Teenage Resistance: Tomorrow, When the War
With a heritage of paranoid invasion narratives and nationalist myths, the much-anticipated adaptation of John Marsden’s book presents a new version of an old story, writes Rjurik Davidson.

BieLLA, Northern Italy. An old man leads us along the wall of a cemetery. He is small, with wiry grey hair. Attached to the wall are small oval-shaped black-and-white photographs of young men. The men range from around seventeen years old to thirty or so. ‘This was my best friend,’ the man says. ‘I went to school with him.’ He walks past the photos, gesturing to them. One of the stories we are told took place towards the end of World War II. The partisans were looking for somewhere to shelter for the night and a farmer offered his barn. Later, under cover of darkness, the farmer informed the Germans, who by this stage had reinforced the area in support of their Italian allies. The partisans were surrounded and, in the morning, the Germans shot them. A teenager at the time we visited the cemetery, I recall the old man vividly. My mind was filled with thoughts of how I would respond in a similar situation: would I be able to survive as a partisan?

World War II resistance movements have rarely been done justice by film. Historically, it is difficult terrain to navigate. This difficulty stems from the complexity of issues with which a film must engage: passive resistance versus military action or terrorism; the place of communism in history; the close relationship between fascism and capitalism; balancing the interests of the individual versus those of the collective. Recent films such as Defiance (Edward Zwick, 2008) fall flat on these issues, no matter how grimly Daniel Craig stares into the Belorussian forests. The most objectionable aspect of Schindler’s List (Steven Spielberg, 1993) is its celebration of a Nazi collaborator who made his money from the regime and, only once the risk had passed, acted to save others. His form of resistance was safe, uncontroversial and risk-free. To hold him up as a hero (as Schindler’s List does in its final scenes) reflects a political outlook that seeks to distance itself from ‘violent’ resistance and the communist movement, which led many of the significant partisan forces.

TOMORROW, WHEN THE WAR BEGAN

Without a doubt, the terrain of resistance movements is complex. The manifold issues mentioned above – violent versus passive resistance, the needs of the individual versus the interests of the group, the role of communism in history – are difficult to navigate. This may explain why, in film and fiction, resistance movements have often been displaced into the science fiction genre. It’s a move that allows these questions to be abstracted from real history and projected into an alternative context.

The most recent Australian example is Tomorrow, When the War Began (Stuart Beattie, 2010), based on John Marsden’s eponymous book for young adults, the first in a popular series. The film tells the story of a group of Australian teenagers who leave their small country town to embark on a camping trip in the glorious bush. The teenagers are a safely diverse bunch: led by Ellie Linton (Caitlin Stasey), they include her best friend Corrie (Rachel Hurd-Wood), Ellie’s Asian-Australian love interest Lee (Christopher Pang), Greek-Australian Homer (Deniz Akdeniz), who is a bit of a larrikin, ‘Aussie’ bloke Kevin (Lincoln Lewis), rich girl Fiona (Phoebe Tonkin) and Catholic Robyn (Ashleigh Cummings). Camping in the bush allows them to engage in the usual teenage pursuits: they flirt, laugh and have minor tantrums. Challenges are handled with sufficient bonhomie that we know everything is all right, and will always be all right. We’re meant to understand that this is a group of ‘normal’ Australian
teenagers (if a little too good-looking for strict verisimilitude) existing in a pre-coming-of-age pastoral world where everything is fun and beautiful.

When they return from their idyllic retreat, the group discovers that the houses in their town are empty. Tanks and armed men roam the streets: Australia has been invaded by a foreign power. Their parents and the rest of the populace have been rounded up and imprisoned in a compound. The Asian invaders rule with a fierce brutality; those who resist are killed.

Rather than surrender themselves meekly, our group decides to fight the invaders, using their knowledge of the local land, their particular skills and their ingenuity. They are forced to grow up quickly, and in this sense the film is a coming-of-age story, but more importantly they show themselves to be intrepid and audacious. Hidden reserves of strength are revealed: not only do they resist, they also strike a serious blow against the enemy (there is sufficient stage direction that everything falls into place: a crucial bridge just ‘happens’ to be nearby). The narrative rejects the notion that the current generation is spoiled, self-obsessed and unable to rise to the challenge of historic events.

Indeed, *Tomorrow, When the War Began* possesses a certain simple excitement. It asks us how we would respond in similar circumstances, and no doubt much of Marsden’s series’ appeal resides in this quality also. It most likely has more appeal for teenage viewers (who may indeed enjoy this film immensely), for the characters are asked these questions in the particular stage they find themselves on life’s arc. The main narrative of the film is bound together with the basic questions of adolescence, particularly the early stages of first love. Which of the group will form relationships with each other? These personal aspects are probably the weaker moments of the film.

Nevertheless, Beattie and his cast pull all this off with sufficient skill: as a blockbuster with a good budget, the action sequences are finely shot, the Australian bush is radiantly beautiful and the performances convincing enough, without being brilliant. Still, there is something antiseptic about *Tomorrow, When The War Began*. Death is not made to have much weight and none of the characters experience the kind of despair you might expect. At times even the colour palette seems bright and manufactured. Perhaps this springs from the film’s origins as a series for young adults. It probably also stems from its nature as a blockbuster, which must exist within certain safe borders, with the sanitised nature of events making it much more palatable for mass consumption. There may yet be a final reason for this: *Tomorrow, When The War Began* seeks to romanticise the group’s resistance, and this has to do with the film’s broader politics.

**INVASION NARRATIVES**

If the Left dominated the resistance movements of Europe, *Tomorrow, When The War Began* belongs to an entirely different lineage, its narrative arc belonging to a long line of right-wing fantasies. As Catriona Ross has argued, ‘Marsden’s *Tomorrow* series presents not a new story, but the old story of Asian invasion that has been told many times before.’ She points out that:

> Early invasion narratives dealt in stereotypes drawn from a lexicon of natural disaster and spoke of undifferentiated ‘yellow waves,’ ‘Asiatic floods’ and plague-like swarming multitudes intent on slaughter and rape. In many of the novels, supplementary declarations preceding the text proper detail the author’s contention that neither the government...
nor the Australian people realise the peril at hand, and state that the explicit aim of the fiction is to shock Australian readers out of this complacency.

These elements are of course not limited to Australian invasion stories, and these narrative moves can be found in many right-wing science fiction novels, in which the invaders are often depicted as alien. Chief among these might be Robert Heinlein’s 1951 novel The Puppet Masters. The novel tells the story of an invasion of earth by alien ‘slugs’ that attach themselves to human and animal spines and turn their ‘host’ into their slave. Our protagonist must warn the blithely negligent government of the danger at hand. In such narratives, the protagonists survive by ingenuity, skill and, most importantly, action. These are not effete intellectuals who seek to resolve things through discussion or debate; there is no room for democratic niceties here. Like the teenagers in Tomorrow, When The War Began, they prove themselves under the pressure of events. Freedom must be ‘earned’. They become ferocious ‘free men’, fighters willing to die for the cause. The final passage of The Puppet Masters exemplifies this conclusion:

I am ... a combat trooper, as is every one of us, from chaplain to cook. This is for keeps and we intend to show those slugs that they made the mistake of tangling with the toughest, meanest, deadliest, most unrelenting – and ablest – form of life in this section of space, a critter that can be killed but can’t be tamed ... Whether we make it or not, the human race has got to keep up its well-earned reputation for ferocity. The price of freedom is the willingness to do sudden battle, anywhere, any time, and with utter recklessness.

In its final scene, Tomorrow, When the War Began neatly repeats this message: our teenagers stand upon a mountain top, guns in hand, a hardy band of warriors ready to do battle against the invaders – just like in the fevered dreams of the American survivalist Right. The film that links Tomorrow, When the War Began and The Puppet Masters is Red Dawn (John Milius, 1984), in which a hardy bunch of teenagers in a Colorado town fight to free America from a Soviet invasion. Red Dawn and Tomorrow, When the War Began share many of the same narrative moves; indeed, the two films repeat the same images (prisoners held in fenced-off enclosures), the same figures, the

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same moral dilemmas (‘should we kill the enemy?’ – the answer is ‘yes, we have to!’), almost down to the same dialogue (‘your parents would want you to live’) and camera angles. In both cases, the teenagers must live by wit and ingenuity, living in the wilderness, building themselves into warriors for gun-toting freedom. One notable exception is that Red Dawn’s invaders are Russian and Cuban communists (just as Heinlein’s ‘slugs’ are symbols for communism) while Tomorrow, When the War Began is vague about the ‘coalition’ that invades Australia. The second important exception is that Marsden chooses a young woman, Ellie, as leader of the group. The film is told from her point of view, and she embodies all the qualities of the freedom fighters.

Though Marsden does not identify the invaders in his books, as Ross shows, a number of times he implies that they are Asian. Both the novels and film suggest that the invasion is to alleviate the overpopulation in the nearby region. The choice of the filmmakers to definitively identify the invaders as Asian was thus propelled by the text. Despite an attempt to distance itself from this very decision – one character yells that ‘It doesn’t matter who the invaders are, just that they are invaders’ and Ellie’s love interest, Lee, is himself Asian – this is the key move that places the film on the political Right.

Ross notes that ‘Marsden’s emphasis on the victimisation of white Australians and the absence of reference to Aboriginal Australians reveals a disturbing logic of effacement at work in his texts’. One of the most interesting moments in the film occurs when Ellie glances at a mural depicting the resistance of Aborigines to the white colonisation of Australia. It is a moment replete with significance and irony, which suggests that the teenagers occupy the place of the indigenous peoples. It’s almost as if the repressed fact of white invasion has here broken through. Yet in an instant, the moment is gone. A bolder director (and writer) would have cast one of the characters as Aboriginal. Instead, Indigenous Australia remains unmentioned and white Australia is naturalised as the ‘true’ inhabitants. Ross argues of the books:

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Born of the anxiety stemming from Australia’s unacknowledged colonial invasion, these texts enact a circular progression where whites become the...
victims, Asians become the invaders and Aboriginals are written out of the equation. As a whole, Tomorrow, When the War Began repeats a number of nationalist myths. The division between ‘us’ (‘our land’, ‘our homes’) and ‘them’ (the invaders) effaces any internal divisions within a society. It assumes that everyone in a nation holds the same interests and that there are no significant internal tensions or contradictions – no one is dispossessed, oppressed or exploited. Instead, any important social problems are generally seen as a result of external threat, which may include immigrants or refugees. Politically, these attitudes have consistently been used to engage a population in times requiring a belligerent stance, most notably during mobilisation for wars.

**CONCLUSION**

Resistance narratives almost always fall on the far edges of the political spectrum: they are usually radically Left or radically Right. The resistance film asserts that there is something wrong enough with the political set-up that military action is necessary. This is not the terrain of liberalism, which values discussion, debate, freedom and incremental change (the aforementioned Schindler’s List is an exception here). Tomorrow, When The War Began falls on the Right.

Other options are possible. One subject could be ‘Pigeon’ Jandamarra, the Aboriginal combatant against white colonisation in the Kimberley region, acknowledged by songwriter Paul Kelly and the subject of two novels – Ian Idriess’ Outlaws of the Leopolds and Mudrooroo’s Long Live Sandawarra – and also a stage play, Jandamarra. The old man who took us to the ceme-
tery in Biella had been only one of many brave resistance fighters against fascism. Among these resistance fighters were Australians, many of them not much older than the characters in Tomorrow, When the War Began. Captured in North Africa, they had been transported to prisons in Italy. Escaping, they made their way north, joined the partisans and during the summer walked over the mountains to Switzerland. Some, however, chose to stay with the resistance and fight until the end of the war. One of these was a close friend of the old man, who recounted that the Australian was terrifically brave — you were always happy to have him next to you in an engagement. The two men remained friends all their lives, taking their families to visit each other's countries over the years. For these men, as for many resistance fighters, this was the most significant action of their lives. Perhaps that is an Australian resistance story worth filming.

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Questions For Class

Is it important that the invaders are depicted as Asian? If so, why?

Task: research Asian invasion narratives. What commonalities does Tomorrow, When the War Began share with these?

Is it important that one of the group, Lee, is Asian?

What would be implied if the invading coalition had been led by the United States?

Ellie glimpses a mural depicting the white colonisation of Australia. What is the meaning of this shot?

Would the film have been different if there had been an Aboriginal teenager as part of the group?

Is the invasion of Australia something to be worried about? Is it conceivable?

What does Tomorrow, When the War Began say about teenagers?

What does Tomorrow, When the War Began say about freedom?

Is it important that the leader of the group, Ellie, is female?

Endnotes

1 Many of the details (such as names) have slipped my mind in the intervening years.
3 ibid., pp.87–88.
5 Ross, op. cit., p.91.
6 ibid., p.95.
8 This significance is repeated throughout Europe. On a hilltop cemetery not far from Orroux, in France’s Burgundy region, the newest gravestones are of recently buried former English soldiers who had fought with the partisans there during the war and had chosen to be buried among their former comrades.