

12-11-2014

Moral Anxiety, Mortal Terror: Considering Spielberg, Post-9/11

Jake T. Bart

Grand Valley State University, bartj@mail.gvsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine>

 Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bart, Jake T. (2014) "Moral Anxiety, Mortal Terror: Considering Spielberg, Post-9/11," *Cinesthesia*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine/vol4/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Cinesthesia by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Introduction

Steven Spielberg occupies a rare arena in world cinema. He is one of the few directors to achieve status as a popular icon to cinephile and average moviegoer alike. No matter the genre, star, or source material, Spielberg is often the largest selling point of his own films. Spielberg and his films are an effective conduit through which one can consider both the industry and artistry of American films. Yet, in terms of critical response, such films are often taken for granted. Many look askance at Spielberg's sense of joyous popular craft while celebrating his contemporaries. The gritty social realism of Scorsese, operatic classicism of Coppola, and bravura stylization of De Palma are privileged while Spielberg's unflinchingly populist approach earns condescension and caveats.

However, Spielberg's contemporary output is a potent reminder of the unique power of mainstream, popular cinema. In the wake of 9/11, a defining moment in the young 21st century, Spielberg's thematic concerns undergo a marked evolution. As film historian Joseph McBride noted, "(n)o other American artist confronted the key events of the first decade of the century with such sustained and ambitious treatment" (450). Together, Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (2005), *Munich* (2005), and *Minority Report* (2002) create an informal trilogy, each exploring a different facet of American shock and anxiety in the War on Terror era. Despite being filmed before 9/11, *Minority Report*, a science fiction parable set in a near future where precognition is used to make arrests for crimes that have yet to be committed, is prophetic in its consideration of the grey area between enforcing the law and infringing on civil liberties. *War of the Worlds*, seemingly a straight down the line alien invasion picture, presents the starkest portrayal of widespread, communal trauma to be found in a major Hollywood production and includes some of the most brazenly, bleakly terrifying images of Spielberg's entire career. Finally, *Munich*, his self-described "prayer for peace" investigates the moral conundrums inherent in responding to terrorism (qtd. in Schickel online). Taken together, these films constitute an expression of a complicated, at times contradictory, moral and political philosophy that is often incongruous with the established image of Spielberg as wunderkind populist. These films comprise an attitude that is as ambivalent and uneasy as American popular cinema itself. Each ultimately confronts the looming existential

questions of American life post-9/11— what decisions are we to make in the shadow of such trauma and how do those decisions reflect, contradict, and complicate fundamental cultural values.

Before the Storm: Spielberg at *Fin de siècle*

Spielberg entered the 21st century yet again on top of the moviemaking world. As a director, he rounded out the 1990s with *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), a film that called upon both ends of his artistic register. *Private Ryan* combined the historically based gravity of *Schindler's List* (1993) and *Amistad* (1997) with the keen sense of genre dynamics found in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and *Jurassic Park* (1993). It's also a case study in what makes Spielberg a difficult film artist to pin down, as the *vérité* and viscera of the opening Omaha Beach sequence brushes up against the pro-forma “men on a mission” narrative structure and golden hued sentimentality through the rest of the film. However, for audiences and critics at the time, the film was a resounding success, winning five Academy Awards— including a second Best Director honor for Spielberg— and earning nearly half a billion dollars at the worldwide box-office.

The 90s also saw the ascension of another artistic identity for Spielberg— studio mogul. As the “S” in DreamWorks SKG, Spielberg sought to gain further control and ownership over the films he created. While the fledgling studio struggled through early growing pains— its first two films, *The Peacemaker* and the Spielberg directed *Amistad* were financial disappointments— it ended the decade with a Best Picture win for *American Beauty* and would repeat that same feat the next year with *Gladiator*.

As the year 2000 approached, Spielberg, both mogul and the moviemaker, was riding high. He chose *AI Artificial Intelligence* (2001) as his inaugural directorial work



for the new decade. *AI* is notable for its reworking of recurring Spielberg motifs into a darker form. Loneliness pervades *AI*. Spielberg presents the recurring image of David suspended underwater, arms outstretched, eyes wide with anticipation

hoping for human contact. The epilogue, which reunites David with his mother, or rather, a *projection* of his mother, for only a single day, is not a classic Spielbergian balm, but

something more wrenching and mournful. The openly philosophical nature of the film—it began life as an idea by Stanley Kubrick and is dedicated in his memory—turned off audiences and puzzled critics. *AI* was branded, if not a flop, certainly a disappointment. Numbers aside, word of mouth was bad enough that the ads for *Minority Report*, Spielberg's next directorial effort, would tout star Tom Cruise over Spielberg's involvement. Nevertheless, the unabashed thoughtfulness on display in *AI* worms its way into the more conventional *Minority Report* in intriguing and ultimately prescient ways.

Blind Justice: *Minority Report* and the Surveillance Era

“They that can give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety.”— Benjamin Franklin

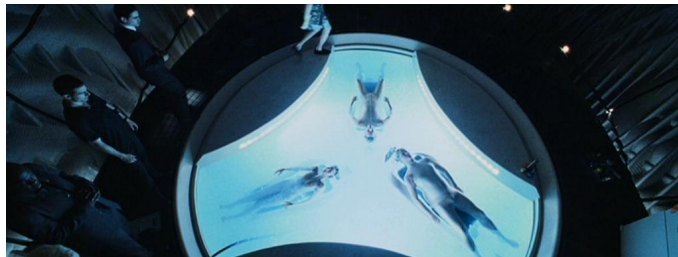
There is no title card reading “A Steven Spielberg Film” in the opening credits, but there's no mistaking *Minority Report* for the work of any other director. The film includes some of the finest action choreography and special effects work of his career. Yet, an explicit sense of theme and overt message makes it more than a film of surfaces. Combining elements of the futuristic action film with the unflinching pessimism of classic film noir, *Minority Report* is a paranoid thriller uniquely calibrated for the digital age as well as the political climate of War on Terror America. As Mark Garrett Cooper astutely observes, it is “our *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*” addressing a “United States that loathes technocracy even as it craves it” (24). However, Cooper's assertion has further applications, for *Minority Report*'s moral reckoning concerns technocracy as an extrapolation of government surveillance. *Minority Report*'s technological concerns are intertwined with its consideration of classic democratic freedoms. To borrow Cooper's insightfully drawn parallel and his phrasing; *Minority Report* concerns a United States that is desperate for safety, even as it endangers its fundamental principles.

The film's narrative patterns adhere to genre expectations and the resolution it provides restored order, but find no solace in order being restored. Instead, *Minority Report*'s ending suggests that in an age of encroaching surveillance and swiftly disappearing privacy isolation and societal disconnection is perhaps our last refuge. As with *AI* before it, *Minority Report* presents an intricately visualized portrait of the future. Set in the year 2054, Tom Cruise stars as John Anderton, the head of Washington DC's

“Pre-Crime” unit, devoted to stopping murders before they happen. A trio of “pre-cogs”—shorthand for precognitives, foresees these murders and reports them.

This very idea is a morally touchy one and *Minority Report* is unafraid to engage such questions on an explicit level. One Department of Justice representative, a skeptic sent to audit the process, cautions, “We are arresting people that have committed no crimes.” To this, Cruise blithely replies, “But they will.” This opens the film up to weighty philosophical considerations of free will, especially when Cruise’s chief is the next person predicted to commit murder.

It’s a heady premise, but the marvel of Spielberg’s effort is the way in which he orients the audience in this brave new world, particularly with regard to methodology of Pre-crime. Warrants and due process have become more or less an expedient formality, as the right to investigate these visions is earned by approval from a judge and second witness who literally have a limited view of the case— they look out from monitors, teleconferenced in. Cooper observes that the Pre-crime process “not only dispenses with the jury and mocks judicial supervision; it also denies the accused the opportunity to confront his accuser” (31). In the film, the predictive, fragmented visions of the “pre-cogs” are projected onto screens. However, it is Anderton’s task to arrange these fragments into something coherent in order to identify the location of the crime. In other words, Pre-crime’s efficacy relies on human interpretation of an interaction with images. Further, the token presence of the judge and witness compresses the typical legal order of investigation followed by arrest, and then trial into a strange frighteningly accelerated hybrid of the three.



The final step in this process doesn’t even involve traditional apprehension methods. Spielberg’s portrayal of standard procedure has a fittingly horrifying undercurrent. In the opening sequence, a vaguely militarized squad of Pre-crime cops busts through an upper middle-class Colonial and apprehend the would-be murderer seconds before he’s expected to commit the act. Dramatically, it’s a moment of remarkably relieved tension, but the moral queasiness soon sets in— the man is in fact

guilty of nothing. He is not read his Miranda rights and the traditional handcuffs have been replaced by a “halo,” a device attached to the head that quickly sedates and neutralizes its wearer. The symbolism of the action—official forces forcibly entering a quiet home—has all the subtlety of a smashed window.

While *Minority Report*'s moral stance is clear, its larger significance perhaps is not. As a work of science fiction, the “the most philosophical of all the filmic genres,” it may be tempting to read *Minority Report* as an allegory not unlike *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* or *Planet of the Apes* before it (Sharpe online). However, this tact is wrong minded. Instead it expresses the fundamental tensions of its era. With *Minority Report*, the filmmakers “anticipated the repression of the Bush years, catching a wave rather than creating one” (Wasser 190). The film has no specific correlation a single event, but it is attuned to the cultural climate. It is not representative. It is demonstrative. Consider the USA PATRIOT Act, a measure swiftly written and passed in the months following the September 11th attacks that drastically redefined personal privacy laws, or the question of due process for detainees at the Guantanamo Bay holding facility. As Stephen Prince notes, *Minority Report* was “remarkably in sync” with the political climate of the time—“the Bush administration had launched extensive programs of domestic surveillance,” additionally, “the FBI and CIA were conducting warrantless wiretaps of American citizens’ telephone and electronic communications... many were in violation of the FBI and Justice Department’s own regulations” (83). Through a more contemporary lens, the questions raised in *Minority Report* can be applied to the recent NSA surveillance scandal or the issue of increasingly militarized local police forces. *Minority Report* speaks to a rapidly changing civic landscape, one motivated by anxiety. The film’s power lies in its correspondence to a real life era of reformulated civil liberty in America.

In these contexts it is clear that Cruise’s role in the film is that of an “everyman,” an instinctually relatable figure and easy locus of audience identification. Anderton begins the film as a staunch defender of Pre-Crime. Though he holds strong to his beliefs, Anderton’s personal life is left in shambles after his son disappeared years before the film’s beginning. His marriage has ended in divorce and he’s developed a drug addiction. Accordingly, as the Pre-Crime director played by Max von Sydow proudly notes, Anderton’s beliefs are “rooted in pain, not politics.” The simple ironic reversal at the

center of the narrative—the hunter being hunted— serves to reveal the danger in such an ethos.

As the film opens, the Pre-crime process has undoubtedly produced results—there hasn't been a murder committed in six years. Yet, the complicating details still lay ahead, as it is revealed that the pre-cogs are children of former drug addicts and their predictive powers are “the unintended consequences of a series of genetic mistakes.” This indicates that the human toll of enforcing such policy affects more than just those who are haloed. The pre-cogs are “the innocents [used] to catch the guilty.” As one policeman



remarks of the pre-cogs, “it’s better if you don’t think of them as human,” implying there is something fundamentally wrong enough about Pre-crime to require coping mechanisms. The

titular “minority report” refers to occurrences wherein one pre-cog has a vision differing from the other two, thus creating a minority report. However, copies of these reports are routinely destroyed because no one “wants a justice system that instills doubt.” However, the originals are only to be found in the pre-cogs themselves. Echoing the rhetoric used to justify the abrogation of civil liberties, advertisements in favor of a proposed national Pre-crime initiative boast “this great system is what will keep us safe [and] will also keep us free,” a claim doesn’t hold up to Anderton’s own experience on the run as we see policemen rummaging through his apartment and personal property as soon as Anderton flees. The conclusion of the film offers perhaps the bitterest reality of Pre-crime—it was predicated on the murder of an innocent woman. Collectively, these elements present a society fundamentally altered, shaped by an insidious government program made all the more pernicious by its guise of protecting the citizenry.

Like many other Spielberg works, the film is suffused with religious symbols and analogs. Pre-crime is often portrayed as a religion zealously and fanatically adhered to. The pre-cog holding area is called “The Temple,” prisoners held in halo-sleep are watched over by a single guard named Gideon, a Biblical name meaning “destroyer.” Musical notes blaring from an organ, casting a church-like pall over the setting,

accompany the first scene set in the halo-sleep containment area. One passer-by exclaims “Jesus Christ,” when seeing a pre-cog in the flesh. Most interestingly, a statue dedicated to the three pre-cogs replaces the traditional Statue of Justice indicating that the cultish appeal of Pre-crime has over taken traditional ideals of law and order.

Other elements of the film clarify that Pre-crime is more false idol than anything else, as Anderton’s journey is subtly portrayed as one of spiritual rebirth. Water is a recurring symbol of the film, as when Anderton submerges himself in an ice-water bath to prevent police from reading his body heat. This image is connected to Anderton’s son’s disappearance, which occurs at a public pool, but is also symbolic of his spiritual and ideological rebirth. As one character reminds him, “Sometimes to see the light, we must risk the dark.”

Seeing is also an essential motif of the film. In the future of *Minority Report*, everyone is cataloged and identified by eye scans. While on the run, Anderton turns to the black market. He won’t be able to get anywhere with his own eyes. As a result, he undergoes a transplant that operates as another symbol for the evolution of his beliefs and convictions away from Pre-crime. The visions of the pre-cogs motivate the entire film, yet they do not fully comprehend these visions and in order for them to have any purpose, the images must be organized and analyzed. This is a stark rebuke to the traditional belief that “justice is blind,” for the justice of Pre-crime is anything but blind. Instead, it operates under the assumption it sees all, often before it occurs. Images bombard the production design of *Minority Report* in the form of advertisement specifically calibrated toward each person. With these omnipresent ads, the film further communicates the onslaught of images that will come to define the digital age. The world of the film is also littered with screens used for legal matters, crime solving, and advertising but also as a window to the past as expressed through Anderton’s home videos of his lost son. This footage is projected before him in the form of a hologram, creating the illusion that his son is there with him again. *Minority Report*’s vision of the future is one where images and seeing are privileged and being able to effectively read those images is equated with power. Consider Anderton sifting through the pre-cog’s visions rearranging them at his will, a moment set to Schubert’s “Unfinished Symphony” for in that room in that moment, he is a conductor. Given this motif and Anderton’s ideological transformation,

the pre-cog Agatha's plaintive question, "Can you see?"—repeated four times throughout the film—serves as a metaphorical call to attention for the characters and the audience. The film implores viewers to look closer at the systems in place in our society and to engage both the advantages and dangers of such systems.

The rest of *Minority Report* engages the idea of systemization as well, specifically in its portrayal of bureaucracy and peppering references to classic icons of American democracy throughout the film. For much of the film's runtime, the villain is not a single character but an entire flawed



process that strictly followed. Indeed, the insidious undercurrents of the process are greatly obscured by its bland institutionalization. Predicted murders are solved swiftly and mostly identified not by their potential perpetrators or victims, but instead by case number. The process is dulled and mechanical.

When the ultimate villain is finally revealed, it comes as no surprise that he's an entrenched bureaucrat. The choice of Washington, DC as a setting is a pointed one. Clearly, as the nation's capital, it is a fitting location to set a consideration of the morals and ethics that animate laws and their enforcement. It's made even more fitting for its history of drastic economic disparity and local institutional dysfunction. The film also includes sly references to the American Civil War— one character is presented with antique revolvers meant to "symbolize the end of destruction and death" and in another scene a child can be heard reciting The Gettysburg Address in the background— suggesting America as a nation is ideologically and philosophically at war with itself.

Minority Report combines the imagination of science fiction, the narrative structure of detective fiction, the stark, monochromatic surfaces and pessimism of film noir and palpable paranoia of post-Watergate political thrillers into a uniquely modern, 21st century vision. While it may be tempting to say the film's happy ending betrays these qualities that would be mistaken. Anderson proves his innocence and the program is shut down, thus leading to the release of both the pre-cogs and any prisoner arrested based on

Pre-crime evidence, yet the implications of the ending are unsettling. The closing title cards are careful to mention that, despite their apparent freedom, those apprehended and released are still routinely monitored, presumably against their will. The cycle of invasive surveillance has not been fully broken. Though Spielberg often ends his films with a sense of family reunification that is not the case here. While Anderton reunites with his wife, their son remains lost, every indication that the case has gone cold. Likewise the informal family unit comprised of the three pre-cogs is also shown living together. However, both the Anderton and pre-cog families retreat to isolated locations, far from the reach of society. Thus despite the surface happiness of an ending where the basic narrative tension remains, the film's thematic conclusions are much more troubling. The ending does not "steer the film out of the darkness and into the light" (Gordon 252). They indicate "to be even remotely secure, the family must have no contact whatsoever with the intrusive world of bureaucrats, policemen, and advertisers that exists outside" (Cooper 24-5). This is the film's darkest and most perceptive notion, one that certainly arises from the unease and angst of an era where the balance of safety and freedom is tilting precariously. Speaking of *Minority Report's* visual design "I wanted to make the ugliest, dirtiest movie I've ever made" (qtd. in Gordon 251). By the film's conclusion, he's succeeded in more ways than he could have anticipated.

Dark Skies: Portraying Trauma in *War of the Worlds*

"Something alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as line of defense. [Trauma] invades you, takes you over, becomes a dominating feature of your interior landscape... and in the process threatens to drain you and leave you empty."— Kai Erikson (qtd. in Gordon 262)

"It reflects a lot of our post-9/11 fears, but it also reflects another impulse that we really are human beings and we do come together to help each other survive. Especially when we have a common enemy. In the shadow of 9/11, it felt that War of the Worlds had a special significance."— Steven Spielberg, "Revisiting the Invasion"

War of the Worlds hardly seems like a departure for Steven Spielberg. It's a genre in which he's comfortable and reteams him with bankable star Tom Cruise. Yet the film

is a stark alternative to other invasion films like Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996) or even the original 1953 adaptation of *War of the Worlds* in that Spielberg willfully channels the recent history of trauma to lend the film an allegorical heft. Rather than merely trading on the inherent emotional weight of 9/11, Spielberg uses it as a thematic touchstone to express a darker vision of humanity than even he indicates in the quote above. Indeed, while other historical events may also be referenced—the film includes visual echoes of the Holocaust and explicit references to Hiroshima—the prevailing anxiety animating the film is post-9/11 fears of invasion. Spielberg may have intended to express an impulse to “come together to help each other survive,” but that’s hardly what’s conveyed in the film itself. As Stephen Prince comments, the film “elicits a narrow range of emotional responses by the characters, mainly terror and blind panic” (87). Indeed the film mostly serves to reveal that in the grip of terror our priorities and ability to make rational, cooperative, peaceful choices are all but obliterated. It brings terrifying life to Erickson’s notion of trauma. In the shadow of 9/11—*War of the Worlds* was released in 2005 a mere four years after the attacks and in the midst of the resulting Iraq and Afghanistan Wars—these are controversial and politically charged notions.

The terrorism parallels begin in the film’s opening moments, with a harrowing voiceover by Morgan Freeman. Though it’s in reference to the invading aliens, the narration echoes the popular sense of terrorist organizations looming in the American consciousness—

“...as men busied themselves about their various concerns, *they* observed and studied, the way a man with a microscope might scrutinize the creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. With infinite complacency, men went to and fro about the globe, confident of our empire over this world. Yet across the gulf of space, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic regarded our planet with envious eyes and slowly, and surely, drew their plans against us.”

Before dealing with the major characters, the opening narration emphasizes the invaders. The images conjured therein call upon common post-9/11 associations. In method and motive, these aliens are drawn as an Al-Qaeda parallel, covertly scheming either in far off lands or observing us at close range only to rise from within our own ranks. Rhetorically,

it's motivated by fear, dread, and paranoia. Such paranoia also rises later in the film when a character bemoans "Right under our feet... They've been planning this for millions of years." This mirrors 21st century terrorist action against American in that the aliens "are sleeper cells lying undetected in America until they launch their attack" (Prince 87). The "us versus them" dichotomy introduced by this opening is subtly reinforced throughout the film— Ray openly derides Middle Eastern food as substandard, the French occupation of Algiers is explicitly referenced, and the tribal-esque rivalry between the Boston Red Sox and New York Yankees is used to establish generational tension between father and son. While these details may strike too broad a point, they are clear evidence that the film is orienting the audience's attention toward such divides and conflicts.

After this foreboding prologue, the film opens on a symbolically loaded image: the New York City skyline. Next, we're introduced to the protagonist, Ray Ferrier. Throughout the film, the audience is made to identify with his point of view. As Ray, Cruise is cast against type, playing a working class dockworker. He's also an odd choice as an everyman in that he begins the film as an ineffective father who shares custody of his children with his ex-wife— the contemporary permutation of a classic Spielberg trope of the family in need of fixing. It is also a tacit acknowledgement that the prototypical American family has fundamentally changed and so too have the common values which are to be protected.

The equivalence between the invaders and terrorist organizations carries through into the film's first major action set piece. The alien invasion begins, tellingly, with dark, ashen skies, recalling the smoke choked landscape of Manhattan on September 11th. The film relocates the center of terror from the World Trade Center, a symbol of white-collar activity in a bustling metropolis, to a more working class New Jersey neighborhood. This expresses both the way in which 9/11 was introduced to the American consciousness and how it was perceived. As witnessed live on television, the September 11th attacks had the unique effect of feeling intensely personal, a national



calamity was transpiring in living rooms before the eyes of millions of viewers. Spielberg is clearly attuned to this distinction, as at one point, he includes a shot with an accentuating push in toward a video camera dropped on the ground but still capturing the wreckage. Later in the film, Ray and his children take shelter in an abandoned suburban house outside of which lies a downed commercial airplane with wreckage, debris, and luggage strewn about. Newscasters and cameramen hover over the damage. One reporter asks Ray, “Were you on that plane?” because it would “make a great story.” Such moments echo the televisualization of the immediate



September 11th experience. The proximity of the alien attack to symbols of All-American domesticity—modest storefronts, rows of houses, each conspicuously lined with American flags—evoke the visceral emotional sensations of the moment rather than the exact events themselves. In *War of the Worlds*, the lingering smoke of the attack rises not from the ground of Manhattan’s financial district, but from the asphalt lining the streets of a blue-collar America.

Spielberg’s formal approach to the invasion recalls his previous work while also being pointedly reflective of September 11th. The perspective is more or less exclusively that of a ground level observer, as Spielberg and editor Michael Kahn repeatedly cut to close up shots of anonymous citizens fleeing on foot in terror. It would not be outlandish to confuse these haggard, traumatized faces with actual footage during the World Trade Center attacks. Shots of faces do much of the heavy lifting throughout, as in the moments leading up to the attack, on-lookers gaze up into the sky in curiosity and awe, a favorite image of Spielberg’s that can be found in films as varied as *Jurassic Park*, *Close Encounters* (1977), *Jaws* (1975), and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. These same faces will soon become stricken by the gravity of the situation. These shots are dark mutations of the so-called “Spielberg Face.” The Spielberg Faces of *War of the Worlds* do not gaze at miraculously regenerated dinosaurs or benevolent extra-terrestrials. They look out to a landscape of abrupt annihilation. Their awe is tempered with vivid, horrifying shock. Other loaded symbols appear in the sequence. Robert Kolker opines that a scene “in

which clothing of the human victims comes snowing down from the sky” is a clear “reference to the bodies leaping from the burning towers on September 11th (324). Another moment in the first attack shows Ray covered by chalky white debris. Although it’s revealed to be the ashes of victims of the aliens, a clear connection can be drawn to the concrete dust blanketing New York’s financial district on 9/11.

Just as one must credit editor Kahn, one must also consider the contribution of two other perennial Spielberg collaborators. Cinematographer Janusz Kaminski photographs the entire film in a grainy, monochromatic haze. The color palette of the first act features dull silver and grays that recall the resulting dust from crushed cinder blocks.



Musical composer John Williams forgoes his usual melodic tendencies in favor of a score that mostly recalls the droning tones of emergency sirens, fading in and out at a steadily increasing then decreasing volume. Each of these elements connects *War of the Worlds* to the frenzied state of emergency that characterized 9/11 and the days that followed.

As in *Minority Report*, Cruise’s protagonist Ray is again the locus of audience identification. Again, Cruise plays a man on the run, in this case more or less constantly on the run. But Ray is differentiated from *Minority Report*’s Anderton as well many other of Cruise’s characters in one essential way. He and all his surroundings “exude the American working class” (Combe 938). The tangible facts that are given about Ray—he’s a union worker, likes cars, and lives modestly—are reminiscent of other working class heroes: the first responders at Ground Zero. Indeed, there is a lingering shot after the first attack that lingers on Ray’s worn down weather beaten boots, strengthening the working class connective tissue from one attack to the other.

Ray is the nominal “action hero” in the film, but it’s notable how much time even he spends in utter confusion. Were it not for the audience’s familiarity with Cruise, Ray would disappear in the crowd. His only motivation is to protect his horrified daughter who’s prone to panic attacks and his rebellious son who’s prone to aggressive, impetuous

action. Taken together this trio covers the spectrum of popular reaction to an expansive trauma like 9/11. In Ray and his son Robbie are the two poles of flight and fight. Situated between the two is Ray's daughter, Rachel, paralyzed with panic. The overriding sense is that Spielberg doesn't quite trust young Robbie's bold violence and aggression. Instead, Robbie is aligned with retaliatory fervor and blind patriotism. The military ineptitude on display in *War of the Worlds* is continually evident as army force after army force attempt to weaken invading aliens to absolutely no avail. The disparity in size is so pronounced, the army's attempts border the comical, perhaps Spielberg's expression of the futility of a traditional "shock and awe," "total war" response.

One of the strengths of Spielberg's project is its convincing portrayal of widespread hysteria. It seems as if every person Ray encounters on his journey to protect his family is motivated by self-preservation. Consider the remarkably tense scene where a man steals Ray's van at gunpoint, a turn made cruelly ironic by the fact that Ray himself had stolen it. Ray's handgun, his only form of protection, is also stolen from him. Spielberg heightens the moment when a passerby picks up Ray's discarded firearm and picks it up by composing it as a single shot, ending in a close-up. The full shot comprises a silent expression of the way fear and paranoia proliferates swiftly and destructively.

Yet no figure in the film encapsulates fevered paranoia quite like Ogilvy. He's introduced about two thirds of the way through the film and is the closest thing the film has to a human antagonist. The notion of everyday, blue collar workers also carries through to Tim Robbins' paranoia addled Ogilvy, who is introduced with his paramedic's badge conspicuously prominent in the frame. Ray and his daughter seek shelter with Ogilvy in a cellar. However, things turn sour quickly. Ogilvy is eager to "take 'em [the invading aliens] from underground." Of course, this is a reversal of the initial fears expressed in the prologue; the order has been reversed with humans underground and aliens ruling the landscape. It's also Spielberg's expression of the futility in fighting terror with terror further explored in *Munich*. With his wild eyes



and manic demeanor, not many sound ideas are coming from Ogilvy. The final confrontation between Ogilvy and Ray is a thematically rich one, expressing that zealots, even if they're on your side are fundamentally too dangerous to ensure collective safety. Ray murders Ogilvy in cold blood, but it's an expression of the moral concessions he'll make to protect those he loves. It is the moment when Ray becomes a superior father, but that's only achieved through something morally suspect. Tellingly, Spielberg plays this moment out almost totally on a close-up of young Rachel, her eyes covered as she sings a lullaby in the moment of trenchant juxtaposition. With this single shot, Spielberg interrogates the outcomes of American aggression to which U.S. citizens are perhaps willfully blind. It communicates that experiences of terror force us to know things about ourselves that we may never acknowledge.

Given all that has transpired leading up to it, the denouement of *War of the Worlds* rings hollow. Ray has finally reunited his children with their mother. Son Robbie has somehow, in a gesture of pure hokum, survived alone and made it back home. But that's not to say the whole ending is subsumed in schmaltz. As with *Minority Report* before it, *War of the Worlds* seems to end on a note of family reunion. Yet, Ray never steps through the front door of the family home. Instead, he remains on the street outside. It is a moment, in its own way, reminiscent of the conclusion to John Ford's *The Searchers* where Ethan Edwards turns away from the door to civilization, search complete, more comfortable, more at home in the unforgiving wild. It is also a bitter echo of the conclusion of Spielberg's *Close Encounters*. Just as Roy Neary walks into the spaceship amongst the aliens, Ray Ferrier is left alone with the invasion and its wreckage both physically and psychically. He may have survived, but he's clearly undergone spiritual and emotional damage, an indirect victim of resounding trauma, a trauma that has reframed his world.

Unanswered Prayers: Responding to Terror in *Munich*

Initially, *Munich* would appear to have little connection to either *Minority Report* or *War of the Worlds*. Whereas those films outwardly resemble Spielberg's past blockbuster output— *Jurassic Park*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*— *Munich* adheres to his “historical” sensibility— *Schindler's List*, *Amistad*, *Empire of the Sun*. In popular criticism this invisible stratification is the difference

between disposable and more valuable work. That's how it's classified by Daniel J. Levine, who refers to these films as "stories that speak to collective memory, history, and identity" (online). *Munich* enjoyed the most distinguished reception of these three films, receiving five Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture and Director honors for Spielberg. Yet, the film is animated by the same sense of genre convention as any other less somber Spielberg film. At its core, *Munich* is a spy thriller. But it is also the most explicit confrontation of the themes and ideas first considered in his previous films.

Although the film chronicles the covert government response to the assassination of a group of eleven Israeli coaches and athletes at the 1972 Olympic games in Munich, it is not only about that event. It also addresses long-standing tensions between Israel and Palestine, but that again is not the sole concern of *Munich*. In a DVD introduction that seems explicitly created to address the flurry of political controversy that met the film upon release, Spielberg says his methodology as a filmmaker is to first "extend empathy in all directions." Further, he paints the film as "an attempt to look at policies Israel shares with the rest of the world and to understand why a country feels its best defense of a certain kind of violence is violence." *Munich* is a consciously Jewish film, but Spielberg's language is a tacit acknowledgement to look beyond its surface conflicts. In this context, the film's opening credits—a wall listing the major cities of the world, each name fading away with "New York" and "Munich" being the final cities—also cast a contemporary light on the film.

Munich begins with a terrorist action. The audience is oriented in the action through the interweaving of contemporary news reports of the era. Spielberg doesn't yet recreate the event, instead preferring the audience to identify with the viewers at home, hanging on every



word of the telecast. Further, the interlaced video footage makes this "the most mediated of Spielberg's films" as audiences are asked "to reflect on how these images are being used by the news industry as well as the terrorists to send different messages to different audiences" (Wasser 209). This is the first indication that he is uninterested in the details

of the act itself, or at the very least that he's sublimating the details of that event to the visceral emotions in response. This first section of the film includes numerous shots of families huddled around televisions, eyes wide with anticipation and horror. A noticeably somber John Williams score accompanies these moments.

The resonances in these sequences are clear, if not from the images themselves, then in the dialog surrounding them. The horror of watching terrorism unfold on live TV could be keenly felt in 2005 America and indeed throughout the world. The scenes following this introduction juxtapose the offices of the Israeli government with the dens of common family homes, clearly linking the two as sites of trauma, places where these events are to be mulled over, made sense of, and then responded to. The rhetoric in the offices, distinctly outfitted to appear almost like underground bunkers, is clear. "This is about fixing the world's attention," one character asserts. Another character says of the Palestinian terrorists who are interviewed on TV after killing the Olympians, "Look at them. They're movie stars." With *Munich*, Spielberg is clearly confronting the notion of televised terror as well as the role mediating forces play in our lives.

The prevailing notion in the war room is clear—there will be no negotiation with the terrorists. Another character, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir remarks, "Today, I'm hearing with new ears," a testament to the viciously transformative effect suffered at the hands of terrorists. By the time the decision is made to send an unofficial squad to kill the men who planned the Munich massacre, Spielberg has successfully cast an ambivalent pall over the picture. "Every civilization finds it necessary," Prime Minister Meir asserts, "to negotiate compromises with its own values." *Munich* spends the remainder of its running time tracking the cost of such compromises.

The ambivalence at the core of the film is played out through its main character, Avner, the man leading the response squad. In some ways, he's a classically Spielbergian protagonist— he's a family man, yet he also has an uneasy relationship with his father or rather the legacy of his father, a distinguished hero of the Israeli army. Yet, his arc is distinctly out of Spielberg's comfort zone, unlike Chief Brody of *Jaws* or Roy Neary of *Close Encounters*, Avner is never quite allowed to overcome his fears and suspicions. Indeed, the film often traces his descent into paranoia. As a covert agent, he's uniquely familiar with the unseen powers at work in the world and spends the film's back half in

constant fear for his own safety and that of his family. Spielberg and his screenwriters, Tony Kushner and Eric Roth, have cast him as a casualty of vengeance.

Avner plays another important role in the film. His are the eyes through which the audience will see the actual Munich murders. As seen in the film, they are encased in a flashback that proceeds with the steadfast pace of a nightmare. This choice privileges visceral reaction, a sense of commonly shared tragedy, over portraying the event with a sense of documentary realism. The moment is “a double fiction” mediating the truth through both Spielberg and Avner’s point of view. That is not to say he overdramatizes the event or misrepresents it, merely that his concerns lie elsewhere with the first person perspective, an attempt to transfer a national grief to a single point of view. Avner’s recurring nightmares of the massacre locate him as the film’s center of grief.

Unpacking the Avner character also requires a return to the film’s Jewish concerns. Upon release, *Munich* courted controversy with groups decrying it as somehow both anti-Israel and anti-Palestinian. Many scholars have chosen to focus their work on the film’s consideration of Jewishness, Zionism, and the Israel-Palestine conflict. Yet their work betrays the sense of universality that is both Spielberg’s stated intention and the ultimate sense one gleans from the film itself. James Schamus writes, “Avner’s genealogy and identity are key and contested issues constantly tied up in discourses about ‘home,’” (57). While this is true, those concerns are rarely limited to Judaism. Consider the following dialog exchanges between Avner and Robert, the team’s bomb maker:

Robert: We're Jews, Avner. Jews don't do wrong because our enemies do wrong.

Avner: We can't afford to be that decent anymore.

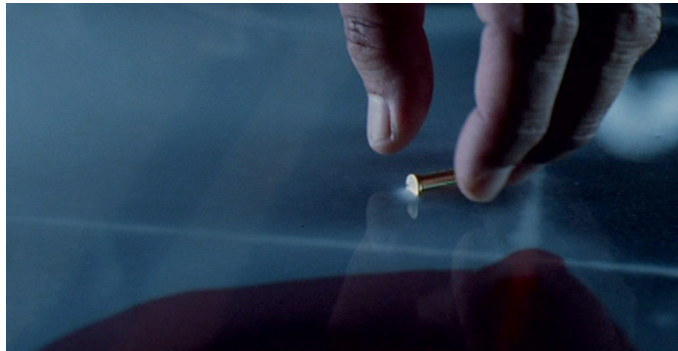
Robert: I don't know if we ever were that decent. Suffering thousands of years of hatred doesn't make you decent. But we're supposed to be righteous. That's a beautiful thing. That's Jewish. That's what I knew, that's what I was taught and I'm losing it. I lose that and that's everything. That's my soul.

Replace any mention of “Jews” or “Jewish” in that exchange with “American” and meaning does not substantially change. *Munich*’s exploration of Avner’s crisis of conscience and identity are merely framed as Jewish. *Munich* does not say the vengeance

poisons only the Jewish soul, but all souls. The team's mission is routinely sidetracked, by bad information, by botched assassinations, and eventually by avenging the death of a fellow team member. As Avner remarks, "There is no peace at the end of this."

Spielberg's aesthetic also undergoes a marked evolution in *Munich*. The international intrigue and spy gaming at work in the film inspire its almost drab color schemes. Indeed, it doesn't just replicate the dull browns and beiges of the early 1970s, it adopts them as its color palate. This somber minded visual design subconsciously separates it from other Spielberg's work, indicating it belongs to a more contemplative, restrained mode of cinema. Just as *Schindler's List* adopted the *vérité* camera style and black and white photography of wartime documentaries, *Munich* recalls the paranoid thrillers of the Watergate era.

Working with editor Michael Kahn, Spielberg also maintains a merciless control of pace and rhythm. Although the documentary pretensions of *Schindler's List* camouflaged, to an extent, Spielberg's adept manipulations, *Munich's* aesthetic heightens them. He and Kaminski repeatedly deploy zooms and handheld camera work during the assassinations, orchestrating them as suspense set pieces. Yet, there is an arc to these set pieces. They begin as thrilling and immaculately composed. The first includes the striking image of an expanding pool of blood encroaching into spilled milk. In the center of the frame lies a shell casing—the collision of life and



death and the means by which that collision is enabled. It's an eloquent image. No such images are found in later deaths, as the subsequent killings become more grisly. One bombing results in the death and maiming of other civilians and puts Avner's own life at risk. Another ends with the victim draped across a chair, stark naked with two bullet wounds in her chest and blood trickling out of each of them. The brutality of these images reflects Avner's descent into paranoia at the hands of enforced vengeance. What begins as a crusade ends as a death march.

Spielberg's sense of realism is stripped away along with Avner's trust in the outside world. Much has been made of the film climax—a sex scene between Avner and his wife that is intercut with flashbacks to the Munich massacre. It's a bold decision and it doesn't totally work. The meaning is clear—the violence committed against Israel haunts its people to their core, but their violence in response has done little to assuage it. It has only exacerbated their angst. Furthermore, it has chipped away at their fundamental values. In the film's denouement, Avner walks along a New York City waterfront with Ephraim, his Israeli government contact. Avner tells him, "Break bread with me. Come on, you're a Jew in a foreign land. It's written somewhere I should invite you to break bread with me. Break bread with me, Ephraim." His response is chilling—"No." These are the film's final lines before it cuts



to a wide shot of New York City, the World Trade Center towers ominously haunting the skyline, a unsettling reminder that *Munich* is a film of startling and immediate contemporary relevance, and that Spielberg's self-described prayer for peace lingers unanswered.

Conclusion

Overwhelming popular success will always color the critical legacy of Steven Spielberg, yet that alone should not preclude him from serious consideration as one of the most important filmmaking voices of his generation. In his career, Spielberg has spanned genres and audiences. His films have reached audiences both at home and abroad. Furthermore, many withstood the test of time and endure as popular classics. Yet, Spielberg has also tested his limits as a filmmaker. He's used both his industry power and preternatural visual skill to dive into the heart of a discontented American populace, as he is able to capture and elicit their greatest joys and deepest shocks, their most cherished desires and their most visceral fear. His genius in crafting popular entertainments lies not only in his high-level film craft, but also in his keen judgment regarding the widespread emotional temperature of the age. With the new century, he has further explored the social and political resonances of his stories and embraced a newfound darkness and

ambivalence. Perusing his post-*Munich* filmography proves such qualities haven't left Spielberg. Indeed, Spielberg's cinematic sensibility has undergone further shading with formally, narratively, and thematically ambitious projects like *The Adventures of Tintin* and *Lincoln*. Such evolution only serves to further confirm that Spielberg's oeuvre is worth serious consideration and scholarly attention and that the manifold resonances of his work have yet to be fully mined.

Works Cited

- Combe, Kirk. "Spielberg's Tale of Two Americas: Postmodern Monsters in *War of the Worlds*." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44.5 (2011): 934-952. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 21 Sept. 2014.
- Cooper, Mark G. "The Contradictions of *Minority Report*." *Film Criticism* 28.2 (2004): 24-41. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 15 Sept. 2014.
- Friedman, Lester D. *Citizen Spielberg*. Urbana: U of Illinois, 2006. Print.
- Gordon, Andrew. *Empire of Dreams: The Science Fiction and Fantasy Films of Steven Spielberg*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008. Print.
- Kolker, Robert Phillip. *A Cinema of Loneliness Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011. Print.
- McBride, Joseph. *Steven Spielberg: A Biography*. Jackson, MS: U of Mississippi, 2011. Print.
- Minority Report*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Perf. Tom Cruise. Dreamworks SKG, 2002. Blu Ray.
- Munich*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Perf. Eric Bana, Geoffrey Rush. Universal Pictures, 2005. DVD.
- Prince, Stephen. *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism*. New York: Columbia UP, 2009. Print.
- "Revisiting the Invasion." Dir. Laurent Bouzereau. *War of the Worlds*. Paramount Pictures, 2005. Blu Ray.
- Schamus, James. "Next Year in *Munich*: Zionism, Masculinity, and Diaspora in Spielberg's Epic." *Representations* 100 (Fall 2007): 53-66. *Modern Language Association*. . Web. 28 Sept. 2014.
- Schickel, Richard. "Prayer for Peace." *Time Canada* 166.24 (2005): 50-2. *Business Source Complete*. Web. 1 Nov. 2014.
- Sharpe, Matthew. "Is There a *Minority Report*?, Or: What Is Subjectivity?" *Other Voices* 2.3 (2005). Web.
- Vest, Jason. "Future's End: Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (2005)." *Film & History* 36.1 (2006): 67-71. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 20 Sept. 2014.

War of the Worlds. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Perf. Tom Cruise, Dakota Fanning, Tim Robbins, and Justin Chatwin. Paramount Pictures, 2005. Blu Ray.

Wasser, Frederick. *Steven Spielberg's America*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010. Print.