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## Dan Trachtenberg's *10 Cloverfield Lane* (2016) – Inconceivable Horror

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# Chapter 20

## Unremitting Banality and Inconceivable Terror: On *10 Cloverfield Lane*

Gerry Canavan

‘Ours is indeed an age of extremity’, writes Susan Sontag in her foundational essay on 1950s and 1960s science fiction film, ‘The Imagination of Disaster’. ‘For we live under the continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror. It is fantasy, served out in large rations by the popular arts, which allows most people to cope with these twin spectres’ (Sontag 1965: 42). Sontag saw the science fiction cinema of her day as operating within a dialectic between escapism and normalization, with a single gesture ‘inuring’ us to the very horrors it distracts us from thinking about. She finds such films to follow an intensely formulaic pattern, with the alien invasion variety proceeding like clockwork from ‘the arrival of the thing’ to confirmation of its incredible powers in an act of mass destruction to the declaration of national emergency to the last-chance deployment of a countermeasure and finally the ‘final repulse of the monsters or invaders’, followed by the ambiguous worry: ‘But have we seen the last of them?’ (42-3). In the end, though, these films are all about the same thing: not science but disaster, ‘the aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess’ (44). Sontag’s wide reading of the genre, with examples ranging from *The Thing from Another World* (Nyby, 1951) and *This Island Earth* (Newman, 1955) to *It Came from Outer Space* (Arnold, 1953), *Attack of the Puppet People* (Gordon, 1958), and *The Brain Eaters* (VeSota, 1958) and many more – which remarkably declares that ‘there is absolutely no social criticism, of even the most implicit kind, in science fiction films’ (48) – views them all as entirely symptomatic of larger social forces, as an understandable but wholly ‘inadequate response’ to the ‘almost unsupportably psychologically’

contemporary situation in which ‘collective incineration and extinction ... could come at any time, virtually without warning’ (48).

A Sontagian reading of the Cloverfield franchise would thus seem almost to write itself. The throwback 2008 sleeper-hit original, *Cloverfield* (directed by Matt Reeves), centred on a Godzilla-style kaiju monster attack on New York City, draws heavily from the chaotic, found-footage imagery of 9/11 rather than nuclear attack, but otherwise tracks Sontag’s alien-invasion formula quite closely, right down to the breathy, terrified ‘it’s still alive’ played over the ending credits. That the film itself deployed a marketing strategy designed to inculcate excitement and confusion in its potential audience – including the release of a teaser trailer that did not even give the name of the film – contributed to its eerie sense of a disaster that could suddenly and spectacularly erupt anywhere, at any moment. This ‘surprise’ branding would become the key to the Cloverfield franchise: *10 Cloverfield Lane* (Trachtenberg, 2016) was filmed in secret under a fake name, with its first trailer dropping less than two months before release, while the third movie in the franchise, *The Cloverfield Paradox* (Onah, 2018) was released unexpectedly on Netflix late in the evening on February 4, 2018, after being first advertised that same day, in an unannounced Super Bowl ad, with even the actors themselves not knowing the release strategy until that morning.

Both *Cloverfield* and *The Cloverfield Paradox* rely heavily on explosive science fictional spectacle for their internal narrative propulsion – but *10 Cloverfield Lane*, the middle film, is something of an outlier in the franchise. Not directly connected to the events of the original, but seen as a sort of spiritual sequel by the production company, Bad Robot, *10 Cloverfield Lane* begins with a wordless scene of Michelle (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) frantically packing up an apartment, while occasionally checking her phone or glancing through the blinds out the window. But despite the eerie depiction and the creepy sounds on the soundtrack – or the fact that a picture in the room seemingly blows over by itself, as if responding to the sway of the camera or a half-perceived sonic boom outside – she’s not actually fleeing in the face of a monster attack; she’s just leaving a bad relationship. Likewise, the report she hears on her car radio about widespread blackouts in the South is just a

perfectly ordinary natural disaster, not a token of some larger science fictional catastrophe. Our knowledge that we are watching a Cloverfield film, and our familiarity with the wider genre of science fiction monster movie with which the franchise is in conversation, may reflexively cause us to scan the horizon, looking for signs of trouble – but there's no trouble to be found.

But then everything changes. T-boned by another car, Michelle's car flies off the road and she blacks out, while we smash-cut to the title: 10 CLOVERFIELD LANE. When she wakes up, she finds herself chained to a bed in an unfurnished cellar in a cast that immobilizes her leg. The gruff man who has brought her there – Howard, (John Goodman) – offers bizarre responses to her questions and speaks in a disturbingly flat affect, and so we quickly revise our genre assumptions; now we are in *that* kind of movie instead, the kidnapping, the abduction. Michelle has seen such movies too, and (a born survivor) quickly takes action to protect herself, improvising a fire in the air duct that causes Howard to return to the room that is serving as her cell, at which time she attacks him with a wooden crutch she has cleverly sharpened into a weapon. Howard barely resists the attack and, after subduing her, explains that she is only there in the bunker at all because he has chosen to save her life: there has been some sort of massive attack on the surface, which is now contaminated by fallout; they have only survived because Howard built a bunker for just such a contingency. He is, he says, her rescuer, not her captor.

It all sounds crazy to Michelle, but another man trapped in the bunker with them, Emmett (John Gallagher Jr.), believes him; Emmett is wearing a cast on his arm, he says, not because he got hurt trying to get out but trying to get *in*. Michelle isn't having any of it – until, during an escape attempt, she reaches the airlock on the surface and sees a deranged woman outside the bunker, visibly suffering the chemical or radiological effects of some sort of hyper-technologized attack, who frighteningly bashes her own head against the window when Michelle won't open the door. The ghastly scene persuades Michelle that Howard has been telling the truth all along. Having wrong-footed its audience over and over through its first third, constantly teasing plot developments that do not come to pass, in its second third *10 Cloverfield Lane* now settles into an odd sort of habituated,

even old-fashioned domesticity; we see the three survivors doing puzzles, playing board games, eating together, and watching old movies over a montage set to the poppy, bubblegum original 1967 version of 'I Think We're Alone Now,' later covered by Tiffany in 1987 – a brilliant song choice that evokes the uncanny way that the newly domesticated sphere of the bunker evokes the childhoods of both Goodman and Winstead's characters simultaneously. Despite the occasional rumble in the distance, and the periodic ominous shaking of the world above, it's a reasonably good life for the three of them underground: an awkward but unexpectedly comfy ersatz family.

### **Insert Figure 39 Here**

Figure 39. Not even the end of the world can stop family fun night.

*10 Cloverfield Lane*, dir. Dan Trachtenberg (Paramount Pictures, 2016).

Still, this is a Cloverfield film, and the relaxed mood cannot last; it turns out that despite apparently being right about the attack outside Howard is *also* a creepy kidnapper after all, as Michelle and Emmett find evidence that he had previously kidnapped a missing teenager from the area and forced her to live with him in the bunker as a replacement for the daughter he lost in a divorce. This discovery corresponds with the abusive childhood revealed to be part of Michelle's own backstory, a trauma she says she has relived whenever she was unable to help a child being yelled at by a father in a grocery store and which she is now finding inflicted upon her own person. The menace that had infused Howard's earliest presentation in the film now returns with a vengeance, imbricated with his newly dad-ish persona (nicely playing on Goodman's most famous role as the father on *Roseanne*) – perhaps most stunningly in an intense game of charades played among the three survivors that vacillates between amusing and terrifying and back again. Meanwhile, using Michelle's design knowledge and materials pilfered from Howard, she and Emmett are able to construct a hazmat suit to allow one of them to escape to the surface and look for help without being exposed to the fallout – but Howard discovers their work and murders Emmett, disposing of the body in a vat of

sulphuric acid he has in the bunker. Now Howard switches his affect from creepy father to creepy husband, shaving, neatly combing his previously unkempt hair, and dressing nicely as Michelle is trapped only with him; he offers her ice cream before dinner, ambiguously noting 'I thought we'd change things up tonight. And have dessert before dinner. After all, we can do whatever we want now' – a creepy hint of the breakdown of the incest taboo in the face of nuclear war as depicted in such early Cold War works as Ward Moore's 'Lot' (1953) and 'Lot's Wife' (1954). Before things progress too far in this direction, however, Michelle is able to turn the tables and escape; recovering the hazmat suit, she incapacitates Howard and makes it to the surface, starting a catastrophic fire that ultimately destroys the bunker in the process. Behind her, a wounded and mutilated Howard bellows: 'You're going to walk out on me? After I saved you? And kept you safe? This is how you repay me?' We have swung all the way around to the other side of Sontag's extremities. It is the domestic sphere, the unending cycle of bad dads terrorizing frightened children that becomes the real horror, whether suburban or subterranean; the true nightmare is not that the apocalypse will upend the quiet misery of our lives together but that nothing, not even the apocalypse, ever could.

*10 Cloverfield Lane* has a final surprise for us, however. Despite the initial relief and serenity of returning to the surface, it turns out Howard's most paranoid theories were entirely true, despite his larger mental illness; the surface *is* held by grotesque alien invaders who are ravaging the surface, using roving drones and a mysterious green gas to exterminate any humans left. Michelle (truly a consummate survivor) soon takes down a large alien exterminator with an improvised Molotov cocktail, and steals a car to safely get away. A female voice on the car radio announces that a battle is being raged against the invaders, but the humans are winning; she says that any human survivors should head to Baton Rouge, which is said to be a sanctuary from the war – but adds that able-bodied people with combat or medical experience are needed in Houston to continue the fight. After a brief moment of contemplation, Michelle chooses Houston, resolving now to be the sort of person who intervenes to help the innocent where she can (something she never could before the apocalypse); the film ends as we see her driving away towards her destiny, while a lightning flash ambiguously

illuminates massive alien ships in the distance, directly in her path, threatening to render her steadfast heroic determination quickly and completely moot.

*10 Cloverfield Lane* trades on our familiarity with the 1950s monsters-from-space genre and its grim nuclear ideological subtext in multiple metatextual ways: first, by exploiting our supposition that such narratives belong to a ridiculous past that no longer holds sway over us, and second by making them unexpectedly urgent and terrifying after all. Trading the old-style male scientist of Sontag's archive for a would-be fashion designer in Michelle, the switch from distinguished older man to younger, marginally employed woman belies a much more progressive social transformation in this sort of science fiction spectacle than a surface glance would suggest. Michelle's ability to survive extends beyond mechanical invention to an incredible ability to read and manipulate people; perfectly aware of a woman's stereotypical role in such stories as the one in which she now finds herself, she is able to swing fluidly from damsel-in-distress to flirty coquette to doting daughter to steely warrior woman and back again as the situation demands, to get what she needs out of the men around her. (Emmett's one attempt to move through personas the way Michelle can, in contrast, gets him killed almost immediately). Meanwhile, in Howard the masculine hero turns sour: adaptive, knowledgeable, and always prepared, having anticipated and planned for every contingency and in his own bizarre way a genuine genius, he is nonetheless the true monster of the picture, a toxic figure who views the world exclusively through the prism of his own wounded resentment and entitlement and destroys everything he encounters. Thus Howard's cleverness and ingenuity only empowers him to build himself a sterile and miserable tomb, while Michelle finds ways to heal her own pain and (at least provisionally) reconnect to the larger world of collective life.

In his 1971 essay 'Metacommentary', Fredric Jameson remarks upon Sontag's essay and finds a path out of her hopeless dialectic between banality and terror through a different reading of the films with which she is concerned; the essay provides an early glimpse of the utopian theory with which Jameson would become so closely associated. Jameson identifies a utopian impulse beneath the surface level banality of such stories, which 'uses the cosmic emergencies of science fiction as a way

of reliving a kind of wartime togetherness and morale, a drawing together among survivors which is itself merely a distorted dream of a more humane collectivity and social organization' (Jameson 1971: 17). Such a drawing together is teased first in the bunker, only to be poisoned by Howard's broken masculinity – and then teased a second time in Michelle's ambiguous sharp turn towards both the battle for Houston and those mysterious floating warships. I suspect that for many viewers the genre classification of *10 Cloverfield Lane* – whether it is 'really' a science fiction movie or a horror movie – may hinge in the end on that deeply ambiguous image: whether one concludes Michelle will soon be coming for those ships, or rather that they will soon be coming for her.