

10 Cloverfield Lane (Dan Trachtenberg US 2016). Paramount Home Video 2016. Region 1. 2.35:1 letterboxed anamorphic. US\$29.95.

10 Cloverfield Lane is an unusual addition to any line-up of recent notable sf films, for it goes to great pains to obscure its most apparent genre affiliations until its finale. Through tonal playfulness, narrative convention and generic innovation, such repudiation challenges our strategies for categorising, experiencing or contextualising genre films. Further complicating issues is the fact that this film clearly constructs meaning through its relationship to other transmedia texts produced by its production company, Bad Robot, which begs questions about the construction of nascent franchises as well as the ability of deeply interconnected media texts to stand on their own.

The film begins as aspiring fashion designer Michelle (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) flees New Orleans after an argument with her fiancé. As she drives through rural Louisiana, her car is run off the road. When Michelle wakes up, shackled by her injured leg to the wall in a cinderblock room, the framing and bleak *mise-en-scène* make deliberate nods towards so-called ‘torture porn’ films such as those of the *Saw* (AUS/USA 2004 –) franchise. Michelle displays impressive resourcefulness, adapting her crutch into a weapon and lighting a fire to draw her jailer to her. However, she is soon given the reassuring impression that her captor – intimidating ex-Navy survivalist Howard (John Goodman) – is ostensibly benevolent. He has forcibly confined Michelle and a genial local handyman, Emmett (John Gallagher Jr.), to his homely, well-stocked underground doomsday shelter, where he says they must stay for the foreseeable future to survive the fallout of some massive attack of unknown origin.

The film is tonally varied, often leveraging humour against horror. There are persistent moments of tongue-in-cheek comedy, many centred on the sheer oddity of the shelter’s cheery mid-century suburban American décor. This frames the awkward domesticity as a distorted ‘father knows best’ sitcom in which Emmett and Michelle take on the roles of wayward children and Howard the long-suffering patriarch – something exacerbated by one’s potential knowledge of John Goodman’s paternal role in the long-running blue-collar sitcom *Roseanne* (US 1988–97). Nonetheless, much of the film takes on the taut tone and the tense visual grammar of the psychological thriller, rendering the cheery space of the shelter a well-furnished prison. For all his magnanimity, it is apparent that Howard is actually deeply disturbed. His character obviously ticks every box in the abuser’s playbook: he is controlling, moody, deeply paranoid and prone to sudden bursts of violence. He infantilises Michelle, and is jealous of her friendship with Emmett. Indeed, Michelle soon realises that Howard is the one who ran her off the road and kidnapped her. She and Emmett deduce that Howard may have also abducted and killed another woman before her, and they covertly plan their escape. And yet, Howard is not lying about an above-ground catastrophe; Michelle sees for herself the visceral evidence of some type of chemical weapon. We are therefore asked to entertain the possibility that although Howard is some sort of psychopath, he might also be their best chance at survival. All this situates the film within the broader context of apocalyptic or dystopian sf dramas.

The film’s final act performs a remarkable about-face when we learn that the attack is part of a larger alien invasion of (at least) the southern United States. This abrupt shift in tone, pace and even spatiality re-contextualises the prior action while also interrogating how our knowledge of the conventions of genre shapes our expectations of narrative and our viewing experience. After a violent altercation that leaves Emmett dead, Howard dying, and the shelter in flames, Michelle escapes in a homemade hazmat suit and respirator. However, her

relief that the air is now breathable is countered by her horror at the sight of distant, distinctly non-human aircraft that are soon attracted by an explosion from the bunker. The film's previously claustrophobic framing and often long, tense shots give way to a rapid-fire, action-oriented finale that nods more towards tent-pole blockbusters such as the *Transformers* franchise (Bay US, 2007 –) and *War of the Worlds* (Spielberg US 2005). Michelle, terrified but still quick-witted and resourceful, not only evades a deadly worm-like creature, but also manages to destroy one of the aliens' immense, living biomechanical ships by throwing an improvised Molotov cocktail into its 'mouth'. The film ends as Michelle drives off into a human world besieged by alien forces.

Beyond the film's final act twist, what is perhaps most curious about the film is that it demands to be read with regards to its intertexts, alongside the reputation – and creative and industrial practices – of work more broadly associated with the film's producer J.J. Abrams. Although Howard's farmhouse is revealed, by the end of the film, to have been located at the titular address, the film's title explicitly connects it to the found footage monster horror film *Cloverfield* (Goddard US 2008). In this earlier film, a group of young New Yorkers at a going-away party use their video cameras and cell phones to document an attack on the city by an enormous alien creature, and their shaky, frenzied footage combines the shocking and still-fresh iconography of the attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001 with the cultural legacy of the *kaiju* film. Importantly, as with *10 Cloverfield Lane*, *Cloverfield*'s release was cloaked in secrecy. The 2008 film was promoted with much-hyped teaser trailers and an enigmatic viral marketing campaign that was similar to the interactive paratextual materials used to market and augment the world of J.J. Abrams' cult sf mystery show *Lost* (USA, 2004–10). The term 'Cloverfield' is not mentioned in that film at all, or even in those initial teaser trailers, but instead appears in other media (such as the 2008 blu-ray edition's special features), and it was initially no more than an arbitrary code name for the film while it was in production. Such strategies leverage fan expectations about the sort of playful, often wryly humorous sf- and mystery-infused texts produced by Abrams' production company, Bad Robot.

It would not be remiss, then, to suggest that (for a pop-culture savvy viewer, at least) the entire experience of *10 Cloverfield Lane* is significantly shaped by the overt and provocative suggestion that, despite their seeming independence, the two films exist within a shared conceptual space. This is not at all to suggest that both films take place in a shared universe with a mutual sense of narrative continuity. Rather, beyond the relationship between the films' names, and numerous statements by the film's director and producers that this latter film is a 'blood relative' or 'spiritual successor' to the first, *10 Cloverfield Lane* is explicitly connected to the former film through viral marketing that reveals that Howard was an employee of a Japanese company, Tagruato. The suggestion is that Howard's expertise with satellite systems might have proffered him some inside knowledge regarding potential military – or alien – threats; indeed, Emmett notes that one of Howard's 'best' conspiracy theories involves 'mutant space worms'. Tagruato is connected to fictitious Japanese beverage company Slusho!, a brand that features prominently in *Cloverfield* and its own viral marketing, and that also appears throughout other Bad Robot properties, including television shows *Alias* (US 2001–6), *Fringe* (US 2008–13) and *Heroes* (US 2006–10), as well as the sf thriller *Super 8* (Abrams US 2011). Another film, *God Particle*, which is slated for release in early 2018, will act as the third film in the loosely-connected Cloverfield anthology. All of this complicates how it is we categorise or theorise the nature of new and original film franchises, anthologies, or series; indeed, the 'Cloververse' label explicitly acts as a *brand* that invites recognition and loyalty. Notably, here it is transmedial and paratextual products

that are providing the connective tissue, rather than more explicit narrative connections, such as those that exist in films adapted from pre-existing material like comics or television series.

Beyond issues of tone and content, or even of the breadcrumb-following participatory fan practices that are encouraged through the provision of online puzzles, this playful world-building also sets up considerable expectations regarding narrative and genre. This is most significantly with regards to how the underground action and the aboveground attack in *10 Cloverfield Lane* might be read given the viewer's knowledge of alien incursion, and its subsequent military suppression, in *Cloverfield*. Consider two key moments in the film's opening sequence. As Michelle hastily prepares to leave her fiancé, some sort of significant, seismic jolt knocks over a framed photograph of the couple, but this is ignored as she swiftly packs her bags. As she drives away, an announcer on the radio describes widespread blackouts and the initial effects of some sort of unknown incident, playfully touching upon sf and horror narrative conventions that include both the eerie radio report at the beginning of George A. Romero's landmark zombie film *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero US 1968), which announces that a space probe returning from Venus is emitting unusual radiation, as well as the infamous 1938 radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* by The Mercury Theatre on the Air. Each small touch nods towards invasion narratives, even as they are sidelined by more pressing personal drama.

Expectations surrounding narrative and genre play out in more subtle ways, too, complicating the film's darkly comic tone. A jaunty montage in which Michelle, Emmett and Howard find a brief rhythm to domestic life in their underground quasi-suburban home – preparing and eating their 'family' meals, distracting themselves with teen magazines and garish jigsaw puzzles, and (most ironically) playing the 1980s board game *The Game of Life* – highlights the absurdity of their subterranean domestic environment vis-à-vis the calamity above ground. And yet, the controlling, psychologically abusive environment of the bunker is rendered even more troubling by our own knowledge that Howard – kidnapper, abuser, and murderer – is actually correct in his seemingly paranoid reasoning. In short, for the viewer who has a degree of intertextual knowledge about the film's industrial, narrative, and genre-driven relationships, the film employs an uneasy sense of dramatic irony that emphasises, early on, a dual monstrosity: the human monstrosity that exists underground, and the very real sf-infused monstrous other above.

One must ask, then, how well the film stands alone, and not just in terms of how it potentially attracts an audience because of its connection to other media texts. Any issues of narrative consistency aside, the alien attack at the conclusion of the film is an external threat that offers Michelle a coherent character arc. As she fights the aliens, her newfound status as a resourceful action hero is a natural extension of the aptitude and ingenuity she has demonstrated in the bunker, even if these later action beats and physical feats – lobbing an explosive into the chattering mouth of an alien ship, surviving a significant fall when the pickup truck she is hiding in is dropped from a great height – stretch credulity in ways that the action underground does not. More importantly, the film opens as she bolts from a relationship after a fight with her fiancé, and later she confesses to Emmett that even when seeing others in danger her impulse is to turn and run. In the film's final moments, Michelle drives away from the farmhouse, but after hearing a distress call on the radio asking for help from people with combat experience, she deliberately stops, turns, and heads towards besieged Houston to offer assistance. This frames the captivity and escape narrative as a genre-bending frame for Michelle's character development, for the double meaning here is that the combat she has survived is psychological as well as physical – an origin story,

perhaps, for a future hero. Her escape from abuser Howard (and, perhaps more broadly, a history of abusive relationships dating back to her father) is as important as her ability to fight back against the extra-terrestrial menace with extreme prejudice.

10 Cloverfield Lane's resolution asks questions about how we define a film by its relationship to expectations surrounding genre and industrial practices. Although the film was relatively well received upon its release, a swift online search indicates how divisive the ending has been among viewers, even though the appearance of the aliens has been quietly flagged since the film's opening moments, and the film's intertextual relationships make ample space for a narrative involving an alien incursion. The film also offers up queries about the extent to which audiences might find innovation and playfulness with genre palatable, especially if initial expectations or preferences regarding genre are defied. *10 Cloverfield Lane*, then, is something of an anomaly. Although it is not unusual for films to use the trappings of genre to tell character-driven stories or to augment theme, this is a film that both repudiates and embraces expectations surrounding alien invasion, captivity and apocalyptic narratives, in that its success is, perhaps, predicated on the extent to which its sf roots remain cleverly concealed until the very end.

Revised version