

# Hollywood Post-9/11 Alien Films: Recontextualization of George. W. Bush's Discourse

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## Abstract

The widely shocking attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11 was interpreted differently by various institutions worldwide, ranging from America's legitimate motive to begin a 'war on terror' to defend her 'very freedom', to a pretext for Bush administration to pursue G. H. W. Bush's temptation for 'a new world order'. Various institutions, therefore, made use of their potentials to support a parallel ideology, including Hollywood as a most powerful center for producing, conveying, and supporting such an ideology worldwide. This study intends to reveal Hollywood film making companies' recontextualization of G. W. Bush's discourse used in his first speech broadcast on CNN after the attacks. A close examination of Bush's speech discloses a narrative sequence of five steps which were accordingly incorporated in alien films produced during the decade following 9/11. Recontextualization of Bush's five-section speech could psychologically remind and legitimize the war.

**Keywords:** 9/11; Alien Films; Bush; Hollywood; Recontextualization; War on Terrorism

## 1. Introduction

Still after 13 years, the consequences of the horrendous 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC) and the Pentagon is with us and each day a new political and financial outcome of the event is broadcast on media (Osuri & Banerjee, 2004, cited in Erjavek and Volčič, 2007, and Kellner, 2005). The same mediums for public broadcasting are used by many social, political, and religious institutions to convey their interpretations of the event. CNN and Al Jazeera for instance were the major official networks broadcasting the views of Bush administration and Al Qaeda, respectively (Kellner, 2005). The affiliated networks, therefore, have continuously been implementing different strategies to pursue their preferred messages since the attacks (Miles, 2005).

Soon after the attacks, CNN and many other television networks including BBC, Fox, and CBC put the tragic attacks live on air, and later interpreted and supported Bush's official announcement of 'war on terrorism' on September 20, undoubtedly referring to Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden, and Al Qaeda,

accordingly, responded the accusation by its announcement broadcast exclusively on Al Jazeera (Leudar, Marslan, & Nekvapil, 2004). During the verbal and non-verbal war between Bush administration and their ostensible enemy named Al Qaeda, the role of media was a decisive one, which has frequently been acknowledged in the literature (Altheide, 2007). In fact, media has had an important role in changing, maintaining, and modifying public opinion (de Burgh, 2000; Lewis, 2001), particularly after September 11.

Media is said to use or follow a certain discourse necessary for its objectives, and one clear representative of media is cinema. According to Lazar and Lazar (2004), “following Foucault, ‘discourse’ is understood as comprising a field of related statements – revealed in concrete content across time and space – which produces and structures a particular order of reality.” (p. 224) Discourse in cinema can also be claimed to possess such characteristics so that they can be implemented especially for controlling the public domain by the authorities (Harper, 2009). It should be born in mind, however, that individuals do not produce a particular discourse, yet “those in positions of institutional authority do function as key figures in the inauguration of the emergence and development of particular forms of knowledge and truths” (Lazar & Lazar, p. 224). Then, we deal with institutional figures and not individuals.

One gigantic and influential center for motion picture industry nowadays, speaking of both popularity and technicality, is Hollywood, California, where thousands of motion pictures are produced every year. A close analysis of the movies produced in Hollywood by various companies reveals the attempts made to support ideas and ideologies. If Jewish societies condemned Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), it was because they believed the director had tried to illustrate a negative picture of Jewish people. Or if Iranians announced their strong objection to Zack Snyder’s *300* (2006), it was because of the evil image Iranians and their culture were given in this movie. Nonetheless, movies are not always historical and imaginary. Some have used quite serious actors with serious topics to deal with, produced to support certain ideologies.

The present paper intends to analyze a genre of movies produced after 9/11 in Hollywood depicting aliens, unworldly creatures, coming to earth for destruction and finalizing human race, known as disaster movies (Keane, 2006). When closely examined from the point of view of recontextualization (Bernstein, 1996; Fairclough, 2003), and when compared with Bush’s first announcement after the attacks, interesting similarities can be found. These similarities can bear witness that film making companies have followed and advocated Bush’s discourse to threatening people, particularly American citizens, in the first place, and then

promising them the imminent victory which follows their tolerance of severe aftermaths.

### 1.1 9/11 and Bushspeak

Soon after the attacks at WTC, G. W. Bush, the president of the United States at the time, appeared on CNN and addressed the public for about 4 minutes and 23 seconds, introducing a novel discourse to the world of politics. Since then, his discourse has abundantly been interpreted from various perspectives (e.g. Altheide, 2007; Dunmire, 2005; Graham, Keenan, & Dowd, 2004; Kellner, 2005; Lazar & Lazar, 2004; Łazuka, 2006; Leudar & Marsland, 2007). In Bush's words, there is a binary classification of those who fight with us, "freedom fighters", and those who fight against us: "terrorists". This very "simplistic, moralizing and absolutist" (Kellner, 2003; Erjavek & Volčič, 2007, p. 133) distinction of Bushspeak (Erjavek & Volčič, 2007), actually, led to huge conflicts, still existent in the world.

Kellner (2005) interpreted the attacks on the Twin Towers as Al Qaeda's attempt "to demonstrate that the U.S. was weak and vulnerable to terrorist attacks." (p. 3) As a consequence, the ex-president's first speech after the event had to display a proper response. Bush, however, was not alone to convey the message they were under attack, no matter where or when. Big media centers, like CNN, repeatedly broadcast the event to remind American citizens all around the world the danger threatening them, "even in Fortress America". "The live television broadcasting brought a "you are there" drama to the September 11 spectacle." (Kellner, 2005, p. 4) Thus, from the early moments after the attacks Bush and his administration demonstrated an orderly managed discourse that was later implemented in the Hollywood alien movies, which are examined in this study.

### 1.2 Politics and Movies

Rowe (2004), claiming that "activity and talk are generally interrelated" (p. 50), cited Clark (1996) who introduced a continuum of the most linguistic activities to the most nonlinguistic activities where movies are located at the very middle of the scale. This means that having implemented movies, one can refer to both activity and speech equally, and as a result, one can make use of plays or movies to refer to any of speech or activity, or both, external to the main course of the movies.

Literature shows how media can influence opinions. Chouliaraki (2004), as a case in point, analyzing television programs focusing on the 9/11 attacks believed that "television spectacle engages the affective potential of the spectator and evokes a specific disposition to act upon the suffering" (p. 185). Movies, by the same token,

can incorporate such elements in order to refer to some external phenomena, in this case Bush's discourse on "war on terrorism".

Movies, especially those produced in Hollywood, have frequently used political, military issues as their central or peripheral motifs. Many movies have tried to support an incident or a decision made, or announced by the government. Milk (2008), for instance has chosen gay rights as its key theme to support homosexuals' right people voted for about 40 years ago in the States. The leading role Academy Award went to this movie, partly because the new president of the U.S., Barak Obama, had a positive attitude about the rights of all citizens, straight or non-straight. It can be said, for that reason, that movies are excellent mediums to support (or criticize) an idea regarding the vast audience they have worldwide (Albarracín, Johnson, & Zanna, 2005).

Movies and their references to the external world, nevertheless, can be understood if audience is aware of the idea the movie tries to remind its spectators. Choi (2006) believes that "knowledge of the cultural or the political history of a country could help the spectator to understand the realistic motivations of certain films." (p. 317) In other words, audience can understand the themes behind films mainly if they have some background knowledge of the cultural and political states of the country. By the same token, films can remind us of the previous cultural and political points in the history of a country.

The present study intends to show that one genre of Hollywood movies produced after 9/11 recontextualized the narrative discourse G. W. Bush, Jr. incorporated in his first public announcement after the attacks. These movies have subtly embedded the sequence of narration Bush used then, trying to remind their audience what they heard and internalized soon after the horrendous attacks.

### 1.3 The Principle of Recontextualization

The principle of recontextualization was originally introduced by Bernstein (1990, 1996) as a principle representing social events meaning that one has to recontextualize a social event to represent it (Erjavek & Volčič, 2007). Bernstein (1990) believed that particular social events entail particular 'recontextualizing principles', which affect the evaluation, explanation, legitimization, and hierarchical order of the represented events. These principles are summarized by Fairclough (2003, p. 127) as: *Presence, Abstraction, Arrangement, and Additions*.

*Presence* refers to the presence/absence of particular events and their degree of prominence in the chain of events. The second principle inquires the degree to which an event has been generalized. According to *abstraction*, one can directly refer to a phenomenon or he/she may utilize certain symbols which only indirectly refer to it. *Arrangement*, the third principle, is the degree to which the

orderly sequence of the events is observed in the recontextualized social event, and *additions* looks for those incidents added to or omitted from the original story. In Erjavek and Volčič (2007), for instance, “recontextualization involves a movement of discourse(s) (G.W. Bush’s discourse) across practices, from one type of a practice (Bush’s administration practice) or context (the situation in the USA after 9/11) to another (Serbian nationalistic practices).” (p. 127) In other words:

...the informants reproduce[d] Bush’s binary discourse, except they appropriate[d] it according to their own political-historical context: while they reclaim[ed] themselves as the good ones, and ‘the victims’ of their own ‘local’ Muslim perpetrators, at the same time they accuse[d] them of being connected with ‘global’ Islamic terrorists, personified by Osama bin Laden. (p. 130)

Thus, in this study recontextualization refers to the examined movies’ reproduction of Bush’s five-stage narrative discourse, except for the point that these movies appropriated this discourse based on their own settings.

## 2. Methodology

In order to study the likelihood of Bush’s discourse adapted and recontextualized in the Hollywood alien movies, first, G. W. Bush’s brief speech on September 11 was closely examined for the number, type, and sequence of discourse categories implemented. Then, in order to have a representative sample of alien movies produced after 9/11, a list of movies in the genre of disaster was prepared comprising a minimum of 50 movies from cinema and theater magazines and the Internet released between 2001 and 2011. All the movies were selected to be among the genres characterized as “Action; Mystery; Sci-Fi; Thriller”, according to the well-known websites and magazines specialized on movies, like *Monthly Film*, released in Iran. From among the listed films, three movies were randomly selected for the analysis. These movies (*Cloverfield*, *Slither*, and *War of the Worlds*) were analyzed for their consistency of the number, type, and sequence of their recontextualization of Bush’s speech.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Bush’s five-section Discourse

After naming many attributes of Bush’s discourse, including his binary distinction between concepts such as evil and good, Erjavek and Volčič (2007) classified Bush’s speech in terms of three separate concepts; however, the analysis carried out in this study is of a structural type, dividing Bush’s speech into five sections (some sentences of Bush’s speech are omitted in the following quotations):

#### 3.1.1 The previous safe life

In his first sentences, Bush reminded the audience of the excellence of life they experienced prior to the attacks. “Our way of life” and “our very freedom” (l. 1) reminds us of whatever American citizens are said to have enjoyed prior to the attacks. Different jobs were also mentioned as typical jobs in a normal American life (ll. 3-4). But the last sentence (l. 4) holds a very powerful statement concerning people, “Moms and dads. Friends and neighbors”, who have been with us before the attacks but not now. Everything shows American people had a safe, wealthy, and healthy life back then, until their “very freedom came under attack” (ll. 1-2).

### **3.1.2 The terrorizing evil attack**

What put an end to the happy old days is introduced as “the terrorizing evil attack”. Bush, in the second section of his speech, referred to the ‘attack’ which broke the secure continuum of ‘the previous safe life’. Immediately, he referred to “evil, despicable acts of terror” (l. 5), which finalized the safe life. The “evil” nature of the attack can be interpreted by the inhumanness and unworldliness of the attackers. In other words, those responsible and blamable for the attacks are not normal human beings or they would not act so. Also, it is described as “terrorizing”: creating an atmosphere of fear, violence, and panic among the audience who were just reminded how safe and peaceful their previous life used to be.

### **3.1.3 The sad aftermaths**

The feeling of fear should dominate the speech to be more effective. That is why, still, in the third phase, Bush highlights the consequences of the attack. A very immediate aftereffects could be “fires burning; [and] structures collapsing” (l. 6), which could lead America into “chaos and retreat” (l. 8). But, one strategy Bush resorted to raise his “fellow citizens[’]” (l. 1) emotions was referring to their “unyielding” anger (l. 7). These three lines depict a sad, irritating atmosphere of the time resulted because of the attacks. Yet, there is also another story to tell.

### **3.1.4 The comprehensive immediate strong response**

True that we [America and fellow Americans] were attacked, but “they have failed” (l. 9). This very first quoted sentence is a preface to the fourth section of Bush’s speech where he tried to tell what they (Bush administration) would do after the attacks. In this part of his discourse, Bush mentions the strengths of people, country, and the army. He emphasizes that “Terrorist[s]...cannot touch the foundation of America” (l. 10). He also refers to “his” implementation of government’s emergency response plans, “his” direction of the full sources for “intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and bring them to justice.” (ll. 16-17) In the next sentence, he goes further and speaks as if he is certain they could find those responsible for the attacks. When he says, “We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who

harbor them.” (ll. 17-18), he bases his utterance on the presupposition that ‘we will find them’. Having read or heard these lines, one feels heroic and proud: no matter how hard the attacks are, we will win and “stay down” (l. 19) the enemies as we have already done (ll. 19-20).

### 3.1.5 The triumph

The ‘comprehensive immediate strong response’ should end up in a victory. So, Bush, in the final section of his speech, takes the role of a leading actor and uses another presupposition: ‘We will win the war against terrorism’. He takes the previous experiences when America had stayed down enemies as witness, and thus, he concludes that “we will do so this time” (l. 20) once again. He goes even further to use an ambiguous phrase “our world” (America or the globe?) to defend. In his final words, he talks about an imminent triumph against terrorism. To him, God *will* bless America.

Borrowing the terms from literature, the sequence of Bush’s speech sounds like German critic Gustav Freytag’s (1863) analysis of story plot, known as “Freytag’s Pyramid” according to which “the typical plot of a five-act play [is] as a pyramidal shape, consisting of a rising action, climax, and falling action.” (Abrams, 1993, p. 161) Here, in Bush’s speech, his description of the previous calm life is the *equilibrium* which anticipates the *inciting incident*: what breaks the existent serenity. *Inciting incident*, according to Bush, is the 9/11 attacks. The attack is a beginning for the conflict between the good (‘we’; ‘us’; America) and the bad (‘they’; ‘them’, ‘terrorists’). After *complication* (rising action in Freytag’s classification), which also involves Bush’s emphasis on the ‘sad aftermaths of the attack’ and ‘comprehensive immediate strong response’, the discourse enters the next phase of triumph (Freytag’s *climax*) when America will “win the war” (l. 19). He also adopts Freytag’s *falling action* in saying, “...yet we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world.” (ll. 20-21) Payandeh (2006), in his comprehensive and detailed analysis of the television advertisements in Iran, tried to show that no matter how brief and strange the ads were, they implemented the overall structure of constructing short stories, quite similar to Freytag’s Pyramid. Interestingly, the analyzed movies, too, have implemented a similar order in their plots.

### 3.2 The Five-section Discourse in the Movies

The movies analyzed in this paper displayed accurate consistency with both Freytag’s Pyramid and the sequence of patterns and the pattern types Bush implemented in his September 11 speech. The following is detailed analyses of the three movies based on the five-section discourse in Bush’s speech.

As for the four traits of recontextualization, as a general statement, the three principles of *presence*, *arrangement*, and *addition* (Fairclough, 2003) are all implemented in the three analyzed movies. In other words, all the five parts of Bush's speech are also used in the movies (presence), all of them follow, chronologically, the sequence Bush utilized (arrangement), and no section is omitted nor added to deteriorate this five-section classification (addition). However, the only principle which makes a difference among the movies is abstraction principle. The way movies have incorporated various elements may directly or indirectly refer to the original reference in Bush's speech.

### 3.2.1 Movie one: Cloverfield (2008)

Cloverfield brings with it many hidden emotions the world experienced 8 years before, especially the street scenes where people ran for their lives were similar to the documented amateur movies on 9/11. In terms of the abstraction principle (Fairclough, 2003), Cloverfield is the closest movie to Bush's discourse. The urban locations, especially, and the aftermaths are very much identical to what Bush described in his speech.

*The previous safe life:* One of the very first sentences of the movie says, "And it's already a good day". The first scene includes a high picture of Manhattan and a happy couple, having daily casual conversation, doing shopping. The previous safe life is taken for granted.

*The terrorizing evil attack:* Guests in the surprise party think of the first "bomb" as "another terrorist attack", refreshing our memory of the 9/11 attacks. The second bombing-like sound is actually the starting point for the terrorizing evil attack, since we could witness the fire burning the buildings. Terror begins spreading, ironically, by observing the monster, which comes from nowhere, swiping the head clean of the statue of liberty. Buildings fall (a memento of the Twin Towers fall) and people die. Everything turns chaotic.

*The sad aftermaths of the attack:* Sirens are heard, babies cry, and people are devastated. Chaos has dominated the town. The situation is disappointing. There seems to be no escape. But the major sad events have to do with our sympathizing with the characters stuck in the middle of the event.

*The comprehensive immediate strong response:* Immediately after the attacks, we see the emergency teams helping people, choppers guiding people, and military tanks on their ways to destroy the creature. Military jets and choppers keep flying in the sky, trying to knock down the monster and move people out of the town.

*The triumph:* The major triumph, however, is not explicitly shown in the movie. Although the hero of the movie dies in the final scene, we hear the monster

screaming and groaning, meaning that it is beaten down by the military forces. Once more, they could hit it and kill it. Yes, they have saved the world.

### 3.2.2 Movie two: *Slither* (2006)

*Slither* is not the story of buildings destroyed and 30-story monsters. It is a scary story of an extraterrestrial malevolent creature infecting people to destroy the human race.

*The previous safe life:* In the beginning scenes, everything displayed witnesses a normal calm night when two cops are chatting and listening to a country music on radio, showing serenity in the small town.

*The terrorizing evil attack:* In the middle of the night, when people are dancing in the Deer Hunt season part, a meteor falls in the woods with the egg of an alien worm. Grant, after touching the strange moving egg, is hit by some kind of sparrow carrying an alien parasite that takes over Grant's brain: this is the major attack in the movie, because every single disaster is directed from this attack.

*The sad aftermaths of the attack:* People and pets disappear. Grant intends to kill her own wife. Thousands of parasitic creatures are fled away to infect people. No one seems to be able to escape.

*The comprehensive immediate strong response:* Ben, the sheriff, and a couple of locals try to kill the beast. They are determined to kill it. He seems firm and adroit.

*The triumph:* At the end, Ben could kill the beast in his astonishing attempt to blow it up. In the last scene, it is dawn now and Ben has saved the world.

Although in this movie we are not confronted with a huge monster, destructing buildings, making huge devastations, the terror and anxiety is vividly felt. In fact, the fear of an evil-doer alien creature, more powerful than us, never leaves us.

### 3.2.3 Movie three: *War of the Worlds* (2005)

In this Steven Spielberg's movie, too, the five-section classification is notably implemented. Abstraction principle (Fariclough, 2003) is also at work in this movie.

*The previous safe life:* A beautiful eye-catching scene from Manhattan is the happy beginning of the movie.

*The terrorizing evil attack:* The 26-time lightening on the same spot is terrorizing enough, but the audience will truly be frightened a strange unworldly tripod firing at people and burning them up is unveiled.

*The sad aftermaths of the attack:* People, shocked and crying, say they “came from another place”. Many die. Many are sucked up in by the machines. The tripods suck people’s blood. People who are trapped in the net-like cage of the tripods are desperate, waiting for their turn to die.

*The comprehensive immediate strong response:* The National Guard unit is in place in no time. A line of army troops are heading toward the danger, to fight the tripods: they look so determined. Army soldiers are almost anywhere help is needed.

*The triumph:* Ray was there to help everyone by throwing two grenades into the body of a tripod helped by an army soldier. Army’s first strike hits the tripod and a few more shots knocked it down. A dying spaceman with his powerless arm ensured us the triumph has taken place while a soldier makes sure the alien is dead.

#### 4. Conclusion

As Kellner (2003) mentioned, since Bush’s discourse is unsophisticated, moralizing and absolutist, it is not a difficult endeavor to take its dimensions for other purposes. One of the dimensions which was studied in this article was Bush’s narrative-like use of different elements of 9/11 attacks. A content analysis showed that his speech can be divided into five different, but normatively related sections discussing different specters of 9/11 event and Bush administration’s responses: the previous safe life, the terrorizing evil attack, the sad aftermaths, the comprehensive immediate strong response, and the triumph. Quite like Freytag’s (1863) Pyramid (Abrams, 1993), the sequence of these five steps serves as an objective of conveying the purpose of the speaker/writer, as Bush used it.

Close analysis of the three randomly selected disaster alien movies produced after 9/11 revealed that the five-section narrative discourse Bush implemented in his speech, were recontextualized in the plot of the movies. The recontextualization processes taken by the authors and/or directors of the movies are identically implemented in the three movies in terms of the three elements of presence, arrangement, and addition. The only element which was applied to the movies’ plots with variations was abstraction. This is because dramatic and unrealistic stories of alien genre entail adding the taste of variation.

According to the findings of the present study, producers of the alien movies in Hollywood have implemented this five-section classification in their plots so as to pursue the political debate of the time, i.e. ‘war on terrorism’, by putting the structure of Bush’s speech on such a significant occasion in their movies to remind the audience of the huge danger their safe life is facing, there will be deaths, chaos, and darkness, however there is a power (a symbol of American Dream/a police officer/U.S. government/army) to protect all and save the world. This ‘huge danger’

may be a 30-story monster destroying buildings and killing people, a malevolent extraterrestrial creature threatening the human race, or alien tripods sent hidden in the earth and awakened by 26 strikes of lightening. In other words, what alien movies show is a parallel structure and content, this time recontextualized to meet the need of the new story. To put it in a nutshell, Hollywood, intentionally or unintentionally, has supported and propagandized the 'war on terrorism' policy of the White House at the time of G. W. Bush's presidency. Needless to say, Bush administration would willingly embrace it.

Analyzing four speeches by four leaders during the history (Urban II, Elizabeth I, Hitler, and G. W. Bush), Graham, et al. (2004) revealed that all of them "suffered from a crisis of legitimacy" (p. 208) before each declared a war on their enemies at the respected period in time. As a result, any medium that helps such politicians receive support and attract public opinion would be positively welcomed. Hollywood, in this case, seems to have served U.S. government interests quite effectively.

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