Review: On Settler Colonialism and Science Fiction (Again)

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Cowboys and Aliens. Universal Pictures, 2011 (118 minutes)

I have elsewhere drawn attention to what I believe is the intimate relationship between a specifically settler colonial form of consciousness and science fiction.[1] Following on from this work, in this review I argue that *Cowboys and Aliens* (2011) provides a clear example of this relationship. (Its relevance for an understanding of settler colonial sensibilities does not make the movie any less atrocious – it was a well-deserved, resounding flop).

What can possibly supersede the indigenous-settler relation? Or, as Mahmood Mamdani rhetorically asked, 'When does a Settler Become Native'?[2] Logically, there are only two ways out of this predicament: either the indigenous collective disappears, leaving the settler one in the position of being the default new-indigenous group, or the settler collective fully indigenises, thereby acquiring a type of indigeneity that makes it indistinguishable from the old-indigenous group. The first option, making the indigenous forcibly disappear, once widely practiced, has now become unfashionable. Indigenising, however, is also hard work and must be done while paying constant attention to the risks of 'going native'.[3] Then again, there is a third option, indeed a shortcut: a new invasion – the appearance of new settlers – can immediately turn the settler into a 'native'.[4] Even if the English had been in America longer than the Americans (and even if the Indian allies of both had been there from time immemorial), it was the possibility of recoding the English presence as 'invasion' that allowed the American rebels to fully embrace their nativism. True, invasion remains a double edge sword, and settlers are often, recurrently and obsessively concerned with the possibility of an

invasion that will turn them into natives. At the same time, fantasies of alien invasions can fulfill a settler craving for immediate indigenisation. *Cowboys and Aliens* constitutes an example of this fantasising.

There is no settler-indigenous relationship without invasion. In an often quoted passage Patrick Wolfe quipped that settler 'invasion is a structure and not an event'. Settler colonisation, he noted,

> is at base a winner-take-all project whose dominant feature is not exploitation but replacement. The logic of this project, a sustained institutional tendency to eliminate the Indigenous population, informs a range of historical practices that might otherwise appear distinct – invasion is a structure not an event.[5]

But there is an event that can replace that structure: further invasion. Thus, settlers often dream of alien invasions that will fully indigenise them. Yet again, it will all be in vain if these invasions do not ultimately fail. In other words, the invading aliens must depart at the end, while the indigenisation of the settler that their presence brings about must be irreversible. Dread and desire invariably mix: invasions must happen and must fail. *Cowboys and Aliens* is an example of this type of settler wishful thinking and of the narrative structure that sustains it.

Here is the story: an alien spaceship lands in Arizona in 1873 near a town called Absolution and a newly constituted ensemble comprising a few of the inhabitants of Absolution, natives, and a group of outlaws is humanity's only remaining hope.[6] The movie's setting is significant: it is set in Arizona (a locale that has been at the forefront of US debates about unwanted 'aliens' – could this be a coincidence?), and it is set in a Territory (a locale where the political order is by definition still unsettled, even if in the process of becoming established). Then again, even the name of the movie's location cannot possibly be a coincidence. When there is absolution, a crime must have been committed in the first place. But this is the point: the history of this alien invasion is also the history of settler absolution.

Even if there are pastoralists and settlers, and they are obviously not the same thing, the denizens of Absolution, Arizona, are the typical settlers of an iconic wild 'western' settlement. Faithfully observing the stereotypes of the genre ensures that they are already 'normal' in a setting that decidedly isn't. In settler colonial fashion, it is the setting that will eventually change and end up conforming to their normalcy, not them. They could have called their town Normalisation, Arizona.

The aliens want to take over the planet: they are not ultimately interested in exploiting humans. Thus, in order to assess whether their takeover is feasible or advisable, they still need to probe a few human samples. To do this, they are kidnapping the people of Absolution and a few other humans they find in the vicinity. They are also doing some mining and prospecting as well: they want to take over, if it's worth it, and to replace the humans, if it's practicable. In other words, even if they are still considering their options, they are developing a structure, and its dominant feature is replacement, not exploitation. They are settler colonisers.

The Indians, at first, are not yet subdued. However, the Indians are eventually 'stunned' into an alliance with the (settler) inhabitants of Absolution. Good alien magic allows this type of 'shock and awe' (a good and beautiful alien from a planet that was previously conquered and destroyed by the bad and ugly ones has been dispatched to Earth in order to save it from experiencing the same fate). (Isn't it remarkable that Indians, like indigenous people elsewhere, are by definition incapable of making rational decisions and that magic is essential to prompt them into political decisions?). In turn, Indian magic allows the protagonist to finally figure out what is really going on. It all began in a fantasy of settler self-reproduction involving a beautiful woman, an isolated homestead and surrounding fields. Then the aliens ruptured the fantasy, and brutally kidnapped both the protagonist and his spouse. She did not survive. What is significant is that this settler colonial fantasy is recovered in a very settler colonial way. Acquiring 'secret' indigenous knowledge, after all, has always been a favourite way to speed up settler indigenisation and ensure that they better belong. Even if these settler-indigenous exchanges have been most unequal, indeed exactly

because they have been most unequal, the Indian Chieftain and the settler leader begin working together.

When the bandits (settler-invaders who until now had been beyond the limit of the consolidating political order) also join in, the settler/normal regime has finally coalesced. (For the sake of comparison, it is significant that the bandits don't need magic; their decision is entirely rational: if the aliens take over, they assume, it's over for everybody.)

Alien invasion has thus united all human agencies. A number of structuring contradictions separating pastoralists and settlers, newcomers and indigenous peoples, and law abiding people and outlaws has been subsumed. At the end of a process of (settler) self-constitution, both indigenous and exogenous alterities have been subsumed within a single political order. Despite the appearance of a coming together, that the whole sequence is fundamentally settler-oriented and settler-directed should be emphasised.

The story of the *reductio ad unum* of an inherently temporary plurality is the real point of the narrative. What happens next is merely a necessary coda. Having performed their role, all aliens – good and bad ones – have to disappear. How better to kill two birds with a stone than having them killing each other off? The good alien heroically sacrifices herself to save humanity and is thus successful in her quest. Thanks to her, the bad aliens are annihilated. Of course, though, nothing goes back to the way it was. The bandits and the indigenous people must also disappear. Thus neither the Indians nor the bandits survive the crisis as autonomous agents. The first depart, and the latter, now incapable of challenging the settler order, withdraw away from sight and perform the usual vanishing act that is generally expected of them. The settlers acquired their land and even their gratitude for saving them from mortal danger – another typically settler colonial fantasy. Once fiercely independent, they fought valiantly and successfully against the aliens but their insurgency against the settlers has been quelled. They have become a domestic dependent nation. How this happened remains unclear, but this is neither alien nor Indian magic; this is settler magic. Absolution is absolved, and the settler has become the default new native. Future Arizonians will keep keeping aliens at bay.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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NOTES

[1] Lorenzo Veracini, '*District 9* and *Avatar*: Science Fiction and Settler Colonialism', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 32, 4 (2011), pp. 355-367.
[2] Mahmood Mamdani, 'When Does a Settler Become a Native? Reflections of the Colonial Roots of Citizenship in Equatorial and South Africa', Inaugural Lecture as A. C. Jordan Professor of African Studies, University of Cape Town, 13 May 1998. This lecture is available at: http://www.bard.edu/hrp/resource_pdfs/mamdani.settler.pdf Accessed: 15/12/11.
[3] See Terry Goldie, *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Literatures* (Kingston, McGill-Queens University Press, 1989).
[4] Thanks to Edward Cavanagh for first discussing this point with me.
[5] Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London, Cassell, 1999), p. 163.
[6] For an outline of the movie see: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0409847/synopsis Accessed: 12/12/11.