

## Morton Marcus: 'Cloverfield' a canny portrait of a generation

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"Cloverfield" does everything just about right. It is a clever idea perfectly realized that will entertain as it trenchantly satirizes today's twentysomething, middle-class society.

The plot follows several participants at a surprise going-away party for twentysomething Robert Hawkins [Michael Stahl-David] who is leaving New York City for a job promotion in Japan. A handheld camera, through whose lens we see the entire film, travels giddily from one young face to another, recording banal conversation, when suddenly the apartment building is rocked by what seems an earthquake. Next the partygoers join the panicked crowds on the street, trying to flee the city from what turns out to be a gigantic monster rampaging through midtown.

Buildings topple, cars and tanks are crushed or fly through the air as the military loses its sophisticated weaponry at the beast -- all done with special effects that are as suggestive as they are spectacular, and all recorded by the ever present, constantly moving, dizzying handheld camera whose simulation of reality is flawless.

Supposedly shooting randomly in the hands of an amateur, the camera is actually rigorously controlled by director Matt Reeves, who tightly choreographed and edited every scene in the film's trim 80-minute running time.

At this point the old Hollywood theme of the heroine who must be rescued from mortal danger by the hero, a particular staple of sci-fi and horror genre films, brilliantly advances Drew Goddard's script while at the same time revealing that "Cloverfield" is a love story. In the opening sequence, Robert is filming Beth and we learn they have spent the night together. Snatches of the couple in similar scenes surface throughout the film due to glitches in the camera.

In the second sequence, Robert's brother is filming the going-away party with Robert's camera, which he has commandeered for the occasion without asking Robert's permission. Robert realizes his footage of Beth is in the camera. When he runs into Beth during the party it turns out he hasn't seen her since their night together, and, distraught, she leaves the party. When pandemonium breaks out, Robert calls her as he tries to get out of the city, only to learn that she is trapped in her apartment. Panicked, guilty, realizing he loves her, he insists on going back to rescue her, and drags three of his friends with him, one of whom, Hud [T.J. Miller], has decided to film the evening's events for posterity with Robert's ever available camera. Beth's apartment, of course, is in the middle of the monster's stomping grounds.

The film is an astute amalgam of several recent trends in sci-fi horror films and several old staples of the genre. As seen in last year's "Hostel," it places frivolous young Americans, ignorant of the world beyond malls and shopping centers, in horrifying situations, while it technically utilizes the national fetish of photographing practically everything with home video cameras, a method first used in "The Blair Witch Project."

It also alludes to the 1950s sci-fi films in which a monster served as a metaphor for unknown threats from the "outside" -- that is, the Cold War Soviet Union -- as seen in such films as "The Monster from 20,000 Fathoms," which also threatened New York. The unknown threat in "Cloverfield" is a possible reference to terrorist attacks, unidentified pandemics and global warming -- all the uncertainty we, and especially young people, are constantly aware of at the periphery of our daily lives which is haunted, as is the film, by the memory of 9/11.

Usually the survivors of these and other American genre films are resourceful, reflecting fabled Yankee ingenuity. Not in "Cloverfield." Throughout the film, none of the protagonists know what to do. The last man standing is erect through pure luck -- and the genre is turned upside down. "Cloverfield" shows us that our young protagonists are neither mentally nor physically equipped to deal with the unknowns in the world. Maybe none of us are.

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