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Patrick O'Brien

ABSTRACT

Hollywood has shown an unending affection for the airplane for nearly one hundred years. From fantasy, to war, to salvation, to heroism, to romance, to adventure, airplanes have been and continue to be a powerful symbol in American film. Two intertwined themes based on flight are menace and hope, and the tension between them has successfully driven many flying films. This may explain why film has featured the airplane as the archetypal machine of the twentieth century, just as, according to Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden*, the locomotive served as the archetypal machine in American literature of the nineteenth century. Specifically, this dissertation will focus on how cargo planes, bomber aircraft, commercial airliners, and all those aboard have been portrayed in film from 1950-2004. This is chapter 7 of the dissertation.

Addendum: In addition to the text of chapter 7 from my 2004 dissertation, this submission also contains added material from airplane films that have appeared since then and feature disturbed or disturbing passengers. Of particular note is the character played by Jodie Foster in *Flightplan* (2005).

CHAPTER 7

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On the evening of October 11, 1963, American television viewers who tuned in to a certain channel were greeted with this opening monologue, spoken in a flat and subdued manner, with a clipped inflection familiar to many:

Portrait of a frightened man: Mr. Robert Wilson, thirty-seven, husband, father, and salesman on sick leave. Mr. Wilson has just been discharged from a sanitarium where he has spent the last six months recovering from a nervous breakdown, the onset of which took place on an evening not dissimilar to this one — on an airliner very much like the one in which Mr. Wilson is about to be flown home. The difference being that, on that evening half a year ago, Mr. Wilson's flight was terminated by the onslaught of his mental breakdown. Tonight he is traveling all the way to his appointed destination — which, contrary to Mr. Wilson's plan, happens to be the darkest corner of ... the *Twilight Zone*.

Perhaps *the* cinematic prototype for the disturbed flying passenger can be found in this episode of Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* called "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet," starring a youthful William Shatner as Robert "Bob" Wilson, a man returning home with his wife from a long stay in a mental hospital. Their opening dialogue begins on a note mixing hope and despair. After attempting to light a cigarette, his wife asks him to put it out, which he nervously does. "I'm not acting much like a cured man, am I?" To which she replies, "Honey, you *are* cured." Events during the ensuing flight will determine whether or not

this is true.

Bob Wilson's dementia is a solitary one. Though his wife and many others passengers share the same risks, they are totally outside of his experiences. This sense of isolation runs through the drama, from the opening references to a six-month stay at a sanitarium — where we can imagine him in a straight jacket or in solitary confinement — to how he experiences ordinary occurrences aboard this flight. For instance, when the co-pilot latches the cabin door shut with a resounding thud, Wilson experiences it as evidence that he has been locked in a personal prison. Trying to rationalize his fear, he reflects on the last six months, reassuring himself: "I had a teensy-weensy breakdown, but now I'm cured."

Next they take off in the DC-7 propeller plane but quickly enter a roaring thunderstorm with heavy rain. Having taken a sleeping pill, Mrs. Wilson is oblivious to the world outside the craft, but Mr. Wilson is hyper-attentive: looking out the length of the left wing, he spots a figure at the dark end of the metal. This begins a sequence where only he sees this "gremlin," a furry, man-like creature walking on the wing. Whenever he calls the stewardess or wakes his wife, however, the gremlin flies off. Slowly, Wilson, though "cured," sinks back into the solitary hell that is invisible to those around him. Both realizing what they think of his behavior and at the same time believing what he sees with his own eyes, he is mentally torn, a sure sign that his illness has not been cured. Pleading with others to look out the window with their own eyes, he impulsively supports his position by shouting, "Do I look insane?" As soon as he has said this, however, he realizes that in his case it is not merely a rhetorical question.

As mentioned, this is the prototypical case of the disturbed passenger, someone who, though surrounded by any number of other passen-

gers in the same boat (so to speak), intensely experiences a unique and personal crisis brought on by flight. Until such individuals get out of the plane and back on the ground, there can be no relief, for it is some aspect of flight itself that sets off such a person, and trying to explain it to others only exacerbates the problem. Sometimes this fear can be too much, and irrational thought spills over into irrational—and possibly dangerous—behavior. This is certainly the case with Robert Wilson, who, determined to protect himself and others from the gremlin out on the wing, craftily borrows a loaded revolver from a sleeping officer of the law, conceals it in his jacket and takes it back to his seat. When the time is right, he opens the emergency exit in flight to get a clear shot at the gremlin. This, of course, depressurizes the aircraft, and Wilson is half-sucked out of the plane. Nonetheless, he fights the passing slipstream, raises the gun and squeezes off all six shots, successfully driving off the gremlin and, in his mind, saving the plane.

Safely back on the tarmac, passengers and crew walk away from the plane, while Mr. Wilson lies on a stretcher, restrained by belts and blankets around him. Accepting that what he has done is right, he smiles and relaxes, after which the camera pulls back to include the wing of the airplane, where we see that the engine cowling has in fact been violently clawed open. Finally, the scene cuts to Serling's closing remarks:

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The flight of Mr. Robert Wilson has ended now — a flight not only from point A to point B but, also, from the fear of recurring mental breakdown. Mr. Wilson has that fear no longer — though, for the moment, he is, as he has said, alone in this assurance. Happily, his conviction will not remain isolated too much longer. For, happily, tangible manifestation is, very often, left as evidence of trespass — even from so intangible a quarter — as the Twilight Zone.

A remake of this classic episode was done as part of 1983's *The Twilight Zone — the Movie*. In this instance John Lithgow plays the role of deranged passenger in Richard Matheson's original script. Lithgow understood that it was something in flight itself that put paralyzing fear in some people, stating to an interviewer that "This is a man who loses any semblance of rationality at 20,000 feet up in the air but who, when down on the ground, is completely *normal*. It could be any one of us."¹ This individual transition while at altitude will be evident in all instances where the disturbed passenger makes an appearance in flying films. Before reviewing these films, however, I would like to situate the airplane in its myth and symbol setting and tie that to the presence of either disturbed or disturbing passengers.

In using Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, I do not mean to imply that aviation films somehow posit a binary "machine" and "garden" encounter. After all, what would the "garden" be? Even "the wild blue yonder" is too distant from the image of the pastoral ideal, too ephemeral, to make the parallel work. What I borrow from Marx is his emphasis on the machine, particularly how the machine intrudes on our normal, daily lives. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on a detail in Marx's critique of the garden: the intrusion of

violence, coupled with the machine.

One of Marx's interests in the machine's representation in literature was how the machine made its appearance in the pastoral setting. For example, in the fourth section of his first chapter, "Sleepy Hollow," he introduces the concept of *counterforce*, in which a world that is more "real" is brought into juxtaposition with "an idyllic vision." To illustrate his point, he notes that seventeenth-century landscape painters "introduced the image of a speaking death's-head into the most delicate pictorial idylls. To make the meaning of this *memento mori* inescapable they sometimes inserted the printed motto, *Et in Arcadia Ego*," meaning "I [Death] also am in Arcadia."²

Again, the point here is not to argue that aviation films display a similar juxtaposition; the point is to absorb what Marx says next. He begins by saying that *counterforce* "is applicable to a good deal of modern American writing," but then makes the observation that "The anti-pastoral forces at work in our literature seem indeed to become increasingly violent as we approach our own time. *For it is industrialization, represented by images of machine technology, that provides the counterforce in the American archetype of the pastoral design*" [emphasis added].³

This represents a progression in portrayals in two ways. First, there are the media. Marx begins with landscape painting and extends the analysis to American literature; I move one step further in time and extend it to film. Second, the industrialization that Marx looks at is still in its infancy, locomotives and such. With the advent of the motion picture — itself a fascinating form of advanced industrial production — came myriad other industrial advances: complex telecommunications, advances in materials science, the harnessing of the power of the atom, space exploration, and so on. Just as the image of

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the machine seemed to Marx to become “increasingly violent” as he approached his own time in the early 1960s, aviation films seem to have done so as we approach *our* own time (the late twentieth century and beyond).

While nature, mechanical failure, pilot failure, or war were the main menacing factors in flying films from the beginning until about 1970, after that point we begin to see the increasing appearance of violent people on board the plane, whether they be hijackers, madmen, or dangerous prisoners. This tendency has become so pronounced that the “disturbed and disturbing passenger” syndrome has become its own sub-genre, as will be discussed below. Furthermore, we now have one iconic example of reality imitating aviation film with which we — and literature, art, and film — must deal: the image of two Boeing 767 jumbo jets, fully fuelled for flights from the East Coast to the West Coast, slamming squarely into first one tower of the World Trade Center, then the other, resulting in a cataclysmic fire which ultimately brought down both towers and rudely jetted us from one era in American history to the next, just one year, nine months, and eleven days after the more or less arbitrary numerical date that so many of us thought represented such a major transition.

Many of the movies with these themes had seemed far-fetched, but events of the past few years have made them seem less so. For example, had a writer conceived of a film in which a Muslim terrorist concealed a miniature bomb in his shoe, then attempted to light it with a match or lighter while flying high over the Atlantic Ocean, audiences would have been skeptical, to say the least. But this in fact came to pass when on December 22, 2001, Briton Richard Reid boarded American Airlines Flight 63 from Paris to Miami and proceeded to attempt what has just been described. Quick and decisive action by crew and

passengers may have been the only thing that prevented a disaster.⁴

By most accounts, the golden era of the “mayday” type of flying film began with the 1970 blockbuster, *Airport*, which dutifully features a very disturbed passenger. Of course, this was not the first flying film to portray a problem passenger, as the concept goes back to at least 1936, with *Flying Hostess*, where the pilot is shot and the stewardess has to land the plane, and *Fugitives in the Sky* (1937), which features a group of convicts who take over the plane. Fastforward a dozen years and one can find two films dealing with the killing of a passenger in the air and the crew’s attempt at subduing the killer. These were *Sky Dragon* and *Sky Liner*. The following year saw *The Great Plane Robbery* (the temptation to use this word-play must have been too great to resist), a film that continued the killer-on-board theme. Nineteen fifty-six saw the release of *Julie*, in which Doris Day plays a woman fleeing her deranged and murderous husband. Once in the air there is nowhere for her to flee, and the tension builds as her husband stalks her. When he kills both pilots, it is she who must land the plane. *Mayday at 40,000 Feet* (1959) also featured a murderer loose on board,⁵ but it was *Airport* that ushered in the mayday age for commercial jetliner travel.

Airport

In chapter four, I discussed the heroic portrayal of the pilots aboard a Trans Global Airlines flight to Rome, a Boeing 707 passenger aircraft. In this section I will discuss the portrayal of the disturbed passenger, one D. O. Guerrero, a troubled WWII veteran. We become aware of the risk factor associated with Guerrero when his wife goes to the airport looking for him. When she learns that he is aboard the plane, her worst fears are confirmed, fears she reluctantly shares with airport

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manager Mel Bakersfeld. Highly distraught, she explains in bits and pieces that since the war her husband has been unable to hold a steady job because of his temper. She then recounts how her husband spent time in an Army hospital because of his war experiences, a hospital Bakersfeld deduces to be for those with mental conditions. Ominously, Guerrero's field of expertise during the war was demolitions, a talent he tried to use in his postwar career in the construction business using dynamite for excavation. This link to demolitions explains why he has access to explosives and makes it plausible that he is the one behind some missing dynamite at his last job.

Nearly broke, Guerrero has pawned his wife's ring to buy a ticket to Rome, as well as an excess of flight insurance. Once aloft, the action begins. Guerrero, Army demolitions veteran, is now confirmed as a mentally disturbed passenger. Seated aboard the plane, he nervously clutches his briefcase, refusing to relinquish it even during mealtime. Such behavior becomes understandable once the authorities have pieced together the situation: passenger Guerrero intends to explode his bomb over the Atlantic, leaving no trace of the cause of the explosion. His wife will receive the insurance money, and for once he will have succeeded in properly supporting her. The challenge, then, is to get the bomb and briefcase away from him. As we have seen, the pilot and stewardess momentarily succeed in this, but inadvertently, the briefcase ends back up in Guerrero's possession.

The scene in which Guerrero explodes the bomb is an aviation film classic, so a small bit of repetition can be forgiven. The drama unfolds when Captain Demerest (Dean Martin) devises a plan in which he and his girlfriend Gwen will work in tandem with elderly stowaway Ada Quonsett to get the briefcase bomb away from Guerrero. Because she is aboard without a ticket, Quonsett (Helen Hayes) will be accosted by

the stewardess, thus creating a diversion that will allow Demerest to grab the briefcase. At first, the plan goes well. Gwen sternly demands that Quonsett accompany her to the cockpit. When Quonsett breaks down in (fake) tears, Gwen slaps her, creating just the diversion she needs to get the briefcase. Unfortunately, a principled passenger sees this as a minor injustice and returns the briefcase to Guerrero. The jig, as they say, is up.

Now we have the disturbed Guerrero in possession of the briefcase again, but he knows that the plane is not yet far enough over the Atlantic for his plan to work. Furthermore, Demerest has informed him that the insurance plan has been exposed, so it would do no use to destroy the plane now. Demerest's pleas to surrender the bomb seem to be working, and Guerrero seriously considers giving up the briefcase. Fate again intervenes, however, when a passenger suddenly exits the lavatory just behind the nervous Guerrero. Someone shouts for him to grab Guerrero's briefcase, but Guerrero is too fast and ducks into the lavatory, his intentions unknown. Then, despite Gwen's pleas, Guerrero, clearly tormented by his demons, explodes the bomb in the rear of the plane, ripping a hole in the fuselage and releasing the air from the cabin in a horrible storm of wind and debris. Guerrero is immediately sucked out of the plane, so the disturbed passenger aspect of *Airport* has ended, and the heroism, which was addressed in chapter four, begins in earnest. All in all, the presence of this troubled man adds further realism to a fine movie.

Skyjacked (1972)

In this drama, James Brolin plays a young soldier, Jerome K. Weber, tormented by inner demons, which he tries to drive away with

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drugs and alcohol. Part of his delusion is that if he hijacks a 707 and flies it to the Soviet Union, he will be honored by the Soviets. Initially, he is quite smooth, convincing the pilot (Charlton Heston) to authorize his boarding of the plane despite the lack of a reservation. Given the year of the film, the 747 used is a 100 model complete with spiral staircase.

Once in the air, Global Airways heads toward Minneapolis, but Weber alerts the crew to the presence of a bomb aboard. He then demands to be flown to Anchorage, Alaska. To reduce the likelihood of the frame of the airplane failing, the pilot flies at a lower altitude where the pressure difference between the inside and outside of the plane is not as great. This means that they will have to fly through a thunderstorm and will consume more fuel, but in the end they manage to land in Anchorage.

The plane is then refueled and flown to Russia, where all of the passengers are released. Outside the 707, Russian troops wait with guns trained on the hijacker. Preparing himself for a hero's welcome, Weber confidently shaves in the cockpit. Suddenly, though, his demons return and great fear of the Soviets replaces his earlier euphoria. Nearly insane, he shoots the captain in the shoulder, then holds him hostage as he exits the plane carrying a band of hand grenades. Once on the ground, the soldiers shoot Weber, who falls on his own grenade just as it explodes. Coming at the height of real hijackings, this film no doubt unsettled some uneasy fliers.

The Evolution of the "Disturbed Passenger" Film

Perhaps it was the improvement in the safety record of commercial airliners that forced a decline in movies portraying the disturbed

passenger. Or possibly it was the fact that as jet planes got bigger and flying became available to the general public, the entire process became routine and was no longer a primary setting in which to examine conscious and subconscious fears. While the disturbed passenger theme continued to appear sporadically in flying films, such characters were eventually outnumbered by a different kind of menace; instead of passengers who were mentally unbalanced, we began to see problem passengers who were cold, calm, calculating, and often even charming. Despite exquisite self-control, this character remained very much a menace to all aboard. For this reason, I dub this kind of passenger the “disturbing passenger,” the better to show the anguish such a character causes not to himself but to other passengers and, by extension, to the viewing audience.

The spate of hijackings that plagued airlines during the late sixties and early seventies resulted in movies with parallel storylines. Certainly, a hijacker aboard is a disturbing development, as could be seen in *Wild in the Sky* (1972), a remake of the 1937 *Fugitive in the Sky*, and *Skyjacked*, mentioned above. In the middle of the decade came *Murder on Flight 501*, which involved terrorists aboard a 747; this was quickly followed by two American films based on the actual hijacking of an Israeli civilian airliner to Entebbe, the first being *Victory at Entebbe* (1976), followed a year later by *Raid on Entebbe*. *Mayday: 40,000 Feet* was a 1977 flick that saw David Janssen as the pilot of a 747 trying to deal with a killer aboard. One might also mention *The Pursuit of J. D. Cooper* (1981), which addressed the story of the folk hero who took his ransom money, strapped on a parachute, and jumped out the door of a Boeing 727, never to be found or heard from again.⁶

The Evil Genius in the Air

An interesting development in the genre of the disturbing passenger is the emergence of a hijacker or even madman who is suave, charming, handsome, and highly educated. For example, Bruce Payne plays an escaped prisoner in *Passenger 57* (1992) and uses his British accent, considerable intellect, and flashing blue eyes to great effect, as does the blue-eyed Ray Liotta in *Turbulence* (1997). Of course, the charming villain is hardly an invention of flying films, but he appears with such regularity that it is now a stock character. Later, this type even includes women, almost always blonde, though they act as accomplices to their men, not as main antagonists.

This character is often European, though later we occasionally see an Australian in the role. Possibly it grew out of the "evil Aryan" image seen so regularly in Hollywood films from the 1970s onward. Who can forget the sadistic Nazi dentist Christian Szell drilling into the teeth of graduate student Babe Levy (Dustin Hoffman) in *Marathon Man* (1976)? Played by Laurence Olivier, this German is composed and fully self-controlled, but his inner spirit is animated only by darkness. The same can be said for the character played by Gregory Peck in *The Boys from Brazil*, a 1978 film that imagines rich ex-Nazis alive and well in South America making clones of Adolf Hitler.⁷ Additionally, of course, one can recall the Amon Goeth character (played by Ralph Fiennes) who is the cruel concentration camp commander in Steven Spielberg's 1993 *Schindler's List*.

The consummate non-Nazi German terrorist might be Alan Rickman playing Hans Gruber against (police)man-in-the-street John McClane (Bruce Willis) in the original *Die Hard* (1988). This film highlights an interesting melding (in the American mind anyway) of the

cold, calculating German genius and an upper-class British accent. Having taken control of the Nakatomi Plaza high-rise office building in Los Angeles, Gruber and his Teutonic gang proceed to shoot and blow up nearly everything in their path. Perhaps to the consternation of the British, this trend toward casting an Englishman as the antagonist in American films continued. One need only witness the chilling but erudite figure of Dr. Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) in the 1991 *The Silence of the Lambs* to support this. Perhaps this device is merely a playing out of the simple and pure-of-heart American self-conception versus that of the worldly, sophisticated, and corrupt European. Whatever it is, it is not restricted to films based on the ground, as flying films have time and again availed themselves of similar casting.

Passenger 57 (1992)

In this film, Bruce Payne is British killer Charles Rane. This 1992 movie features Wesley Snipes as John Cutter, an off-duty safety consultant for Atlantic International Airways. As fate would have it, the day he is traveling on his company's flight to Los Angeles, ruthless killer Rane is being transported aboard the plane, though he is shackled and heavily guarded.

Unfortunately, Rane has accomplices: a stunning brunette flight attendant, a beady-eyed male flight attendant, and a burly passenger. When it is time for a meal, the flight attendant wheels her cart to the row with Rane and the marshals, then lifts the cover off the tray to reveal a gun, which she immediately uses to dispatch both marshals. The bad guys now have control of the aircraft, a Lockheed TriStar L-1011 making its most noticeable appearance since *The Crash of Flight*

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401. When Cutter initiates a fuel dump, the TriStar is forced to land at a short runway in the American South. The action then moves outside the plane, though there is an additional scene of refueling the plane and taking off again after the hijackers have escaped out the cargo door.

Hijacked: Flight 285 (1996)

In this TV movie, James Brolin pays his dues for playing a mad hijacker in the 1972 thriller *Skyjacked* (opposite Charlton Heston as captain). In the new movie, Brolin, now appearing as a pilot himself, plays second fiddle to former lover, Captain Kim Mitchell, a beautiful and assertive woman in the left-side seat. The casting and character development in this movie are worth mentioning, for they are superior to that of many Hollywood flying films. In addition to the pilots, Kim Miyori plays flight attendant Barbara, there is a realistic strong-willed husband and his frustrated wife and pretty daughter, two Vietnam vets, one a cowardly alcoholic, the other a saintly paraplegic, and an elderly black couple with a fine sense of humor.

The action starts when Anthony Michael Hall (*The Breakfast Club* — 1985), starring as hijacker Peter Cronin, makes his appearance as the now-familiar prisoner in shackles. With him are two accomplices: a former IRA bomb expert, and Cronin's beautiful girlfriend, Shayna Loring. Shayna is a cool cucumber, smuggling a ceramic pistol in her bra and threatening to kill the pilots should they not obey commands. Cronin quickly asserts himself as the man in control, threatening not only to shoot passengers but to explode a bomb. Referring to the IRA member's laptop computer, he yells, "Now my friend's computer here is filled with plastic explosives. Quite enough to reduce all of us — and

this plane — to tiny pieces.” With over two hundred hostages, it is likely Cronin and his friends will get the \$20 million in bearer bonds they have demanded. That is, if they do not crash first.

It seems Captain Mitchell resents the hijacking of her plane and deliberately sends it into a dive, telling the hijackers that turbulence caused it and has seriously damaged the plane. After a tense landing, they are now on the ground, but Cronin wants to take off again, either in this plane or in an airworthy 747. As one gesture of good faith, he allows an ailing woman to be removed from the plane, but the cowardly Vietnam vet tries to flee with her. Hauled back aboard the plane, he is shot in cold blood by Cronin, who is determined to make his point about who is in control.

There is also a side drama between Cronin and the two hostage negotiators who had earlier been responsible for his capture. This Freudian twist adds a bit of novelty to what is otherwise a standard “disturbing hijacker” character. The denouement is also mildly original, as the woman hijacker kills the IRA bomber when his nerve wavers, then the SWAT team boards and kills Cronin. One point that needs mention, however, is the portrayal of the airplane. While some flying films flit between pictures of various different models of planes (from two-engine 737 to three engine DC-10, for example), *Hijacker* is egregious in this respect, showing an Airbus A-300 on takeoff, a Boeing 767 in flight, then the tiny undercarriage of a single-aisle 737 at landing, and finally a Lockheed TriStar on the ground for the SWAT scenes. That this last aircraft has an enormous duct above the rear passenger section seems not to have bothered the moviemakers at all.

Medusa's Child (1997)

. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this TV movie involves a nuclear device inadvertently shipped aboard a cargo plane headed for the nation's capital. The creator of the bomb is a scientific genius who had been working on the "Medusa Project," a doomsday device for the Pentagon that would knock out all instruments relying upon computer chips, meaning it would cripple all advanced economies. Though the bomb is nuclear and could have been discussed more in the previous chapter, the deranged scientist's role is more prominent than that of the bomb, so I relegate it to this chapter, even though he is not aboard the plane. The twist here is that he is dying of cancer and is determined to get revenge on both his ex-wife (who has a new fiance) and the Pentagon, which had ultimately cut the funding for his project.

To exact his revenge, Dr. Henry has created a "mock" bomb that should prove the viability of his vision. As his dying wish, he begs his former wife Vivian to personally take it to the Pentagon. To show his sincerity, he has willed her all the royalties for the device's cutting-edge technologies. Moved more by compassion than greed, she assents and rides together with the bomb on its flight from Florida to Washington's National Airport. Midway through the flight, however, the device arms itself, and we quickly learn that this mock-up is in fact the real thing. The vengeful scientist has boarded the flight in spirit by incorporating a computer screen with his face and voice into the bomb, making it seem as though he were talking to Vivian directly. An oncoming hurricane only makes everyone more tense.

Back on the ground, SWAT teams have tracked down the dying doctor, hoping to get him to reveal how to shut off the bomb, but just as they surround his remote cabin, he kills himself, forever ending any

chance of deactivating the nuclear device. It looks as if millions of Americans will pay with their lives. Meanwhile, it is certain that Vivian will pay with her life, for her ex-husband has linked her pacemaker to a detonator in the bomb that will explode should she venture more than fifteen feet from it. This seemingly rules out dumping the bomb into the Atlantic.

Now dead, Dr. Henry still controls the fate of those aboard the plane — not to mention millions of Americans below — as he makes successive appearances on the computer screen. His dementia is mixed with cunning coolness, as he pretends to arm the bomb, then laughs maniacally as Vivian resigns herself to death. With blazing eyes, Dr. Henry comes across as a mad prophet from the Old Testament. In the end, however, the Eastern Seaboard and all aboard the plane are saved when the pacemaker is removed from Vivian's chest, attached to the bomb, and pushed overboard far out to sea.

While this movie easily could have used that stalwart of flying films, the Boeing 747, it instead employs the commercially ubiquitous Boeing 737, in this case a 200 series configured as a cargo carrier.⁸ The cargo cabin is open to the flight deck, so movement between cockpit and the rest of the plane is fluid and unobstructed, creating a workable stage for the cast of characters. The three cockpit members and two passengers work the inside of the plane like the stage that it is, highlighting the value of using an airliner for dramatic purposes. Back on *terra firma*, Martin Sheen appears in this movie as the United States President, long before he became president on the hit NBC TV series "West Wing."⁹ Though some of the flying scenes push the level of believability, the movie succeeds in combining a rich cast with a plausible threat, all encased in an aluminum tube 30,000 feet above the earth.

Free Fall

This 1998 made-for-TV drama stars former Charlie's Angel Jaclyn Smith as National Transit Safety Board member Renee Brennan. The movie opens with a stunning sequence of an airliner crash. Children are playing in the aisles of the plane, two young flight attendants cheerfully go about their business, and two handsome males pilot the plane. Suddenly, there is a rudder malfunction warning and soon the plane is out of control. The pilots struggle to bring the plane out of its dive but fail. Computer-generated graphics blended with scenes from inside the plane provide a chilling enactment of a plane disintegrating as it cuts through a forest and plows into the ground. No one survives.

Brennan is called in to investigate the crash, one that is eerily reminiscent of one she investigated one year earlier. That Seattle crash involved the same airline: Trans Regional Airlines. Brennan is contacted by the saboteur responsible for this latest crash, and soon he causes another Trans Regional plane to crash into San Francisco Bay, then another as it heads for Washington, D. C. Her new boyfriend was on that plane, but he was helpless to do anything as they plummeted to the ground.

Finally, Brennan figures out the saboteur's motives and predicts the next means of bringing down a loaded jetliner. When Trans Regional takes to the skies again, a plane is quickly stricken with an electrical failure, and the pilots lose control. Anticipating the problem, Brennan reaches them by radio from the air traffic control tower and tells them what to do. Paralyzed by fear, the two seasoned pilots do nothing. Without Brennan's firm prodding and instructions, they surely would have crashed, but now Brennan is in control.

In the climactic final segment, Brennan and her FBI counterparts

believe the saboteur has died, so they let down their guard and board a flight back to D.C. It is not hard to guess which airline: Trans Regional. This time the saboteur has killed a pilot in the parking lot and used his uniform to sneak aboard the soon-to-depart airliner. Once in the cockpit, he kills both pilots and begins his unapproved takeoff roll, while Brennan and the other passengers hurriedly close the door of the plane. Thinking quickly, Brennan grabs a penknife and begins to remove various circuit breakers from the plane's electronics bay. Knowing just which circuits to remove, she deprives the pilot of control of the plane, whereupon the two FBI agents break into the cockpit and kill the saboteur pilot.

Turbulence: There's Something in the Air

A blended kind of suave antagonist can be found in a number of recent flying films, beginning with *Turbulence* (1997), starring Ray Liotta. Possessing the charms of his Euro-terrorist counterparts, this American character is also deranged, though unlike "disturbed" passengers who fear flying, this type of character has been unstable from childhood. It is as though Hollywood has taken a creepy insane man like Alan Bates from *Psycho* and given him all the charm and poise in the world, making him irresistible to women. In this respect, Liotta's performance is classic.

Liotta appears as psychopathic serial killer Ryan Weaver, whom we first see leaving a store with a teddy bear, wishing strangers a Merry Christmas. Shots then abruptly alternate between him happily walking the December streets and the decorated interiors of two attractive women's separate homes. Tellingly, both women are blonde, which we have learned is Weaver's favored hair color for his

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victims. Weaver rings the bell of one home and is warmly welcomed, whereupon he utters a string of compliments that are well received; he is the consummate charmer. Unfortunately for him, he is arrested by a SWAT team at this latest girlfriend's house. The other woman's home that appears in this sequence belongs to flight attendant Teri Halloran, who has lavishly decorated her apartment with Christmas ornaments in anticipation of the arrival of her boyfriend. Sadly, she receives a call and learns that her boyfriend has other plans. Deeply hurt by this abandonment, she confronts the holiday in a vulnerable state, a condition not conducive to surviving a chance meeting with charmer Weaver.

Once captured, Weaver is taken in handcuffs aboard a 747 bound for Los Angeles. One flight attendant is Teri, who assumes it will be a relaxing holiday flight, given the paucity of Christmas Eve travelers aboard. She and Maggie, another blonde, are among the few flight attendants for this flight, and they both try to forget that it is Christmas. Among the passengers are Weaver, his fellow prisoner Stubbs, and four Federal marshals sent to guard them. As their journey begins, the flight crew is warned of severe weather ahead, with the first tremors of this storm foreshadowing more dangerous tremors to come. A direct risk on board comes from Stubbs, a crude and vocal prisoner who makes obscene comments to the flight attendants. Weaver, in contrast, is a gentleman very much concerned with the feelings of both women. Consistently, he makes soothing remarks to them, being sure to make solid and extended eye contact each time.

As the turbulence gets worse, the captain puts on the seatbelt sign, but Stubbs is still in the lavatory. To speed him along, one of the marshals enters the stall. Stubbs, in an effort to gain freedom, pulls the metal plunger from the soap dispenser and uses it to stab and kill

his guard. He then takes the other marshal prisoner, and a murderous gun battle ensues in which the other marshals and the pilot are killed. Because the unpredictable Stubbs is a threat to himself and to Weaver, however, Weaver simply kills him. Weaver is now on the loose, there is no one there to stop him, and from this point forward the horror genre aspect of hunter and hunted between Weaver and Teri takes over.

During the gun battle, a hole is shot in the fuselage, and air rushes out through the hole. Teri deftly places a briefcase in front of the hole, thereby conserving their air and oxygen, but the emergency unnerves the first officer, who leaves his seat in search of the captain. Just as he stands up, severe turbulence rocks the plane and the co-pilot is rendered unconscious. Later, when Weaver stumbles upon him in this unconscious state, he takes the opportunity to kill him, too. In addition, Weaver has succeeded in getting flight attendant Maggie to lower her guard; she too becomes a lifeless victim and is unceremoniously stuffed into one of the overhead bins.

Because Weaver continues to charm Teri, she is not convinced that he is actually guilty of the serial murders of women with which he has been charged. As his psychopathic behavior inevitably returns, however, she learns the horrifying truth and does all she can to save herself and the plane, beginning with going to the empty cockpit and contacting authorities on the ground. From here on out, it is a cat and mouse game as Weaver attempts to get her to open the cockpit door so he can kill her. Because she resists, he elects to crash the plane into downtown Los Angeles by randomly ripping computer boards out of the equipment on the shelves in the avionics bay, knocking out the autopilot that is the only hope for Teri to successfully land. With his madness burning brightly, Weaver asks the computer boards if any of them will

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“volunteer” to come out, and when one of the boards gives Weaver a mighty shock, he does a little dance and mumbles, “Okay, okay, you can stay.” Believing he has successfully disabled the autopilot, he lies back with a bottle of champagne, intent on enjoying the spectacle of a fiery crash into the city.

The use of the 747 in this film and the subsequent two sequels is of a piece. An old Japan Airlines 747 was used to make these three airliner-based movies from 1997-2001. All three movies depict the dangers inherent in flight and amplify the fears associated with it by introducing other factors such as prisoners aboard the plane, concealed biological weapons, and a devil-worshipping co-pilot. The inaccurate portrayals of the jumbo jet are similar to other movies using this plane: though it is an older generation plane, the cockpit is the two-man set-up available only on the newer 400 series; the avionics bay is spacious and allows an individual to move about freely. Because the denouement of this movie crosses over into issues of gender and power, the discussion will continue in chapter nine.

Turbulence 2: Fear of Flying (2000)

Like its prequel, this film combines the inherent risks of flight with the presence of disturbing passengers, with a bevy of passengers afraid of flying thrown in for good measure. First we have two hostile elements wielded by nature: turbulence and lightning. Next comes a twist on the evolving nature of America’s therapeutic culture. Whereas in the *Twilight Zone* episode “Nightmare at 20,000 Feet,” Mr. Robert Wilson was a solitary figure sent to a sanitarium to “cure” his fear of flying, nearly forty years later, once the therapeutic culture had gained hold in America, a film featuring fear of flying had gathered all those

so afflicted and put them in a therapy group.

The title of this movie gives it away: *Turbulence: Fear of Flying*, and in this film the familiar TAC Airlines 747 is again the setting. The movie begins with a motherly flight attendant trying to calm a group of terrified fliers. As turbulence outside makes the flight increasingly rough, this group of fearful flyers begins to panic, and one man finally leaves his seat and heads for a locked door. Grabbing the lever of the door, he opens it as the others plead for him to stop. This tense introduction sets the pace, though it turns out to be only a flight simulator used by this group of adults trying to overcome their fear of flying.

Turbulence 2 is adept at playing off the audience's preconceptions with regard to disturbed passengers (those who fear flying) and the disturbing passenger who often turns out to be a terrorist or hijacker. Among those who fear flying are an aircraft designer and a couple who are resolved to combat their fear of flying together. The woman in this relationship is played by Jennifer Beals of *Flashdance* fame, and she demurely clings to the arm of her lover, a handsome and kind man with a British accent. Our seemingly disturbing passengers are a group of Slavic-speaking Europeans who have arrived late from an Aeroflot flight, and in this movie we are led to believe that this group of non-English speakers has access to a biological bomb in the cargo hold, so the suspense revolves around securing a triggering device held by one of these foreigners.

In fact, we have been misled, and these Slavs are actually the hunted, having nothing to do with a hijacking or planting a bomb. Instead, the villain turns out to be the British boyfriend who has only feigned a fear of flying, when actually he is quite in control of his wits. He hopes to steal the biological weapon the Czech passengers possess

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and sell it for a large sum of money. In common with the other *Turbulence* movies, the pilots are killed, leaving no one qualified to fly the plane. In addition, there is the matter of the nerve agent in the cargo hold.

The movie's heroes move to the spacious avionics bay to contact air traffic control, then they go to the cargo hold to try to identify the package that holds the chemical agent. Finding it, they succeed in pushing it out the plane. Had they failed, a U.S. military fighter jet was prepared to shoot them down. Despite the B-movie quality of *Turbulence 2*, it did manage to attract Jennifer Beals to a leading role, while Tom Berenger gives his usual gruff-man performance, this time as a no-nonsense air traffic controller. Roughly the same strengths and weaknesses are found in the final movie in the *Turbulence* series, *Turbulence 3: Heavy Metal*.

Turbulence 3: Heavy Metal (2001)

One thing that can be said of the *Turbulence* series is that it has had the uncanny ability to attract big-name stars despite being so uneven in the quality of its scripts and acting. While the original *Turbulence* was of film quality and Roy Liotta turned in a fine performance as a homicidal maniac, *Turbulence 2* and 3 are through and through TV movies; that is, they are mediocre. Still, as we just saw, Tom Berenger was willing to lend his skills to the second in the series, while the third one attracted Rutger Hauer as a devil-worshipping co-pilot and Joe Mantegna as an air traffic controller.

The subtitle of this movie, *Heavy Metal*, can perhaps be considered word play on the band's favored form of music, and also on the fact that the craft in which the passengers are riding is capable of returning to

earth in a thoroughly destructive way because it is, after all, composed of heavy metal. This interpretation is bolstered by a major scene in which the flight's featured performers, Slade Craven and his heavy metal band, perform live for a worldwide Internet audience. The stage constructed aboard the 747 has been stripped down to the plane's bare metal, and one of the band's most outrageous stunts is to "electrocute" a member of the audience in a metal electric chair in front of the stage. Sparks fly when the metal of the switch contacts its opposite pole, and the Internet audience votes its approval by greatly increasing the number of "hits" at the site.

Here again, in the beginning of the movie, the 747 jumbo jet appears as a solid and reliable piece of machinery as the camera begins a shot of the two front tires, then slowly pans up the enormous flank of the white Boeing. This sense of strength and security is reinforced by the presence of two seasoned pilots, one of whom survived a tour of duty in Vietnam as a helicopter pilot. Once airborne, however, the familiar turbulence greets the plane, which becomes the site for all manner of mayhem and death. Among the disturbing passengers are Slade Craven himself, made up in demonic white facial make-up to look like death itself; an imposter who imitates Craven but is really a devil-worshiper who wants the plane to crash; and the first officer, also a devil worshiper, who, after the pilot has been killed, blows his own brains out in the cockpit so that no one will be able to fly the plane. No one can say that the plots of the three movies that compose the *Turbulence* series are unoriginal.

Sonic Impact (1999)

Following the release of the original *Turbulence*, we see a similar

opening setting in *Sonic Impact*, a film in which a suave prisoner is taken by authorities aboard a civilian airliner. In a clear act of homage to *Turbulence*, prisoner-turned-hijacker Jeremy Barrett asks to be taken to the men's room to relieve himself. Reluctantly, the marshal escorting him removes the handcuffs, leaving Barrett free to rummage about the lavatory, just as prisoner Ryan Weaver was in *Turbulence*. Recall that in *Turbulence*, the prisoner removes the metal soap dispenser pipe and uses it to stab one of the guards. In *Sonic Impact*, Barrett attempts the same move, but this time the soap dispenser will not come out, prompting Barrett to wryly (and in a perfectly self-conscious postmodern way) remark, "How come that shit always works in the movies?"

Fortuitously, the weaponless Barrett is given a chance when a fire breaks out in the number four engine. In a ridiculous sequence, the pilot is heard calling for a shutdown of the number one engine, followed by a command to commence "feathering" it, an odd command for an all-jet airliner like the 747. As both pilots place their hands on the throttles, the throttles "lock," causing the jumbo to dive, at which point Barrett makes his move and kills one marshal.

Dressed in black trousers, black sweater, and black leather jacket, Barrett is another incarnation of the suave disturbing passenger. And this time there is nothing deranged about him. On the contrary, his motives are purely material: he wants money — lots of it. Barrett's superior breeding is contrasted with that of two fellow prisoners, the Strauss brothers, one of whom is enough of a low-IQ yokel to be cast as a member of the *Deliverance* clan. Barrett rarely raises his voice, relying instead on a disinterested air of contempt for his hostages. He even shows a streak of humor, like when he gets to the cockpit and takes control of the mike, announcing: "News flash! Jeremy Barrett

here.”

The real action now is simply stolen from *Airport '75*, as are the external scenes of the plane. When a shootout results in an explosion that takes out the co-pilot's window and much of the surrounding fuselage, we are primed for another call-in-the-rescue-helicopter-and-drop-in-a-hero scenario, which is exactly what we get. The 747 is the same silver Columbia Airlines ship that Charlton Heston entered via the hole in the cockpit, though in *Sonic Impact* it has been configured incorrectly into a two-member cockpit. In addition, scenes in the front of the plane show the spiral staircase of the early 747-100 that wound up to the middle of the upper deck, while *Sonic Impact* features an upper deck with a rear entrance and straight stairs.

Cabin Pressure (2001)

This timely TV movie weaves a plot of computer intrigue that has the “disturbing passenger” firmly on the ground, albeit in total control of the aircraft in question. As with *Medusa's Child*, this movie uses advances in technology to spin a story about virtual control over the lives of those in the air. In *Cabin Pressure*, B-actor Craig Sheffer stars again in his third flying movie in two years, the others being the latter two *Turbulence* movies discussed above. Sheffer's roles have been imaginatively shuffled, making it hard to peg him in one role. In *Turbulence 2*, he is an aircraft designer with a genius for computer software, a skill he displays again in *Turbulence 3* as a crack computer hacker on the ground. In *Cabin Pressure*, however, he becomes a top military pilot turned alcoholic, and his complete lack of computer skills causes him to rely on old-fashioned muscle to subdue the villain.

In this case the villain — the disturbing passenger — is an eccen-

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tric computer programmer who is blamed for the crash of the world's first all-computer controlled airplane. His brilliant software was to have allowed a flight to take off, fly to its destination and land all without any input from the pilots aboard. Something goes wrong, however, and the pilots are flown to their deaths, all in real time. Immediately, the programmer is fired from his job, and this is the impetus for his revenge: he will sabotage the software of the next plane slated to make a computer-controlled flight. As in *Medusa's Child*, this disturbing passenger is virtually aboard the flight as he has cameras installed aboard the plane and appears in person on the aircraft's flight panel displays. This kind of interactive terror — seen also in *Turbulence 3: Heavy Metal* — is very much in tune with the growing influence of computer networks and the Internet in the daily lives of tens of millions of Americans, which is no doubt why it has begun to appear in plots of flying films.

Air Panic (2001)

Cabin Pressure had a companion movie that aired the same year and featured the same conceit of a malevolent soul virtually controlling a civilian airliner by hacking from computers on the ground. Called *Air Panic*, this movie presents Cain, a mad genius who was horribly scarred in a fire at his place of employment, a manufacturer of flight control systems. Embittered, he sets out to create increasingly horrific crashes, beginning with the collision of a loaded Airbus 320 into the tallest building in Denver. By programming a crucial computer chip at the heart of the airplane's control system, this hacker is able to take over complete control of the plane.

For his grand finale, the culprit plans to dive another A-320 into a

nuclear power plant near Baltimore, Maryland, on the Fourth of July. When SWAT troops assault his house, he blows them up by remote control from his location far from home. Relentlessly, the aircraft under his control heads toward Baltimore. The U.S. government knows about this risk, so they scramble a flight of F-16s to bring the plane down. Aboard the plane, an FAA troubleshooter works to restore control to the pilot and succeeds just as the airliner misses the cooling towers of the nuclear power station. As a just dessert, Cain is killed when the ambulance he has hijacked has a collision on the runway with a third A-320 he has programmed to take off.

Air Rage (2001)

Like *Sonic Impact*, this TV movie features rapper Ice-T as an officer of the law going up against a formidable hijacker. The hijacker is one Colonel Sykes, a recently convicted war criminal who feels he was betrayed by the general presiding at his court-martial. After escaping from a prison van with the aid of some Marine accomplices, Sykes and his band individually board a flight carrying the general to an important meeting. Once in the air, they take over the plane, and Sykes begins to exact his revenge.

The flying film takes here are by now familiar, as they simply use the original footage of Boeing's test plane for the 747-100 program, just as *Strategic Command* did two years earlier. As with *Strategic Command*, the basic plot is taken directly from *Executive Decision* and includes the airborne transfer of commandos onto the 747 through stealth means. While *Executive Decision* used the F-117, *Strategic Command* and *Air Rage* use the SR-11, a spy plane. When it comes time to land in "Atlanta," the 747 in *Air Rage* quite clearly lands at

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Paine Field in Everett, Washington, which is not surprising given the source of the flying clips.

Code 11-14 (2003)

This recent TV movie rises above many other made-for-TV movies in that the plot is sound, the acting good, and the aircraft setting creative. In addition, it is the only movie to date that I know of that uses the 747SP. The use of the SP is probably related to the fact that it was filmed on location in Queensland, Australia. Here is why. In the early days of jumbo jets, extended range aircraft were still rare, causing a problem for any airline in desperate need of them. Such an airline was Qantas, the Australian carrier, whose flights across the Pacific were among the longest in the world. When the long-range SP became available, it was only natural that Qantas was interested, acquiring two in 1981. From 1994-1996 their two planes were transferred to subsidiary Australia Asia when it became politically difficult to fly to Taipei.¹⁰ A craft in that livery, with the Australia Asia logo painted over with the now familiar Oceanic Air name, appears in *Code 11-14*.

The plot of *Code 11-14* owes clear debts to both *Turbulence* and *The Silence of the Lambs*. A serial killer in Los Angeles attacks blondes and takes photographs of them near the time of death, leaving one print in the dead woman's hands, and hiding the other within the room. In the hidden picture, one body part is always carefully cut out, very much recalling the mutilation featured in *A Silence of the Lambs*. In addition, the taking of a "trophy" from the corpse is the same, as is the presence of an FBI profiler. The obsession with murdering blondes is straight from *Turbulence*, where a charming Weaver seduces his

prey; the m.o. in *Code 11-14* is the same.

When the FBI receives a report of a similar murder in Sydney, Australia, it sends Kurt Novak, a young agent, down to investigate, and he takes the opportunity to bring his beautiful wife and young son along for a vacation. Once in Australia, the killer begins to stalk Novak and his family, ratcheting up the effort once the Novaks are aboard the Oceanic 747SP for the fourteen-hour flight back to Los Angeles. Seated in first class, the Novaks are given superb service by an attentive flight attendant and they settle in for a comfortable return home. Soon, however, the threats begin. First, Mrs. Novak receives a gift of earrings that clearly only the killer could give. Then, the killer calls Novak in flight, raising the specter that he might be aboard as well. When another blonde is found murdered in a galley in the same way, we are then certain that the murderer is stalking the Novaks aboard this very plane.

The use of the limited space aboard the airliner is the primary device driving the suspense. It appears the killer is able to slip in and out of the lavatories from above, go down to the cargo hold, and move from the front to the back of the plane undetected. Suspects include a sleazy young man seated in economy class and the male flight attendant who has reported on that passenger. When Novak's son goes missing, Novak aggressively questions both men, but finds they both have alibis. A report from agents back in America, however, reveals that the serial killer is the male flight attendant who has served them so professionally in first class.

The action now descends to the cargo hold, and here it must be said that such drastic liberties are taken with respect to free space available that other movies using the cargo hold look claustrophobic. Characters are able to move at will among the cargo containers, long, open

walkways extend far in either direction, and the “avionics” panel is as big and open as a game in a video arcade. This is simply not tenable, but it does make for high drama, especially when the plane has descended to just above the water because the killer has disabled the flight controls. Hoping to viciously murder the boy, he opens a hatch in the floor and attempts to push the boy through it to the passing waves below, giving a new twist to the well-known aviation term “hell hole.”

This film brings us nearly up to the present and is a fitting way to end the chapter, for it offers a level of psychological complexity that has been missing from too many purely fast-action flying films. As noted in the introduction above, the increasing safety of airplanes and flying has forced moviemakers to focus more on threatening passengers than on threatening technology. Toward that end, they have imagined a wide array of disturbing scenarios.

Additional Flying Films

Flightplan (2005)

One of the biggest flying movies since Harrison Ford starred in the 1997 mega-hit *Air Force One* is Jodie Foster’s *Flightplan*, in which she plays Kyle Pratt, aircraft engine designer and recently bereaved widow. While living in Germany, her husband dies in a fall from an apartment roof, and Kyle must return his body to the United States, at the same time comforting her young daughter Julia. Stressed, and under medication, Kyle herself becomes a both disturbed and disturbing passenger, maniacally running about the plane when her daughter goes missing.

The passenger airliner is clearly a mock-up of the new Airbus A-380, the only fully double-deck passenger plane, here described on Airbus’s official website:

Taking a clean-sheet design for airlines' operational needs of tomorrow, Airbus developed the A380 as the most spacious and efficient airliner ever conceived. This 555-seat aircraft will deliver an unparalleled level of comfort while retaining all the benefits of commonality with Airbus' other fly-by-wire aircraft Families.

Thirty years after launching the world's first twin-aisle, twin-engine jetliner, Airbus is preparing to introduce its A380 as the first true double-deck passenger airliner for the long-range market. The A380 offers unprecedented levels of productivity, efficiency and economics in passenger service, while the A380-800F cargo version is to be the first commercial freighter with three full cargo decks.¹¹

We see night views of the aircraft at the gate, colored lights flashing everywhere and an ominous darkness surrounding the plane. Kyle and fearful daughter contemplate the scene. Kyle assures her that all is safe because "mommy" has had a hand in designing the engines of ALTO Air's "E-474." Once again, Jodie Foster plays a role confounding our knowledge of gender roles. While aircraft designers-like pilots in America more generally-are in fact overwhelmingly male, Kyle excels in a man's role. As seen elsewhere in this dissertation, Hollywood prefers to ignore reality in favor of a false, empowered image of women.

Foster has been in the fore of such celluloid imagery, with the portrayal FBI agent Clarice Starling a prime example. Off screen, it has been widely rumored that Foster is not part of a traditional male-female couple, but is, rather, in a long-term relationship with

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Cydney Bernard, whom she met on the set of the movie *Sommersby* (1993).¹² Typical is one Hollywood website, which notes, "Jodie, always reticent about her private life, has been an icon in the gay and lesbian world for years."¹³

Returning to the plot of *Flightplan*, after take-off, Kyle and Julia fell asleep, and when Kyle wakes up, Julia is missing. At first only mildly concerned, Kyle asks surrounding passengers and the flight attendants if they have seen Julia. They have not. Increasingly more concerned, she asks the captain to look for her daughter, but the crew does not believe she has a daughter. In fact, they think that because Kyle has taken some medication, she might incorrectly believe she has her daughter with her. Of course Kyle believes she really does have her daughter, so she gets angry with the captain for not believing her. Because they must follow airline procedures, the flight attendants search the entire plane, including down in the cargo hold. Kyle is worried that someone has kidnapped, and possibly molested, her 6-year-old daughter.

This sets the scene for a "learning moment." In the post-9/11 world, one in which we have been treated to images of Arab hijackers thousands of times, it is not surprising that director Robert Schwentke initially gives us a group of believably suspicious Arab male passengers. Having possibly internalized media stereotypes of Arab males, Kyle approaches them after she becomes convinced she saw them in Berlin near the time of her husband's death. Accusing them of kidnapping her daughter, she reasons that she was the target because "I know the plane. They're going to hijack it!"

Other passengers come to a similar conclusion and appear ready to subdue the Arabs. Suddenly turning the tables on these passengers-and us in the audience-the group leader manages to chastise them for their

assumptions of Arab guilt. These men are passengers no different than the others; unfairly accused, they have become victims of racial prejudice. The larger message comes through clearly: presumptions of guilt based on racial stereotypes is wrong. Individuals must be judged individually.

After this encounter, the captain tells Kyle that her daughter is dead. Kyle's husband committed suicide and took his daughter with him. Therefore, Julia cannot be a passenger on the plane. Kyle cannot accept this tragic news, so she runs away but as she does so, she falls and hits her head. Back at her seat, she must wear handcuffs. A female psychiatrist talks to her about grief. Slowly, Kyle begins to believe that Julia is in fact dead. We in the audience are increasingly led to believe so too.

Kyle, however, is suddenly inspired that Julia is not dead, so she tricks the psychiatrist and asks to go to the lavatory. Once inside, she climbs through the ceiling and begins to sabotage the plane's electronics. First, all of the oxygen masks fall, then the lights go out. Passengers panic. In the darkness, Kyle is able to descend to the cargo hold to search for Julia. Thinking that Julia is in an expensive car, Kyle smashes the windshield, but Julia is not there. Next, Kyle sees her husband's coffin. Is Julia in there with him? Kyle must check, so she opens the coffin. Fortunately, Julia is not there.

A fellow passenger, Carson (Peter Sarsgaard), turns out to be a federal air marshal and now appears and handcuffs Kyle. Because of the problems Kyle has caused, the airplane must make an unscheduled stop at a different airport. As he leads Kyle back to her seat, the passengers cheer because they think their problems are finally over. They are not.

It turns out Carson is blackmails the airline by claiming Kyle will

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destroy the plane unless a large amount of money is transferred to a certain account. Escorted by fighter aircraft to a secret base, the passengers are allowed to disembark. Carson, mission accomplished, also leaves the plane. Meanwhile, Kyle's daughter remains in the foreword hold of the aircraft, with high explosives set by Carson next to her. By blowing up the plane, Carson will destroy all evidence and leave authorities with the belief that Kyle was the hijacker all along.

In the climax, Kyle challenges Carson to return to the aircraft, whereupon she handcuffs him. Following the usual reversal of fortunes, she eventually overcomes Carson's assaults, frees her daughter, and escapes before the plane explodes on the tarmac. This disturbed passenger has dispatched the most disturbing fellow passenger on the flight, disrupting his plans in the most emphatic way.

Other Films

A TV film, *Flying Virus* (the U.S. video release was *Killer Buzz*) was released in 2001. This unusual story starred the familiar B-airplane movie Craig Sheffer as well as Rutger Hauer, appearing as the malevolent "Ezekial," a renegade military man willing and able to murder for his government clients. Genetically engineered bees come into the story when an ambitious but unscrupulous doctor ships them back to America aboard an airplane. When they escape, predictable mayhem follows.

Such "disturbing passengers" is again the theme in the 2006 *Snakes on a Plane*, in which a federal agent must escort a crime witness from Hawaii to Los Angeles. The quiet flight is interrupted when hundreds of angry, poisonous snakes are released into the cabin. Employing the well-established tactic of populating the passenger manifest with

memorable eccentric characters, the film takes us on a trip where it is unclear whether the last creature standing-or crawling-will be snake or man.

Finally, 2004 saw a remake of the 1965 thriller *Flight of the Phoenix*, starring James Stewart as the beleaguered captain of a private cargo plane that has crash-landed in the desert. In the remake, Dennis Quaid takes the role of Captain Frank Towns, and Giovanni Ribisi gives a credible performance as Elliott, the power-hungry designer of model aircraft. As in the original, he is the only one capable of turning the large, two-engine cargo plane into a smaller single-engine plane that can carry them out of the desert.

In keeping up with the times, this remake presents a multi-racial, international cast (plus one woman), as opposed to the original's multiethnic male cast. Using computer graphics to create an above-average crash scene, the film conveys the hopelessness of being lost without a radio in such a remote region, in this case the Gobi Desert, where the passengers had been unsuccessfully exploring for oil. Asiatic nomads now replace the original blood-thirsty Arab nomads, giving us a final scene akin to Mad Max's confrontation in *Mad Max Three: Beyond Thunderdome*. There, Max clears a way through the charging disfigured survivors of a nuclear holocaust, the plane nearly going over the edge of a cliff. In *Flight of the Phoenix*, the plane actually goes over a cliff escaping its pursuers, and of course flies the crew and surviving passengers back to civilization. As much as each character may have disturbed the others, it is their teamwork in the end that gets them home.

Rare is the Hollywood fiction that allows the triumph of the disturbed or disturbing passenger, unlike the semi-documentary portrayals of the fourth plane involved in the 9/11 tragedy, United Airlines

Flight 93. In the emerging films of that crash, heroes emerge but die trying to protect larger numbers of their fellow Americans on the ground. Alas, real life often lacks the optimism for which Hollywood can be famous.

Notes

1. See <http://www.thetzsite.com/pages/movie/lithgow.html>.
2. Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 26.
3. Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 26.
4. "Richard Reid pleads guilty," <http://www.cnn.com/2002/LAW/10/04/reid.guilty.plea/>.
5. Paris, *From the Wright Brothers*, 203.
6. Paris, *From the Wright Brothers*, 203-204.
7. For discussions on Hollywood's image of the Nazi, see Lester D. Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1982), 242-246; and Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 345-351.
8. In order to keep a tight-knit team of three together, the owner of the jet has added a 727 flight engineer's panel to a jet that normally needs only a two-man crew. When the 737 was in the design stage, there was controversy over whether there should be two or three crewmembers in the cockpit. The earlier three-engine 727 had two pilots and a flight engineer, but Boeing and the airlines argued that the 737 could be safely flown with only two pilots. Political maneuvering among the Air Line Pilots' Association (ALPA), the Flight Engineer's International Association, Boeing and the airlines delayed production. Rather than a flight engineer's station, the ALPA wanted a third pilot to ride in the cockpit. (The comparable twin-engine Douglas DC-9 and BAC One-Eleven had only two pilots.) In the end, the FAA certified the two-man design as being safe, although bargaining compromises resulted in two airlines — United and Western — operating with three crewmembers on the flight deck. See Malcolm L. Hill, *Boeing 737* (Farnborough, Marlborough, England: Crowood Press, 2002), 23-24, 29-30.

9. The series, which premiered September 22, 1999, airs Wednesday nights at 9 pm/ET, and stars Sheen as Josiah Bartlet, President of the United States. See <http://www.tvguide.com/showguide/ShowPage.asp?iProgramID=1877707>.
10. Baum, *Boeing 747SP*, 110-111, 124.
11. See <http://www.airbus.com/en/aircraftfamilies/a380/>.
12. See <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0076184/>.
13. See <http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Set/2417/news.html>.