

War of the Worlds. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Starring Tom Cruise, Justin Chatwin, Dakota Fanning, Tim Robbins.

Well... (urf! urf!) 1895 or so, H. G. Wells (Bonus question: What do H. and G. stand for?), haunted by the danger of (ptui!) untempered scientific discovery and mechanical invention that threatens on the sill of the new century, writes his *War of the Worlds* to restore human vanity to its rightful place, namely torturing one another and not pretending to the cosmos. 1938 or so, Orson Welles, haunted by the danger of a War of *this* World, allthemore savage on account of scientific discovery and mechanical invention that threatens as the new century reaches its mid-point, broadcasts a dramatic version of the original, to redirect human vanity to its rightful place, namely out into space and away from torturing one another. Meantime, George (Or)well writes *1984*... Think about it! 1987, Woody Allen recreates Welles' shocker in his *Radio Days*. Sooooo... it was time. The plague bacillus lies dormant for 40 years and then bursts out upon us. Steven Spielberg, fresh from triumphs as a serious direc-toor (*Amistad*, *Artificial Intelligence*, *Schindler*... not a yuck in a carload), determines to show us he can bring fresh stuff to old stuff. He's tackled Kubrik, and now's the moment to take on Orson, haunted as he is by the danger of the War on Terrorism, allthemore savage owing to scientific discovery and mechanical invention that threatens on the sill of the new century, remake the 1953 film (in which, if you look, you can see a very young Barbra Streisand in her acting debut as one of the tripods) exploiting, of course, scientific discovery and mechanical invention, realign human vanity along its rightful axis, namely appreciating the genius of Steven Spielberg.

Star War of the Worlds, heavily hyped on account of Tom Cruise evidently went haywire sommeres between his new found passion for Katie Holmes and his old found passion for L. Ron Hubbard (Bonus question: What does L. stand for?) and embarked on some sort of pilgrimage during the wind up for the flick but also for its promise of next-level special effects, is really two movies:

First—and for not nearly long enough—the halfway funny, halfway poignant (variously pronounced: French for “halfway funny”) story of breathtakingly handsome but worthless crane operator (yeah, and the kinda crane that moves by microscopic increments those big steel containers you see on ships, which sounds like a high skill, high tech, high dollar job to me but that evidently doesn't pay this guy doodle on account of he wears work shoes and a down vest and a cat hat and drives a ratty old Mustang) Ray Farrier (Cruise), recently dee-voiced from his uptown floozy of a high cheekbones, high aspirations wife (who's, of course, re-married now to a stiff in a suit...). One can only imagine how she fell for and then married poor Ray and what their domestic life may have been like, though we have some evidence in the reluctance with which she grants visitation to Ray (she and the tassle-loafed, manicured WASP husband are off to Ibiza (or something)... annnnd the apparently equal reluctance with which the kids, sulky adolescent Justin (Robbie Chatwin ... or maybe it's Robbie played by Justin Chatwin) and smart mouf' little Melissa (or something, Dakota Fanning, perennial cutesy film kid), greet the prospect of another dreary weekend with Dad. This part of the flick (ten minutes or so) is pretty clever and Cruise is delightful as just a guy, dumbo endowed

with good looks if not ambition and who loves his children to the point of tolerating their infantile titanism and snobbery at his expense, clearly encouraged by the wife. The peanie butter sammich stuck to a window just might be the high point of *War*. Don't miss it.

Come now the aliens, who ride down thunderbolts, turns out, to man (to "life form," maybe...) tripod thingies, long hidden under the streets of New Jersey but suspiciously like the "walkers" in *Star Wars* with those canted back tyrannosaurus rex legs (except three of them) full of big headed *Alien*-looking guys (did I say they have really big heads?) with E.T. fingers who alternately blast people with disintegrators and suck their blood. Ray's first instinct, naturally, is to flee across the Hudson... just like a bazillion other bawling Yankees as the doohickies mop up after destroying our cities. Now here, good people, I'm told the heavy-hitter Spielberg is conveying to us some kinda message about "post-9/11 America," but I'm goddamned if I can see it. Panic in the streets when *al Q'a'ida* (actually, there's no apostrophe in there, but all the dudes who really know Arabic drop those things in and looks cool... also air-you-dite) nukes Brooklyn? No, really? All the "aliens" (read "Arabs" ...or worse) are gonna contract measles and die (after they suck up our blood) so we just wait them out? Allegory here shot right over me. Maybe you'll catch it.

Foiled in his escape, Tom holes up in a cellar with cracker gun nut, sole survivor(alist) Harlan Ogilvy (Tim Robbins, giving us his impression of, well... *us!*), out of horror, out of despair, out of honor determined to fight the space gismos. Ray, though, refuses, wants to use his brains. Nobody seems to be able to do anything to these creatures, though, except the National Guard, God bless them, who despite the standard Hollywood trope (firing small arms at the armored tripods till vaporized), seem to bear a dignity and serve a purpose that guys like Spielberg normally deny to what they seem determined to call "the military." Of course, Ray does have to show our boys how to use the hand grenades, stuffing a couple into an orifice, which—alien or not—looks a whole lot like an umph umph... not that I've ever looked that closely at one, howsomever. The message seems to hang on Ray's survival instincts, though you'da thought that Harlan's were good, too. Sooooo... you mustn't fight (least of all with a pump shotgun from behind of a barrel fulla stored wheat germ) but rather wait for the infection (if you catch my drift) of (ptui!) Western Culture (measles, in the event) to invade (if you get me) the "aliens" and save us all (soon's they demolish our civilization)? Hunh?

Answer to Bonus question: Herbert; George.

Answer to other bonus question: *Lafayette* Ronald. You'd make it L. Ron, too.