

# The Family Myth in Hollywood



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Michael Crichton is arguably the successor of Arthur Hailey, the first great author of “capitalist realism” (whose bestsellers back in the 1960s – *Hotel*, *Airport*, *Cars*... – always focused on a particular site of production or complex organization, mixing melodramatic plot with lengthy descriptions of how the site functions, in an unexpected replica of the Stalinist classics of the late 1920s and 1930s like Gladkov’s *Cement*).<sup>1</sup> Crichton gave to the genre a postmodern techno-thriller twist, in accordance with today’s predominant politics of fear: he is the ultimate

novelist of fear – fear of the past (*Jurassic Park*, *Eaters of the Dead*), of the nanotechnological future (*Prey*), of Japan’s business (*The Rising Sun*), of sexual harassment (*Disclosure*), of robotic technology (*Westworld*), of medical industry (*Coma*), of alien intrusion (*Andromeda Strain*), of ecological catastrophe (*State of Fear*). *State of Fear*, his last book, brings an unexpected final twist to this series of shadowy forces which lurk among us, poised to wreak havoc: America’s fiercest enemies are none others than environmentalists themselves.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> To this series, one should add Leon Uris’s *Exodus* as an exercise in “Zionist realism.”

<sup>2</sup> He already resorted to a similar reversal in *Disclosure*, the sexual harassment novel, in which a woman harasses a man.

As many a critic has noted, Crichton's books aren't really novels, they are more a kind of unfinished drafts, prospectuses for screenplays; however, it is this very feature which makes his work interesting for an analysis of today's ideology: the very lack of quality, the totally 'transparent' mode of writing, allows the underlying ideological fantasies to be staged at their embarrassingly-desublimated purest, in a naked form, as it were. Exemplary is here *Prey*, in which a nanotechnological experiment in a laboratory in the Nevada desert has gone horribly wrong; a cloud of nano-particles – millions of microrobots – has escaped. The cloud – visible to observers as a black swarm – is self-sustaining, self-reproducing, intelligent, and it learns from experience, evolving hour by hour. Every effort to destroy it has failed.<sup>3</sup> It has been programmed to be a predator; humans are its prey. Only a handful of scientists trapped in the laboratory stand between it and the release of this mechanical plague on a defenceless world... As is always the case in such stories, this 'big plot' (the catastrophe that threatens to ruin humanity itself) is combined with the 'small plot,' a set of relations and tensions among the group of scientists, with the troubled role-reversal married couple at its center. Jack, the novel's narrator, was the manager of a cutting-edge computer program division in a media technology company before he was made a scapegoat for someone else's corruption and fired; now he's a house-husband while his wife, Julia, is the workaholic vice-president of Xymos, the nanotechnology company which owns the Nevada desert laboratory where the catastrophe occurs – erotic, manipulative, and cold, she is a new version of the corporate vixen from *Disclosure*. At the novel's start, Jack has to cope with their three children, discusses Pampers versus Huggies with another father in the supermarket, and tries to handle his suspicions that his wife is having an affair.

Far from providing a mere human-interest sub-plot, this family plot is what the novel really is about: it is the prey of nano-particles which should be conceived as a materialization of the family tensions. The first thing that cannot but strike the eye of anyone who knows Lacan is how this prey (swarm) resembles what Lacan, in his Seminar XI, called "lamella": the prey appears indestructible, in its infinite plasticity; it always re-assembles itself, able morph itself into a multitude of shapes; in it, pure evil animality overlaps with machinic blind insistence. Lamella is an entity of pure surface, without the density of a substance, an infinitely plastic object that can not only incessantly change its form, but can even transpose itself from one to another medium: imagine a "something" that is first heard as a shrilling sound, and then pops up as a monstrously distorted body. A lamella is indivisible, indestructible, and immortal – more precisely, undead in the sense this term has in horror fiction: not the sublime spiritual immortality, but the obscene immortality of the "living dead" which, after every annihilation, re-compose themselves and clumsily go on. As Lacan puts it, lamella does not exist, it insists: it is unreal, an entity of pure semblance, a multiplicity of appearances

which seem to envelop a central void – its status is purely fantasmatic. This blind indestructible insistence of the libido is what Freud called "death drive," and one should bear in mind that "death drive" is, paradoxically, the Freudian name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis: for an uncanny excess of life, for an 'undead' urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption. Freud equates the death drive with the so-called "compulsion-to-repeat," an uncanny urge to repeat painful past experiences which seems to outgrow the natural limitations of the organism affected by it and to insist even beyond the organism's death. As such, lamella is "what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction": it precedes sexual difference, it multiplies and reproduces itself by way of asexual self-division.<sup>4</sup> In the novel's climactic scene, Jack holds in his arms Julia who, unbeknownst to him, is already infected by the swarm and lives in symbiosis with the nano-particles, receiving from them an over-human life-power.

"I held her hard. The skin of her face began to shiver, vibrating rapidly. And then her features seemed to grow, to swell as she screamed. I thought her eyes looked frightened. The swelling continued, and began to break up into rivulets, and streams.

And then in a sudden rush Julia literally disintegrated before my eyes. The skin of her swollen face and body blew away from her in streams of particles, like sand blown off a sand dune. The particles curved away in the arc of the magnetic field toward the sides of the room.

I felt her body growing lighter and lighter in my arms. Still the particles continued to flow away, with a kind of whooshing sound, to all corners of the room. And when it was finished, what was left behind – what I still held in my arms – was a pale and cadaverous form. Julia's eyes were sunk deep in her cheeks. Her mouth was thin and cracked, her skin translucent. Her hair was colorless, brittle. Her collarbones protruded from her bony neck. She looked like she was dying of cancer. Her mouth worked. I heard faint words, hardly more than breathing. I leaned in, turned my ear to her mouth to hear.

'Jack,' she whispered, 'It's eating me.'" (468-69).

This separation is then undone, the particles return to Julia and revitalize her:

"The particles on the walls were drifting free once more. Now they seemed to telescope back, returning to her face and body. /.../ And suddenly, in a *whoosh*, all the particles returned, and Julia was full and beautiful and strong as before, and she pushed me away from her with a contemptuous look..." (471).

In the final confrontation, we then get both Julias side by side, the glimmering Julia composed of the swarm and the exhausted real Julia:

"Julia came swirling up through the air toward me, spiralling like a corkscrew – and grabbed the ladder alongside me. Except she wasn't Julia, she was the swarm, and for a moment the swarm was disorganized enough that I could see right through her in places; I could see the swirling particles that composed her. I looked dawn and saw the real Julia, deathly pale, standing and looking up at me, her face a skull. By now the swarm alongside me become solid – appearing, as I had seen it become solid before. It looked like Julia"(476).

<sup>3</sup> In a rude Marxist reading, one is tempted to see in this fear of the prey of nano-particles self-organizing itself out of control of its human creators the displacement of the fear of the worker (or other oppressed group) class-consciousness.

<sup>4</sup> No wonder that the first climax of the novel is when a group of battling scientists progress into a hidden cave in the desert, the site of Evil where the swarm regenerates itself, and destroy it – similarly to *Eaters of the Dead*, in which the group of Vikings warriors has to penetrate the cave in which the matriarchal chief of the Neanderthal tribe of cannibals dwells, and kill her.

Here, we are not talking science, not even problematic science, but one of the fundamental fantasy-scenarios, or, more precisely, the scenario of the very disintegration of the link between fantasy and reality, so that we get the two of them, fantasy and reality, the Julia-swarm and the 'real' Julia, side by side, as in the wonderful scene from the beginning of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, where food is served in an expensive restaurant in such a way that we get on a plate itself a small patty-like cake which looks (and probably tastes) like shit, while above the plate, a colour photo is hanging which shows us what we are "really eating," a nicely arranged juicy steak...

This, then, is how one should read *Prey*: all the (pseudo) scientific speculations about nano-technology are here as a pretext to tell the story of a husband reduced to a house-job, frustrated by his ambitious corporate vixen of a wife. No wonder that, at the novel's end, a 'normal' couple is re-created: at Jack's side is Mae, the passive but understanding Chinese colleague scientist, silent and faithful, lacking Julia's aggressiveness and ambition. And *Prey* is, as such, typical of the Hollywood matrix of the production of a couple, in which everything, from the fate of the Knights of the Round Table through October Revolution up to asteroids hitting the Earth, is transposed into an Oedipal narrative. (A Deleuzian would not miss the chance to point out how the main theoretical support of such familiarization is psychoanalysis, which makes it the key ideological machine). For this reason, it is of some interest to focus on Hollywood products which, unexpectedly, undermine this matrix – amongst them are two recent big commercial movies.

In March 2005, no less than Vatican itself made a highly publicized statement, condemning in strongest terms Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* as a book based on lies and spreading false teachings (that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and that they had descendants – the true identity of Grail is Mary's vagina!), especially regretting the fact that the book is so popular among the younger generation in search for spiritual guidance. The ridicule of this Vatican intervention, sustained by a barely concealed longing for the good old times when the infamous Index of prohibited books was still operative, should not blind us for the fact that, while the form is wrong (one almost suspects a conspiracy between Vatican and the publisher to give a new boost to the sales of the book), the content is basically right: *The Da Vinci Code* effectively proposes a New Age re-interpretation of Christianity in the terms of the balance of the masculine and feminine Principles, i.e., the basic idea of the novel is the re-inscription of Christianity into the pagan sexualized ontology: the feminine principle is sacred, perfection resides in the harmonious coupling of the male and female principles... The paradox to be assumed is that, in this case, every feminist should support the Church: it is ONLY through the 'monotheistic' suspension of the feminine signifier, of the polarity of the masculine and feminine opposites, that the space emerges for what we broadly refer to as 'feminism' proper, for the rise of feminine subjectivity. The femininity asserted in the affirmation of the cosmic "feminine principle" is, on the contrary, always a subordinated (passive, receptive) pole, opposed to active "masculine principle."



This is why thrillers like *Da Vinci Code* are one of the key indicators of today's ideological shifts: the hero is in search of an old manuscript which would reveal some shattering secret threatening to undermine the very foundations of (institutionalized) Christianity; the 'criminal' edge is provided by the desperate and ruthless attempts of the Church (or some hard-line faction within it) to suppress this document. This secret focuses on the 'repressed' feminine dimension of the divine: Christ was married to Mary Magdalene, the Grail is actually the female body... is this revelation really such a surprise? Is the idea that Jesus had sex with Mary Magdalene not rather a kind of obscene secret of Christianity known to all, a Christian *secret de polichinelle*? The true surprise would have been to go a step further and claim that Mary was really a transvestite, so that Jesus' lover was a young beautiful boy!

The interest of the novel (and, against the suspiciously fast dismissal of the film, one should say that this holds even more for the film) resides in a feature which, surprisingly, echoes *The X-Files* where (as Darian Leader noted) the fact that so many things happen "out there" where the truth is supposed to dwell (aliens invading Earth) fills in the void, i.e., the much closer truth that nothing (no sexual relation) is going on between the couple of two agents, Mulder and Scully. In *Code*, the sexual life of Christ and Mary Magdalene is the excess which inverts (covers up) the fact that the sexual life of Sophie, the heroine, Christ's last descendant, is non-existent: SHE is like contemporary Mary, virginal, pure, asexualized, there is no hint of sex between her and Robert Langdon.

Her trauma is that she witnessed the primordial fantasmatic scene of the parental copulation, this excess of *jouissance* which totally “neutralized” her sexually: it is as if, in a kind of temporal loop, she was there at the act of her

some surprises. *The Village* takes place in a Pennsylvania village cut off from the rest of the world and surrounded by woods full of dangerous monsters known to the villagers as ‘Those We Do Not Speak Of.’ Most villagers are content to

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own conception, so that, for her, EVERY sex is incestuous and thus prohibited. Here enters Robert who, far from being her love-partner, acts as her “wild analyst” whose task is to construct a narrative frame, a myth, which would enable her to break out of this fantasmatic captivation, NOT by way of regaining ‘normal’ heterosexuality, but by way of accepting her asexuality and “normalizing” it as part of the new mythic narrative. In this sense, *The Da Vinci Code* belongs into the series we are analyzing: it is not really a film about religion, about the “repressed” secret of Christianity, but a film about a frigid and traumatized young woman who is redeemed, freed of her trauma, provided with a mythic frame that enables her to fully accept her asexuality.

The mythic character of this solution resorts clearly if we contrast Robert as its proponent to Sir Leigh, the counterpoint to Opus Dei in the film (and novel): he wants to disclose the secret of Mary and thus save humanity from the oppression of official Christianity. The film rejects this radical move and opts for a fictional compromise-solution: what is important are not facts (the DNA facts that would prove the genealogical link between her and Mary and Christ), but what she (Sophie) believes – the movie opts for symbolic fiction against genealogical facts. The myth of being Christ’s descendant creates for Sophie a new symbolic identity: at the end, she emerges as the leader of a community. It is at this level of what goes on in terrestrial life that *Da Vinci Code* remains Christian: in the person of Sophie, it enacts the passage from sexual love to desexualized *agape* as political love, love that serves as the bond of a collective. The film thus rejects the standard Hollywood formula: the couple is not created, Sophie finds her way outside sexual relationship.

The other example is Night M. Shyamalan’s *The Village*. Those who all too easily dismiss Shyamalan’s films as the lowest of the New Age kitsch are in for

live with a bargain they made with the creatures: they don’t enter the forest, the creatures don’t enter the town. Conflict arises when the young Lucius Hunt wishes to leave the village in search of new medicines, and the pact is broken. Lucius and Ivy Walker, the village leader’s blind daughter, decide to get married, which makes the village idiot really jealous; he stabs Lucius and nearly kills him, leaving him at the mercy of an infection that requires medicines from the outside world. Ivy’s father then tells her about the town’s secret: there are no monsters, and the year isn’t really 1897. The town elders were part of a 20th-century crime victims’ support group which decided to withdraw from it completely; Walker’s father had been a millionaire businessman, so they bought a bunch of land, called it a ‘wildlife preserve,’ surrounded it with a big fence and lots of guards, bribed government officials to reroute airplanes away from the community, and moved inside, concocting the story about ‘Those We Do Not Speak Of’ to keep anyone from leaving. With her father’s blessing, Ivy slips outside, meets a friendly security guard who gives her some medicine, and returns to save her betrothed’s life. So, at the film’s end, the village elders decide to go on with their secluded lives: the village idiot’s death can be presented to the non-initiated as a proof that the creatures exist, confirming the founding myth of the community.

Sacrificial logic is thus reasserted as the condition of a community, as its secret bond – no wonder that most of the critics dismissed the film as the worst case of ideological cocooning: “It’s easy to understand why he’s attracted to setting a movie in a period where people proclaimed their emotions in full and heartfelt sentences, or why he enjoys building a village that’s impenetrable to the outside world. He’s not making movies. He’s making cocoons.”<sup>5</sup> The desire underlying the film is thus the desire to recreate a closed universe of authenticity in which innocence is protected from the corrosive force of modernity: “It’s all about how to

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<sup>5</sup> “Village Idiot. *The Case Against M. Night Shyamalan*,” by Michael Agger, <http://slate.msn.com/id/2104567>.

protect your innocence from getting hurt by the ‘creatures’ in your life; the desire to protect your children from going into the unknown. If these ‘creatures’ have hurt you, you don’t want them to hurt your children and the younger generation may be willing to risk that.”<sup>6</sup>

in the best ‘totalitarian’ manner staged by the inner circle (‘Elders’) of the community itself, in order to prevent the non-initiated youngsters to leave the village and risk the passage through the forest to the decadent ‘towns.’ The ‘evil’ itself has to be redoubled: the ‘real’ evil of late-capitalist

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Upon a closer look, however, the film reveals itself to be much more ambiguous. When reviewers noticed that “the movie is in H.P. Lovecraft territory: severe, wintry New England palette; a suggestion of inbreeding; hushed mentions of ‘The Old Ones,’ ‘Those We Do Not Speak Of,’”<sup>7</sup> they as a rule forgot to mention the political context: let us not forget that the 19<sup>th</sup> century self-subsistent community also refers to the many utopian-socialist communities that thrived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century US. This does not mean that the Lovecraft reference to supernatural horror is just a mask, a false lure. We have two universes: the modern open ‘risk society’ versus the safety of the old secluded universe of Meaning – but the price of Meaning is a finite closed space guarded by unnamable Monsters. Evil is not simply excluded in this closed utopian space – it is transformed into a mythic threat with which the community establishes a temporary truce and against which it has to maintain a permanent state of emergency.

The “Deleted Scenes” special feature on the DVD release all too often makes the viewer only realize that the director was right to delete these scenes – however, in the DVD edition of *The Village*, there is an exception to this rule. One of the deleted scenes is that of a “Drill”: Walker rings the bell, giving to the community the signal to practice the fast retreat into underground shelters in the case of the creatures’ attack – as if authentic community is only possible in the conditions of a permanent threat, in a continuous state of emergency.<sup>8</sup> This threat is, as we learn,

social disintegration has to be transposed into the archaic magic-mythic evil of ‘creatures.’ The ‘Evil’ IS a part of the ‘inner circle’ itself, IMAGINED by its members. Are we here not back at Chesterton’s *Thursday*, in which the highest police authority IS the same person as the super-criminal, staging a battle with himself? In a proto-Hegelian way, the external threat the community is fighting is its own inherent essence...<sup>9</sup>

**A**nd what if this is true in a much more radical way than it may appear? What if the true Evil of our societies is not the capitalist dynamics as such, but the attempts to extricate ourselves from it (while profiting from it), to carve out self-enclosed communal spaces, from ‘gated communities’ to exclusive racial or religious groups? That is to say, is the point of *The Village* not precisely to demonstrate that, today, a return to an authentic community in which speech still directly expresses true emotions, etc. – the village of the socialist utopia – is a fake which can only be staged as a spectacle for the very rich? The exemplary figure of Evil are today not ordinary consumers who pollute environment and live in a violent world of disintegrating social links, but those (top managers, etc.) who, while fully engaged in creating conditions for such universal devastation and pollution, exempt themselves from the results of their own activity, living in gated communities, eating organic food and taking holidays in wildlife preserves.

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted from <http://glidemagazine.com/articles120.html>

<sup>7</sup> David Edelstein, on <http://slate.msn.com/id/2104512>.

<sup>8</sup> One of the more stupid reproaches to the film (not unlike the same reproach to Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*) is that it spoils the suspense by disclosing the secret already two thirds into the film – this very knowledge makes the last third all the more interesting. That is to say, the film’s last third – more precisely, Ivy’s painfully slow progress through the forest – confronts us with a clear enigma (or, as some would have put it, narrative inconsistency): why is Ivy afraid of the Creatures, why are the Creatures still presented as a mythic threat, although she already knows that Creatures don’t exist, that they are a staged fake? In another deleted scene, Ivy, after hearing the ominous (and, as we know, artificially generated) sounds that announce the proximity of the Creatures, cries with desperate intensity: “It is for love that I am here. So I beg you to let me cross!” – why does she do it if she knows there are no Creatures? She knows very well, but... there is more reality in the haunting unreal specters than in direct reality itself.

<sup>9</sup> Here, Nicholas Meyer is also right in his Sherlock Holmes pastiche *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*: within the diegetic space of the Sherlock Holmes stories, Moriarty, the arch-criminal – “Napoleon of crime” – and Holmes’ ultimate opponent, is clearly a fantasy of Holmes himself, his double, his Dark Half: in the opening pages of Meyer’s novel, Watson is visited by Moriarty, a humble mathematics professor, who complains to Watson that Holmes is obsessed with the *idée fixe* that he is the master criminal; to cure Holmes, Watson lures him to Vienna, to Freud’s house.