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Cold War Fears, Cold War Passions: Conservatives And Liberals Square Off in 1950s Science Fiction

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Forming meaningful generalizations about American culture in the 1950s is a tricky affair. On the one hand, professional historians and lay commentators alike long have contended that a deep-seated social and political conservatism characterized the decade and its cinematic productions.[1] On the other hand, Peter Nicholls argues science fiction, "Because it was deemed socially insignificant, could play host to political criticism of a kind which might elsewhere have attracted the attentions of Joseph McCarthy and his Un-American Activities Committee."[2] Recent scholarship suggests the opposite, though Nicholls' assessment is not entirely without merit.[3]

An analysis of science-fiction films released in the 1950s reveals a complex interplay of Cold War fears, conflicting ideologies, and political contestation. Of nine major studio releases, for instance, six featured plots or themes that embraced Cold War policies and assumptions attributed to political conservatives. Notably, though, the remaining three films, all of which assumed stances more in line with the nation's liberal lobby, garnered the lion's share of cinematic awards. A microcosm of American society, science fiction in the 1950s was a cultural arena in which conservatives, though ascendant, by no means held a monopoly on public opinion or popular discourse. How science fiction handled concerns over domestic subversion provides a case in point.

William Cameron Menzies' *Invaders from Mars* was released in 1953 and immediately set the tone for much of what followed. The story centers on David MacLean (Jimmy Hunt), a young boy who witnesses a spaceship crash near his home. At the boy's insistence, his father, George (Leif Erickson) investigates the site of the alleged UFO. When his father returns, he acts strangely. A small mark on George's neck is the only evidence of his having been taken over by the Martians. Over the course of the next half hour, the Martians successfully convert other members of David's community—his mother Mary (the glacial Hillary Brooke), the neighbors, an Army general, and the police.

With the help of his astronomer friend Dr. Stuart Kelston (Arthur Franz) and public health official Dr. Pat Blake (Helena Carter), David discovers that the Martians intend to sabotage a nearby atomic project. The Martian saboteurs, in turn, capture David and Pat. Meanwhile, Stuart strives to convince the military of the pending danger. While captive, David and Pat discover yet another awful truth about the aliens—a single Martian overmind, little more than a mess of tentacles in a bowl, controls both the hideous bug-eyed green

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mutants, and their human slaves. The Army's arrival at the end of the film signals a victory for humankind, as military explosives destroy the Martian spaceship, but leave the underground hive in which the aliens hold David and Pat intact. When the two finally escape, they discover to their horror that the Martians have sealed off the escape tunnels. In a classic set piece from 1950s science fiction, the young boy David comes to the rescue, using a captured Martian ray gun to burn a path to safety.

In many respects *Invaders from Mars* was a thinly veiled (and simplistic) allegory with which audiences in 1953 would have no difficulty identifying. The loss of respected authority figures to Martian control likely struck a chord with moviegoers who had spent the previous five years reading and hearing about the exposure of such figures, previously above reproach, as communist agents. So, too, would the discovery that the Martians' target was a nuclear project—the Rosenberg trial dominated the airwaves and headlines in 1953. The Martians, I would argue, serve as obvious stand-ins for communists. Devoid of emotion, hostile, and duplicitous, the Martians were the very essence of American stereotypes of their Cold War counterparts. Likewise, the absence of individualism, depicted in both the presence of an overmind and the construction of a literal hive, alluded to the more extreme notion that all communists served exclusively to carry out the orders emanating from Moscow. Finally, the Martians' use of mind control touched as well on American fears of brainwashing, reports of which surfaced during the Korean War.

The film's stroke of genius, such as it was, lay in its choice of protagonist. The debate over domestic subversion and how to combat it had become a regular feature of political campaigning in the 1950 and 1952 elections.[4] The issue's highly charged political nature, though, no doubt left many Americans skeptical, especially as special investigations exposed Senator Joseph McCarthy's more outrageous claims as outright fabrications. No stranger to films depicting domestic subversion—his 1951 *The Whip Hand* featured the discovery of Nazi saboteurs in post-war America—Menzies neatly avoided any questions regarding his star's agenda. Young David MacLean was the quintessential sympathetic witness—innocent, truthful, and untainted by any political affiliation. David's greatest challenge lay in getting adults to take seriously the claims of a child. Ultimately, his success in doing so leads to victory and to the preservation of America's nuclear arsenal. The film's political message was crystal clear—failure to take seriously charges of domestic subversion would lead to the loss of American military superiority.

Three years later, director Don Siegel transformed the key plot elements of *Invaders* into a classic of American cinema. Siegel's 1956 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* similarly turns on the realization of its protagonist, in this case Dr. Miles Bennell (Kevin McCarthy), that aliens are taking control of the people around him. Beginning with Santa Mira, California the pod people—so called because the alien spores kill their hosts only after producing clones of them in what look like giant pea pods—plan to take over the United States and, presumably, the entire planet. The problem, of course, is that nobody will take Bennell seriously.

Within the first fifteen minutes of the film, Bennell and his fiancé Becky Driscoll (Dana Wynter) discover residents acting in a suspicious fashion. Family members and friends insist in increasingly hysterical terms that the afflicted truly are not themselves. When Bennell discusses the matter with the town psychiatrist, Dr. Kaufman (Larry Gates), the latter assures him that any fears or delusions Bennell's patients might be experiencing are simply the result of "a strange neurosis, evidently contagious, an epidemic mass hysteria." Later that same night Bennell's friend Jack (King Donovan) calls him to show him a strange cadaver-like object lying across his pool table. Bennell quickly deduces that the mysterious body is a clone of Jack, albeit in the early stages of its formation. From that point on, the plot races forward at breakneck speed.

Santa Mira's residents fall one by one, family by family, to the alien spores, which waste no time seizing control of the town government and police force. While the loss of Santa Mira and all those familiar to Bennell and Becky is devastating enough in its own right, matters go from bad to worse when they discover the pod people loading fresh pods onto vehicles headed to other towns in California. Having conquered Santa Mira, the aliens are extending the lines of battle. When the doppelgangers of Jack and Dr. Kaufman finally corner them, Bennell and Becky learn that the aliens have "no need for love, desire, ambition, faith." Without them, the pod people sigh, "life is so simple." Unfortunately for Becky, her dreams of marriage and family are dashed when the aliens take control of her. The film ends with a disheveled, frantic Bennell standing in the middle of a busy highway screaming to drivers and viewers alike, "Look, you fools. You're in danger. Can't you see? They're after you. They're after all of us. Our wives, our children, everyone. They're here already. You're next!"

Politically speaking, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is little more than a restating of what conservatives like McCarthy had been saying all along—i.e. that subversives had infiltrated all of our most cherished social and political institutions. That the pod people eschewed human emotions, desires, and ambitions, making all of their decisions collectively only reinforced for the audience the sense that Bennell and Becky were dealing with communists or, at the very least, with aliens bearing a striking resemblance to common American stereotypes of communists. Likewise, the notion of well-placed townspeople—Dr. Kaufman, the police, and the telephone operators—serving as a vanguard, squashing inquiries before they could threaten the conspiracy, echoed McCarthy's most extreme claims regarding Roosevelt and Truman (and their respective underlings) providing cover for communist infiltrators. Finally, Bennell's failure to stop the conspiracy's spread sent a strong message regarding the need for greater vigilance and action.

Interestingly enough, considerable debate exists over whether Siegel's film implicitly embraced the McCarthyist position or subtly lampooned it. Siegel, for his part, maintained until his death in 1991 that the film contained no political message of one form or another, that it was simply an invasion story and intended as entertainment.[5] Siegel's actual intentions notwithstanding, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* plays very well as a vindication of anti-communist hysteria, and a prescription of sorts for how to deal with the enemies among us. It also serves, I would argue, as another excellent example of the political conservatism that characterized *Invaders from Mars*.

In 1958, director Gene Fowler, Jr. gave the familiar storyline a subtle twist. *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* has all the hallmarks of its predecessors. In this particular outing, though, the protagonist is a woman—Marge Farrell (Gloria Talbott)—and the aliens' sole targets are men. Their plan, after successfully replacing the human males, is to inseminate Earth women and create alien hybrids that will then do their masters' bidding. The story begins on the night before Marge's marriage to Bill Farrell (Tom Tryon). Bill spends the evening out with friends and returns distant and changed. Almost immediately, Marge and Bill's relationship takes a sharp turn for the worse. Bill ignores Marge, shows no desire to spend time with her (even on their honeymoon), and at one point even exclaims, "Why do we have to talk?" Marge then notices other changes—Bill, previously no teetotaler, now refuses to drink alcohol and disappears from the house on a nightly basis. Marge's inexplicable (to her) inability to become pregnant raises yet more concern. Following an extensive check-up, the town physician Dr. Wayne (Ken Lynch) assures Marge that the problem does not lie with her. Marge's suspicions peak when Bill refuses all of her pleas to schedule an appointment with the doctor.

In less than twenty minutes of screen time, Marge uncovers the plot in its entirety and, like Dr. Bennell in *Body Snatchers*, discovers that the aliens already have taken control of the police force, the telephone and telegraph operators, and so on. She convinces Dr. Wayne of the aliens' existence only after one of the alien doppelgangers dies upon receiving oxygen following a boating accident. At that point, Dr. Wayne rallies the proverbial troops—in this case an "army" of fathers from the maternity ward—and confronts the aliens. While the film hasn't attained the classic status of *Body Snatchers*, it remains an evocative and generally underrated work that accurately documents the fears and hopes of the Cold War era, and in particular, the Cold War's construction of feminine agency (or, more accurately, the lack of it).

During the period in question, only one film challenged what had fast become conventional wisdom in Hollywood science fiction. Jack Arnold's *It Came From Outer Space*, released in 1953, takes the assumptions underlying the plot of *Invaders* (released the same year) and turns them on end. The result is arguably the most liberal approach 1950s science fiction would take toward the issue of domestic subversion. At first, *It Came From Outer Space* plays largely like a bigger budget (it was originally shot in 3D) retread of *Invaders*. The protagonist in this case is writer John Putnam (Richard Carlson) who, like David in *Invaders*, witnesses a UFO crash. When he warns the townspeople, they ignore and ridicule him. Even his girlfriend Ellen (Barbara Rush) remains dubious after hearing his tale of a UFO that crashed and then sank beneath a pile of rocks.

Just as David gradually became aware of his parents' and neighbors' sudden and inexplicable strange behavior, Putnam discovers that locals, including Ellen, are disappearing. When they reappear, their behavior resembles that of the human slaves in *Invaders* and, later, that of the pod people in *Body Snatchers*. By this time, Putnam's increasingly shrill warnings to the sheriff and townsfolk begin to pay off. Others now note the strange behavior and disappearances. Convinced that a threat does exist, they prepare to confront the alien menace. So far, so good—1950s moviegoers were now prepared for the inevitable clash between good and evil, us and them, Americans and the "Other".

The film's finale, though, would not be that simple. With local inhabitants bent on a final showdown that he precipitated, Putnam notes belatedly that the aliens' intentions seem benign. The townspeople under their control do little more than gather harmless pieces of equipment that they take back to the crashed ship. The aliens' purpose has nothing to do with conquest. Rather, Putnam concludes, their mind-control serves one purpose—to help them repair their ship so they can leave Earth undetected. The climactic tension hinges on whether Putnam can avert the conflict that his earlier warnings succeeded in brewing. In the end, the sheriff and his posse of locals heed Putnam's advice, allowing the aliens to escape unharmed. Politically speaking, *It Came From Outer Space* provided a strong counterpoint to the argument underlying the previously discussed films. The very existence of aliens in *Invaders*, *Body Snatchers*, and *Monster* presupposed a causal relationship whereby their differences, by default, would lead to pre-emptive efforts to infiltrate and dominate us by any means possible.

Director Jack Arnold and story author Ray Bradbury (the film's screenplay was written by Harry Essex from Bradbury's short story), by contrast, argued that the existence of political (or other) differences was not part of a *de facto* causal chain that would lead to domination and/or destruction. That many Americans flirted with or belonged to the Left, Arnold and Bradbury never questioned. What they challenged was the assumption that such leanings made them enemies to be identified, isolated, and removed from society. In short, they challenged the underpinnings of McCarthy and other political conservatives, whose positions otherwise garnered a very favorable reception in 1950s sci-fi circles. Still, they provided only one lone voice of opposition in a genre otherwise united in consensus.

Compared to its largely one-sided perspective on domestic subversion, Hollywood science fiction devoted screen time to liberal and conservative agendas alike with respect to foreign policy. In Washington, few questioned the chief assumption underlying George F. Kennan's so-called containment strategy—i.e. that Soviet inspired communism would continue to expand unless checked. The issue that divided analysts, politicians, and the public was that of whether to take advantage of perceived American military superiority to deliver crippling pre-emptive strikes against our enemies. John Foster Dulles argued that the Cold War was a zero sum game of the deadliest kind and that the containment strategists' efforts to maintain the global status quo would end in nuclear holocaust once Soviet capabilities exceeded our own. Containment theorists, by contrast, contended that, ethical considerations aside, even a successful American first strike would result in tens of millions of U.S. casualties from Russian retaliatory strikes. Vigilance, combined with slow and steady pressure, they felt, would provide the desired results.

The Republican Party used its critique of containment (now identified with the Democrats) as a key part of its campaign platform. Referring to containment as "negative, futile and immoral," John Foster Dulles called for a "Great New Declaration of Independence" for countries then under communist control.[6] Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson, for his part, defended Truman's containment policy, arguing that "action for action's sake [was] the last resort of mentally and morally exhausted men."[7] Dwight Eisenhower's election to the presidency, and his selection of Dulles as Secretary of State, though, seemed to indicate that the average American preferred a more muscular form of foreign policy.

In the midst of the policy debates, producer/director Howard Hawks released *The Thing from Another World* (1951), a film that spoke loudly to the raging debate and the fears that it reflected. Supposedly directed by Hawks' long-time editor, Christian Nyby, the film has long been known to be almost entirely Hawks' own work. *The Thing* opens with the discovery of a spacecraft half-buried in the Arctic ice. Base commander Captain Patrick Hendry (Kenneth Tobey) orders its excavation, at which time they discover the frozen body of the craft's pilot. The soldiers turn the creature over to Dr. Arthur Carrington (Robert Cornthwaite) for further study. In the course of his investigations, a soldier accidentally thaws the seven-foot tall extraterrestrial, which promptly escapes and begins to ravage the base and its occupants. Unaffected by bullets, the appropriately named Thing takes the offensive, slowly picking off the members of Polar Expedition 6 while beginning to reproduce itself through incubated spores in Carrington's lab. When Captain Hendry suggests that the scientist destroy the enemy spores, Carrington bristles, "There are no enemies in science, only phenomena to be studied." The team eventually sets a trap for the Thing, succeeding with electrocution where bullets previously failed. With the creature's remains still smoldering, journalist Ned Scott (Douglas Spencer) broadcasts the team's harrowing story, famously warning listeners, "watch the skies everywhere! Keep looking. Keep watching the skies!"

Lest anyone miss the film's none-too-subtle moral—only total commitment, not containment, will save us—scriptwriter Charles Lederer includes several didactic exchanges to drive home the message. The exchanges pit Captain Hendry against Doctor Carrington. The first concerns whether to dispose of the aforementioned spores. The doctor, still refusing to destroy the alien spores, assures the captain, "Knowledge is more important than life." Even after the Thing has killed numerous times and the team's hopes for survival seem slim, Carrington urges Hendry to reconsider his plan to electrocute it, maintaining, "We owe it to the brain of our species to stand here and die ... without destroying a source of wisdom." Lederer's depiction of inevitable conflict—and the pathetic futility of those urging

disengagement or containment—turns in part on its portrayal of the Other. The alien's peculiar nature—it is more vegetable than animal or mineral—makes its destruction all the more palatable for the characters and audiences alike. Interestingly, *The Thing* makes no effort whatsoever to develop audience sympathy for the alien or to understand its motives. The Thing simply wants to survive and reproduce, and gives no thought to the consequences of its actions. At no point in the film does the Thing show any hint of social civilization, or even the ability to communicate—odd, given that it arrived in an ultra-sophisticated spacecraft.

Subsequent films would paint much the same picture of invading aliens. Bryon Haskin's *The War of the Worlds*, released in 1953, is a case in point. Based on the H.G. Wells novel of the same name, *War* makes much the same political argument as its celluloid predecessor. The film opens with a spaceship from Mars crashing into the California countryside. A crowd of curious onlookers gathers but, upon discovering no action, soon leaves to attend the town dance apparently written into the script for the sole purpose of providing renowned physicist Dr. Clayton Forrester (Gene Barry) the opportunity to develop a love interest. Only town drunk Wash Perry (William Phipps) and his two buddies stay behind, determined to make history as the first humans to greet the aliens when they finally emerge from their craft. They get their chance. When the ship's electronic eye rises from the wreckage, Wash welcomes it to California. Without further ado, the Martian machine incinerates all three.

The alien's ensuing rampage knocks out the power and plunges the town dance into darkness. Further havoc ensues until the military arrives and surrounds the ship. Major General Mann (Les Tremayne) then informs Forrester that this was not an isolated incident. Countless vessels had crashed to earth and conflicts between humans and aliens were raging across the globe. Under orders to contain the craft to its present locale, tanks, aircraft, and hundreds of soldiers entrench themselves around the alien. Pastor Matthew Collins' (Lewis Martin) arrival offers both a brief respite and a moment of hope. Convinced that the initial hostilities had resulted from alien misunderstandings of human intentions, Collins approaches the Martian ship, reading Biblical passages and reaffirming the humans' commitment to peace. The heat rays make short work of the pastor, and the army opens fire. The military learns the hard way that it is no match for the aliens' heat rays and blasters. Major General Mann later laments, "Guns, tanks, bombs—they're like toys against them."

As Forrester and his surviving allies take cover, two Martian ships lay waste to Los Angeles. Sporadic reports carry similar news from elsewhere on the planet. Roughly two-thirds of the way through the film, and with its cities in ruins, the United States finally opts to play its nuclear trump card. Unfortunately, the Martians' defenses prove superior to the atomic bomb's destructive force. But at the last possible moment, with humankind facing almost certain extinction, the hand of God (much is made in the film of faith in organized religion) intervenes. The Martians eventually succumb in the film, as they do in Wells' original story, to the common cold, against which they have no natural immunities.

Like *The Thing*, *War* works from the assumption that the Other is aggressive—in both cases, the aliens draw first blood—and that efforts to maintain an equilibrium or status quo between the two sides will inevitably fail. When General Mann's troops surround the spacecraft, their containment efforts fail miserably. Likewise, Collins' effort to solve the conflict through diplomacy results only in his cold-blooded murder. The film makes painfully clear that overwhelming force and total commitment provide the only viable solution, with, of course, a supporting hand from above.

If conservatives found early 1950s science fiction conducive to expressing their views, Fred F. Sears' 1956 *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* might well have served as the centerpiece of Eisenhower's re-election campaign. *Earth* opens with protagonists Dr. Russell Marvin (Hugh Marlowe) and his newlywed wife Carol (Joan Taylor) driving through a military

rocket testing area. Suddenly, a UFO buzzes their car, then abruptly disappears. Upon arriving at the base, Marvin finds the military brass somewhat skeptical of his report, but hard evidence soon follows. The strange craft lands unexpectedly the following day and, to Marvin's dismay, army sharpshooters immediately fire upon and kill several aliens that emerge. Payback is swift and sure. UFOs subsequently destroy the entire complex. The Marvins manage to survive the alien onslaught and, as they escape the wreckage, Russell discovers evidence that the UFOs have been trying to contact him. He now pleads with the military to allow a meeting. Indeed, he suspects that the aliens' role in downing unmanned satellites aside, they may have come in peace.

Marvin grows impatient at the military's stalling and contrives to meet the aliens with or without permission from his superiors. His actions lead to the capture of himself, Carol, and several members of their military escort. Once onboard the UFO, Marvin learns the terrible truth—the aliens have not come seeking peace. Survivors of a doomed world, the aliens send Marvin and his friends back to earth with an ultimatum. Should the people of earth fail to turn the planet and its resources over to them in fifty-nine days, the alien UFO fleet will lay waste to human civilization. The remainder of the movie follows Marvin's desperate efforts to create a sonic ray capable of downing the alien ships. The professor succeeds, but not before a series of climactic battles in which the UFOs attack the world's capitals Washington, Paris, London, and Moscow. Highlighting the threat to the United States, director Sears devotes considerable screen time to the attacks on various government buildings and memorials in Washington, DC. Utilizing the talents of special effects master Ray Harryhausen, Sears treats viewers to images of UFOs firing upon the Capitol, the White House, and the Washington Monument. At last, though, the combination of Marvin's sonic ray and old-fashioned military hardware bring the battle to an end, and the Earth, for the moment, is saved.

Earth's debut in the midst of the space race (the Soviets would launch Sputnik the following year) spoke loudly to popular Cold War anxieties. The aliens' destruction of U.S. rockets and satellites served as steady reminders of America's failures and of their potential cost should the Soviets reach space first—the vividly depicted attacks on Washington landmarks (and the iconographic symbols of the U.S. government) left little doubt as to the stakes for which both sides played. In the era of "duck and cover," the film's climactic assault on the nation's capital proved all too possible a scenario. The space race context notwithstanding, *Earth* already had mined another familiar Cold War lode. While the Thing and the Martians in *Invaders* simply attack first and without provocation, Sears' aliens use diplomatic overtures to mask their true intentions. Russell, standing in for liberals and the gullible containment crowd, takes the bait and learns belatedly that the military was right in its shoot first strategy. His naïveté nearly costs the human race its existence. Speaking for the liberation lobby, one general cracks, "When an armed and threatening power lands uninvited in our capitol, we don't meet him with tea and cookies!" Exactly forty years later, the same scenario would be spoofed by director Tim Burton in his 1996 film *Mars Attacks!*, which, though ostensibly based on a series of bubble gum cards, lifts much of *Earth*'s plot line and iconography.

At a time when political ideologues and Hollywood scriptwriters alike stressed stark black and white depictions of us versus them, Robert Wise's 1951 *The Day the Earth Stood Still* brought a hefty dose of balance to Americans' politico-cultural dialogue. The story features all the usual 1950s suspects—soldiers, scientists, politicians, and a young boy. A UFO lands in Washington and the military rushes to the scene. When the alien visitor Klaatu (Michael Rennie) announces, "We have come to visit you in peace—and with good will," a jumpy soldier shoots him down. Immediately, a large robot, Gort (Lock Martin),

appears and begins to melt the soldiers' rifles and tanks with a heat ray. In a sharp departure from the aliens' behavior in *Earth*, Klaatu eschews retaliation, ordering Gort to stop. A medical ambulance arrives and whisks the wounded alien to Walter Reed Hospital.

From the moment he arrives at the hospital, Klaatu begins requesting a meeting with the president. What he gets is a meeting with the president's advisor, Harley (Frank Conroy), who inquires as to the purpose of the alien's visit. Klaatu announces that he comes with a message that he must deliver to all of earth's leaders. Nonplussed, Harley explains that such a meeting is completely "without precedent". Besides, he goes on, "I'm sure you recognize . . . the evil forces that have produced the tension in our world." Klaatu responds, "I am not concerned with the internal affairs of your planet . . . My mission here is not to solve your petty squabbles." Having said his piece, Klaatu brusquely ends the conversation with a final demand to meet with all of earth's leaders.

Shortly thereafter, Harley returns with a sheaf of papers. "Not very good news," he tells Klaatu. The president called the meeting that Klaatu requested but the Soviet premier insisted that they hold the gathering in Moscow. The British, as do the Americans apparently, refuse to attend any meeting held in Moscow. "Surely," Harley explains, "you realize my government has done everything in its power . . . " Klaatu replies, "It's not your government I'm thinking about. It's the world." Harley offers to arrange a personal meeting with the president but Klaatu responds, "I will not speak to any one nation or group of nations. I don't intend to add my contribution to your childish jealousies and suspicions."

Determined to learn more about the earth people, Klaatu escapes the hospital and, passing for human, moves into a boarding house where he meets Bobby Benson (Billy Gray) and his mother Helen (Patricia Neal). Klaatu befriends Bobby, who takes him on a tour of Washington. After visiting the Lincoln Memorial, he asks Bobby who might now be the wisest man in America. Bobby responds that the smartest would have to be Professor Barnhardt (Sam Jaffe). When Klaatu manages to meet the professor and convince him that he is in fact the alien for whom the nationwide manhunt continues to search, Barnhardt demands to know why Klaatu has come to earth. "We know from scientific observation," Klaatu explains, "that you have discovered a rudimentary form of atomic energy . . . [and] . . . that you are experimenting with rockets." He continues, "We've observed your aggressive tendencies, and we don't trust you with such power." Barnhardt agrees to set up a meeting between Klaatu and members of the scientific community, but holds out little hope of a congregation involving national leaders.

Convinced that the only way to get earth's leaders to set aside their differences and hear him out, Klaatu stages the ultimate show of strength. Sneaking back onboard his spacecraft, he neutralizes all forms of energy around the world. Cars stall, lights go out, elevators stop between floors, trains come to a halt. Only hospitals and aircraft in flight remain unaffected. Thirty minutes later, everything resumes functioning normally. Klaatu's message is loud and clear—for all their vaunted military prowess, earth's nations scarcely hold the proverbial candle to his own capabilities.

The army plans an offensive against Gort even as they receive word that Professor Barnhardt is harboring Klaatu. Narrowly escaping capture, Klaatu and Helen race back to his spacecraft. As they near the craft, an army marksman drops Klaatu with a single shot. Before collapsing, Klaatu gives Helen a message to convey to Gort, which, even as they speak, is breaking free of the Americans' latest containment device. The authorities take Klaatu's corpse away, but Gort breaks into the police station where it is being held and steals Klaatu's body, then returns to the spacecraft. While Helen watches, Gort restores Klaatu to life. Meanwhile, Professor Barnhardt, still awaiting Klaatu's arrival, learns that the Army will not permit his meeting to take place. As the scientists prepare to leave, word

arrives that Gort and Klaatu are back at their ship. Crowds of soldiers, politicians, foreign delegates, scientists, and passers-by surround the alien vessel. "There must be security for all," Klaatu says to the crowd, "or no one is secure." "This does not mean," he goes on, "giving up any freedom except the freedom to act irresponsibly." "Your choice," Klaatu concludes, "is simple. Join us and live in peace. Or pursue your present course—and face obliteration." In the film's memorable final shot, Klaatu and Gort enter their ship and depart for the stars as quickly as they arrived, vanishing in the distant heavens.

From the opening sequence, Wise attempts something that none of his directorial counterparts seem to have considered—he depicts the alien Klaatu as an intelligent and sympathetic character. Rather than an "us versus them" scenario depicted from our perspective, *Day* provides an outsider's insights into the conflicts between "us" and "them." The Cold War and, more importantly, the accompanying nuclear arms race, by Klaatu's reckoning, will lead only to total destruction. The fault, moreover, will lie with both sides. Klaatu's remarks about petty squabbles and irresponsible actions are in much the same vein as Adlai Stevenson's critique of liberation policy. In depicting both sides as equally capable of irrationality, Wise paves the way for films like Sidney Lumet's *Failsafe* and Stanley Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love The Bomb* (both 1964) more than a decade later.

Day also proves unique inasmuch as it offers no utopian panacea. Klaatu's overriding concern is to force the U.S. and Soviet Union away from the brink of nuclear conflict, nothing more. Should they do so, both nations appear free to continue their ideological struggles through diplomatic means. Over time, democracies might replace the communist regimes of Eastern Europe and Asia. Or not. In short, *Day*, more than any other film from this period embodies the essence of American containment policy. Winner of the 1952 Golden Globe Award for best film promoting international understanding, *Day* made a powerful statement. American audiences on the whole may have favored the conservatives' Cold War policies (as evidenced by the Republicans' electoral successes in 1950 and 1952), but the film's box office and critical success was a reminder that no consensus existed and that, for the most part, containment was here to stay.

The final film under consideration, Fred M. Wilcox's 1956 *Forbidden Planet*, likely struck the greatest chord with audience members inclined toward the even more liberal policy of disengagement. Similar to America's so-called isolation policy of the 1920s and 1930s, disengagement advocated a multilateral (i.e. U.S. and Soviet) withdrawal from Europe and Asia, and a cooling off period. While disengagement was the least well developed or formulated Cold War option, and arguably had the fewest supporters, one point on which most of its advocates agreed was that U.S. involvement risked making the situation overseas worse rather than better. *Forbidden Planet* speaks precisely to such concerns.

The story follows the United Planets Cruiser C-57D and the crew of Commander John Adams (Leslie Nielsen) as they seek to discover what became of a scientific colony on Altair-4. Upon landing, they find only two members of the original colony—Dr. Edward Morbius (Walter Pidgeon) and his daughter Altaira (Anne Francis). Never having met any males other than her father, Altaira flirts innocently with Adams and his crewmembers, all of who eagerly hope to further her education of human behavior. Altaira, though, reserves her strongest affection for Adams, with immediate and disastrous consequences.

Their first night on the planet, some "thing" destroys the C-57D's sophisticated communications equipment. Morbius' odd behavior the following morning convinces Adams that he is somehow involved. In an attempt to explain what has happened, Morbius leads Adams and two of his officers on a tour of long abandoned laboratories that once belonged

to the alien Krell. The mystery surrounding Altair-4 deepens when Morbius explains that no one knows what became of the Krell, though their miracle machines have doubled his own IQ and enabled him to transform the planet into a veritable Eden.

Determined to delve more deeply into the matter, Adams decides to remain on the planet. That night something attacks the ship and kills a soldier standing guard. Again, no one sees anything, though they find physical evidence—giant claw marks—at the scene of the attack. Adams subsequently orders the construction of a force field around the ship. As his men go to work, the captain turns his attention back to Altaira. The relationship between them intensifies, as does the accompanying jealousy of the men under Adams' command. The nightly attacks against the ship continue, with the creature finally breaching the force field. Numerous crew members suffer a hideous death before Adams and the survivors make it back to Morbius' chambers. Even there, they are not safe. At this point, one of the ship's officers, "Doc" Ostrow, (Warren Stevens) solves the mystery. The "thing" is a "creature from the Id", a product of Morbius' desire to remain as sole ruler of his inherited domain, as facilitated by the amplification power of the Krell's machinery. Morbius' realization of the truth leads him to sacrifice his own life to ensure that Altaira and the crew flee the planet. The film's lesson is clear—great power demands great responsibility, perhaps more than any man can provide.

Morbius is no villain; his creativity and love of literature and languages have literally transformed Altair-4 into an Eden-like retreat where he may pursue his studies. Indeed, his one desire is to preserve the solitude that brings him such joy. Still, Morbius' best intentions result in disaster due, to his ill-advised access to the advanced Krell technology. *Planet* suggests that Adams and his men would fare no better were they in possession of the Krell machinery. Director Wilcox takes great pains to depict the crew's more base instincts. Lust and jealousy abound in the presence of Altaira. Nowhere is this truer than in the onscreen rivalry between Adams and his two chief officers, Lieutenant Farman (Jack Kelly) and Chief Engineer Quinn (Richard Anderson). In staging the attacks against the ship after scenes involving Adams and Altaira, Wilcox cleverly (and repeatedly) suggests a link between the officers' jealousy and the Id creature.

Cold War analysts might read the film several ways. The first and most obvious would be as a repudiation of the arms race—in short, equating the dangers of possessing nuclear weapons with those of the Krell technology. The second, and perhaps more interesting reading, would be as evidence that the international tensions to which we were responding were in part our own making—exactly what the disengagement advocates believed. Unlike most of the films discussed in this essay, with the exception of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Planet* was a generously budgeted science-fiction film, and MGM's first foray into the genre. Accordingly, the production values, like those in *Day*, were quite high—the Academy in 1957 nominated the picture for an award in special effects. Moreover *Planet*, like *Day*, enjoyed both critical and box office success.

Given the aforementioned analyses, we might draw several conclusions with respect to U.S. politics, 1950s science fiction, and Hollywood. First, the decade as a whole did possess a conservative bias. The Republican Party scored heavily in the national elections of 1952, securing the presidency and both houses of the legislature, with its emphasis on Cold War national security. Hyping the threat of domestic subversion and stressing the liberation of communist controlled Europe and Asia, Republicans successfully cast Democrats as weak on national security issues. From charges of White House collusion with communists during the Roosevelt and Truman administrations to claims that Democratic containment efforts had "lost" China and Czechoslovakia, Republican candidates capitalized repeatedly on widespread popular anxieties.

Science fiction offerings similarly recognized and cashed in upon Americans' fears. As noted earlier, four of the five film releases dealing with internal subversion depicted the presence of aliens in our society as a veritable fifth column aimed at destroying the foundations of American life. Only one picture, *It Came From Outer Space*, suggested that the presence of aliens might be benign or neutral. In addition, science fiction typically depicted first contacts with alien civilizations as hostile encounters. Aliens repeatedly attack humans without provocation and submit only to superior force. Seven of the aforementioned nine alien encounter films took this stance. Only *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *Forbidden Planet* suggested otherwise.

In addition, evidence exists to support the notion that studio executives, reeling from the ongoing HUAC charges and investigations, consciously went out of their way to make more conservative, politically "right" films. Daniel J. Leab, for example, contends that while studio executives feared that overtly political films might not sell, they consciously undertook their production as both a means of distancing themselves from the HUAC charges and, in many cases, out of their own strong conservative political convictions.[8] Characterizing the film industry as overwhelmingly conservative, though, would be an overstatement. Teresa Alves, for instance, argues that in assessing the 1950s, "Beat" literature, contemporary pop music, and films about rebels, rock n' roll, and teenage gangs hardly characterized a conservative entertainment industry.[9] The success of *It Came From Outer Space*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and *Forbidden Planet* to some extent corroborates Alves' thesis. *It* and *Day* both won Golden Globe Awards in addition to performing well at the box office. *Planet*, as mentioned above, received an Oscar nomination for Best Special Effects. Of all the other films discussed, only *War of the Worlds* captured similar honors, winning an Oscar for Best Special Effects and being nominated for two others. The Academy, at least, exemplified no obvious conservative Cold War consensus.

Hollywood's science-fiction output in the 1950s reflected the tensions, conflicts, and debates playing out in the broader American political landscape. Just as Republicans proved ascendant in the beginning of the decade, so too did studios increase production of films justifying the agenda that both McCarthyists and liberation advocates laid out. The political opposition, though, did not disappear—it continued to wage its battles onscreen and off (in 1954 Democrats won back narrow majorities in the Senate and the House, though Republicans continued to hold the presidency), eventually eclipsing its opponents in the 1960s with the appearance of the aforementioned films *Failsafe*, *Doctor Strangelove*, as well as Franklin J. Schaffner's *Planet of the Apes* (1968) and Boris Sagal's *The Omega Man* (1971), all of which suggested that the path that liberation advocates followed would end in the human race's destruction. Indeed, as Jonathan Kirshner argues, by the early 1960s, it had become popular and common for filmmakers to actively lampoon the assumptions underlying the previous decade's canon.[10] And yet the films discussed here remain a vital part of 1950s culture, accurately assessing the fears and desires of Cold War America, even as they sought to entertain and offer escapism, of a sort, to anxious and often politically ambivalent audiences.

Notes

1. Brian Neve, for example, cites the production and release of at least 42 anti-communist films between 1951 and 1953 alone. See Neve, *Film and Politics in America: A Social Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 187. See also Linda K. Fuller, "The Ideology of the 'Red Scare' Movement: McCarthyism in the Movies," in Paul Loukides and Linda K. Fuller,

eds., *Beyond the Stars,* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1990), 229–248.

2. See Peter Nicholls' entry for "Politics", in John Clute and Peter Nicholls, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, (New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin), 1995.
3. See Roger A. Berger, " 'Ask What You Can Do for Your Country': The Film Version of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* and the Cold War," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 17.3 (1989): 177–187; Peter Biskind, "Pods, Blobs, and Ideology in American Films of the Fifties," in Georg Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin, eds., *Shadows of the Magic Lamp: Fantasy and Science Fiction in Film* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 58–72; James B. Gilbert, "Wars of the Worlds," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 10.2 (1976): 326–336; Cyndy Hendershot, *Paranoia, the Bomb, and 1950s Science Fiction Films* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999); and Patrick Lucanio, *Them or Us: Archetypal Interpretations of Fifties Alien Invasion Films* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).
4. When the Chinese Communists took control of China in 1949, Republican legislators charged Democrats with having "lost" China. Senator Joseph McCarthy quickly charged that the "loss" had resulted from communist infiltration of the U.S. State Department. The now-famous senator went on to accuse the Truman administration and even the Army of harboring communist sympathizers and subversives. See David Caute, *The Great Fear* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 562–567.
5. "*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*," <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0049366/>. 16 August 2005.
6. John Foster Dulles, "A Policy of Boldness," reprinted in Hugh Ross, *The Cold War: Containment and its Critics* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1963), 22–24.
7. Adlai Stevenson, "Labor Day Speech," reprinted in Hugh Ross, *The Cold War: Containment and its Critics* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1963), 27–28.
8. See Daniel J. Leab, "How Red Was My Valley: Hollywood, the Cold War Film, and *I Married a Communist*," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 19.1 (January, 1984): 59–88.
9. See Teresa Alves, " 'Some Enchanted Evening': Tuning in the Amazing Fifties, Switching Off The Elusive Decade," *American Studies International* 39.3 (2001): 25–40.
10. See Kirshner, "Subverting The Cold War In The 1960s: *Dr. Strangelove*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, And *The Planet Of The Apes*," *Film & History* 31.2 (2001): 40–44.