



“THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL” (1951)—

A FIFTY-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE

By Dr. John L. Flynn

Introduction

One of the first Hollywood films produced during the science fiction boom of the 1950's, “The Day the Earth Stood Still” (1951) told the thoughtful and provocative story of the arrival in Washington, D.C. of a strange visitor from space who brought a message of goodwill and peaceful coexistence and a giant robot to enforce that message of peace. At a time when the world was poised on the brink of nuclear annihilation and one man’s crusade to end the Communist infiltration of American culture spread fear, panic and paranoia, the motion picture was a major departure from the cold war dramas of its day.

Directed by Robert Wise, who would later helm “The Andromeda Strain” (1970) and “Star Trek—The Motion Picture” (1979), “The Day the Earth Stood Still” not only addressed the anxieties of atomic war and the maelstrom of events surrounding the “Red Scare” but also showed that science fiction was a medium of high-minded ideas and ideals. The Twentieth Century-Fox production became one of the most successful films of its day, and is still highly regarded by fans as one of the greatest science fiction films ever made.

Origins

Although the 1950’s produced the greatest number of science fiction films of any other decade (to date), the genre of science fiction was far from a proven box office favorite when the decade first began. In fact, there had been only a handful of successful science fiction films made in the first fifty years of the Twentieth Century, and most of those had been made overseas in Europe. Science fiction had been first characterized by the trick photography of Georges Melies with the French fantasy, “A Trip to the Moon,” in 1902. Other short films—mostly whimsical comedies that relied on numerous camera tricks to fool audiences into thinking they were taking a journey to the stars or under the sea—came and went, with little fanfare in the two decades that followed. Following World War I, filmmakers in Germany experimented with exaggerated sets, extravagant costumes, and far-out ideas to create some of the first Expressionist films. Films like “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari” (1919), “Algot” (1920), “Metropolis” (1926), “Alraune” (1928), and “The Girl in the Moon” (1929) represented the first serious attempts at using science fiction as a medium to discuss the ills of the day, including fascism, conformity, and the threat of technology out of control. In 1936, England’s “Things to Come,” based

on the novel by H.G. Wells, relied on elegant and expensive special effects to depict a world after a devastating final war and the efforts of a group of men to take a rocketship to the stars. However, the late Thirties and early Forties relegated science fiction to low budget pot boilers and kiddy fare, as in serials like “The Phantom Empire” (1935), “Flash Gordon” (1936) and “Buck Rogers” (1939) and in films like “King Kong” (1933) and “Dr. Cyclops” (1940).

While the science fiction film was largely undistinguished in the first five decades of the Twentieth Century, science fiction’s literary legacy had been squandered on low budget pulps by the 1950s. The promise of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus (1818) and the works of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, that had established science fiction as a literary art-form of distinction in the Nineteenth Century, had given way to the best-selling potboilers of Edgar Rice Burroughs and H. Rider Haggard. By the 1920s, a group of talented writers, including Abraham Merritt, Ray Cummings, and Murray Leinster, were competing with Burroughs and Haggard in the very lucrative market of science fiction, but the genre quickly became an outlet for action and adventure. Lurid tales of extraterrestrial conquest, rampaging robots, and nearly naked women being carried off by monstrous creatures were what readers (mostly young, male readers) clamored for in the magazines of the day.

Hugo Gernsback responded to the demands of the marketplace with the first all-science fiction magazine, Amazing Stories, in April 1926; but as an editor, he also tried to shape the genre by insisting that each story have a “scientific content.” Manuscripts poured into Gernsback’s offices from A. Hyatt Verrill, E.E. “Doc” Smith, and Jack Williamson, and soon he was printing some of the best speculative fiction since Shelley

and Wells. But other editors of the day, including Harry Bates, favored science fiction stories that told action-packed adventures, and Astounding Stories of Super Science was born. Astounding, first published in January 1930, featured the work of Cummings and Leinster, as well as new writers like Edmund Hamilton, Stanley Weinbaum, and John W. Campbell (writing as Don A. Stuart). Other magazines, including Wonder Stories, Marvel Science Stories, Astonishing Stories, and Planet Stories, published many new authors, including Isaac Asimov, L. Ron Hubbard, Robert Heinlein, and A.E. Van Vogt. With very few exceptions, most of the work was less than literary, and the quest for a thoughtful and intelligent treatment of science took backseat to a thrilling adventure tale set on another world. To the public at large, science fiction was a juvenile art-form, just a cut above the comic book.

The few literary works of science fiction explored many social issues beyond the purview of science and technology. Issues related to bigotry, prejudice, paranoia, fascism, political corruption, sexuality, psychology and the power of the mind showed up in works like Asimov's "Nightfall" (Astounding 1941), Lewis Padgett's "Mimsy Were the Borogroves" (Astounding 1943), Heinlein's "The Roads Must Roll" (Astounding 1940), and other stories. Instead of fearsome alien monsters, Weinbaum's "Martian Odyssey" (Wonder 1934) introduced audiences to a creature with a life and a purpose all its own; instead of mindless rampaging robots, Campbell wrote about automatons still dutifully tending machines long after man's demise in "Twilight" (Astounding 1934) and "Night" (Astounding 1935), and encouraged Asimov to carve a set of commandments that every robot must follow. But for each thoughtful and intelligent story, a dozen others focused on the more lurid and juvenile elements of the genre.

So, when, early in the winter of 1949, Julian Blaustein decided to find a science fiction story to make into a motion picture, he had a number of uphill battles to fight. First, he had to select a tale that would require few (if any) special effects, elaborate costumes and set designs in order to keep the production costs to a minimum. Blaustein realized that he would only be able to consider earthbound stories. Then he had to find a story that would make an entertaining film while, at the same time, would say something of importance. And finally, he had to choose a project that production chief Darryl F. Zanuck, the rigid and notorious producer who would eventually run Twentieth Century-Fox, would give the green light to film. Blaustein called upon assistant story editor Maurice Hanline to assist him, and together they poured over hundreds of pulp science fiction magazines and novels to find the right story. Hanline eventually brought him a ten-year-old issue of Astounding, and in the same issue that had “Butyl and the Breather” by Theodore Sturgeon and the second installment of A. E. Van Vogt’s classic “Slan,” they found a little known short story.

Farewell to the Master

“Farewell to the Master” by Harry Bates, the former editor, was first published in the October 1940 issue of Astounding magazine, and featured several lurid black and white illustrations of the robot (who was originally named Gnut) by F. Kramer. The illustrations depicted Gnut as a kind of powerful Roman god with bulging muscles and a loin cloth as his only form of clothing. Gnut was, in fact, the focal point of the story, not the humanoid visitor Klaatu, and the story that is set in an undetermined but advanced future is told by Cliff Sutherland, a hard-boiled newspaper reporter who is determined to stop at nothing to get the story of a lifetime. The tagline to the short story read: “The

robot was harmless, in fact couldn't be moved in any way whatever—till a newsman stuck his nose in where it didn't belong!" Not exactly the stuff of legend, but then that was the kind of lurid lead-in most stories received back in the days when science fiction was published in pulp magazines. Upon closer evaluation, however, "Farewell to the Master" was much deeper and more thought provoking than most of the other stories that were published in the same issue.

Following a couple of brief, introductory paragraphs which details Klaatu's arrival on the Mall in Washington, D.C. in an interplanetary spaceship, his emergence with Gnut from the interior of the ship, and his desire for peace, we learn that Klaatu is dead, the victim of a crazed sniper. Sutherland and other members of the world press report from the scene of the tragedy, hoping to add a postscript to their story, but Gnut remains motionless. The nine-foot-tall, humanoid robot is described as "a giant...like the powerful god of the machine of some undreamed of scientific civilization, on his face a look of sullen brooding thought," but the robot takes no action. For weeks the robot stands a lonely vigilance outside of the ship, like any one of the great bronze immobile statues from around the nation's capital, and the world grows weary of the story of the visitor from another world. Eventually, the robot and his spaceship are moved to a dark, dreary corner of the Smithsonian Institute, and presumably forgotten about, like all of the other treasures of the museum.

Dissatisfied with the conclusion to his story, Cliff Sutherland sneaks into the Smithsonian one night, and discovers that Gnut is not the large, immobile statue that he thought. Instead the robot is hard at work using a bird and a gorilla in a strange procedure to replicate Klaatu and bring him back from the dead. Unfortunately, the

cloned duplicate of Klaatu is also dying. Sutherland intercedes, suggesting to Gnut that they rush the dying spaceman to a local hospital, but the robot has run out of time. Gnut climbs aboard his spaceship, and departs, leaving Sutherland with the ending for his newspaper story. In a strange twist of fate and irony, he learns that the robot is the true master and Klaatu is just another one of his servants.

Julian Blaustein didn't need to read beyond the assassination of the peaceful Klaatu to realize that he had found the story he wanted to make into a film, and contacted Maurice Hanline to investigate the possibility of acquiring the rights. Blaustein also approached Darryl Zanuck with his idea. Zanuck read the story, but was not particularly impressed with the plot or the characters. Blaustein pressed the production chief, telling him about the popularity of the science fiction genre and showing him sales figures of the various pulp magazines of the day. He also referred to the recent rash of unidentified flying object sightings, and said that the general public was hungering for stories about flying saucers. Zanuck soon relented, and gave Blaustein the go-ahead to purchase the rights to the Bates story. Within a matter of days, Hanline had purchased the screen rights to "Farewell to the Master" from Street & Smith Publications (the owners of Astounding) for \$1000, \$500 of which went to Harry Bates. (At the time of the sale, the publishers never bothered to contact Bates for his approval, and years after the fact, Bates was still resentful that he hadn't received more money. Today, it's not unusual for an author to earn thousands if not millions of dollars in revenue for a story, but back in the 1950's writers were not as well compensated for their work.)

Blaustein requested that Edmund H. North, a writer who was under contract at Twentieth Century-Fox, be assigned to write the screenplay for the film. North readily

accepted as he was anxious to work with the producer who had brought “Broken Arrow” (1948), the first film to treat Native Americans as sympathetic figures, to the screen. The two shared many of the same values and sensibilities, and agreed that their film should be about the struggle for peace despite man’s own stupidity and predilection for war. North read the original story and, with a few notes in hand, started writing the screenplay for “Farewell to the Master” (as the film was then titled) on July 7, 1950. Four weeks later, he had finished a thirty-five-page outline which detailed the action, the setting, and all of the major characters for the script that he would later write. Armed with North’s outline, Blaustein sought Zanuck’s final approval.

As luck or fate would have it, two events had already shaped Daryl Zanuck’s final decision. On June 25, 1950, the Korean War broke out, prompting the United States to initiate a “police action” with its military troops, and two days later, on June 27, 1950, George Pal’s “Destination Moon” opened at the Mayfair Theater in New York City to unprecedented box office receipts and good reviews. Zanuck knew that Blaustein’s film would be viewed as a “peace” film, and he was all in favor of putting the United States government (and the rest of the world) on notice that the studio favored peace over war (particularly at a time when the possibility of nuclear war hung over the heads of every person on the planet). And with every major studio in Hollywood hurrying science fiction films into production, including Howard Hawks’s “The Thing” at RKO, “Flight to Mars” at Monogram, and Pal’s “When Worlds Collide” at Paramount, Zanuck realized the importance of having their own project in the works. The only thing that Zanuck insisted upon was emphasizing Earth’s reaction to the landing of the interstellar craft; he did not think that it was appropriate to start the story in space, and demanded that the

motion picture opened from the point of view of the average person on the Mall in Washington D.C. Both Blaustein and North argued for a short introductory scene aboard Klaatu's ship, but that scene was ultimately rejected by the production chief. (All that remains now of that introductory scene are a very tantalizing descriptions from North's outline, and little more.)

The Screen Story

After writing several drafts of the script and screen story, Edmund H. North delivered his final screenplay on February 21, 1951. In adapting the short story "Farewell to the Master" to the screen, North made a number of improvements over the original story while still maintaining the spirit of Harry Bates. One of the first changes was in the name of the robot; "Gnut" which both had agreed would provide an endless amount of difficulty in proper pronunciation became "Gort." North also changed the robot's role; instead of being the "master," as in the original story, Gort became a simple policeman. In matters of aggression, the race of robots had final authority, and were given a role not unlike the "peace-keeping" role that the United States military had assumed in Korean. The Confederation of Planets that had dispatched Klaatu and Gort to Earth was envisioned in North's screenplay as a kind of United Nations, and the fact that Klaatu offers Earth the right to take part in "other profitable ventures" with them suggests that he and the others are confirmed capitalists. North also took great pains to avoid all of the clichés and stereotypes associated with invading aliens; in far too many science fiction stories, beginning as far back as H.G. Wells's War of the Worlds (1898), aliens brought only death and destruction in their conquest of Earth. North wanted to change all of that, and while the people of Earth do in fact react to Klaatu and Gort with the kind of

fear and paranoia that Orson Welles had preyed upon in his “War of the Worlds” radio broadcast only 12 years earlier in 1938, Klaatu is not a tentacled invader; he is kind, soft spoken, and full of peace and good will. Finally, North also incorporated several of the greatest fears of the period: the fear of the atomic bomb and nuclear war; the fear of Communism and the Red Scare, and the fear of flying saucers. His final screenplay is a work of true genius, spinning a tale about a visitor from another world that is both entertaining and cautionary.

As North was putting the finishing touches on his screenplay, which had since been renamed “Journey to the World” by Blaustein, he began hearing nervous rumors that Senator Joseph McCarthy’s Communist “witch hunt” would again target members of the Hollywood industry. (A group known as “The Hollywood Ten” had already been blacklisted.) Trade magazines like Variety scoffed at the news, and focused on more pressing concerns, like the impact of television on motion picture production. But many others, including fellow writers and artists, were scared. North continued to revise his work, adding a delicious but dangerous subtext to the screenplay, which he later thought about removing. He envisioned his story as a modern retelling of the Christ story, with Klaatu as a messianic figure. A man arrives from the heavens who is, by all outside appearances, human but also more than just a common man. He adopts the name “Carpenter,” which was Jesus’s occupation; he moves among the people of the day, by pretending to be one of them; he befriends a kind of Mary Magdeline, and is betrayed by a friend; ultimately murdered by the local authorities, he rises from the dead, and returns to the heavens after delivering a kind of sermon on the mount.

“I had always hoped that the Christ comparison would be subliminal,” Edmund North confessed years later. “It was my private little joke. I never discussed this angle with Blaustein...because I didn’t want it expressed.”

But his private, little joke was just the kind of thing that McCarthy and his committee might mistake as subversive. At one point, when the House Committee on Un-American Activities moved west and again began hunting Communists in the film industry, North considered revising huge sections of his script, but by that time it was too late. All of his notes and earlier drafts had already become a matter of public record so that Daryl F. Zanuck and Twentieth Century-Fox could protect themselves by appearing to be cooperative with the infamous “witch hunt.” In the end, while a number of North’s friends and fellow screenwriters went to prison or were blacklisted, North was never called by the committee. His work, after all, was science fiction, and no one paid much attention to such juvenile flights of fantasy.

With the exception of a short prologue that North wrote, establishing Klaatu’s approach to the earth from his point of view, and a scene in which Klaatu tells Bobby all about his world, the final screenplay is pretty much what went before the cameras when production began. The on-air commentaries by the newsmen of the day, including Elmer Davis, Drew Pearson, H.L. Kalthenborn, and Gabriel Heatter, were later ad-libbed by the commentators themselves in order to lend an air of authenticity to the dramatic events as they were unfolding.

Production Details

Shortly after Blaustein announced the title change on December 11, 1950, he met with his first choice for a director, Robert Wise. Wise, then a journeyman director under

a non-exclusive contract with Fox, had begun his career as an editor, working for Orson Welles, on “Citizen Kane” (1941) and “The Magnificent Ambersons” (1942). He was just completing “The House on Telegraph Hill” (1950) for Fox when Blaustein approached him with the script for “Journey to the World.” Robert Wise liked North’s take on the science fiction theme, and accepted the project before the end of the year. Together (with Blaustein) he collaborated on a budget of \$960,000, and prepared for an early Spring start date.

Producer Julian Blaustein and Director Robert Wise carefully selected each member of the cast to bring their science fiction film to life. At first, they considered Claude Rains and Spencer Tracy for the pivotal role of “Klaatu,” but then thankfully they reconsidered. Wise felt the role should be played better by an actor who was not overly familiar to American audiences, and selected tall, dark-haired Michael Rennie, a British actor who had appeared briefly as the Norman king in Twentieth Century-Fox’s “The Black Rose” (1950). Rennie was perfect for the visitor from another planet because of the quiet dignity and self-assurance he brought to the role. For the part of Helen Benson, the war widow who understands the space visitor’s motives and proceeds to help him with his mission, contract player Patricia Neal was given the nod. Tall, curvaceous, and sophisticated, Neal was perfect as a thinking man’s girl Friday; she was credible as the mother of a precocious ten-year-old boy (played by child actor Billy Gray), and highly resourceful in her scenes with Gort. (Ironically, she was depicted as a helpless blonde in Gort’s arms in all of the publicity posters, even though Neal was brunette.) Hugh Marlowe, the versatile performer of “All About Eve” and “Twelve O’clock High” (both in 1950), rounded out the featured trio in the role of Helen’s self-centered fiancé.

For the role of Professor Barnhardt, Blaustein and Wise hired veteran actor Sam Jaffe, who had been working in the industry since 1916. Jaffe had the same unruly hair as Albert Einstein, and brought his own deep, outspoken convictions about nuclear war and the Communist “witch hunts” to his onscreen character. Seven-foot, six-inch tall Loch Martin, who had been the doorman at Grauman’s Chinese Theater, was given the role of Gort. As an added feature, noted news commentators Drew Pearson, Gabriel Heatter, H. V. Kaltenborn and Elmer Davis were hired to appear as themselves reporting to the world the arrival of the strange spaceship from another world.

On the production side, Blaustein and Wise employed Leo Tover as the cinematographer; Tover was renowned throughout the industry for his eerie lighting and film noir-like photography, and since the production was going to be filmed entirely in black and white, he was essential to the team. Art directors Lyle Wheeler and Addison Hehr were brought aboard to design and build the spaceship and to build the robot Gort. Hehr went back to the original story, and from Bates’s description of Gnut, he hit upon the notion of a “fluid metal” humanoid machine. Fred Sersen and his five-man team, which included the great L. B. “Bill” Abbott, were given the formidable task of creating the film’s special effects. They relied on many conventional optical and matte-work effects, including a traveling matte shot for Klaatu’s arrival in Washington, D.C. Other optical effects, including Gort’s destructive laser beam, were added in postproduction using double-printing techniques that were fairly commonplace at the time.

For the music, Blaustein and Wise approached the great Bernard Herrmann. Wise had worked with Herrmann on “Citizen Kane,” and knew that Herrmann would write an excellent score for his picture. Since it was science fiction, Herrmann had no

intention of writing an ordinary score. He researched several new electronic instruments, including a theremin (which responded to the oscillations of waving hands no less!), and produced in five weeks what many still regard to this day one of the great film scores.

Late in January of 1951, the New York office of Twentieth Century-Fox insisted on yet another title change for the film, “Journey to the World” soon became the more commercial “The Day the Earth Stood Still.” Production on “The Day the Earth Stood Still” began on March 26, 1951, and principal photography took approximately six weeks to complete, with the crew working six out of seven days.

Contrary to popular opinion, the film was shot almost entirely on the Fox backlot in West Los Angeles, not Washington, D.C. Klaatu’s flying saucer, which measured 850 feet in circumference, stood twenty-five feet high, and came with a 100-foot sliding ramp, was constructed on the Fox’s largest soundstage at the time at a cost of \$100,000 in building materials. Construction workers used enough material on the spaceship to build a dozen average houses. Two other versions of the flying saucer—a two-foot model and a seven-foot model—were also built at the same time. The interior of the boarding house, Barnhardt’s office, and the jewelry shop where Tom Stevens gets Klaatu’s diamond appraised were also built at the studio. That beautifully atmospheric Harvard street where Klaatu finds a room in Mrs. Crockett’s boarding house was created on the same backlot street where so many Andy Hardy films had been made. Today, Century City now stands on the ground in Westwood where the Twentieth Century-Fox backlot once hosted a visitor from another world.

A second unit, under the direction of Bert Leeds, was dispatched to Washington, D.C. on March 19, 1951, to shoot location scenes that would later be incorporated into

the sequences Wise shot on the backlot. None of the actors accompanied Leeds to the nation's capital; instead he relied on stand-ins that were photographed at a distance. In addition to shots of the Mall (just adjacent to the Washington Monument and the Smithsonian Institute), the interior of the Lincoln Monument, Arlington National Cemetery, and exteriors of Walter Reed Hospital, Leeds was given unprecedented access to military machines and equipment at nearby Fort Myer. He literally mobilized a small army, including jeeps, tanks, weapons carrier, and trucks, for the climatic night chase through the rain-slicked streets of Washington, D.C. All of those scenes were seamlessly woven into the final film.

During production on the film, the Breen Censorship Office contacted Blaustein to discuss the scene in which Gort brings Klaatu back to life on board the spaceship. Blaustein and North met with them on the set at Twentieth Century-Fox, and argued how important the scene was to the overall story of the film, but they were absolutely adamant the scene had to go, or they would pull the plug on the production. At the time, the Breen Office, an independent agency the studios relied upon to enforce the code of moral decency in motion pictures, was the final word; without their stamp of approval, a film could not be shown in theaters. They said that only God had the power to control life and death, and that "The Day the Earth Stood Still" could not violate this concept. Eventually Blaustein and North hit upon a compromise that Gort would bring Klaatu back to life, but his life span would be extremely limited. Against his better judgment, North also inserted a line in the film that stated that only God had the power of life and death: When Helen questions the newly resurrected Klaatu, "You mean he has the power of life and death?" Klaatu replies gravely, "No, that is a power reserved to the Almighty Spirit."

Ultimately, The Breen Office accepted the revised screenplay and permitted production to continue.

On Monday, April 9, 1951, Wise resumed filming as scheduled, shooting the first of two days on the Walter Reed Hospital set. In the background, in between takes, Wise could hear Lyle Wheeler and his team working on the large, full-scale mock-up of the flying saucer. The ship was first pressed into service on Friday, April 13, 1951, when the director moved to shoot scenes featuring Klaatu's first emergence from the interior of the spacecraft with Gort. Robert Wise and his team kept shooting to a tight schedule, and often worked six and seven days a week to complete the work. On Monday, May 22, 1951, principal photography wrapped. Wise then closeted himself with editor William Reynolds to work on the film's rough-cut.

"The Day the Earth Stood Still" was previewed, without any publicity or fanfare, at a small theater in Inglewood, California, on August 15, 1951. Fears about how the audience would react to Gort, who still looked to Blaustein and Wise as nothing more than a man in a rubber suit, were quickly relieved by the loud gasps and nervous sighs of the moviegoers when the robot first lumbered into view. By the end of its 92-minute running time, audiences proclaimed the film a surprise hit with a round of spontaneous applause that lasted several minutes. Less than three weeks later, "The Day the Earth Stood Still" opened in New York and around the country to brisk box office business and glowing reviews, and went on to become one of Twentieth Century-Fox's big box office successes in 1951.

A Sequel?

In the late Seventies, due to the phenomenal success of “Star Wars” and “Close Encounters of the Third Kind,” Edmund H. North wrote a treatment that updated the story of the film to modern day, and presented it to executives at Fox as the pilot for a proposed television series. They passed on the project in favor of a big budget motion picture sequel, and hired well-known science fiction author Ray Bradbury to write the screenplay. Bradbury delivered the first draft of “The Day the Earth Stood Still II: The Evening of the Second Day” on March 11, 1981. In the sequel, Klaatu’s daughter Klaata returns to Earth thirty years later without Gort to discover a world that is still teetering on the brink of nuclear destruction. Most of the people that heard Klaatu’s message are dead and buried, and the rest believe that his visit was part of some elaborate hoax. When she disembarks her spaceship at Cape Canaveral in Florida on Christmas Eve, Klaata has a very similar message for the world.

Bradbury’s first draft screenplay was not received with a great deal of enthusiasm by the executives at Twentieth Century-Fox; the story was very poetic and moving, but did not have the punch of the original. At the insistence of the Board of Directors, Ray Bradbury wrote a second draft, dated September 11, 1981. The screenplay followed the same story arc of the first draft, but added elements drawn from Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol. In the extended story, young Bobby Benson, now inexplicably named Atkins, is metaphorically visited by the ghosts of Christmas past and present and future, and given a glimpse of how the world was when, as a boy, he first met Klaatu. He is then shown how the nations of the world squabble over the Earth’s limited resources, in particular oil. And finally, Klaata shows him two different kinds of futures, one of peace

and one of total annihilation. The story ends with Klaata leaving in her spaceship, promising that she will return in another twenty years when mankind has had a chance to grow up. Fox executives did not care for Bradbury's second draft, and shelved the project completely.

Today, over fifty years after the first release of "The Day the Earth Stood Still," a sequel or an updated remake remain the subject of speculation, but little more than that. The original film, despite its black and white production and outdated clothes and effects, needs no follow-up. It still packs a punch, all by itself.

Critical Commentary

The world of 1951 may seem as distant and remote to most contemporary science fiction fans as the Great Depression or Antebellum South or Colonial America, but it was out of that time and place, slightly more than fifty years ago, that the American science fiction film was born. Prior to the decade of the Fifties, the science fiction film was nothing more than an import from France or Germany or Great Britain, a novelty, or a live-action cartoon. But after World War II, the Nazi death camps, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the world changed, and the far-fetched stories of pulp writers didn't seem so far fetched. Front-page news stories about the recovery of a flying saucer in Roswell, New Mexico, or the arrest of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for selling atomic secrets to the Soviet Union, or the outbreak of war in Korea, or the declaration of Senator Joe McCarthy in Wheeling, West Virginia, that he had a list of 205 "card-carrying" members of the Communist Party, which might have seemed like fantasy a few years before, were now topics of everyday conversation. The world of the 1950s was not the quaint little portrait of "Ozzie and Harriet" or "Father Knows Best" that was used to sell

products for the tobacco companies or the automotive industry, but rather a vast canvas of fear, anxiety, prejudice, and paranoia. No other art-form quite reflected that world as vividly or as thoughtfully or as truthfully as the science fiction film that was produced in Hollywood at the time.

Films like “Destination Moon” (1950), “Rocketship X-M” (1950), and “Flight to Mars” (1951) pointed the way to the stars, and proclaimed our hopeful aspirations for a better tomorrow, while others like “Five” (1951), “The Thing (from Another World)” (1951), and “Invasion of the Body Snatchers” (1956) penetrated the façade of optimism to reveal our greatest fears of nuclear annihilation, Communist infiltration, and the loss of personal identity and freedom. Still others like “Them!” (1954), “The Beginning of the End” (1957), “The Incredible Shrinking Man”(1957), and “The Fly” (1958) examined the role of technology as it quickly advanced and outpaced man’s ability to control and harness it and the other marvels of science. Few of the motion pictures could be labeled masterpieces, in the true sense of the word, and yet a surprising number of the science fiction films that were released in the Fifties still retain tremendous power and meaning to this day.

“The Day the Earth Stood Still” was an entertaining and thoughtful motion picture—the epitome the science fiction film of the decade of the 1950s. On the threshold of man’s greatest adventure into space, he had also discovered a force so terrifying that if used by both sides in a third world war it spelled certain doom for the entire planet. The fear of atomic war was very real to Americans (and the rest of the world) in 1951. Just two years earlier, the Soviet Union had detonated its first nuclear bomb, igniting the fuse on a cold war that would smolder and burn for another thirty-five

years. Both the United States and the Soviet Union knew that if the one side struck first there would still be enough bombs to totally obliterate the other; the balance of terror was called “mutually assured destruction” (or mad, for short), but that didn’t prevent either side from experimenting with the Hydrogen bomb or producing enough weapons of mass destruction to destroy the world many times over.

Klaatu’s main goal when he steps out of his spaceship is to put an end to the madness; his people have been monitoring developments on Earth, and now that man appears poised on the threshold of space, they fear that man might bring his weapons of mass destruction with him; this they cannot allow, for it would threaten the peace and prosperity of other worlds in the confederation of planets. Klaatu really doesn’t give the leaders of the Earth much of a choice: They must end their nuclear arms proliferation and stop all forms of aggression and violence, or Gort and a race of robots like him will do it for them. Atomic war was simply unthinkable, and would not to be tolerated. Unfortunately, Klaatu’s peaceful intentions were received with hostility by the government because the idea of peaceful coexistence with the Russians was a radical, almost subversive, notion.

The idea of surrendering complete authority to Gort and his fellow robots must have also appeared as a very radical notion. By all outward appearances, Gort and his death ray was the symbol of mindless power—an extension of Frankenstein’s monster out of control—but in fact, in the capable hands of Klaatu, he was merely a tool, like Robby the Robot. Similarly, the atom also had a dual nature: When used as a weapon, it was a force of frighteningly destructive power; when used as a power source, as Klaatu instructs Bobby, the atom had many peaceful uses as well. Technology, in and of itself,

was not good or bad—it was how man chose to employ that technology that determined its nature. Regrettably, the film stops short of a far more powerful message by declining to copy the original ending of Bates's story; no longer is the robot the master, and the humanoid alien a servant. Audiences were left with only one hint, when the robot retrieves, then revives his humanoid counterpart. Here, the Frankenstein story has come full circle, with the Creature actually resurrecting his creator. At the time when the film was first released, some critics were bothered by its fascist message, while others found the notion of a passionless, logical and unbiased police force to be a utopian ideal whose time had surely come.

The film also confronts the decade's fear of the unknown and its prejudices towards strangers by challenging the very pretenses and lies middle America embraced in place of the truth. While the white-bread, all-American Nelsons and Andersons of tvland were supposed to reflect the cosmopolitan make-up and moral decency of every home in the country, the truth was that they reflected only a very small percentage of America. Most families struggled to make ends meet on single-salary incomes which were well below the seemingly luxurious lifestyles depicted on television; they paid taxes, and grumbled about supporting entitlement programs; they built bomb shelters and worried about what the godless Communists might do if they ever gained a statistical superiority in nuclear warheads; they kept to themselves in small, segregated communities, and sent their children to the same schools that they had attended when they were children; they never ventured far away from their homes, even on vacation, and distrusted everyone who looked or sounded or worshipped differently from them. The reality was that middle America was composed of fearful, anxious people who mistrusted strangers and even the

neighbor down the street that they didn't know. True, they had fought and won a war against fascism and had survived one of the greatest financial upheavals in human history, but their complacency in accepting the lie about America had also allowed others to strip away their civil liberties in the name of patriotism and bring them to the brink of nuclear annihilation.

North's thought-provoking screenplay functions as a kind of wake up call for all of those who had bought into that lie. When Klaatu mysteriously vanishes from Walter Reed Hospital and then later appears at Mrs. Crockett's boarding house as the mysterious Mr. Carpenter, he is greeted with suspicion and fear. The members of the household, including Helen Benson and her son Bobby, are meant to represent a microcosm of society, and their reaction is indicative of how real people in the 1950s reacted to those who were somehow strange or different. The fairy tale world of television families, like "Ozzie and Harriet" and "Father Knows Best," had many believing that racism and bigotry didn't exist in the Fifties, but that simply wasn't true. Much worse, the character of Tom Stevens revealed America's duplicity about race, pretending one thing while at the same time believing something else entirely. Similarly, the film's portrayal of the media, with its exploitative rhetoric "Are We Long for This World?," also showed how the liberal press of the day seized upon any story to boost its circulation even if it meant throwing a city, or the world, into a panic.

The decade's fear of strangers also meant a fear of the individual whose often unpopular and idiosyncratic views represented a threat to the complacency and conformity of centrist America. Those who did not share the popular view or failed to toe the party line were labeled as Communists, even if they had no affiliation at all with

the Communist Party. Scientists, intellectuals, writers and free thinkers were all suspected as being subversive. There was no middle ground in the Us-versus-Them mentality of the 1950s. So, when Klaatu arrives in his spaceship and tells the world that it must beat its weapons into plowshares, his view runs contrary to the norm. While most would agree that peace is preferable to violence and aggression, the popular belief was that peace was only obtainable through strength and the mutually assured destruction of the enemy if war broke out. Similarly, Professor Barnhardt advocates peace, but like Einstein and Oppenheimer, he is a scientist and therefore suspect, even though it was scientists like Barnhardt that had made the bomb. "The Day the Earth Stood Still" made heroes out of aliens and scientists because they were willing to stand up for unpopular ideas at a time when the world needed new ideas. The fact that Klaatu was assassinated for those ideas made the point even more relevant, and lent courage to a whole generation who would a decade later give peace a chance.

And finally, the film addresses the issue of fear itself. When Klaatu is asked by the reporter about the missing spaceman, he replies gravely, "I'm fearful when I see people substituting fear for reason." The reporter cuts him off before he can complete his full statement, but the essence of which reminds audience members of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's immortal words (following the attack on Pearl Harbor): "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself..." Klaatu knows that fear is an emotion that can be controlled, but left unchecked, it grows into suspicion, hatred and paranoia. Those were the same negative emotions that had brought the decade of the 1950s to the brink of madness, and North was telling us there was a better way.

The winning formula behind “The Day the Earth Stood Still” was copied many times during the Fifties and early Sixties, but none of those films had the impact that this one had or continues to have today.

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