

The Day the Earth Stood Still: Comments

Any comments that I can provide on *The Day the Earth Stood Still* would pale in comparison to the presentation given already in class. The concept of Klaatu as Christ and its related storyline as well as the parallels between the peripheral characters from both narratives is hard to beat. There are many articles available online which reiterate this parallel, in both versions of the film.

Therefore, most of my comments will come from the perspective of the film as representative of the time in which it was made and what we, as aliens viewing from the outside, can see of the society and culture in the time in which it was made. The UFO sighting over Washington DC in 1952 shown in class (actually one year after *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was released) was only one of many started by the widely reported experience of Kenneth Arnold in 1947 and considered to be the start of the modern UFO era (Rohrer, 2007). And, as any viewer of the show *Ancient Aliens* (History Channel, 2009-) is no doubt aware, reported sightings of strange aerial phenomenon dates back throughout recorded history.

But with the arrival of the so-called *Foo Fighters* (inexplicable unidentified aircraft, not the modern rock band, although the latter do owe their name to the former) harassing allied aircraft during World War II (Watson, n.d.), Arnold's report and the famed Roswell incident of 1947, moviegoers were also treated to a *flap* of alien invasion films of varying quality (just Google "B-Grade 1950s sci-fi movies" for an overwhelming sampling).

Most alien films depict invaders - possibly stemming from H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*; the idea of a hostile invader far in advance of ourselves coming to take over the world and to enslave or eradicate humanity is far more common than any alternative. *The Thing from Another World* (Christian Nyby and Howard Hawkes {uncredited} - Directors, 1951), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (both versions: Don Siegel - Director, 1951 or Philip Kaufman - Director, 1978), *Alien* (Ridley Scott - Director, 1979) and *Predator* (John McTiernan - Director, 1987) are just a handful of samples from this genre.

Also common are the visitors that come in peace but with a nefarious agenda, such as the lizard invaders in the 1983 mini-series *V* (Kenneth Johnson - Director), its subsequent, short-lived TV show (1984) and reboot series (2009-2011) as well as the classic Rod Serling *Twilight Zone* episode *To Serve Man* (Richard L. Bare - Director, 1962). Even the 1996 Tim Burton alien invasion spoof *Mars Attacks!* falls into this category as the invaders initially "come in peace" (for a few moments).

And then there is the benevolent or peaceful alien - their intentions are benign, but they are perceived as a threat. Examples include *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg - Director, 1982), *Cocoon* (Ron Howard - Director, 1985), *Contact* (Robert Zemeckis - Director, 1997) and, of course, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (both versions: Robert Wise - Director, 1951 and Scott Derrickson, 2008).

The 1951 version, and the topic of this study, differs from its remake in one crucial aspect: there was no *The Day the Earth Stood Still* before it, nor any *E.T.*, *Cocoon* or *Contact*. It was unusual in that it depicted an alien who was not here to conquer. And it came at a time when the world needed it. As one of the many clips in the 1982 montage documentary *The Atomic Café* (Jayne Loader, Kevin Rafferty and Pierce Rafferty - Directors), following a discussion of the nuclear threat, one observer comments "What do we have to worry about? We're the ones with the bomb?" only to be shot down in the next sequence when

it is announced that the, then Soviet Union was now in possession of the same devastating weapon that brought the mighty Japanese Empire to its knees.

Nuclear annihilation was now a very real possibility, only two years prior to this film's release. There can be little doubt that this was the impetus for the film - Klaatu came to Earth to warn humanity about the danger that it imposed on itself and on other planets. This was Hollywood warning a very skittish public not to panic and I suggest that it is no accident that at the end of Klaatu's speech, where he warns that the choice between peace and destruction "is yours", while not looking directly at the camera, Michael Rennie is looking so close to it that he might as well be - he is warning not only the assemblage of scientists and military men in front of him on the stage but also the audience in the theatre.

This is the obvious warning in the film but there is a more covert one at work, as well. The ambitions of the character of Tom Stevens are, as stated in the lecture, similar to those of Judas who reputedly betrayed Jesus by announcing his whereabouts to the Romans; Tom threatened to betray Klaatu in the same manner. But putting this into the context of the time reveals an interesting dimension.

The concept of betrayal does date back to biblical times but perhaps no period saw more fear and paranoia than the post-war era. Fear of fascism was replaced with fear of communism. The Cold War brought with it inherent distrust and McCarthyism, now starting to get a firm toehold on the United States (Achter, n.d.) was causing another source of fear and irrationality. Tom's betrayal and Helen's subsequent reaction is a warning - distrust, betrayal, greed - these are all failings that humans must overcome.

The radio broadcast first heard when Klaatu disappears from the hospital is dripping with paranoid fearmongering: there is an alien and we don't know where he is - surely, he is something to be feared; it is a veiled warning against ignorant condemnation and mob mentality that causes friends and relatives to turn against each other, much as Tom turned against Klaatu and, subsequently, Helen (and she, in response, to him).

Ironically, the announcer is right - Klaatu is someone to be feared or, more accurately, his titanium henchman Gort is. And, at this point we can revisit the notion of the good alien vs evil alien and ask whether Klaatu is perhaps an invader. After all, he has come uninvited, demanded audience and threatened utter destruction unless the totality of humankind kowtow to his demands. A similar pattern was shown by another alien: Terence Stamp's General Zod in *Superman II* (Richard Lester and Richard Donner {uncredited} - Directors, 1980). Following this thought is beyond the scope of this treatment, but it would be an interesting angle to pursue.

But it is almost certainly more likely that the filmmakers felt that Franklin D. Roosevelt's proclamation needed reiterating: the only thing we have to fear is fear itself (FDR's First Inaugural Address, n.d.) by showing the consequences of unbridled panic. When Klaatu first appears and is shot by a panicky soldier and Gort retaliates by vaporizing their weapons, the crowd runs in a frenzied panic, even though Gort has hurt no one; this panic is highlighted by the film being sped up. The intention appears to have been to enhance the feeling of disorder but, unfortunately, it came across with an almost comic effect.

The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951 version) is insightful from a historical perspective for a number of other reasons. The fashions (Klaatu's - or rather Carpenter's - loose fitting suit) and hairstyles (Helen's -

which resemble those from my mother's family photographs) are prime examples of life for the Silent Generation in the late 40s and early 50s.

It's the small touches that gives this film its dated charm - Klaatu claims to have travelled "250 million of your miles" in "about five months -- your months." This would put his home world somewhere just past the asteroid belt and shy of Jupiter - not a likely location for an advanced civilization (Williams, 2016). Furthermore, it took the Voyager spacecrafts almost two years to traverse that distance (NASA, n.d.). Klaatu's advanced civilization, no doubt could shave several months off, but he's still not coming from 250 million miles away and this shows a charming naivety of the period (Helen isn't concerned that her boy spends the day with a complete stranger) that is easily and brutally shattered when someone like Dick Hickock and Perry Smith (Capote, 1966) or Charles Starkweather (History, 2018) show up.

And what's a calling card? Klaatu (or, rather, "Carpenter") was going to leave one for Professor Barnhardt. These days one might leave their "business card" but would be more likely to call or email, but in the infancy of telephones (and prior) one gave out a card that simply noted that one had been there. Since the prevalence of telephones, the term (and practice) has fallen into disuse (Dictionary.com, n.d.).

But perhaps the cutest feature of films of this time are the news releases - the paper boys roam the streets screaming "Extra, extra!" Why do they do this? What does it mean? Newspapers, in general, are a dying medium (Barthel, 2017) but once upon time the Silent Generation relied on them for all of their news before radio, television and eventually, the Internet made them obsolete. Newspapers are published on a regular schedule - morning, mid-morning, noon etc. but occasionally something exciting would happen like a UFO landing in a baseball field or an alien disappearing from a hospital, and the newspapers would print a special "extra" edition to relay the news. Thus, the newspaper boys would scream "Extra!" meaning, there's an extra edition of the paper, featuring (whatever the paper wants you to read all about).

Television was expensive - "Oh, honey, he's teasing you. Nobody has two television sets." Stella Bains chided her son in *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis - Director, 1985) - so it has a limited appearance, but it is there. However, radio is clearly the dominant medium.

Finally, one final comment, to clear up a misunderstanding. The words, taken from the final draft of the original screenplay (North, 1951) are *Klaatu Barada Nikto* (presumably means something like "Klaatu needs help"). There is probably not a nerd in the world who isn't familiar with the phrase, however, in the parodied version seen in *Army of Darkness* (Sam Raimi - Director, 1992) Bruce Campbell attempts the phrase, saying *Klatoo Verada ... nectar ... necktie* etc. (Raimi & Raimi, 1991) not just stumbling on the last word but getting the whole freaking thing wrong. Perhaps he should have read the original screenplay.

References:

Rohrer, F. (2007). Saucers in the sky. Retrieved from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/6268708.stm

Watson, N. The History Press | UFOs and the Cold War. Retrieved from <https://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/articles/ufos-and-the-cold-war>

Achter, P. McCarthyism | History & Facts. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/McCarthyism>

"Only Thing We Have to Fear Is Fear Itself": FDR's First Inaugural Address. Retrieved from <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5057>

Williams, M. (2016). How Far is the Asteroid Belt from Earth? - Universe Today. Retrieved from <https://www.universetoday.com/130136/far-asteroid-belt-earth>

NASA. Voyager - Mission Timeline. Retrieved from <https://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/mission/timeline/#event-a-once-in-a-lifetime-alignment>

Capote, Truman. In Cold Blood. New York: Random House, 1966.

Killer couple strikes the heartland. (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/killer-couple-strikes-the-heartland>

Barthel, M. (2017). Circulation, revenue fall for US newspapers overall despite gains for some. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/01/circulation-and-revenue-fall-for-newspaper-industry>

Filmography:

Ancient Aliens (TV Series 2009-) IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1643266>

The Thing from Another World (1951) IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0044121>

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0049366>

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1978) IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077745>

V (1983) IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0085106>

V (1984) IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086822>

V (2009-2011) IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1307824>

The Twilight Zone (1962) Season 3 : Episode 24 "To Serve Man" <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0734684>

Mars Attacks! (1996) IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0116996>

Cocoon (1985) IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088933>

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial (1982) IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083866>

Contact (1997) IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118884>