

Pop-culture & Trump, Part I: Five Sci-Fi Films to Watch during the Trumpocalypse

Written by Robert A. Saunders

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ROBERT A. SAUNDERS, AUG 24 2017

This post represents the first in a series on the pop-culture presidency of Donald J. Trump. In this series, I plan to address different facets of the current American president's imbrication with popular culture, recognising that he is – first and foremost – a product of mass media (unlike Obama and his predecessors). I have refrained from focusing too much on the Trump presidency in this blog as I feel that such analysis would be trite or simply become lost in a growing morass of similar content, which ranges from 140-character critiques to monograph-length excoriations. My change of heart results from my son's admonition following his attendance at U2's recent tour. As part of the band's stage show, attendees were treated to a video from a 1958 episode of the Western *Trackdown* in which a charlatan named Walter Trump rides into town promising to save its denizens from the 'end of the world' by building a 'wall' around them. This Trump is quite the orator, and when confronted with his lies, threatens to 'sue' anyone who challenges him. While it has been reported ad nauseum that *The Simpsons* predicted Trump's inevitable ascension to the presidency, this curious artefact from over a half-century ago seems to have actually birthed the real Trump into reality. Reflecting on the power of popular culture, this set of short essays aims to provide commentary on Trump and his times. And with that, I offer up five speculative/science fiction films to view as the Trumpocalypse builds, with helpful suggestions on how to watch.

5. *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014, dir. Anthony and Joe Russo)

The consummate American superhero Steve Rogers undercovers a sinister plot by a world-wide fascist organisation Hydra to infiltrate the highest levels of state power around the globe, including the U.S. government. Nearly killed by the brainwashed turncoat Bucky Barnes (a.k.a. the Winter Soldier), now a (post)Soviet agent of destruction, Cap must go rogue to defend his homeland from the insidious forces who would rob Americans of their liberty and annihilate 'undesirables' capable of challenging the new world order, all in the name of promoting 'security'. Interestingly, when the film premiered, it was read by many as an indictment of the 'deep state', but is now gaining a second life as condemnation of Nazism in all its forms. As filmmaker Nick Murphy pointed out in his tweet on the film, the 2014 version of himself wondered: 'In Winter Soldier, I don't see how Hydra/Nazis could infiltrate the government without anyone noticing'. However, his 2017 self (using the GIF of Captain American dropping his head in bewilderment), no longer finds such malfeasance surprising in the wake of Trump's implied moral equivalency of neo-Nazis and anti-fascist demonstrators in Charlottesville, Virginia.

4. *Dune* (1984, dir. David Lynch)

A baroque adaptation of Frank Herbert's 1965 masterpiece of political science fiction, *Dune* offers up a celluloid roadmap for understanding the machinations of IR in the Trump era. With his orange hair, unquenchable thirst for power, and taste for exotic pleasures, the Baron Vladimir Harkonnen represents a grotesque manifestation of the U.S. head of state. The analogy gains steam when one looks at the coterie that surrounds him – from his relatives Raban and Feyd-Rautha to the twisted Mentat Piter De Vries to the obsequious Captain of the Guard Nefud – one is tempted to draw parallels with Jared and Ivanka, recently-ousted advisor Steve Bannon, and jettisoned Chief-of-Staff Priebus. Likewise, it is not difficult to expand the allegory of the Dune universe, as the Padishah Emperor is the one controlling the intrigue (read Vladimir Putin), while the dutiful advocates of good governance, House Atreides (read

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Angela Merkel), are enveloped in a web a danger in which the only way out is to play the game. Let us hope that the foresight of the Kwisatz Haderach is realised, and that these dastardly 'plans within plans' can be thwarted before it is too late for us all.

3. *Reign of Fire* (2002, dir. Rob Bowman)

If you are curious to see what the world view of the alt-right looks like, I recommend a critical viewing of Christian Bale-Matthew McConaughey fantasy film, *Reign of Fire*. Following a mining accident in subterranean London, a swarm of hibernating dragons are unleashed upon the world. Witness to the origins of the catastrophe, Quinn (played by Bale) has gathered a band of survivors in a Northumberland castle, eking out a proud but meagre existence that smacks of neo-mediaeval privation. When a lost troop of American military personnel arrive, accompanied by a tank, helicopter, and big guns all under the brash leadership of the heavily-tattooed commander of the 'Kentucky Irregulars' (McConaughey), the combined Anglo-American – and almost entirely white – force retake the Earth from their reptilian overlords. The subtly racialised end-of-the-world sensibilities of the film are chilling when cast against *Weltanschauung* of those angry, khaki-clad young white men who filled the streets of Charlottesville, VA on 11 August 2017, chanting 'Blood and Soil' and 'You [or 'Jews'] will not replace us'.

2. *The Dead Zone* (1983, dir. David Cronenberg)

Screening the eponymous novel (1979) by horror writer Stephen King, the plot centres on a small-town schoolteacher, Johnny Smith (Christopher Walken), who is blessed with the ability to see into people's pasts and futures following his recovery from a coma. The gift quickly sours when he meets a third-party candidate for the U.S. Senate, Greg Stillson (Martin Sheen). Upon shaking the hand of this charismatic politician, Smith is witness to a horrific vision in which paranoid Stillson, now president and surrounded only by a single advisor, decides to bring about nuclear Armageddon. Sacrificing himself for humanity, Smith makes a failed attempt to assassinate the demagogue, who – in a craven fit of self-preservation – grabs a baby from a political supporter to block the killing bullet therein ending his political career. Stillson, a former door-to-door salesman who is never without his trusty broom which he plans to use to 'sweep out the trash' in Washington, D.C., is strikingly similar to Trump and his (false) claims to 'drain the swamp', a fact not lost on King, who has called out the billionaire-turned-politician on more than one occasion.

1. *Monsters* (2010, dir. Gareth Edwards)

Playing on the popular notion of the developing world as a place contagion threatening the global North, *Monsters* postulates that NASA unwittingly causes the spread of alien life near the southern U.S. border, resulting in the quarantine of northern Mexico and the erection of massive wall to protect the American population. Personalising the plight of actual migrants who brave the perilous journey every day, the film follows an American photojournalist and a wealthy young woman who attempt to make their way back to El Norte, combating thieves, security forces, and extra-terrestrial threats along the way. The climax reveals that the aliens are drawn to electrical signals, particularly television broadcasts, and when these cease, so does the interest of the creatures. Perhaps we can all learn something about Trump by watching this, perhaps even Trump himself.

About the author:

Dr. Robert A. Saunders is a Professor in the Department of History, Politics and Geography at Farmingdale State College-SUNY. He is the author of four books, including *Popular Geopolitics and Nation Branding in the Post-Soviet Realm* (Routledge, 2017). His research explores the changing nature of national, religious, and political identity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

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