The Nuclear Memory of Harry Potter

The director’s visual allusions imbue J.K. Rowling’s coming-of-age tale with an apocalyptic foreboding.

By LORI MORIMOTO

The “exodus” sequence from *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1* (2010) is one of the most interesting of the entire Harry Potter series, and all because of what David Yates brings to the table as director.
Yates was the filmmaker who introduced present-day Muggle UK to the series. Until Yates’s *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2007), the Harry Potter films had taken place in Chris Columbus’s anachronistic, vaguely “British” (as opposed to clearly Scottish) setting, based in large part on the director’s early vision of the Wizarding World as a kind of pseudo-Victorian, Anglophilic wonderland.

Columbus’s was the Britain of *Young Sherlock Holmes* (1985)— quaint, quirky, and far removed from anything even remotely contemporary. Even the Dursleys’ home, which is as close to the Muggle world as Columbus comes, is more cartoonish than real—an exaggeration of the real world that might reflect J.K. Rowling’s own whimsical representation of Harry’s rather abusive family, but which is all the more distanced from our own world (and the consequences of such abuse) because of it.

The world of the first two films and, to a lesser extent, the following two, is one of fantasy. But that of David Yates’s final four films is markedly different.

**Danger from the Sky**

Indeed, the opening sequence of Yates’s *The Order of the Phoenix* gives us Harry (Daniel Radcliffe)—fresh from the death of Cedric Diggory in the Tri-Wizard Tournament—sitting alone in a squarely middle-class, suburban playground, where danger always seems to come from the sky.
This is a Wizarding World that exists right in the midst of an unknowing Muggle one, thus raising the stakes of Harry’s “adventures” substantially. Yates’s Wizarding World is more real for being closer to “our” world, and it lends Harry himself a certain vulnerability.

Here we see—for perhaps the first time since Alfonso Cuaron’s *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004)—just how young Harry really is in this world of adult activity and stakes. He’s just a kid, not much older than one of the children he wistfully watches playing under the watchful eyes of their mother. Yet everything happening to him is in-
creasing exponentially in danger and consequences for the entire magical world.

This is nowhere better exemplified than in the “exodus” sequence of *Deathly Hallows Part 1*—which depicts Harry’s, Ron’s (Rupert Grint), and Hermione’s (Emma Watson) post-Ministry of Magic debacle of a search for Horcruxes.

Here, Yates does something interesting and unexpected. But to appreciate it, a short primer is in order.

**Post-Nuclear Life in the UK**

What do these four videos have in common?

*Threads (1984)*—from 7:25, although the whole movie is very much worth watching, if you can stomach its frankly harrowing story and images of nuclear holocaust.
"Protect and Survive" public service announcements, UK
Frankie Goes to Hollywood, “Two Tribes” (1983)

In a word, radio.

Wikipedia has a nice discussion of the “Protect and Survive” series of civil defense public service announcements that were produced in the 1980s in the UK, and which entered into the public eye through dramas such as Threads and on news programs, so I won’t repeat it here.

Suffice it to say that the preternaturally calm voice of Patrick Allen, who explained the details of post-nuclear life with complete equanimity, no matter what he was talking about, was in many ways the Harbinger of Doom in the 1980s—or, at least, for me (to the point that I still get a little freaked out on parts of the London Underground, but that’s a different story).

So in short…

Radio + Low Tones/Received Pronunciation = Imminent Apocalypse

No Longer Just Kids on an Adventure

David Yates knows—or, perhaps, remembers—this formula, and he uses it to particularly chilling effect in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hal-
This is a sequence that, in the novel, scarcely takes up two pages. But in Yates’s hands it’s as imbued with real-world significance as any moment that’s come before in his Harry Potter films. Here, we have a Ron Weasley who looks for all the world like he’s dying of radiation sickness in a way that mirrors the slow physical deterioration of the two elderly protagonists in *When the Wind Blows*.

Attack from the sky comes not from faceless nuclear missiles soaring overhead, as in *The Day After* (1983),
but from masked, black-contrailed Death Eaters.

Hauntingly desolate images of a post-apocalyptic wasteland
are reminiscent of the landscapes of *Threads*

And finally—perhaps definitively—the sequence is capped off with a bird’s (or plane’s) eye view of the trio’s campsite that’s eerily reminiscent of the epicenter of the bombing of Hiroshima, the first atomic explosion on a populated area, and all set against the frightening backdrop of this Cold War soundscape.

Which is to say, this scene from *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1* evokes the very real terror and high stakes of the Horcrux hunt in a singularly visceral way.

This is no longer just kids on an adventure. Yates’s transtextual citations here imbue J.K. Rowling’s coming-of-age tale with a truly apocalyptic foreboding—one that exceeds the ostensible youth orientation of the Harry Potter films.

*Originally published at Some of Us Are Looking at the Stars.*

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