

Representations of Masculinities in Steven Spielberg's Film Text *War of the Worlds*

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Abstract

This article follows the four sites Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin propose in order to study the representation of masculinities in film: the body, action, the external world and the internal world. These sites are applied to Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*. The body of the main male protagonist belongs to a well-known star shown in working-class clothes. One of his most highlighted actions is to be metaphorically reborn. His external world relies on his role as a father, and his internal world asks the question "to what extent can you go to save your family, country or planet?"

Keywords: *War of the Worlds*, Steven Spielberg, masculinities, film analysis, stardom studies.

Masculinidades representadas en el film *War of the Worlds*, de Steven Spielberg

Resumen

Este artículo hace uso de los cuatro entornos que Pat Kirkham y Janet Thumin proponen para estudiar la representación de masculinidades en el cine: el cuerpo, la acción, el mundo externo y el mundo interno, aplicándolos a *War of the Worlds*, de Steven Spielberg. El cuerpo del principal prota-

gonista masculino pertenece a una conocida estrella revestida con ropaje de clase trabajadora. Una de sus acciones más señaladas es renacer metafóricamente. Su mundo externo se apoya en su papel como padre, y el interno propone la cuestión “¿hasta qué punto puedes llegar para salvar a tu familia, país o planeta?”.

Palabras clave: *La guerra de los mundos*, Steven Spielberg, masculinidades, análisis fímico, estudios sobre el estrellato fílmico.

1. INTRODUCTION

Not until 2006 do Steven Spielberg’s film texts get academic recognition in the English-speaking world: Warren Buckland’s (2006) and Lester Friedman’s (2006) books place Spielberg’s films at the forefront of artistic and technical advances in the cinematic world. Other subsequent books by Nigel Morris (2007), Andrew Gordon (2008), Frederic Wasser (2010) and more recently James Kendrick (2014), fail to pay particular attention to the representations of masculinities in the films they discuss, including our film. That is our research question here: How are masculinities portrayed in the film text *War of the Worlds* (Spielberg, 2005)?

This article is part of a wider research which considers the whole of Spielberg’s career regarding the representations of masculinities in his films. The most recently published pieces of research are to be found in Díaz-Cuesta (2013), dealing with *Lincoln* (Spielberg, 2012) and Díaz-Cuesta (2014), dealing with *The Sugarland Express* (Spielberg, 1974). The current article stems from Díaz-Cuesta (2012).

2. A NOTE ON METHOD

To answer that we follow an analytico-synthetical method derived from Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim’s approach to the representation of masculinities in film, as stated in *You Tarzan: Masculinities, Movies and Men* (1993).

Research on film masculinities usually comes from fields as varied as genre studies, History, Reception Theory or Stardom studies, among others. It is not common to find research that dares sum up all those approaches in a structured way.

The four sites Kirkham and Thumim propose are very close to the four aspects Robert Connell explores in his seminal *Masculinities* (2001): there he interviews a number of men about their bodies, their daily experiences, their relationships with other people and their wishes. The origins of both sets of traits come from men talking about themselves in the case of Connell's book, and from men writing about men in film in the case of Kirkham and Thumim's anthology. In both cases their object of study is masculinity, or rather, masculinities.

In *You Tarzan* Kirkham and Thumim understand masculinities as a compound of four sites: the body, action, the external world and the internal world. We explore each of the sites, paying particular attention to those scenes in the film where each site is more relevant.

3. Textual analysis

3.1. The body

Kirkham and Thumim, when referring to the body, claim that

The pleasures to be had in consuming the spectacle of the 'perfect' male body are fraught with difficulties, not least because of the contradiction between the vulnerable passivity arguably implicit in the state of being-looked-at, and the dominance and control which patriarchal order expects its male subjects to exhibit. (1993: 12).

They also focus on the star persona of each actor: "Star personae can offer a shorthand history of variants of the masculine in its encounter with the feminine" (1993: 15).

Tom Cruise, Ray Ferrier in the film, is one of those actors that can still be considered as a Hollywood star: "Despite not being one of the tallest men in Hollywood, Tom Cruise certainly towers over most of his contemporaries in terms of popular status and box office success" (Baughan and Sloane, 2005: 59).

Tom Roston claims that "Tom Cruise is intense. And he doesn't keep it inside—he wears his intensity like a second skin. We've seen it on-screen time and again" (2005: 80).

His possibilities as an actor go from the handsome boy of his beginnings (Baughn and Sloane, 2005: 59) —*Risky Business*¹ (Brickman,

1983) and above all *Top Gun*² (Scott 1986) –to performances of greater psychological depth like the ones in *Rain Man*³ (Levinson, 1988), *Born on the Fourth of July*⁴ (Stone, 1989), *Eyes Wide Shut*⁵ (Kubrick, 1999) or *Magnolia*⁶ (Anderson, 1999), to quote the most outstanding ones. He has also done action movies like *Mission: Impossible* (De Palma 1996) and its sequels, and we must not forget his first collaboration with Spielberg in *Minority Report* (2002).

Perhaps this last film, together with *Magnolia*, is the one that allows us to foresee the kind of performance we expect from Cruise in *War of the Worlds*: if *Minority Report* tells the story of a father who has lost his son, a father who is given a second chance as he appears in the last images of the film back with his wife, pregnant, *War of the Worlds* starts with a father whose wife –ex-wife– is also pregnant, but from another man, and Cruise’s character is assigned the risky task, considering the other film, of looking after his own children.

Around Tom Cruise there have been frequent rumours about his relationship with the Church of Scientology, as well as about his possible homosexuality⁷. According to Gaylyn Studlar:

specific textual representations of the body and screen persona of Cruise render the male star an object of a polymorphous gaze that cuts across the desiring possibilities of male and female, gay and straight spectatorship. [...] Cruise’s performances of masculinity played through the beautiful male body have allowed him to become an erotic sign that can be appropriated by more than heterosexual female audiences (2001: 174, 182).

Tom Roston ponders on Cruise’s animal looks:

There’s a reason that PREMIERE’s editors believe 42-year-old Cruise is the greatest movie star working today. He may not have the lovable warmth of Hanks or the heroic dignity of Washington or the angelic looks of Pitt. But he’s definitely the most attractive. There’s a luminosity and fierceness to him. Think of a wolf. There is a feral quality to him, after all –strong bone structure, urgent eyes– that makes him seem a little bit wild (something both women and men can appreciate for different reasons). And then there is his exuberant, cocksure smile, which radiates off the screen, wrapping audiences

in its glow, signifying to all that there's a movie star up there, and he's loving the part (2005: 80).

If we take into account both Cruise's filmography and the accounts about his real life, he can be seen as an actor who can offer complex performances of masculinities:

his films consistently move his characters from a performance of manliness into "authentic" manliness through the incorporation of qualities –gentleness, self-control, compassion– that might be regarded as "feminine." In this respect, Cruise straddles "hard" and "soft" modes of masculinity. It is not his physical but his moral nature that must be changed (Studlar 2001: 176).

Considering his presence in this film, Buckland refers to the way the camera approaches his movements:

The camera closely follows Ray's movements, using what Steven D. Katz calls "sympathetic motion," a type of camera movement designed around the movement of actors as a way of maintaining a close relationship with them, which is also used extensively in *Minority Report*. [...] However, in *War of the Worlds* I would argue that sympathetic motion is used more effectively because, together with restricted narration, it conveys the first-person perspective that is so crucial to Wells's novel. In fact, the sympathetic motion and restricted narration work together to create the film's relentless, terrifying mood. (2006: 216)

Ray Ferrier's body in *War of the Worlds* is very closely linked to his relationship with engines (that of the crane he operates at work [Figure 1], his car's, the one he has in the kitchen, or the one he helps to repair). His body is also linked to his belonging to the working class (Martín, 2009: 170).

His appearance is casual and juvenile, and although we do catch a glimpse of his bare back, he spends the rest of the film covered with several layers of a shell which he will have to take off in order to face the challenge of having to kill another man.



Figure 1. Ferrier at work

His son Robbie dresses similarly to his father, only slightly more juvenile, in such a way that we may not take them for brothers.

Harlan Ogilvy, the man who is sacrificed, stands for the survivor, the one close to his weapons, with a self-destructive attitude that places him close to Quint in *Jaws* (Spielberg 1975).

3.2. Action

Kirkham and Thumim understand ‘action’ as “various representations of the physical, including violence, competition, aggression, skill and endurance, in which these attributes are depicted in terms of the male body in action” (1993: 12).

Ferrier debates himself between the attraction of the encounter with the Real –something he seeks at the beginning of the film– and the instinct of protecting his body and the bodies of the rest of his family.

The alien menace is above any other one in Spielberg’s previous films and has traits of chemical warfare.

Ferrier, together with his daughter and son, undergoes experiences like stealing a car or suffering the consequences of a plane crashed against his ex-wife’s house –this latter situation, without being watched by the girl–, as if the attacks of the 11th of September of 2001 had been recreated (Figure 2).

In fact, this *War of the Worlds* can be interpreted as Spielberg’s vision and reaction to the 9/11 attacks. Spielberg himself accepts this fact when he says:



Figure 2. Ferrier carries his daughter away from a plane engine

in the shadow of 9/11, there's some relevance to how we all feel unsettled about our collective futures. When I reconsidered *War of the Worlds*, it made more sense to me post-9/11, that it could be a tremendous emotional story as well as a very entertaining one, and have some kind of current relevance. (Bond, 2005: 20)

Jason Vest extends the comparison to wars of the XXth and XXIst centuries:

The utter devastation wrought by the aliens, in fact, gives the viewer some sense of what it must have been like to be in Baghdad and Fallujah during the initial American assault of 2003, to experience the napalm attacks on Vietnamese villages in the late 1960s, or to live through the firebombing of Dresden and the London Blitz (2006: 69).

The stevedore gains his children's respect when he fires a warning shot (Figure 3) in order to protect them from the mass of people who, like animals, gather around their vehicle in a menacing way.

His transgression of the law turns him into the symbolic father, as Joshua Gunn puts it:

Ray ends up pulling and firing a gun to take control of the situation temporarily. Although Ray eventually loses the weapon to another angry and desperate man, in this violent scene Ray nevertheless establishes himself as the father who, however flawed, has the power to protect by means of transgression –because of his proximity to death. From this Hob-



Figure 3. Carrier fires a gun

besian moment onward, Ray's children never doubt his status as their father— not simply as their real father, but in terms of his ability to represent the law in an otherwise lawless environment. Ray finally comes to occupy the position of the symbolic father—albeit precariously—protecting his children from chaos/psychosis (2008: 11).

Ferrier finds himself in hand-to-hand combat on several occasions: with members of the mob that wants his car, with his own son (in order to prevent him from joining the battle), and with Ogilvy.

The ability of the crane operator is once more shown when he beats a tripod, after having been reborn —both visually and metaphorically— as the *mise en scène* is close to that of labour and birth (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Ferrier is reborn out of the *womb* of a tripod

3.3. The external world

For Kirkham y Thumim the external world of masculinities in film consists of “representations of the public interaction of male characters with each other and with the conventions and institutions against which they operate” (1993: 12).

The family, and, above all, fatherhood, play a very important role in the film. As Gary Arms and Thomas Riley aptly argue:

One could describe the rest of the film as a quest in which an incompetent father tries desperately to return his children to their mother, but by doing so finally becomes a “true father,” one who will risk his own life to save his children from harm (2008: 15).

We witness the evolution of Ray as a father: he starts as a self-absorbed egotist who can only take fatherhood as a game and who is incapable of catering for the affective and basic needs of his kids (food and security), and progressively turns into a father who carries his daughter in his arms when necessary, sings to her what he can, kisses her when she falls asleep (Figure 5) and is capable of calming her by embracing her and telling her “I love you.”

On his way he will have to stand up to the fact that his kids, especially his daughter, miss their mother, whom Ray ends up replacing in her role of symbolic father. The ultimate outcome of Ray's vicissitudes is the returning of his daughter to her mother, safe and sound, and that involves the creation of a type of family that is not the traditional one.



Figure 5. A tenderly kiss

When he returns his daughter, the family that has been formed is of an extensive kind, including his ex-wife, her parents and her new husband, and within it there is a place for Ray. The experiences he has suffered with his kids have made him evolve as a father and as a person. Ferrier's victory is above all over himself, showing himself what he can do: renounce fight however much he is attracted by that death drive, give up on being the first on his priority list, and be attentive to cater for his children's needs.

3.4. The internal world

Following Kirkham y Thumim, Ferrier would fall into the category of

the [...] heroes of the male epic whose masculine identity is often specified by the control involved in being able to say no, being able to deny, precisely in order to prove oneself a greater man.

Such films, structured around the questions 'what kind of a man is this?', both conceal and imply the underlying question 'what kind of man am I?' It is this enigma which fuels the narrative. Masculinity, these films suggest, cannot be taken as known but is rather something that men must 'live up to' (1993: 23).

The internal world of the male characters of *War of the Worlds* can be summed up in the question "to what extent can you go to save ours (our family, country or planet)?" That is our reformulation of Ferrier's direct address to Ogilvy, to the camera and hence to the spectator: "Do you understand what I'm gonna have to do?"

The film answers both questions by means of Harlan Ogilvy's assassination, which means his sacrifice and that of his murderer, who loses his own innocence. The assassination, in spite of being the climax of the film, is not shown to the camera, as that encounter with the Real can only be withstood by the hero. Spielberg prefers to choose a classical approach to horror, and, like John Ford in *The Searchers* (1956) (Figure 6), is careful enough as to codify the symbolic in this film.

The girl saved by that action turns into an allegory of the innocents, the United States and the Earth. In all cases her father would have acted in self-defence, as any other animal would have done, fighting to survive in a fight that human beings also share with extraterrestrials.



Figure 6. Spielberg follows John Ford closely

The aliens are not far from our own fragility, as David Koepp, one of the film scriptwriters, has put it:

I think *War of the Worlds* is a survival story, about how far will you go to survive? How far will you go to protect your children? But it's also a survival story for the aliens, which is what's interesting. And they're not really villains. I remember on *Jurassic Park*, we were never allowed to refer to them as monsters—we were supposed to call them animals. And the aliens in this movie are animals, too. You could tell the same story again from the point of view of the aliens, and it would be a tragedy. Their planet is dying—they're just looking for a place where they can survive (Feld, 2005: 151).

Spielberg signs his film on a star field, and, like a god, he seems to be telling us that in order to be in peace we need a common enemy.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The masculinity of Ray Ferrier, the main character in *War of the Worlds*, is to be traced in his evolution as a father throughout the film text. In order to highlight this role—and as John Ford had done before with John Wayne—, Spielberg chooses a Hollywood star, Tom Cruise, whose mere presence on the screen is enough to make his character shine and who is capable of incorporating a variety of registers to his performance of masculinities. The director uses Cruise's magnetism so that the audience may feel with him and may be moved by him (Díaz-Cuesta, 2012: 277). The film mainly focalises on Ray Ferrier, whose body is related to most of the images in the film. We agree with Sara Martín when she aptly argues that "Ray is nothing but another alien-in-the-machine: the alienated American man" (Martín, 2009: 170).

At the beginning he assumes his paternal function as if it were a game. When he attempts to take a responsible role he discovers that he is not prepared to do so. Nonetheless, the experiences he goes through and his progressive reinforcement in paternal authority make him a better father and person.

Ferrier keeps a tense relationship with his son. The representation of both of them –more like brothers than like father and son– makes us think of Robbie as an extension of a Ferrier who, at the beginning of the film, acts as irresponsibly as a teenager who is only concerned with himself and intent on becoming a first-line observer of the events. His relationship with his daughter becomes more intimate and intense as the film progresses –especially so when they are left alone, as if the presence of other people interfered with their relationship. At the end of the film he is capable of comforting her like a good father, managing to calm her using his own resources. Eventually both his son and his daughter find in Ferrier the kind of father they had been waiting for, which is why they can call him “Dad.”

Ray Ferrier’s family is not a traditional one but an extended one. Although Ray is not in charge of his children full time, he is now prepared to treat them as they deserve. Thus we can conclude that Ferrier has earned himself a place in that family. Ferrier shows his worth as a hero by being capable of rescuing his daughter and returning her to her mother: his paternal role is reinforced as he renounces to his ex-wife’s love in a family in which another man is now occupying the position he lost in the past. He does not need to be the head of the family either to regain his paternal authority. Nevertheless, quoting Martín again, “his heroism remains unacknowledged at a public level” (Martín, 2009: 173).

The stevedore is capable of beating a monster –an alien tripod in which masculine and feminine features merge, and which has the aura of a legendary animal, like the dragon. This climactic moment culminates the process of figurative death and rebirth of our protagonist, who, against all odds, manages to overcome a number of adverse situations before being allowed to occupy the place of the father, a place that both his ex-wife and his own children –including himself in a not too concious manner– claim from him at the beginning of the film. The place of the father confers Ferrier maturity, self-respect and the confidence of knowing at last which is the place he deserves in the world.

That place asks for a specific kind of time which Ferrier has spent with his children, especially with his daughter, and which Michael Kimmel has called 'quantity time':

What steps are we taking to become better fathers? At best, men say they 'help out' around the house, that they 'pitch in' with the housework, and that they spend 'quality time' with their children. But it is not 'quality time' that will provide the deep intimate relationships that we say we want, either with our partners or with our children. It's 'quantity time'-putting in those long, hard hours of thankless, unnoticed drudge work. It's 'quantity time' that creates the foundation of intimacy. Nurture is doing the unheralded tasks, like holding someone when they are sick, doing the laundry, the ironing, washing the dishes. Nurturing is putting in those hours, unseen, uncelebrated (1996: 49)

In order to defend the most innocent and fragile of his family members, Ferrier has to use his most basic animal instincts to kill another human being that represents a threat to his family, just like the extraterrestrials, who menace them and who constitute another species also trying to fight for survival. Ferrier's murdering of Ogilvy captivates our attention because of the sense of sacrifice that is involved: the sacrifice of the person who is killed and also of the killer, who loses his innocence. Ferrier addresses the camera –and hence the spectator– with a direct question, which is meant for Ogilvy in the diegesis: "Do you understand what I'm gonna have to do." It must be noticed that Ferrier says "have to," as if what he is going to do were an imposition, because of the especial obligation he has to his daughter's innocence, and also because of the survival instinct that justifies the above mentioned act of self-defence.

Such an act of self-defence is conditioned, as we have mentioned, to the survival instinct that every human being, like any other animal, including the extraterrestrials, may be said to possess. The extraterrestrial menace implies the vanishing of human beings and their bodies in some sort of chemical warfare: it is as if we were fighting ourselves. Spielberg goes deep into the most basic part of our humanity and our animality so that we can feel the same things as his characters. The question we are being asked is "to what limits are we ready to go to save what is ours (family, country or planet)?" The answer seems to be conditioned by the basic instinct for survival.

Spielberg's camera prevents us from watching the battle between the military and the extraterrestrials, and it also blocks our way to the room where Ferrier kills Ogilvy. The director behaves like a classical filmmaker and, like a god or a father who, when he considers it necessary, protects his creatures from the encounter with the Real (PG-13)⁸, an encounter that only the hero can stand up to.

Notas

1. The film shows the way in which Joel Goodsen's teenage fantasies come true when his parents go out for a week.
2. Here Cruise embodies pilot Maverick, who wants to become the best and falls in love with his female instructor Charlie (Kelly McGillis).
3. Cruise (Charlie Babbitt) partners Dustin Hoffman (Raymond Babbitt), the autistic brother whom Charlie discovers in pursuit of their father's inheritance, to end up finding himself. Spielberg was close to directing the film.
4. This biopic shows Ron Kovic's disappointment and grief owing to his experiences at Vietnam's War, which has meant his being paralyzed from the mid-chest down and his being profoundly affected at a psychological level. One of his worries comes from the fact that, because of his wounds, he cannot become a father.
5. Cruise stars as Dr. Bill Harford, whose extra-marital life jeopardizes his marriage with Nicole Kidman (Alice Harford), who happens to be Cruise's real-life wife, and from whom he gets a divorce in 2001.
6. Frank T.J. Mackey (Tom Cruise) epitomises the men's movement in the United States. He hides his anger towards his father under a phallic and male chauvinist mask (Rehling, 2009: 66-67).
7. Those rumours have made him prevail in several trials over some individuals or newspapers, like *The Daily Express*, which stated that he is a homosexual. He has also been under the public eye for belonging to and promoting the Church of Scientology (Intxausti, 2005: 46).
8. A rating that involves that parental guidance is suggested for children under 13, and which was promoted by Spielberg himself when he directed *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), as Jim Windolf (2008) has highlighted.

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