

Changing Depictions of America in Cinema: Signs of ‘Self-Awareness’, ‘Resistance’ or a ‘Multipolar World’?

Contains spoilers for *Knives Out* (2019), *Bacurau* (2019), and *The Wandering Earth* (2019)

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“How can I confound myself with those who today already find a hearing? — Only the day after tomorrow belongs to me. Some are born posthumously.” Friedrich Nietzsche - The Antichrist

Introduction

2019 was a very interesting year in cinema, in particular for the South Korean film *Parasite* which became the first film in a language other than English to win Best Picture at the 92nd Academy Awards. The success of *Parasite* shows the changing attitude of Americans towards foreign cinema. 2019 also showed three major new films (national and international) with varying depictions of America’s relations with the rest of the world: *Knives Out* (2019), *Bacurau* (2019) and *The Wandering Earth* (2019). All three films present a hardening attitude towards taken-for-granted positive roles and image of the United States. This is unusual for mainstream cinema. In *Knives out*, an American film, a wealthy American family is depicted as a greedy, grasping lot in contrast to the South American caregiver of their father. Like *Parasite*, we see class and inequality playing itself out horrendously for the wealthy family as the tables turn against them in this modern whodunit.

In the Brazilian film *Bacurau*, a group of American adventurers bent on hunting human prey also end up badly as the village unites and fights back. In the Chinese science fiction film, *The Wandering Earth*, America is more conspicuous by its absence in a story of a world government saving the planet by shifting it off to revolve around another star. It is a film that doesn’t exclude the United States completely, but like its country’s diplomatic attitude of trying not to provoke a head-on confrontation with America, *The Wandering Earth* shows the Chinese getting on with things on their own initiative.

In all three films there is no negotiation, no crossover, no resolution, no happy ending whereby typically the United States resolves problems resulting in a negotiated, face-saving outcome that makes everyone happy. This is all a far cry from the outcome of an older film, *The Day After Tomorrow* from 2004, that also depicts the United States’ relationship with a Latin American country, Mexico. The Northern Hemisphere is freezing over and the immigration situation is reversed as thousands of Americans flood across the border into Mexico. While the Mexicans are not particularly happy about this (considering the American attitude to Mexican immigrants and the US border fences) they turn the situation to their

advantage and negotiate a debt forgiveness deal. Which begs the question: what would the Mexicans have done if they had not owed the United States a lot of money? Would the Mexicans have kept them out? or would they generously have helped them anyway despite the way they were treated historically? All this shows why it is important to stay on good terms with one's neighbours. But that was 2004.

In 2019 we see changing attitudes. In *Knives Out*, *Bacurau*, and *The Wandering Earth* we are shown something symbolically different by three different directors: how America sees itself, how Brazil sees the United States and how China perceives America. I will look at each of these three films in turn briefly to examine this changing attitude.

Knives Out



In *Knives Out*, wealthy crime novelist Harlan Thrombey is a self-made who's novels have made him rich. His family all depend on, feed off, or siphon off funds from him. However, Harlan has decided he has had enough of keeping his extended family financially afloat. Marta is his low paid caregiver who treats all the family with great respect. She is a south/central American but nobody really knows or [cares](#):

"RANSOM to HARLAN: To your Brazilian nurse are you goddamn insane."

"RICHARD: No, Marta your family came from Uruguay but you did it right, she did it legally, I'm saying."

"LINDA: Uh. There was Fran, the housekeeper. Marta, Harlan's caregiver, good girl, hard worker. Family's from Ecuador."

"RICHARD: Good kid, been a good friend to Harlan. Her family's from Paraguay. Linda really likes her work ethic."

After Harlan's death, Marta inherits all his property and money. The family use coercion, persuasion, threats and blackmail to try and get the property back. Harlan's grandson Ransom coerces Marta into confessing to him and offers to help her in exchange for a share

of the inheritance. The other Thrombeys try to persuade Marta to renounce the inheritance; Walt threatens to expose her mother as an undocumented [immigrant](#):

“WALT: Marta if your mom came here illegally, criminally, if you come into this inheritance with the scrutiny that entails I’d be afraid that could come to light. That’s what we’re all trying to avoid here. We can protect you from that happening, or if it happens.

MARTA: You’re saying even if it came to light, with the family’s resources you could help me fix it.

WALT: Yes. The right lawyers, none of those local guys but New York lawyers, DC lawyers, enough resources put towards it, yes. But there’s no need it should ever even come up. But yes.

MARTA: Ok. Good.

WALT: Ok?

MARTA: Cause Harlan gave me all your resources. So that means with my resources I’ll be able to fix it. So I guess I’m going to go find the right lawyers.”

Already Marta sees the advantages of having lots of money in a materialistic world. The family hope to have Marta convicted of Harlan’s death so that slayer law will invalidate the will. However, this does not happen as the whodunit story structure plays itself out. In the last scene the family are all looking up at Marta on the balcony holding a mug bearing the legend: “My house, my rules”. This time there will be no negotiation.

The family have no one to blame but themselves as all their aggressive tactics fail one by one. They lose everything in the process but most of all they lose respect and sympathy. Marta is an immigrant, a symbolic representative of Latin America, of the Third World. The First World is in a serious economic crisis with mounting debts. Is *Knives Out* a morality tale about the First World and the wider world? After decades of geopolitical manipulation and military action around the world combined with massive national debts, how would the First World be perceived if it all suddenly fell apart? So much of our economy is based on cheap production in Third World countries. If real wealth is rooted in production (and not digitally created fiat currencies) then could we also see a wealth switch some day?

Bacurau



Bacurau is a fictional Brazilian town that becomes the focus for a group of American gamers who want to use real people in a trophy hunting game. The town is cut off, first it disappears from maps and then their WiFi signal disappears. The group uses a drone to spy on the village. Michael, their leader is older and of German origin. When two Brazilian helpers of the gamer group kill locals they are shot for interfering in the 'white people's' game. Their identity cards show that they work for the Brazil state. At first the towns people are confused about the random shootings of their neighbours. However, as they learn what is going on the villagers fall back on their own natural (and historical) survival skills as they remove their old guns from their village museum.

The gamers head to the village but are then abandoned by the leader, Michael (an ageing German played by Udo Kier), who goes to high ground to a sniper position. Without leadership, the first two gamers are outsmarted and killed by a Brazilian old couple who have guns. Michael shoots everything that moves in the village including the gamers (like the [Nazi](#) Amon Göth shooting random Jews from his balcony overlooking a concentration camp).

The rest of the gamers are killed by the hiding villagers. All are beheaded and their heads are displayed in front of church, but with no triumphalism. This act reflects the Brazilian folk hero Lampião and his *cangaceiros* (*Cangaço* - "social banditry" [against](#) the government) who had their heads publicly exhibited in a square.

Michael is captured and buried alive in the street cellar. The gamers have the latest weaponry but are killed by villagers using guerilla tactics and their ancient guns. They operate in self defense and their violence is not glorified. No mercy is shown to their mayor who collaborated with the Americans and he is tied naked to a donkey and sent off to die in the desert.

The clashing contrasts of high tech urbanism and Brazilian semi-desert give the feel of a 1960s science fiction film yet there is always a down-to-earth reason. The flying saucer turns out to be a drone and the two strangely dressed murderous motor bikers turn out to be Brazilians and not so alien after all.

As a metaphor for external influence in Brazil the film shows the resilience of the local people against attack from outside forces, and their merciless revenge on the Brazilians who sold them out for their own profit. Is Michael a metaphor for the Nazis who were sheltered in South America after the Second World War? If so his permanent incarceration in the street cellar has the look of an evil influence being sent down to Hell and covered over to prevent its escape back into society ever again.

The Wandering Earth



In *The Wandering Earth* the sun is dying and people all around the world build giant planet thrusters to move Earth out of its orbit and bring Earth to revolve around the star Alpha Centauri. However as they pass Jupiter, Earth has a tremor and many of the earth engines stop working. The Earth is pulled in by Jupiter's gravity and looks to be doomed to fail. [However](#), "a contingency plan exists called Project Helios that involves preserving the crew of the Space Station, 300,000 frozen embryos, 100,000 seeds of basic crops, and digital libraries of all civilizations, should a disaster befall the Wandering Earth."

The Chinese protagonists and devise a plan to prevent the planetary collision but his means sacrificing the Helios project. The plan works and the Earth continues on its long journey to Alpha Centauri.

On a computer monitor we see that the plans were designed by the 'United Earth Government' where underneath we see a vertical row of flags with the United States flag on top, then Russia, China, United Kingdom and France. However, the first time the flags are shown on a monitor the flags are horizontal and in the same order but the Chinese flag is now in the centre but on the same level as the other countries' flags. Also, an actual American flag is shown in the large cockpit of a transport truck just as the failure of the Wandering Planet project is announced. At first it looks like the flag is draped over a coffin but as the camera pulls back we see the flag is actually just sitting on top of a couple of computer monitors.

The names of the two projects here are also interesting. *The Wandering Earth* reflects the medieval geocentric view of the earth at the centre of the universe with the sun and the other planets going around the earth. The paths of the planets seemed to make no sense so

they were [called](#) in ancient Greek ἀστήρ πλανήτης (astēr planētēs), meaning ‘wandering star’.

The heliocentric view cleared up that problem. When it was realised that the planets all revolved around the sun everything fell into place. In the film the Earth has broken out of the gravitational pull of the sun and has become a wanderer again in its long slow journey to another star. Does Project Helios represent the importance of science (frozen embryos, seeds of basic crops, and digital libraries) in the same way that heliocentrism does? Does that mean that science itself is represented as an elitist project which can be sacrificed? It is very common in the Romanticist tradition to denigrate science while at the same time taking advantage of the benefits of science e.g. the Romantics of the 19th century loved the raw wild nature of the Alps which they traveled to see by the new train systems. It is also contradictory in a genre called ‘science fiction’.

The Wandering Earth is a Chinese film but emphasizes internationalism and does this without nationalism or jingoism. It is a low-key subtle approach to international relations giving everyone their due. As the science fiction writer Roberto Quaglia [states](#):

“The Chinese are now also interested in non-English mother-tongue authors. Which means: They want a wide range of views. And above all they cultivate their new generations of Chinese science fiction authors and work to make them known around the world. In other words, the Chinese are introducing a marked multipolar orientation to a cultural sphere with a strong impact on reality, an area that until recently had always been a hostage to a unipolar status quo.”

The vertical orientation of the flags on the monitor is an interesting metaphor for a hierarchical and hegemonic Hollywood cinema industry which is in contrast with the other horizontal, ‘multipolar’ array, with China in a prominent but not dominating position.

Conclusion

As we move firmly into the 21st century with all its geopolitical changes and challenges, we can see some of this reflected in the arts. Whether ideas in cinema symbolise projected possible futures or are reflective of changing current realities, our attention is drawn to them and shaped by their bold visualisations. Whatever their meanings, these are three very confident movies: *Knives Out* for slick storytelling, *Bacurau* for cinematic intelligence and *The Wandering Earth* for extraordinary design and craft.

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