Adapting *The War of the Worlds* for Television

Mehdi Achouche

In 2019, two TV adaptations of H. G. Wells's classic *The War of the Worlds* (1898) were simultaneously released. The two shows make very different choices in the way they adapt the original novel, each trying in its own way to modernize the source material for contemporary tastes. One is a period drama set in Edwardian England while the other is a contemporary update set in both France and England. Both shows foreground female characters as their leads, although both fail to convincingly empower their protagonists and completely move beyond stereotypes. Similarly, the original anti-imperialist content from the novel is maintained by one but not by the other. Instead, it draws from Wells's novel to reimagine it as a post-apocalyptic narrative about human cooperation and competition. Both productions exploit contemporary anxieties over societal collapse. They ultimately focus on the novel's original interest in the limited first-person perspective of its protagonist and narrator, while concentrating on the family as the locus of their narratives and themes.

The War of the Worlds has proven one of Wells's most enduring stories since the novel's original release. Each one of its adaptations has been the object of fascinating studies on how it reflects its own context of production. Wells's story was published against the backdrop of increasing tensions with Germany, as speculative war narratives of futuristic warfare had been popular since the consolidation of the German Empire and its military forces under Bismarck. Sir George Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Volunteer*, which launched the Future War subgenre, was published the very same month as the German forces' actual victory over France: May 1871. This novella imagined a surprise attack on Great Britain by an unnamed

adversary equipped with "fatal engines" that wipes out the Royal Navy, and the following novels and novellas similarly envisioned scientific and technological advances put to devastating uses.

Wells's great contribution to the burgeoning science fiction genre (then still called "scientific romances") was to make aliens the invading enemy while shaking further the smug Victorian sense of self-satisfaction. It also incorporated several key themes of the era, leading I. F. Clarke to call *The War of the Worlds* "the perfect nineteenth-century myth of the imaginary war" (84). Each of the successive adaptations was in turn able to use the extraterrestrial invasion as a metaphor for its own era's anxieties and fears. Orson Welles's 1938 radio drama famously triggered a panic (of disputed proportions) among its listeners, as fears of another world war were headlining the news. The 1953 movie adaptation was part of a cycle of alien invasion narratives that took place in the context of the early Cold War. It also drew on fears over "the terrible weapons of superscience" developed during World War II, as made explicit in the opening of that film. As for Steven Spielberg's 2005 adaptation, it was clearly meant to evoke the 9/11 attacks and their immediate aftermath. This makes the release in 2019 of no less than two television series adapted from *The War of the Worlds* (only the second and third such live-action TV adaptations) all the more interesting.

The first is a three-episode British miniseries produced for BBC One and broadcast in November and December 2019, while the second is a three-season, twenty-four-episode international coproduction between the Fox Network Group and French broadcaster Canal+ that aired between 2019 and 2022. The most obvious difference between the two is that the former is set in Edwardian England while the latter takes place in modern-day France and England. This means that both shows quickly diverge and provide differing reinterpretations of Wells's classic, and both are meant to echo contemporary times.

On the one hand, the miniseries hews closely enough to Wells's narrative, being set in rural England and telling the story of the invasion through the limited perspective of a childless couple. But whereas in the novel the wife is quickly left behind to focus on the husband's misadventures in the midst of the invasion, the BBC miniseries makes her the central character. From the very beginning the famous voiceover remarking on humanity's "infinite complacency," which until then had always been narrated by a somber male voice, is now spoken by the female protagonist, Amy (played by Eleanor May Tomlinson). It quickly becomes clear in the first episode that the series will adopt a feminist perspective to comment on the situation of women at the time.

We learn, for example, that Amy cannot apply to a women's college for a master's degree without letters of recommendation. No one will write her one, however, because Amy and George live together out of wedlock, as George (played by Rafe Spall) already has a wife but has left her for Amy. While he can still work and pay for the couple's expenses, Amy is stuck as a housewife in their rural cottage, even though, as she pointedly remarks, "I don't need to be kept." When she complains about this state of affairs in the obligatory exposition scene, George is rather dismissive of her plight and remarks instead on how their chicken has just laid an egg—implicitly reminding Amy and audiences of women's primary role in Edwardian England (it will soon be revealed that Amy is, in fact, pregnant).

This is certainly an interesting perspective to take on Wells's material, although the series is not entirely successful in that regard. In fact, the relationship between the two lead characters is not well integrated within the overall invasion story. The characters flee the oncoming Martians and their destruction but still find the time, between two attacks, to discuss how George is trying to get his wife to sign the divorce papers. The home they have created together is central to the first episode but leads the writer, Craig Viveiros, to rely on the worst disaster film clichés, such as

one character having to go back to fetch the dog who has been left behind. Such scenes betray the limited creativity behind the show throughout its short run.

The Fox/Canal+ TV series also gives female characters significantly more dramatic space, with one of its leads played by Léa Drucker. She plays Catherine Durand, a French astronomer who is the lead scientific voice in the series (her counterpart in the BBC miniseries is played by Robert Carlyle, but he is only a supporting character). This is an interesting choice given that the genre has historically done a poor job of representing women as protagonists and hard-headed scientists. Yet there is little commentary here on the condition of being a woman: although the family and family relationships are the central narrative dynamic and theme of the show, no specific role emerges for women. Both Catherine and her British counterpart, male professor Bill Ward (played by Gabriel Byrne), must deal with problematic family issues, as do most other characters. It is true, however, that Catherine fits rather well the stereotype of the childless "sad spinster" who has a maternal obsession with protecting her younger, drug-addicted sister. She will eventually help her fix her life and protect her child, and the last scene of the series sees Catherine, who has given up on her own lover, finally broadly smiling as she holds her sister's baby in her arms. The miniseries' penultimate scene also focuses on its female protagonist putting her own child to bed, again associating its female character with motherhood (which in both productions is a symbol for human resilience).

The British miniseries also remembers to honor Wells's anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist theme. The narrator of the original novel remarks in the opening chapter that 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 own 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 as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit? (4-5)

In the miniseries' first episode, a cabinet minister makes a speech in front of journalists remarking on the superiority of "the Anglo-Saxon race, the best, most human, most honorable race the world possesses," adding, "And any challenge will be faced and defeated. We are an empire on which the sun never sets." This is shot while the camera films Westminster Palace and the minister himself (standing on the top of stairs) in low angles to stress their authority and to highlight the same kind of arrogance Wells was set on countering. In the second episode, parallel editing contrasts another triumphant speech by the same Minister with images of the destruction wrought by the aliens: "we are the masters of warfare . . . our cavalry, our cannon, are the best in the world" is heard while British soldiers are depicted being decimated by the aliens' superior technology (an outraged officer is heard exclaiming, "You are in Great Britain!" just before being zapped out of existence). When the Minister remarks that there cannot be more than two of their fighting machines, audiences can in fact see three of them, while another shot soon visualizes dozens of new ships approaching Earth from space. The British Empire seems on its way to being colonized out of existence.

The Fox/Canal+ series, on the other hand, has nothing to say about colonialism, imperialism, or technological hubris. Instead, the initial attack is soon left behind as the show reimagines Wells's story as a post-apocalyptic narrative, echoing the many such series that have been produced over the past few years. This makes it very much a show attuned to contemporary times, as Western societies have been haunted, on and off the screen, by the possibility of imminent societal collapse. In terms of post-apocalyptic TV series, 2019 alone witnessed the release of *To*

the Lake (2019-2022), *Black Summer* (2019-2021), *Daybreak* (2019), *See* (2019-2022), and the terrifying French production, *The Collapse* (2019-2020), and the trend was only given renewed momentum by the COVID-19 pandemic. Mark R. Hillegas noted the connection audiences feel to Wells's apocalyptic vision as early as 1967 when he wrote that "the Wellsian story of the end of civilization brought about by a disastrous war . . . is the most influential ancestor of the nuclear holocaust novels so popular in recent years" (60-61). The popularity of the post-apocalyptic subgenre in the face of contemporary challenges arguably explains the renewed popularity of Wells's novel.

The Fox/Canal+ production is full of wide shots of empty buildings and ruins, car wrecks and dead bodies littering the streets while its characters wander through the rural and urban wasteland—surely some of the most iconic images of contemporary science fiction. Some early episodes raise the question of cooperation versus competition among the survivors, the typical theme of post-apocalyptic narratives that question human nature and the potential for savagery once civilization has collapsed. This element was already outlined in Wells's novel when the protagonist is trapped under the ruins of a house and has to share his limited food supplies with another character (the most memorable scene in the Spielberg adaptation is perhaps when the father, played by Tom Cruise, decides to murder a similar character to protect his family). When it is revealed that the aliens are in fact time-traveling humans, the series seems to be elaborating on that theme—humanity devouring itself—although later seasons in fact do little with it.

The miniseries also likes to film British civilians clogging the streets and roads as they are explicitly referred to as "refugees." Again, the show draws directly from Wells, as the novel describes "a stampede—a stampede gigantic and terrible—without order and without a goal, six million people, unarmed and unprovisioned, driving headlong. It was the beginning of the rout of

civilization, of the massacre of mankind" (175). Such passages and their interest in the civilians' plight when order implodes also explain modern interest in the novel. This is perhaps why the miniseries also intercuts each of its three episodes with scenes set in a future, post-apocalyptic London, as the survivors try to make sense of the reddish Martian vegetation that now thrives on Earth (part of the Martians' colonization scheme). But, again, the miniseries does little with these scenes, and both productions are not as artistically successful as they could have been.

Both series tend to rely on well-worn stereotypes and questionable writing, with the Fox/Canal+ series in particular quickly stretching credibility. Its characters act and react in the most unlikely ways, while its attempts at incorporating quantum theory to support the existence of alternate timelines (another popular theme over the past few years) is rather unconvincing—the writing is full of incoherence and contradictions, and the writers out of their depth. Only the miniseries intermittently tries to achieve the same kind of thematic resonance as Wells, although it also quickly falls back on family-driven story arcs and issues, foreclosing larger social themes.

The limited perspective of the first-person narrator in the original novel is an enticing one, as it makes it possible to recount the story of an alien invasion through the partial and subjective prism of isolated individuals and families. This is very much in line with the contemporary interest in the human dimension behind such large-scale stories. Yet other post-apocalyptic TV series have been more ambitious and successful in their treatment of similar material, both before (*Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009)) and after (*Invasion* (2021-2023), *The Last of Us* (2023-present), *Fallout* (2024)) the release of these two adaptations of *The War of the Worlds*. It is a shame, therefore, that one of the strongest source materials for such stories has not—yet—found the proper TV treatment.

Works Cited

Bernard, Jérémy et al, creators. *The Collapse*, Canal+, 2019.

Chesney, George. *The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Volunteer*. London, Blackwood, 1871.

Clarke, I. F. *Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars, 1763-3749.* 2nd ed., Oxford UP, 1992.

Coleite, Aron Eli and Brad Peyton, creators. *Daybreak*. Netflix, 2019.

Druckman, Neil and Craig Mazin, creators. *The Last of Us*. HBO, 2023.

Hillegas, Mark R. *The Future as Nightmare. H. G. Wells and the Anti-Utopians.* Oxford UP, 1967.

Hyams, John and Karl Schaefer, creators. *Black Summer*. The Asylum, 2019.

Kinberg, Simon and David Weil, creators. *Invasion*. Apple TV+, 2021.

Knight, Steven, creator. *See*. Apple TV+, 2019.

Kostomarov, Pavel, director. *To the Lake*. 1-2-3 Production, 2019.

Moore, Ronald D., developer. *Battlestar Galactica*. R&D TV, 2004.

Overman, Howard, creator. *The War of the Worlds*, Fox, Canal+, 2019.

Robertson-Dworet, Geneva, and Graham Wagner, creators. *Fallout*. Amazon Prime Video, 2024.

Viveiros, Craig, director. *The War of the Worlds*, BBC, 2019.

"The War of the Worlds." *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*. Performed by Orson Welles, CBS Radio Network, 30 Oct. 1938.

The War of the Worlds. Directed by Byron Haskin, Paramount Pictures, 1953.

War of the Worlds. Directed by Steven Spielberg, Paramount Pictures, 2005.

Wells, H. G. *The War of the Worlds.* London: William Heinemann, 1898. *Internet Archive,* archive.org/details/warofworlds00welluoft.

Mehdi Achouche is an Associate Professor in Anglophone Cinema and American Studies at Sorbonne Paris Nord University, Paris. He specializes in representations of techno-utopianism, transhumanism, and progress in science fiction cinema and television.