

VIEWPOINT

WHAT THE EUROPEAN PAPERS SAY

ÀNGEL QUINTANA

Guilty consciences and excess in paradise

Hollywood has always given us variations of the apocalypse that perfectly match the fears of the age. In the fifties, when the cold war went hand in hand with atomic paranoia, the apocalypse was in the form of invasions by malevolent beings from other planets. These extra-terrestrials, just like Stalin's secret police, were capable of controlling and homogenising society by wiping out the burden of individuality. The imbalances in science could also provoke mutations and turn ants into giant monsters ready to liquidate the human race. In the sixties, the regression of the species caused monkeys to enslave humankind and leave the old civilisation buried beneath the sands of the desert. The image from *Planet of the Apes* of the Statue of Liberty poking out of the sand was, for the youth of the age, a stepping stone to all their apocalyptic nightmares.

On the publicity poster of *The Day After Tomorrow*, the Statue of Liberty once more becomes the symbol of a ruined civilisation. This time the statue is covered in ice as New York has disappeared beneath a new ice age brought on by overheating of the planet. *The Day After Tomorrow* is the first Hollywood disaster movie since the 9/11 and the way the film plays on current fears is something unique. The metaphor of a possible climatic disaster is clearly meant to prick the conscience of an America that is beginning to feel ashamed of its president's excesses. In the film, the climate change is the product of an economic liberalism that does not know how to respect ecologic sustainability. At the end, when a large part of the USA is trapped beneath the ice, the president has to beg Mexico to grant his citizens political asylum. The poor countries end up providing sanctuary for the scattered refugees of the rich countries.

The resolution of *The Day After Tomorrow* fits perfectly with the idea of apocalypse advanced by the Austrian director Michael Haneke in *Time of the Wolf*, a metaphor for the collapse of the welfare state in Europe. Haneke begins by showing



In *The Day After Tomorrow* New York disappears under a new ice age

us a middle-class family that find their second residence taken over by immigrants. The man is murdered and the woman, along with the children, finds herself lost in a Europe in which technology has crashed and where even electricity is lacking. This Europe exists in a strange darkness and the middle-classes learn that they are no different from those fleeing their countries to look for work in richer places. In order to survive they have to accept poverty, the loss of comforts and the vanishing of the welfare state.

Despite coming from two backgrounds as different from each other as the cinema of spectacle and arthouse cinema, *The Day After Tomorrow* and *Time of the Wolf* play on the same anxiety. Affluent society is on the point of crossing the frontier of what is tolerable and this involves too many risks. From our cushy position in the developed world we do not realise the limits of our abundance. Apocalyptic fables reveal the ghosts that our society has hidden, reminding us that we are weaker than we think.

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The goodness of common people

On a recent flight to Girona from Liverpool, I was sitting next to two very young ladies on their way to a wild weekend in Barcelona who kindly offered me mints and peanuts as well as their friendly, melodic conversation. The warmth of the working classes of northern England is what makes me feel at home in Lancaster. Such confirmations of the goodness of common people have been lost on a leader who is supposed to have supported them on the other side of the Atlantic. Thus, in the *Time* interview with Bill Clinton last week on the occasion of the publication of his memoirs *My Life* (a \$10 million advance for the author, 1.5 million copies printed), the traditional spaces of the political right and left seem to have become more blurred than ever and Clinton seems more concerned with how his affair with Lewinsky will be interpreted by history over his successful policies and charming political persona.

Indeed, earlier in the week Stephen Robinson in *The Daily Telegraph* commenting on the content of *My Life* says: "Bill Clinton still seems enraged that, for all his domestic policy successes during two terms, he will be remembered as the man who was very nearly hounded out of office by wicked, opportunistic Republicans, because of a zipper problem".

On the other hand, Clinton's view on Irak shows us the political shrewdness of someone who can detach himself from partisan politics and yet still appeal to the masses. In this respect, Clinton says in *Time*, "I have repeatedly defended President Bush against the left on Irak (...) I don't believe he went there for oil". Moreover, even *The Telegraph* acknowledges him the merit of balancing the federal budget and seeing off the trade union interests that wanted to turn America protectionist, and on both these issues "his record is good, and far better than his successor, George W Bush". And yet, at the other end of the political spectrum, Clinton managed to reach two constituencies, the votes of southerners and blacks, that Kerry will struggle to win. That's why the pre-eminence of his not "helping the far right conspiracy" in the Lewinsky affair and in Whitewater,

both magnified by the media at the time they broke out, seems out of place in 2004 and no longer of interest to the media.

The media are indeed dramatically changing. The latest example is the purchase of *The Daily Telegraph* by the Barclay brothers, finalised last week. With this operation, this daily joins a corporation in which the handling of information is only one asset among others including a chain of high-quality hotels and the chain of megastores Littlewoods. In this new context, it may be difficult to sustain the highly idiosyncratic approach to the world taken by *The Telegraph*, a newspaper with a large readership that, despite the high quality of its contents and their great political influence, doesn't seem to have realised that the United Kingdom is a small island in the north-west of Europe which no longer has an empire, something which its obituaries section continues to

can make a difference between the old and the new".

I couldn't agree more on this honourable objective. And it is this challenging objective that the lost left-leaning political forces of Europe should aim to achieve in the near future. Even democrat Kerry might consider assuming these priorities, should he be elected to the White House in the autumn. Perhaps the showing of Michael Moore's controversial documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* will give him a hand towards that end.

Browsing through the Catalan and Spanish papers, I read in *El País* that the Catalan president, Pasqual Maragall, would like to recover the independent group that the PSC (Catalan Socialist Party, federated to the PSOE or Spanish Socialist Party) used to have in the Spanish parliament.

Should this proposal be accepted, the PSC would be free to reproduce in the parliament the coalition in operation in the Senate with the other two Catalan left-leaning parties with which Catalonia has been governed since last December. However, the PSOE's secretary of organisation thinks that this proposal "is not currently one of the items for discussion on the political agenda". Not even all the members of the PSC seem to agree with the president. Where supposedly there is an agreement with the PSC is in the alleged confusion caused between *llengua pròpia* (Catalonia's own language) and *llengua oficial*. Thus, *Avui* reports that Alberto Fernández from the PP (the conservative Popular Party) sees "a tendency in favour of Catalan (over Spanish) prompted by Catalan nationalists in agreement with the socialists..

This might sound like a Byzantine state of affairs to the cosmopolitan reader if it weren't for the fact that even the French are trying to redefine their national identity. The section *Qu'est-ce qu'être français aujourd'hui?* has recently been launched by *Le Figaro* as an open forum for discussing French identity. *The Independent*, however, brings me back to reality, for as it features in its property supplement, one of Catalonia's main assets is that "Catalan golf properties offer much better value than the Costa del Sol".

Can the Telegraph keep its unique approach?

boast about nostalgically.

Corporative capitalism seems to have gone one step further in Italy, where, according to *La Repubblica*, with the end of the Agnelli dynasty in control of Fiat "symbolically ends a cycle in the Italian capitalism of large families". Thus, capitalism, the only economic system known to date which makes it possible to guarantee the highest level of welfare for the largest number of people, seems to be drifting away from what Massimo Giannini considers to be a "system too closed and self-referential". This new capitalism of today "finally allows what yesterday's system had constantly prevented: replacement".

However, what is expected from the newcomers of today's Italian capitalism is the coexistence of the unavoidable search for individual profit "with the ethical tension towards collective interest. Only this



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