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Arousing curiosity in *Them!*

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This analysis is an example of systems for arousing curiosity and holding the audience's interest in a paradigmatic film of Hollywood genre classicism, in the usually highly effective B feature format. The analysis shows the film's capacity to hold back the start of the action to the maximum, turning all the viewer's curiosity towards events which have happened before the story begins and relegating to the background any interest in the future events the audience have come to see take place.

The division we make between *past events* and *future events* assumes a paradigmatic analytical procedure that allows us to differentiate, as Meir Sternberg (1) has done and David Bordwell (2) has subsequently applied, between *curiosity hypotheses* (those referring to an understanding of the past) and *suspense hypotheses* (the ones referring to the future). While admitting that Sternberg's theory (which refers to literary analyses) is limited in terms of the cinema's enormous potential for creating hypotheses projected onto the present —hypotheses which are easily activated through out of field strategies—, its differentiation allows operative analytical applications, according to whether the system of curiosity a film arouses is structured towards already consummated events in the story (but which are hidden by the narrative) or other events which have yet to take place. Although the essential interest of classic cinematic narrative is usually structured towards the always critical resolution of *future events* (a difficult incident-packed struggle towards the protagonists' ultimate happiness), we find exceptional cases, or film zones, where ignorance of the past is the essential element for winning the audience's unconditional interest. It is on the creative procedures of that initial curiosity that we shall focus the analysis of the first minutes of *Them*, a famous film about an invasion of giant ants in the post-atomic context of fifties America directed by Gordon Douglas in 1954.

Opening *in media res*

Few openings of a horror film could be as disturbing and tense as those of this acknowledged masterpiece of Hollywood science fiction. After the classic credits written against a desert landscape, framed by the twisted branches of a threatening tree

looming in the foreground, the opening shots of the film show a desolate desert area in New Mexico, with a police car and plane driving through and overflying in parallel. The occupants of the vehicles (the pilot of the plane and the two uniformed policemen in the car) are in radio contact and through their terse dialogue we can infer that they are looking for something probably out of the ordinary (as the pilot's words suggest: "I think we're wasting our time. The guy who made the report may have had too much to drink") (3). But suddenly an image taken from the plane, following the pilot's subjective view down onto the landscape, shows, in a broad general shot, a tiny figure, almost indistinguishable from the thick scrub, moving slowly forward. The speed of the approach of the plane enables us to identify it easily as a little girl: the pilot's words confirm that immediately: "Little girl about a hundred yards from the road on your left. I'll circle until you pick her up."

The memorable face of the little girl in a state of shock —which appears in close up, finally located and stopped by one of the policemen in the car— is one of the expressive high points of film figuration of all times as far as representation of panic is concerned, a silent image of terror on a face which Ingmar Bergman would not have disowned. But in its radical dumbness lies one of the factors that most ostensibly increase the interest of the story. As all who know the film will remember, the girl, clutching a rag doll in her arms, is sleepwalking and her unfocused eyes, staring into nothing, do not blink when the policeman passes his hand in front of her face. His questions are the same as the audience's: "What's your name?" "Where are you from?"

Begun, according to the Hollywood custom, *in media res*, the narrative is already calling on past events, a knowledge of which turns out to be essential for an understanding of the future events that will then begin to happen. With great power of synthesis, the film makes explicit that it is a knowledge about the story and it is locked up inside the sleepwalking body of the person who holds it: the figure of the child, who repeatedly refuses to explain herself. What has happened —and it must be something important because a little girl is walking alone through the desert clutching a toy, indifferent to everything around her— is unquestionably indispensable for the future evolution of the story, but its power of fascination comes to a large degree from an off screen which we can almost breathe (the wind ruffling the girl's hair, of course, contributes a good deal to that impression), which shouts out (from the girl's paradoxical dumbness) the drama that has taken place in the tragic first act. The questions asked by the policeman —and the complementary question of the other: "What's the matter with this kid?"— are the springboard to an activation of curiosity about the consummated events. The great implicit question is not in fact "What's the matter with this kid?" —we can see that for ourselves!— but rather "What has happened to her?" For what we are sure of is that the author of the report alluded to at the beginning by the pilot was not drunk; whatever he may have seen, it was extraordinary enough for something —an narrative element, a film camera— to take a hasty look.

Past events and future events

An audience can infer the past, but what they are looking at is the present (4). We look at things in the present (5) and in the course of that constant looking we imagine the future, a future which as it is occurs (and it inevitably does occur) enters into a dialectic, sometimes gentle, others harsh, with the hypothetical image we have constructed. A film may be rationally a speculation on past events, but emotionally (and sensorially) it only take shape in the present through the stimulation of a glance darted *to find* (but which *does not necessarily find as it imagines*). To delay the satisfaction of certain hypotheses is a narrative suspense resource designed to produce pleasure: the tension built up in the viewer by the beginning of *Them* cannot be reduced to a speculation on what may have happened, as if we were dealing with the postulates of a detective movie. The succession and arrangement of images and sounds also draw our attention —and we would say most of all— to the preparation of something extraordinary that sooner or later will be shown to the person watching the film. If the little girl gave answers to the mysterious off screen event that has struck her dumb, the importance of what is to come would be diminished, and the eye, excessively satisfied, might well cease to search. It is one thing to establish an intuitive dialectical game with the possibilities open up by a narrative, and another, quite different, to have them all revealed.

An elementary consideration arises about the possible real knowledge that the film producers knew the audience would have before going into the cinema: would they not know, in fact, what kind of film they had gone to see? When the film was released, did the advertising hide the fact that the plot revolved around an attack by giant ants? Not at all: it would have been bad marketing to conceal that information from the potential (and in the end quite specific) audience who went to the cinema precisely to see the cruel behaviour of mutant insects. And so: it us that audience, anxious to enjoy a series of pre-advertised fantasies, who, suddenly, as if unanimously accepting that the knowledge that had brought them to their seats in front of the screen should be suspended, accept and are even grateful for the dilation of what they have come to see, a dilation disturbingly embodied in a little girl determined not to speak: not to speak, precisely, about what the audience, in essence, already know.

In essence, but not in form: the pleasure of narrative is not that of the substantial content, but the formal arrangement. The expectations generated by it —and the suspension of knowledge that is maintained— are the essential source of interest in future events. From that point of view, it is the same manoeuvre that consists of delaying what has already been agreed in the contract signed on entering the cinema, one of the keys to the anxiety aroused by a film apparently as conventional as Them, which knows, in the whole of its masterly first part, how to play on that infallible motto of horror cinema that Jacques Tourneur (6) understood so well, according to which the less the monster is shown, the more fear it arouses, because it is the machine that shows it, the cinematic texture itself, the sole true bearer and spreader of terror.

Protagonism in *Them* does not belong to the ants, but to the narrative itself, which delays their presence. Like so many others in classic cinema, that narrative has to find some physical element inside the fiction that structures it symbolically. From its first

second of existence in front of the audience, the cinematic story has deployed a subtle preliminary rhetoric designed to show that "something is about to happen", that the narrative is on the move, then, and has set out in search of it. That announcement finds the necessary symbolic correlation, as we have already mentioned, in the plane moving towards the audience, its mobile presence incorporated in sound from the first shot (the Warner Brothers emblem covered by the noise of the plane flying), and is seen as a dot growing gradually as it moves into the middle ground, just after the credits, to delegate its metaphorical behaviour as driver of the story (7) to the patrol car with the two policemen, who drive parallel to the audience's gaze, in search of some knowledge not only about consummated events, but also about supposed ones: a look at the search for new events.

Bearer of a knowledge that opens the mind to all kinds of hypotheses about past events, the girl in a state of shock, who suddenly appears in the desert thanks to an eye that is searching for her, is, in parallel, the audience's first phenomenal shock, the first warning, not about what the story is hiding of the past, but what it contains of the future. That first event in the reception of the story, that first alteration of normality that is one of the keys to the horror-fantastic genre to which the film belongs, is not only the first link in the chain of striking events which the audience can begin to fear from that moment, but whose arrangement they are in no condition even to get wind of.

Forced to foresee, but victims of the delay of confirmation, the audience build their hypotheses on consummated events, dense hypotheses here thanks to the special atmosphere of tension that the narrative and figurative arrangement of the elements has produced: an arrangement that turns the unknown —the suspension of knowledge— into an anxious (though gratifying), prolonged wait. An arrangement based on the presentation, within the order of events, of a first phenomenon which is sufficiently disturbing for any delay in the narrative to stir even more the curiosity with which the audience have allowed themselves to be carried away by the initial call of the narrative. And the narrative has to keep warning them that the laws of delay and advance which have been agreed since time immemorial should be respected. The police car, now the correlative symbol of the story, *starts up again* after a prologue sustained in masterly fashion by the concealment of knowledge, with the new (though still precarious) clue offered by the pilot ("there's a trailer about three miles in front of you parked at the roadside. I can't see anyone around, but you should check it.") (8), and which takes the image of the moving vehicle into a fade and picks it up again, with no other break, at the place where the different hypotheses that have already been formulated may find some satisfaction, but most of all further delays.

Them is indeed a film which, from that very moment, arouses a curiosity about consummated events which is reproduced in a series of eight more sequences until, during sequence 10, at minute 27 of the projection —of a total of 1h 28' 35" (almost one third of the running time!)— the camera finally shows the object that has caused the desperate dumbness of the little girl found in the desert, one of the giant ants which troops of soldiers will have to face from that moment on, turning what had been a brilliant paraphrase of a mystery story about *past events* into an accelerated set of

tensed sequences of confrontation that appeal to an interest in *future events*. It is no longer about the nature of the phenomena that have driven the little girl into shock, but how the army will manage to rid us of the plague. In between, the set of eight sequences that follow the initial one is constructed like a prolongation of the enigma, full of fresh clues, schematically distributed, as follows:

Sequence 2 shows the arrival of the police car at the abandoned trailer, which the pilot had spotted in the previous sequence, and where he had sent the patrol car with the little girl. Just before the car arrives, a shot picks out the reason for the investigation again with another close up of the silent girl, now closing her eyes, and pushing her knowledge back down inside her. Curiosity about the new scene is further ratified by the placing of a subjective camera showing, from the policemen's point of view, the arrival of the vehicle at the mysterious trailer, which seems to have been ransacked (a new question that has to be cleared up). The policemen's entry into the trailer is slow: the mystery of the scene takes on its full power. Once inside (in search of the secrets hidden by the setting) the police discover bloodstained clothes (one of the two investigators reckons the stains are ten to twelve hours old, satisfying part of the curiosity: the location of events in time) and other details of destruction, among them two small scraps of cloth which, at the end of the sequence, one of the policemen fits onto the doll the little girl, now asleep inside the car, was clutching. That is complemented by two new enigmas: lumps of sugar inside and out (lumps signalled as an enigma by a close up) and the discovery (also slightly delayed for the public: one of the policemen alerts the other: "Hey, here's something worth looking at. I don't know if it's important or not, but…") of a mysterious track picked out in close up, about which the dialogue warns: "there's no cat could leave that print." The sugar and the track now become the focus of the audience's attention, being as they are the pieces that fit least well (the story has pointed that out) into a global understanding of the enigma. Most likely, if the metonymic mysteries of the track and the sugar lump are resolved, the enigma as a whole will be too.

Sequence 3 takes place some time later at the same spot, now with a more complete police team: they are taking photographs, examining the tracks, and the little girl, now unconscious, is lifted into an ambulance. That is when a new -and very strongly marked — signal to arouse curiosity occurs, in this case about the nature of a sound, but also its location, difficult to pinpoint. Whilst one of the policemen and a male nurse are talking about the condition of the little girl, lying on a stretcher in the ambulance, a strange sound signal, a kind of sustained whistling coming out of nowhere, breaks the monotony of the desert wind and paralyses the conversation for a moment. The characters listen and look at the landscape —a windswept desert—, momentarily diverting their attention from the little girl, so that they do not notice that she has sat up as soon as she hears the mysterious signal and does not lie down again until it stops. The story produces a slight lag in knowledge between the audience and the characters and emphasises the importance of that sound signal to the solution of the enigma.

The fourth sequence takes place at night, at a store in the middle of the desert, which the end of the previous sequence had identified as Grant Johnson's store and where the

two policemen have gone to "see if he knows anything". Once again the place seems to have been destroyed by an unidentifiable force. Some physical elements tend to exacerbate the disquieting atmosphere of the sequence: the howling of the wind rising, a radio switched on with no-one listening to it, a light bulb hanging from a cord blown backwards and forwards by the wind, and the final revelation of Johnson's body, which it lights up intermittently, switching constantly from light to darkness. That moment coincides with the beginning of a disturbing segment of music, a crystal clear signal of the seriousness of the discovery. To that discovery and to the realisation of the process of destruction that has taken place in the store a new signal is added, once again in close up, which acts as a curiosity arouser (since once again it is the presence of sugar) and a piece of self-advertising for the story itself. Over the sugar tiny ants are scurrying, announcing, in a terribly ironic tone, the long-awaited appearance in the story of something the audience have come to consume to satisfy an hidden scopic wish: the presence on screen of a devastating army of giant ants.

But if the film story covertly advertises the reasons for the catastrophe, it continues to thicken the mysteries and prevent the circulation of knowledge: the sequence still has a last, and this time extremely powerful, spur to curiosity. Once the search of the house is complete, the two policemen separate, and whilst the first returns to report to the rest of the team, the second stays watching the house. A few seconds later, the soundtrack reintroduces the mysterious noise that had alerted the characters in the previous sequence, which the makes the policeman on guard go outside. The camera now stays inside the wrecked cabin and shows a window which the policeman walks past until he is out of frame again: shots, a cry of terror and agony are the acoustic signals of his unmistakable destruction by a malign force that remains stubbornly *off screen*.

Having solved the first attack of the invisible ants *off screen*, the narrative has satisfied one of the audience's wishes (in a film of this kind there have to be malign attacks), but has deprived them of another —to really see the ants in action—, and has maintained, as far as knowledge is concerned, complete hermeticism about the nature of the malign entity that is attacking the characters.

Sequence 5, at the police station, may be considered a typical *recapitulation* of our (scant) knowledge about *past events* (we are reminded that the mystery murderer is not looking for money, only sugar) and serves to announce —arousing new expectations— the immediate intervention of a member of the FBI. A restful sequence, then, that adheres to the usual sinuous rhythm of horror and suspense films (after a scene of high tension, one of rest and reflection can be included), a condition that is also given to sequence 6, with the presentation at the station of the FBI agent, who from then on will continue the investigation. But this sequence emphatically reminds us again of some of the enigmatic elements that have stirred our curiosity (we see the track in the sand once again in close up, now in a plaster mould, and there is a verbal allusion to the stubborn silence of the girl picked up in the desert), and the dialogue closes with a new revelation: the corpse has been examined and a large amount of formic acid has been found inside it.

The arrival, announced by a telegram read out by the policeman protagonist, of two scientists from the government department of agriculture centres sequence 7 of the film, a presentation of new characters —a scientific expert and his daughter, habitual figures in the genre in the fifties—, preceded by the slow, ceremonious landing of the aircraft that brings them, and a short suspension of the image of the girl's face, delayed by the classic device of showing the legs first and then the whole body. Sequence 8 is a fresh recapitulation, once again at the police station, but here there are indications that the two scientists who have arrived know something more than the other characters about the cause of the initial destruction. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the FBI agent takes the position that his curiosity demands quick answers (making himself spokesman for the audience), or that the doctor who knows the facts delays them (in this case representing the dilatory voice of the narrator). Let us observe this short exchange:

AGENT: If you really know what this is, tell us. We are on the case just like you.
DOCTOR: Mr Graham, we can't tell you until we're completely sure of our theory.

A declaration, the doctor's, that fans of detective stories will recognise immediately: those inevitable moments at which the detective, always questioned by a colleague who acts as the receiver's spokesman, declares that he has a structured theory about *past events*, but delays his explanation *until he is sure*, which is equivalent to the moment when the narrative has found the best time to produce the revelation. In the case we are concerned with here, the doctor's ambiguous declaration indicates the completely extraordinary character of the phenomena under investigation, and advertises the interest in the two new settings where the scientist is sent on the investigation: first, the hospital where the child is still being kept, and immediately afterwards the desert of the beginning:

DOCTOR (leaving the room): When I've seen the girl I want to examine the place where the track was found.

Sequence 9, focusing on the doctor's visit to the silent girl in the hospital, is fast and sharp, but contains a classic *self-advertising* effect: informed by the nurse that the girl has lost her voice as a result of the trauma and that she could only recover it after a new shock, the doctor asks his daughter to pass him a sample of the formic acid they have brought with them, which he then puts under the little girl's nose, making her smell it. The devastating reaction wakes the girl up with a start; she runs towards the wall as if escaping from an invisible evil, just uttering the words "them, them", the words of the title. An advertisement for the film as such and a reminder of the hermetic character of the title, which structures a scopic wish (to see the attack of the ants) camouflaged by a (simulated) wish for knowledge (what kind of creatures does the pronoun "them" refer to?).

A final point alluding to the nine sequences analysed so far: the planning of this classic film seems completely in accordance with the canons of the years of production, but reveals some generic peculiarities: the scant curiosity aroused by the characters in the

story is taken for granted (none of them has a close up, with the significant exception of the dumb girl) and all the interest in past events has been structured through a series of emphatic signals: hence the presence of the *extreme close ups* and *close ups* reserved exclusively for the mysterious tracks and signs of what has happened.

From not knowing to knowing

But, finally, there is knowledge. Sequence 10 of the film, located in the same zone of the desert where the first track was discovered, will serve to change the audience's cognitive expectations completely. After a series of new, short delays structured around the doctor and his daughter's research on the spot (9), a new burst of the mysterious whistling sound which we now associate with the destructive force, leads the story to transform the quality of the receptive knowledge. The doctor's daughter, clearly distanced from the rest of the group, standing by a dune, is isolated inside the shot, whilst the audience witness the gradual emergence, from behind the dune, of what the film has been postponing since the beginning: the menacing presence of a giant ant. On a concern with past events, curiosity about future ones is now superimposed: *will the giant ant attack the defenceless woman?*

What we see next is, then, an instrumentalisation of cinematic devices for the creation of Sternberg's *suspense hypotheses* about the future, aroused by rhetorical strategies well differentiated from the ones we have examined in this article. For what we have tried to demonstrate so far is how the retaining game played by *Them* in its first part achieves, with minimum production of new events and a systematic paralysis of action projected into the future, maximum motivation of curiosity among the audience about those elements of the past of the story, before the beginning *in media res*. The narrative strength for the arousal of that interest in the past is what helps, when the action is finally triggered in sequence 10, to heighten the tension which, from that turning point, the film generates in relation to future events which structure the narrative of the rest of it.

Notes

(1) Sternberg, Meir, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1978, p. 65.

(2) David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Routledge, p. 37.

(3) Translator's note: the dialogue is not taken verbatim from the script but retranslated from the Spanish dubbed version due to lack of availability of an original copy.

(4) Flashbacks are only seen by the audience *in the present*.

(5) Or in an immediate past which may be significant for optical physics, but not for narrative. Nor do we enter into the logical assumption of the cinema image as a vision

of the past: the fact is that we see it *in the present*.

(6) See the classic *Cat People* (1942) or the revealing case of *Night of the Demon* (1957), where the final showing of the monster, imposed by the producers, is a pale reflection of the terrifying power of suggestion Tourneur accomplishes in the rest of the film, on the basis of suggesting without showing.

(7) On the metaphorical notion of "narrative as a vehicle", see Núria Bou, *La mirada en el temps*, Edicions 62, Barcelona, 1995, pp. 86-87.

(8) It is not by chance that this phrase is also delayed inside the parked car by interference that makes it almost impossible to hear and forces the pilot to repeat it.

(9) And where there are still some exchanges of dialogue in which the FBI agent demands answers, which the doctor and his daughter delay once again.