *again* to grab the next chopper and head back into the fray. A running motto of the characters throughout the film is the line "Retreat? Hell!", a reference to Marine officer Lloyd W. Williams's alleged refusal to retreat on the grounds that "Hell, we just got here."[8]

We can quite easily see how *Battle: Los Angeles* aligns with what James Der Derian calls in his book *Virtuous War* the "military-industrial-media-entertainment network," or MIME-NET: the long-standing nexus of cooperation and co-evolution between the military, the defense industry, the news media, and Hollywood.[9] We might only think of the silent movie *Wings* (1927), which won the first Academy Award for Best Picture in part through unprecedented support from the U.S. military—an estimated $16 million taxpayer gift of vehicles, extras, explosives, and other assets that dwarfed the film's nominal $2 million budget.[10] Since then the history of Hollywood war cinema has been a history of close cooperation with the U.S. military, in which the military has offered subsidized support and consultation in exchange for creative control, as in such films as *Top Gun* (1986)—which famously led to a 500% increase in Navy recruitment, in part through Navy recruiters actively setting up booths outside theaters[11]—or withdrawn such offers of support when objecting to a film's narrative or political content (as with 1995's *Crimson Tide* and 2008's *The Hurt Locker,* also a Best Picture winner).

Der Derian would cast this tight linkage all the way back to the very origins of film it-self, "to the nineteenth century, when chemists experimenting with the same nitrocelluloids found in explosives created new emulsions that could fix images on film."[12] In the contem-porary moment, Der Derian argues, "what is qualitatively new is the power of the MIME-NET to seamlessly merge the production, representation, and execution of war" such that the military and entertainment complexes have become the same thing.[13] Examples of this hyperextended merger are everywhere we might look: recall, for instance, the controversy surrounding 2012's openly propagandistic Oscar nominees *Argo* and *Zero Dark Thirty,* cul-minating in Michelle Obama giving out the Best Picture award to *Zero Dark Thirty* while flanked by soldiers.[14] We might think, alternatively, of 2011's *X-Men: First Class* (a period piece set amid the Cuban Missile Crisis that was the first film to be *directly* sponsored by the U.S. Army). Here the 2000s cinematic valorization of the "military superhero" actually extends outside the film; *X-Men: First Class* was accompanied by both television and in-theater advertising spots that explicitly attempted to position the potential army recruit as the real-world analogue to the film's mutant superheroes.[15]

A recent Air Force recruitment campaign makes much the same pitch, using imagery virtually indistinguishable from popular science fiction cinema to lionize the military as fu-turistic first-responders before finally declaring "It's *not* science fiction; it's what we do every day."[16] The inevitable reference here is *America's Army,* a first-person-shooter video game released by the U.S. Army as a recruitment tool, one particularly vivid example of how this synthesis has begun to work. Immersive MIME-NET spectacles like *America's Army,* or like *Battle: Los Angeles'*s own ludic adaptation, write Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter, *"*reassert, rehearse, and reinforce Empire's twin vital subjectivities of worker-consumer and solder-citizen … *American's Army* is but one among an arsenal of simulators that the militarized states of capital—preeminately the United States—depend on to protect their power and use to promote, prepare, and preemptively practice deadly opera-tions in computerized battlespace."[17] The same could be said of the many co-produced film productions that train audiences not only to see themselves in warzones, but to "see" the world as though they are always already soldiers; recall again the many first-person-perspective shots in *Battle: Los Angeles* that replace the usual camera-eye with military bin-oculars, or with the line of sight of the rifle-scope.[18]

Antonin Scalia's 2007 citation of the Fox television series *24* as "evidence" during a Su-preme Court debate on torture[19] shows that the astounding extent to which this ideological relationship has become multi-directional, with each MIME-NET party influencing the oth-ers. As Paul Boyer has put it: "Mass-culture fantasies and government weapons progammes appear to be interwoven in complex ways. The fantasies lay the psychic groundwork for the weapons programmes; the weapons programmes in turn stimulate new fantasies."[20] As Paul Virilio shows in his prescient 1984 study *War and Cinema,* this configuration has a long history that is older than cinema, older than even industrialization itself. Virilio calls our attention to the simultaneous invention of the handheld camera alongside the machine gun, as well as to the importance of seeing and visuality in aerial photography and satellite sur-veillance more generally; a passage on page 4 of the book anticipates the panopticon of to-

day's unmanned aerial drones (which are at the center of the aliens' air superiority in *Battle: Los Angeles:*

> A war of pictures and sounds is replacing the war of objects (projectiles and missiles. In a technicians' version of an all-seeing Divinity, ever ruling out accident and surprise, the drive is on for a general system of illumination that will allow everything to be seen and known, at every moment and in every place.

The violence that is at the heart of this fantasy of all-seeing mastery is never in doubt: "One you can see the target," Virilio quotes former U.S. Undersecretary of State W.J. Perry, "you can expect to destroy it."[21]

Hints of What We Might Become

So far I have offered up a reading of *Battle: Los Angeles* that places it firmly in a position of cultural affirmation: blurring the line between entertainment and propaganda, naively reproducing the fetishization of the military that has permeated so much of American society in the last decade of global war. Now I want to point us in the other direction, uncovering the constitutive contradictions in the internal logic of the film that push *Battle: Los Angeles* into the realm of resistance to empire (almost against its own desires).

The narrative template for *Battle: Los Angeles* (as for nearly all alien invasion stories published in science fiction for over a hundred years) is H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1898), which depicts a sudden attack on England by Martian imperialists. Specifically, *War of the Worlds* reimagines England not as the perpetrator of imperial resource war but as its victim, in the service of a critique of England's own brutal imperial practices. Wells's Martians are not simply generic alien others; they are *colonizers*. From the novel's first sentence Wells attributes to the Martians the precise racial and cultural superiority that the British attributed to themselves. The Martians possess "intelligences greater than man's"; humanity is "scrutinized and studied" "keenly and closely" as if by an expeditionary force looking to make contact with a heretofore uncontacted tribe. From the Martian perspective, humanity's day-to-day life is no more sophisticated or worthy of consideration than "the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water." The Darwinian ladder of evolutionary progress is here reimagined; the Martians have "minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish." The Martians derive their superiority from a different sort of temporal shift; they originate in the future. Because the "nebular hypothesis" (the book explains) holds that the outer planets formed first, Mars must therefore be significantly older than the Earth, with life consequently appearing on that planet long before it appeared here.[22] The Martians, in this respect, represent not only a competitor to humanity, but also

the *future* of humanity—humanity (and especially European humanity) perfected, at the apex of its powers. In his reading of *War of the Worlds* John Rieder calls special attention to the Martians' cyborgian employment of and reliance on machines, noting the extent to which (as we will see) the Martians' "combination of prosthetic supplementation and organic atrophy" would be imitated in subsequent prognostications of the future of man.[23]

In the opening chapter, Wells quickly lays out the reasons for the Martian invasion (resource scarcity) and their general attitude towards human life (which they view as subhuman/subMartian) before making a surprising turn: "And before we judge [the Martians] too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy," Wells pointedly asked, "as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?"[24] Later, the early "strange horror" of the first racial encounter with the Martian—"vital, intense, inhuman, crippled and monstrous," the Martians are drooling, tentacled and have "one might say, a face"[25]—is inevitably replaced by mid-novel with the recognition that the Martians descend "from beings not unlike ourselves."[26]

In *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* John Rieder demonstrates at length that the colonial discourse of superior and inferior races—what he, borrowing from Laura Mulvey, calls "the colonial gaze," which "distributes knowledge and power to the subject who looks, while denying or minimizing access to power for its object, the one looked at"[27]—is a highly unstable positionality that is under constant threat of polar inversion. In an alternate history, or in some future time, the colonizer knows he could well be the colonized. What happens in the *War of the Worlds* template, then, is nothing less than European civilization getting a taste of its own medicine—the exterminative logic of the colonial sphere coming back home to the metropole. As Rieder succinctly summarizes the novel's novels importance as a document of both science fiction and empire:

> For the ultimate nightmare driving the arms races of modernity, dramatized in an invasion fantasy like H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898), is the industrial and imperial core's fear of being turned into the pre-industrial and colonised periphery, and so, according to the temporal logic of the ideology of progress, of being subjugated as inevitably as the future supersedes the past.[28]

The ultimate horror of *War of the Worlds* is thus the horror of dedifferentiation: the erasure of the privileges of race, class, and nationality that normally make certain kinds of lives valuable and others not. Patricia Kerslake, in her reading of the novel, likewise suggests that the true monstrosity of the Martians may in fact be the terror generated by "the hint of what we might become": "Wells's experiment suggests that humankind is evolving into a species

of technological murderers who would do well to experience a reversal of conditions." In this respect the true horror of *War of the Worlds*—and its utopian core—is precisely the shock of self-recognition.[29]

The science fictional tradition that has followed from Wells—of which *Battle: Los Angeles* is only a particularly recent example—engages the violence at the heart of imperialist expansion precisely by replicating it, over and over, in metaphorical forms that *both* support *and* oppose the imagined racial/imperial hierarchy on which the entire project depends (and sometimes, as in *Battle: Los Angeles*, support and invert at the same time). To begin again, then, let us re-summarize the film from this oppositional, anti-imperial perspective: *Battle: Los Angeles* depicts a devastating simultaneous attack on the world's major coastal cities by a previously unknown extraterrestrial force, which the film hints is interested in our planet's ample reserves of "liquid water." The aliens are, we are told by in-universe experts on diegetic 24-hour news reports, *colonizers,* who require liquid water to power their technology; their attacks are preemptive and maximally brutal because "when you invade a place for its resources, you wipe out its indigenous pollution, that is the rules of any colonization." Their inexorable advance pushes American soldiers back and back until the forward operating base of the resistance is located in the (Mojave) Desert; our soldier heroes, trapped behind the line of advance, become guerillas, simultaneously performing house-by-house searches for surviving civilians and engaging in hit-and-fade tactics against a superior military force with total mastery of the air.

In an early encounter with the aliens, crucially, the soldiers themselves recognize this commonality between the aliens' militarism and U.S. militarism, *our* militarism, intuitively and immediately. On a rooftop, keeping watch on a group of aliens through a rifle scope, one of our protagonists asks another: "You think those things get scared too? They're probably just like us, grunts that get told to go fight." Most of our heroes, after all, have themselves just come back from tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and are currently awaiting yet another redeployment, where their ultimate mission was to secure the acquisition and flows of another particularly valuable liquid, oil; Aaron Eckhart's character, our principal protagonist, begins the movie by retiring from active service, having lost his taste for war after losing most of his squad in a disastrous engagement in Iraq. The look of the film is inspired not just by *any* YouTube video, but specifically by video of U.S. soldiers fighting in the streets of Fallujah; the dust kicked up to keep us from noticing that this Los Angeles is really Louisiana has the secondary function of making Shreveport look like a city in the Middle East, while the iconography of soldiers moving slowly in formation through an abandoned city evokes nothing so much as Baghdad or Kabul. From scene to scene, the characters switch fluidly between the role of U.S. soldier and insurgent, acting sometimes as the one, sometimes as the other. Indeed, as the title of this article notes, at one point one of the characters admits that instead of fighting aliens in Los Angeles, "Shit, I'd rather be in Afghanistan"— but, of course, on the level of structuring allegory, Afghanistan is precisely where they already are, playing both parts at once.

The soldiers themselves have all been badly scarred by their repeated tours and the loss of many beloved comrades—and indeed the double false ending in which our indefatigable

heroes twice leap back into battle without having rested can be reframed, from this perspective, as an all-smiles figuration of the repeated tours of duty of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, in which the same troops were rotated into battle zones again and again and again and again. The film itself seems to valorize what in another context would surely be diagnosed as a unit-wide case of post-traumatic stress disorder—the inability to stop fighting even when you've earned the right, when you've *been ordered,* to rest.

Little wonder that the earliest set pieces in the film hinge on the inability to tell "friendlies" from "unfriendlies": to the extent that the aliens start to look a lot like "us," "we" start to look a lot like the people who live in places America attacks, invades, and occupies. Even the alien's air superiority—immediately and totally decimating our air force before omnipotently zeroing in on individual soldiers tracked through radio-wave transmission—derives from a direct parallel of cutting edge U.S. military technology, which the Marines in the film discover to their extreme dismay. Alongside everything else the drones offer the aliens, they offer a new version of the precise relationship between superhuman visuality and military violence that Paul Virilio lays out in *War and Cinema:* the drones can trace our infrared signals, be it from radios to cell phones. The marines must go completely silent to become invisible and thus survive. To do so the marines use tactics that could have been derived from a recently discovered al Qaeda document on evading drones, in order to blind their all-seeing eyes:

2. Using devices that broadcast frequencies or pack of frequencies to disconnect the contacts and confuse the frequencies used to control the drone.
4. Placing a group of skilled snipers to hunt the drone, especially the reconnaissance ones because they fly low, about six kilometers or less.
6. Jamming of and confusing of electronic communication using old equipment and keeping them 24-hour running because of their strong frequencies and it is possible using simple ideas of deception of equipment to attract the electronic waves devices similar to that used by the Yugoslav army when they used the microwave (oven) in attracting and confusing the NATO missiles fitted with electromagnetic searching devices.
9. To hide from being directly or indirectly spotted, especially at night.
10. To hide under thick trees because they are the best cover against the planes.
11. To stay in places unlit by the sun such as the shadows of the buildings or the trees.
12. Maintain complete silence of all wireless contacts.[30]

Indeed, to fight back against such a powerful and seemingly omniscient foe, the film's military heroes must use all the familiar tactics of asymmetrical guerilla warfare—like im-

provised explosive devices (IEDs), shoulder-held anti-aircraft missiles, and even suicide bombings to level the playing field, and remove the ability of the invaders to rain down death from above without challenge. One of the most heroic moments in the film comes from a wounded civilian who has essentially been conscripted into the unit: he sacrifices himself in a suicide car bombing to kill several of the invaders at once. (His young son is given five seconds to mourn him, and then told that he too is now a Marine, and must be brave.) Crucially, the final triumph at the end of the film is the destruction of the command-and-control network that links the drones and thereby renders the colonizing power unable to continue in its imperial ambitions—the destruction, that is, of the very power that most defines U.S. military superiority today. Unexpectedly, then, we find *Battle: Los Angeles* relocates the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to a familiar U.S. context, imaginatively recasting the U.S. military as the *victims* of its own imperial ambitions—which is to say, necessarily casting those who resist the advance of American imperialism as the true *heroes* of our real-world, non-science-fictional "alien invasion" narrative.

"There is no such thing as an anti-war film," famously warns Francois Truffaut—and *Battle: Los Angeles* is by no means an anti-war film, exactly. But the version of war it finally celebrates—and this is the constitutive contradiction, the antinomy of *Battle: Los Angeles*—is not the wars the United States wages, but the ones that are waged back against it. The model for military heroism it ultimately draws on for its internal energy, the only model of heroism it can reliably reproduce, isn't *our* heroism—it's *theirs*. The film thus ultimately offers, on the level of form, an inextricable and deeply subversive critique of the very "production partners" the *content* of the film seems intended to promote. The film turns Marines into mujahideen; from this standpoint we might say it looks less like *Battle: Los Angeles* and much more like *Battle: Algiers*.

Battle: Utopia

In recent years the field of science fiction studies has been divided over the question of the essential politics of the genre. Is science fiction better understood as a genre of the left—of critique, of utopia—devoted at its core to "our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now, and as we feel in our bones it ought rather to be lived," as Fredric Jameson has described the utopian impulse he sees working at the core of all art, including and especially science fiction?[31] Or is it better understood, as Reidier and Kerslake would have it, as a genre of the right, of empire, R&Ding new habits of violence and control and inuring us to their creeping normalization?[32] In my own work I have tried to suggest that utopia and empire form a dialectic, perhaps even an antinomy, as each seems to continually produce versions of the other. The critical antiwar reading of *Battle: Los Angeles* sketched above, for instance, is of course always at risk into collapsing back into just another version of pro-military propaganda, insofar as the military is able to twist *even resistance to itself* to the service of its own herorization as it transmogrifies itself (on the level of fantasy) into the underdog victim of its own habits of violence. Rather than the possibility

of an against-the-grain critique, what *Battle: Los Angeles* exemplifies is instead nationalist ideology's absolute flexibility, its radical independence from any requirement of facticity or logical coherence.

Likewise, even the film's most jingoistic tendencies can potentially have the sheen of utopia when looked at from the right angle. Jameson argues that the rationalizations and justifications for imperial violence, when unmoored from any specific historical conflict or enemy and presented instead as a purely science fictional spectacle, seem to prime not violence but the fantasy of "reliving a kind of wartime togetherness and morale, a kind of drawing together among survivors which is itself merely a distorted dream of a more humane collectivity and social organization," as Jameson put the point in his 1972 essay "Metacommentary."[33] In a much later essay from 2009, "War and Representation," Jameson expands on this point, identifying within the form of the war film (and within similar genres like the gangster film and the "caper") a constitutive utopian fantasy about a perfected "division of labor" implicit in the military "unit," in which each person has a necessary part to play in the functioning of a larger collective:

> ...each of the character types stands for a certain competence, something brought out much more strongly in the caper films, where each character is selected for a specific specialty. The small or micro group is the Deleuzian nomadic war machine, literally or figuratively—that is to say, an image of the collective without the state and beyond reified institutions.[34]

Recently Jameson has been giving a talk that goes further still, presenting (as both utopian scheme and as satiric provocation) his demand for "universal military conscription."[35] Here, dialectically, would be the utopian answer to the logic of universal threat in *Battle: Los Angeles* that transforms every civilian into a potential soldier, and draws every human (including veterinarians and children) into an ersatz Marine unit regardless of who within it actually *is* a Marine or a soldier or even an adult; now, indeed, literally everyone would be a soldier, with good pay, guaranteed employment, health benefits, a pensioned retirement, access to the higher values of solidarity and meaningful work that are systematically denied to us elsewhere in global capitalism, free education, and so on. Simply on the pragmatic level of logistics, the immense effort of signing up billions of new conscripts simultaneously would undo the complicated bureaucracy necessary to wage war—and, of course, with *truly* universal military conscription, there'd be no one left "outside" the new military collective to hurt or kill anyway. Such a formation would no longer properly be a military at all, but something rather like an anti-military, possessing the opposite electrical charge.

Of course universal military conscription is not some realistic program for change that is being offered in earnest; as a "plan" the notion is self-evidently absurd. Rather, the point is to draw our attention to the utopian potential for an "unimaginable collective totality" of which the military unit, the gangster crew, the soccer team, the monastery, the classroom, the family are all but the faintest glimmers. Such a line of speculation has been echoed in

expressly science fictional terms by no more unexpected a person than Ronald Reagan, who frequently fantasized about the existence of an alien threat that might break the otherwise implacable oppositional logic of the Cold War—precisely because we'd finally have somewhere else to point the missiles. See, for instance, his Address to the 42d Session of the United Nations General Assembly, which eerily parallels the absurd plan at the heart of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* (1986-1987), as well as the politics of unity and "coming together" valorized in *Battle*:

> Cannot swords be turned to plowshares? Can we and all nations not live in peace? In our obsession with antagonisms of the moment, we often forget how much unites all the members of humanity. Perhaps we need some outside, universal threat to make us recognize this common bond. I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world.[36]

This version of the alien invasion fantasy is also familiar in dozens of instances across the alien-invasion genre; think only of the speech from Bill Pullman's "President Whitman" in *Independence Day* (1996): "Mankind, that word should have new meaning for all of us today. We can't be consumed by our petty differences any more. We will be united in our common interest."[37] Here then is an alternative political valence for dedifferentiation; now it is revealed as not only the nightmare that reduces that privileged subject of Empire to the unhappy position of the wretched of the earth, but also and at the same time the desire for a new and genuine universality that could somehow include *every* member of the human species as true equals.

   And this is precisely what happens in *Battle: Los Angeles:* the film tracks the construction of a new collectivity beyond race, beyond gender, beyond nationality, beyond enlistment status, and beyond history, which exists to serve both each other and the common good. Their achievements, while specifically in the service of one America city, will nonetheless help the entire world; the anti-drone combat style they developed is being broadcast not simply across the U.S. armed forces but internationally, to "every army in every city." Likewise, the battle-scarred Marines in the film choose to refuse a well-earned rest not because unrelenting commanders demand it but because they believe their continued sacrifice is important and because they know an end to the war is in sight—which is to say *this* war (unlike their previous deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan) is a war that actually can help people, and which can actually end. Compare the sadness of Aaron Eckhart's character at the start of the film, and his disdain for his hollow achievements as a soldier, with the renewed spirit of hope he evinces at the finale; in the disjuncture between the real deployments and the filmic fantasy we find precisely Jameson's proposed distinction between the military that wages bitter internecine war *against* humanity and the utopian *anti*-military that struggles collectively on behalf of it. Within the dream-logic of the film, of course this too must be a violent conflict against some hated, hateful Other—but its glimmer of an alternate future where all humans work together towards a common purpose can inspire us even in a

world with no monstrous alien invaders to slaughter. Here the bottomless forever war that is produced by the divisive ideologies of empire turns out to unexpectedly produce at one and the same time its utopian opposite: regret and guilt, yes, but also hope, the dream of some final end to war, the promise that the obscene violence of our time might one day yet give way to another, better sort of world.

Notes

1. Roger Ebert, "Battle: Los Angeles," RogerEbert.com, last modified 9 March 2011, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/battle-los-angeles-2011.
2. In April 2014, its "freshness" ranking at Rotten Tomatoes was a mere 35%, and only 21% from the site's highest-ranked critics. See "Battle: Los Angeles," RottenTomatoes.com, http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/battle-los-angeles/.
3. *Battle: Los Angeles,* dir. Jonathan Liebesman (2011; Culver City, CA: Sony Home Pictures, 2011), DVD.
4. The film itself actually spawned a first-person shooter, released the same day the film was released to X-Box and PC, and later to PlayStation. Reviewers didn't care for the game, either.
5. The script for the sequel was still being crafted as of March 2012.
6. "The advisers have been there the whole time. We're very lucky and fortunate through boot camp, through the entire process of filming, they're there. Or wherever we need, any guidance. If they see something that doesn't look right, that doesn't agree, that doesn't look Marine… they'll immediately jump on it. They'll tell us the dialog, the movement. Whatever it may be. And that was the great thing about boot camp was that we really learned how to become Marines and how to work as a unit. How to work as a platoon. Hopefully that translates to the film." Steve Weintraub, "Aaron Eckhart, Michael Peña, Michelle Rodriguez, Bridget Moynahan and Ramon Rodriguez On Set Interview *Battle: Los Angeles,"* collider.com, last modified 1 February 2011, http://collider.com/battle-los-angeles-interview-aaron-eckhart-michael-pena-michelle-rodriguez/.
7. Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 261.
8. Wikipedia's entry on Williams dryly notes that "Williams did not survive the ensuing battle," and the line itself was later transformed into an apocryphal line from Marine General O.P. Smith, a wonderful summation of the link between determination and denial: "Retreat Hell! We're just attacking in another direction."
9. James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping in the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001): xi.
10. See Thomas Gladysez, "*Wings,* 1927" silentflm.org, accessed 1 April 2014, as well as Rebecca Peters's 1999 essay at the same site.

11. David L. Robb, *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies,* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004): 182.

12. Der Derian 166.

13. Der Derian xxxvi.

14. A Senate report released in early 2014 confirmed that, directly contrary to the presentation in *Zero Dark Thirty*, torture in fact played no role in finding Osama bin Laden. See Bradley Klapper, "Senate Report: Torture Didn't Lead to Bin Laden," ap.org, last modified 31 March 2014, accessed 1 April 2014, http://bigstory.ap.org/article/senate-torture-report-examines-hunt-bin-laden.

15. One such promotion can be found on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-OvnGgfwQc.

16. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bg9K1mCh65U.

17. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009): xiv-xv. As with my approach in this article, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter identify a counterforce running through even such an openly propagandistic text as *America's Army,* noting examples of "digital dissent" persisting even in this deliberately designed space for training and recruitment. The intertwined history of American military fantasy and video gaming is developed in much more detail in the collection *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games,* ed. Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Payne (Taylor & Francis, 2009); an in-depth history of gaming's particularly close relationship with science fiction (especially military science fiction) can be found in Patrick Jagoda's "Digital Games and Science Fiction" in *The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction,* ed. Eric Carl Link and Gerry Canavan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

18. As Alexander Galloway demonstrates in the second chapter of his *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture,* this type of value-neutral first-person shot is much more native to computer gaming than to film, where first-person POV has been more typically used to denote an altered, deranged, or predatory, mental state than simple active perception. See Alexander Galloway, "Origins of the First-Person Shooter," *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 39-69.

19. Andrew Sullivan, "Scalia and Torture," theatlantic.com, last modified 19 June 2007, http://www.theatlantic.com/daily-dish/archive/2007/06/scalia-and-torture/227548/.

20. Paul Boyer, *Fallout* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 177.

21. Paul Virilio *War and Cinema* (New York: Verso, 1989): 4.

22. H.G. Wells, *War of the Worlds* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 3-4.

23. John Rieder. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2008), 111-112.

24. Wells 4-5.

25. Ibid. 17.

26. Ibid. 114-115. In fact, that the course of human evolution would take a Martian form had already been predicted within the diegetic world of the novel by a Wellsian

"speculative writer of quasi-scientific repute"; the reference is to Wells's own publication of "The Man of the Year Million: A Scientific Forecast," published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in November 1893.

27. Rieder 7.

28. John Rieder, "Spectacle, Technology, and Colonialism in SF Cinema: The Case of Wim Wenders' *Until the End of the World," Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction,* ed. Mark Bould and China Miéville (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2009): 83-99 (86).

29. Patricia Kerslake, *Science Fiction and Empire* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2010), 90. "To know the alien more clearly," writes Peter Hutchings of 1950s and 1960s alien invasion narratives (including the 1953 film adaptation of *War of the Worlds),* "is to know oneself as well." Peter Hutchings, "'We're the Martians Now': British SF Invasion Fantasies of the 1950s and 1960s," *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*, ed. Sean Redmond (New York: Wallflower Press, 2007): 337-345 (345).

30. The document, originating with al Qaeda, was found in a building captured during the 2013 insurgency in Mali. "Al-Qaeda's 22 tips for dodging drone attacks: the list in full," Telegraph.com, last modified 21 Feb. 2013, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/al-qaeda/9886673/Al-Qaedas-22-tips-for-dodging-drone-attacks-the-list-in-full.html.

31. Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Signatures of the Visible.* Routledge: New York, 1992): 11-46 (46).

32. "Science fiction is now a research and development department within a futures industry that dreams of the prediction and control of tomorrow." Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 287-302 (291).

33. Fredric Jameson, "Metacommentary," *PMLA* 86, no. 1 (January 1971): 9-18 (17).

34. Fredric Jameson, "War and Representation," *PMLA* 124, no. 5 (October 2009): 1532-1547 (1547).

35. A second-hand description of one of these talks can be found in Joseph G. Ramsey's "Re-Imagining the Place and Time of Communism Today: Between Hardt's 'New Love' and Jameson's 'Citizen Army'" from *Socialism and Democracy* 27, no. 3 (November 2013): 54-82; the version of the talk delivered at the Graduate Center at CUNY can be found on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNVKoX40ZAo.

36. Ronald Reagan, "Address to the 42d Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, New York: September 21, 1987," Reagan Presidential Library, http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1987/092187b.htm. Manufacturing a hoaxed alien invasion as a means of tricking the nations of the world into abandoning warfare against each other is the utopian scheme at the heart of Moore's *Watchmen—and it works.*

37. *Independence Day,* dir. Roland Emmerich (1996; Century City, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2000, DVD.

Bibliography

"Al-Qaeda's 22 tips for dodging drone attacks: the list in full," Telegraph.com, last modified 21 Feb. 2013, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/al-qaeda/9886673/Al-Qaedas-22-tips-for-dodging-drone-attacks-the-list-in-full.html.

Battle: Los Angeles. Directed by Jonathan Liebesman. Culver City, CA: Sony Home Pictures, 2011 (2011). DVD.

"Battle: Los Angeles." RottenTomatoes.com, http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/battle-los-angeles/.

Boyer, Paul. *Fallout.* Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.

Der Derian, James. *Virtuous War: Mapping in the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001.

Dyer-Witheford, Nick, and Greig De Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Ebert, Roger. "Battle: Los Angeles." RogerEbert.com, last modified 9 March 2011, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/battle-los-angeles-2011.

Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 287-302.

Galloway, Alexander. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Gladysez, Thomas. "*Wings,* 1927." Silentflm.org, http://silentfilm.org/archive/wings-2012.

Huntemann, Nina B. and Matthew Thomas Payne, editors. *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games.* Taylor & Francis, 2009.

Hutchings, Peter. "'We're the Martians Now': British SF Invasion Fantasies of the 1950s and 1960s." *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*, edited by Sean Redmond, 337-345. New York: Wallflower Press, 2007.

Independence Day. Directed by Roland Emmerich. Century City, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2000 (1996). DVD.

Jagoda, Patrick. "Digital Games and Science Fiction." *The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction,* edited by Eric Carl Link and Gerry Canavan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.

Jameson, Fredric. "Metacommentary." *PMLA* 86, no. 1 (January 1971): 9-18.

---. "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture." *Signatures of the Visible,* 11-46. Routledge: New York, 1992.

---. "War and Representation." *PMLA* 124, no. 5 (October 2009): 1532-1547.

Kerslake, Patricia. *Science Fiction and Empire.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010.

Klapper, Bradley. "Senate Report: Torture Didn't Lead to Bin Laden," ap.org, last modified 31 March 2014, http://bigstory.ap.org/article/senate-torture-report-examines-hunt-bin-laden.

Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen.* New York: DC Comics, 1986-1987.

Ramsey, Joseph G. "Re-Imagining the Place and Time of Communism Today: Between

Hardt's 'New Love' and Jameson's 'Citizen Army.'" *Socialism and Democracy* 27, no. 3 (November 2013): 54-82.

Peters, Rebecca. "Wings, 1927." Silentflm.org, http://silentfilm.org/archive/wings-2012.

Reagan, Ronald. "Address to the 42d Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, New York: September 21, 1987." Reagan Presidential Library, http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1987/092187b.htm.

Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction.* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2008.

---. "Spectacle, Technology, and Colonialism in SF Cinema: The Case of Wim Wenders' *Until the End of the World." Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction,* edited by Mark Bould and China Miéville, 83-99. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2009.

Robb, David L. *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies.* Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004.

Sobchack, Vivian. *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

Sullivan, Andrew. "Scalia and Torture," theatlantic.com, last modified 19 June 2007, http://www.theatlantic.com/daily-dish/archive/2007/06/scalia-and-torture/227548/.

Virilio, Paul. *War and Cinema.* New York: Verso, 1989.

Weintraub, Steve. "Aaron Eckhart, Michael Peña, Michelle Rodriguez, Bridget Moynahan and Ramon Rodriguez On Set Interview *Battle: Los Angeles."* Collider.com, last modified 1 February 2011, http://collider.com/battle-los-angeles-interview-aaron-eckhart-michael-pena-michelle-rodriguez/.

Wells, H.G. *War of the Worlds.* New York: Bantam Books, 1988.

Gerry Canavan is an Assistant Professor of 20th and 21st Century Literature in the English Department at Marquette University. He is co-editor of *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction* (Wesleyan University Press, 2014) and co-editor of the journal *Science Fiction Film and Television.* Email: gerrycanavan@gmail.com