

Bird Box and Apathetic Blindness

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“Turn on the news, dumb-dumb,” says Jessica (Sarah Paulson) to her sister Malorie (Sandra Bullock), the protagonist of the recent streaming hit, *Bird Box* (S. Bier, 2018). Completely unaware of the unexplained mass suicides in East Europe, Malorie has not stocked her kitchen with groceries. She does not seem to be interested in what is going on in the world, and the alarming reports of the ongoing catastrophe on the TV is not enough to spur her into action: “Well,” after all, “it’s in Russia.” She just turns the TV off, and continues with painting in her new studio.

In her comfortable numbness, Malorie is one of us, that is, the lucky ones who have the luxury of slipping away from the distressing images of modern life. The immigrant children in cages separated from their parents, the civil war in Syria, and the irreversible devastation of the biosphere are held in the entitled ones’ peripheral vision. Just like her, we blind ourselves to the rest of the world at the push of a remote control button, and mind our own business. “If you don’t acknowledge a thing, it simply goes away,” Jessica sarcastically puts it during the sonogram.

However, *Bird Box* reminds that what happens on the screen does not always remain there. In an alternative interpretation, the narrative, which is adapted from the novel of the same name by Josh Malerman, subtly warns us that there will be a time when “it” will not simply go away. If viewed as an allegory, the most original aspect of the film is the ironic requital that humanity pays for its hamartia; apathetic blindness to human affairs and the ecosystem develops into collective misery.



[[f/fc/images/13761232.0043.314-00000001.jpg](http://fc/images/13761232.0043.314-00000001.jpg)]

Figure 1: Malorie and her children flee down a perilous river.

Turning the screen off no longer helps to escape the “truth” which is now lurking at the front door. In the face of the avenging verities (i.e., the plight of others living on an endangered planet), which appears in the form of psychosis-causing paranormal entities in the film, the only way to stay sane is to literally go blind. Hence, the comfortable cocoon that isolated individuals build for themselves is substituted with tightly sealed boxed-in houses, into which the terrorized characters have to lock

themselves away in order to survive. Loneliness is not just incidental anymore, as it is in Malorie's abstract painting; isolation becomes destiny. The film presents a bleak yet comical carnivalesque in which only the insane, disabled, and suicidal are given the freedom of mobility.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.314-00000002.jpg\]](#)

Figure 2: Mad Gary forces Cheryl to "see it."

Malerman's novel makes constant allusions to humanity's failure to leave a habitable world for the next generation. However, the film carries this conceit to a whole new level. Identification with the on-screen characters who put on and take off their blindfolds reminds us of the way we see, and close our eyes to, the whole world in sliding pixels and milliseconds every day. The film invokes the distracting images of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's culture industry and Jean-Louis Baudry's illusionary cinematic apparatus, but exposes these methods as woefully out-of-date. We purport to enjoy an age of conscious, anonymous, and distanced participation in a colossal digital network, which turns out to subject us to new ordeals of solitude.

The film adaptation includes significant details that are not found in the novel, such as the painting and sonogram. Malorie's initial attitude is marked with skepticism in the novel rather than disinterestedness. The characters in the film express differing attitudes towards the encroaching apocalypse. The film's characters evince a multitude of contrasting voices, even among the very small group of survivors.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.314-00000003.jpg\]](#)

Figure 3: "The end game" for humanity.

The way the characters tackle the truth of apocalypse reveals who they are. Douglas (John Malkovich), not one of the book's characters, is an annoying windbag. He is not very different from the scientist who makes a fuss over global warming, or the yellow vest who protests the taxes in the streets of Paris. He is treated accordingly by the other characters before he is finally silenced. Douglas is as annoying as the news footage on TV because he is telling the bitter truth, and he is always proven right in the end.

Douglas' cynical remark, "there are only two types of people in the end: the assholes and the dead," serves as a blueprint for how Malorie survives in the end. Malorie is not morally superior to the others, but because she is the fittest as a result of her tough upbringing on her father's farm. She redeems this familial agrarian history, from which she had cut ties in the film's backstory. Unlike Malorie, Olympia (Danielle Macdonald) knows from the beginning that she is "soft," and will not be able to protect her baby.

Tom (Trevante Rhodes), a Black working-class war veteran, is the most distinguished character in the film. In the novel, he is described as a blond, blue-eyed white man, a secondary school teacher. Tom is tough but he does not share the self-centered stoicism of Douglas and Malorie. He plays the role of a self-sacrificing protector and nurturer, a role which later Malorie unwillingly undertakes when she has children. Tom is able to connect with others, and he never turns a blind eye to those who need help. His service in the military does not make him a representative of imperialist exploitation. While contrived, the film constructs his character via his devotion to protecting Iraqi children. Via his lack of hesitation to go overseas to help humanity, Tom does not isolate himself from the rest of the world as Malorie does. He is an idealized world citizen.



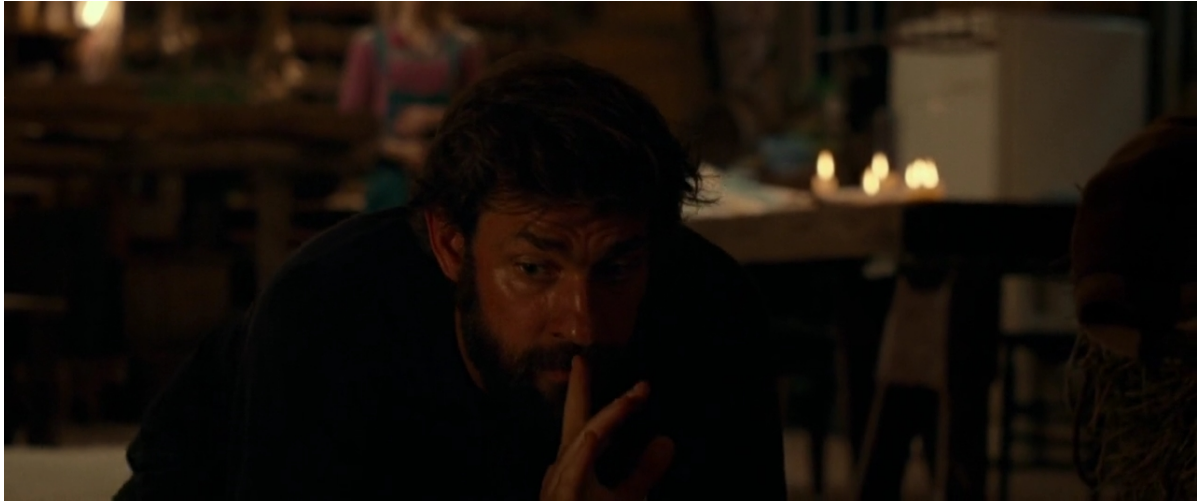
[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.314-00000004.jpg\]](https://f/fc/images/13761232.0043.314-00000004.jpg)

Figure 4: Tom tells his children about trees, flowers and clouds in the good old days.

Bird Box stands apart from the preposterous normalization of violence in recent fiction. Another member of the group, Charlie describes "those kids' stories where they are killing each other to survive or running around in some giant maze." At times, the seemingly very different film veers toward the ecological themes in the more obviously aesthetically and thematically radical, *mother!* (D. Aronofsky, 2017).

Bird Box bears a striking resemblance to *A Quiet Place* (J. Krasinski, 2018). Both films center on a sudden *in medias res* reversal from civilization to the primitive. Under the threat of unknown beings,

humanity perforce undergoes sensory crippling in both films, blindness in *Bird Box* and speech impairment in *A Quiet Place*. When considered together, the unexplained and unspecified origin of the menace marks the limits and ultimate failure of humanity in subduing nature through an incessant search for knowledge.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.314-00000005.jpg\]](#)

Figure 5: Lee warns his children to stay quiet in order to survive.

In the meantime, the last resort of the social structure, the nuclear family, collapses with the death of the father. Rapidly downsized society is on the edge of extinction in both films. However, the mother figure manages to save the newborn with the help of nature. Water in *A Quiet Place* and birds in *Bird Box* provide protection and hope for future generations (also unique to the film adaptation of *Bird Box*).



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.314-00000006.jpg\]](#)

Figure 6: The newborn is put in a soundproof box.

The major difference between the two films is found in the ending. While the characters in *A Quiet Place* tritely learn how to fight back using technology, in *Bird Box* they have to embark upon a completely new way of living. Thus, the latter allows more room for allegorical interpretation, especially if it is considered as a grotesque foretelling of the violent end of the Anthropocene.

Bird Box is a retelling of the tragedy of Oedipus, who gouges his eyes out in the end for the mistakes he has made. The hero forced to wear a blindfold is humankind, punished for remaining aloof for so long. From Sophocles to *Bird Box*, personal space isolated from the surrounding universe keep humans oblivious to the fact that they are always already headed to extinction.

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