

It Comes at Night, dir. by Trey Edward Shults (A24, 2017)

The proliferation of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives in American literature and film in the years following the 9/11 terrorist attacks remains one of the day's most striking, if predictable, cultural consequences, and sixteen years on, the trend shows no signs of abating. Both the 2008 economic collapse, and, more recently, the surprise election of Donald J. Trump to the White House in November 2016, have inspired new waves of dystopian and apocalyptic texts in film and fiction. Alongside eco-catastrophe, one of the most frequently deployed means of bringing about the rapid collapse of 'Civilisation as We Know It' is also one of the most historically resonant: the outbreak of a rapidly spreading and uncontrollable contagious disease.

The frequency with which plague epidemics depopulate the United States in film and fiction surely owes much to the fact that the continent has already seen one civilisation (that of the Native Americans) seriously destabilised by infectious disease. In these narratives, however, it is invariably white characters and communities that find themselves devastated by contagion, and the survivors and their descendants often find themselves 'regressing' to a much more primitive, and even 'Indian-like' hunter-gatherer state, thereby transforming those who have benefitted most from the consequences of European colonisation into de facto victims themselves. Early twentieth-century examples include Jack London's 'The Scarlet Plague' (1912), George Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949), and Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978), while more recently, *Carriers* (2009), *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (2014), Emily St John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), and Alexandra Olivia's *The Last One* (2016) all deal with broadly similar themes. As in these texts, in *It Comes at Night*, the outbreak of a horrific infectious disease is the catalyst for the sudden and violent breakdown of every certainty that white, middle-class America holds dear. It's a familiar premise lent intense contemporary resonance by the fact that the economic stability of the middle-income United States is in long-term decline; long-standing racial tensions have only intensified in recent months; and, as demographers have for some time been pointing out, white Americans will soon no longer be in the majority (as the Census Bureau noted in 2012, 2011 was the first recorded year in which more 'minority' than white babies were born in the US).

The film — the second by writer/director Trey Edward Shults — is an intelligent, intense, and formally restrained exploration of paranoia, claustrophobia, and the devastating but seemingly inevitable erosion of pre-catastrophe moral standards. Its small cast, isolated setting, siege mentality, and pervasive feeling of dread (reinforced by the film's many long,

Kubrickian tracking shots) also evoke *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), another bleak exploration of the ways in which previously ‘decent’ and law-abiding people turn on each other when placed under intolerable strain. Like Romero’s film, *It Comes at Night* has also been interpreted by many critics as articulating something resonant about the current state of the nation — in this instance, the sense of despair and helplessness that, for many commentators, has characterised the chaotic first year of the Trump presidency.¹

Within this rapidly disintegrating social and civil framework, Shults rapidly establishes that brutal and unsentimental pragmatism is now the core survival strategy for his main characters, family man Paul (Joel Edgerton), his wife Sarah (Carmen Ejogo), and their sensitive seventeen-year-old son, Travis (Kelvin Harrison Jr), who have fled the unnamed city and boarded themselves up in a large wooden house in the forest. The film opens as Paul and Travis take Sarah’s father (the owner of the house, who has already been infected by the deadly contagion) out into the verdant woodland. Paul shoots the old man dead, and the body (which is covered in Bubonic-plague-style buboes) is then doused in gasoline and burned. It’s an act of clinical, brutal efficiency that reinforces the fact that pre-plague sentimentality can no longer be indulged in by those who hope to survive.

Crucially, the outbreak has obviously been active for some time, and we are not shown any scenes set before the epidemic began. References to the pre-plague era are brief and often cryptic. There is no TV, radio, or electricity, and the house must be locked down every evening, with the only key to the ominously red front door being that held by Paul alone. The threat of infection remains a constant, looming source of terror, and even travelling a few miles is fraught with peril because other (possibly infectious) survivors lurk by the roadsides, ready to rob and kill passers-by. Try as they might to focus on practicalities such as food, water, shelter, and security, Paul and Sarah remain acutely conscious of the fact that even the smallest mistake or instant of bad luck will likely have fatal consequences.

The lack of reference to the outside world — aside from some brief references to the fact that the cities are now a no-go area — reinforces the sheer hopelessness of the situation. The isolation of this core family group is violated when they discover a desperate man breaking into their house in search of supplies. Will (Christopher Abbott) is looking for food and water for his wife Kim (Riley Keough) and young son, who are holed up in a cabin

¹ See, for instance, Aja Romano, ‘*IT Comes at Night* is a Terrifying, Uncomfortably Relevant Horror Masterpiece’, *Vox*, 8 June 2017 <<https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/6/8/15739132/it-comes-at-night-review-dystopia-politics>> [accessed 7 September 2017]; and Michael Gingold, ‘Is *IT Comes at Night* a Horror Film for Trump’s America?’, *Birth.Movies.Death*, 8 June 2017 <<http://birthmoviesdeath.com/2017/06/08/is-it-comes-at-night-a-horror-film-for-trumps-america>> [accessed 7 September 2017].

some miles away. After some tense negotiations — initially conducted when Will is tied to a tree with a gun at his head — Paul decides to invite the other family to move into the house so that the two groups can share resources and security duties. Though the arrangement initially seems to go well, it isn't long before their enforced proximity and mutual paranoia begin to create dangerous tensions.

The fact that none of this is likely to end well is foreshadowed from the outset by the surreal night terrors experienced by Travis, the well-mannered teenager who is still too young to be considered a true adult by the others, but too old to engage fully with toddler Andrew (despite treating the child with playful kindness). Travis is obviously deeply traumatised by everything that has happened. His feverish nightmares provide some of the film's most vividly disturbing moments, as he is tormented by visions of plague-ridden, blood-spewing loved ones, which only become more extreme as he finds himself increasingly attracted to Kim. Whether Travis's dreams should be seen as prophecy, foreshadowing, or something else ultimately remains unclear (as does the exact nature of the 'It' referenced in the title). Nevertheless, they do undoubtedly reflect the film's pervasive miasma of anxiety, despair, and mutual mistrust.

It should also be noted that Travis is of mixed race (his mother Sarah is black); everyone else in the film, save for his dead grandfather, is white. Though there is, on the surface, no overt racial tension in the film, the household is one in which white and black characters are compelled to share resources uneasily, and in which the sole mixed-race character is the most visibly traumatised, sensitive, and perhaps even dangerously unstable figure in the narrative. Indeed, one of the nagging questions left by the film is the extent to which Travis deliberately or otherwise helps bring about the incident that precipitates the final, fatal confrontation between the two families.

In addition to these implicit racial anxieties, relationships between the two families are also subtly shaped by class-based tensions. Will and Kim clearly hail from a lower socio-economic and educational background than Paul and Sarah, which may play into the householders' growing fear that their new guests may in fact covet their property and position. Paul is a middle-class white man with a teaching background, and in one of the film's more on-the-nose conceits, was an expert on doomed societies (Ancient Rome, to be exact), who now gets to witness the collapse of North-American civilisation unfolding in real time. This suggestion that recent events have a clear historical precedent is reinforced by the film's intermittent visual references to a previous devastating outbreak, the Black Death.

Though a less subtle film may have been tempted to depict Paul as a familiar species of domestic tyrant — the domineering and paranoid patriarchal archetype that has haunted the American gothic since the publication of Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* in 1798. To his credit, for most of the movie's run time, Shults makes Paul's controlling tendencies seem like an understandably pragmatic response to dire circumstance. In addition, Paul's obviously warm and loving relationship with his wife and son helps us understand that, no matter how brutal his defensive measures may be, like everything else, they are undertaken with only their safety in mind. It also helps that Sarah too is a nuanced and strong-willed character, who, crucially, can be held equally responsible for shocking acts of murder that occur at the end of the film. This welcome note of moral complexity extends to the secondary characters. Though they are mainly seen through the eyes of Paul, Sarah, and Travis, it is also clear that, whatever the less-well-off couple's real plans might be, Kim and Will ultimately only want what is best for their child as well. Indeed, everyone in the house just wants to protect their own. As a result, the despairing final moments of the film, which highlight the utter futility and moral cost of this 'family first' policy, are rendered all the more devastating.

The film's climactic acts of brutal violence are all the more terrible then, because they save no one and accomplish nothing. The characters who remain alive in the stark final moments can be certain only of two things: death is inevitable, and fear has turned them into monsters. The nebulous 'It' that has stalked the family since the plague began — ultimately perhaps more representative of their increasingly paranoid mindset than any literal external threat — has come for them at last, and this time, there can be no escape. If the film is interpreted as an oblique commentary on the political and social climate of the United States in late 2017, it's unlikely that we will see a bleaker, more despairing vision of a world in which the very worst has come to pass, all hope is lost, and reason and compassion have been overtaken by self-interest and panic.

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