Bryn Loftness – The Day the Earth Stood Still Worksheet

Side Notes: Question 4 and Question 6 is answered throughout the other answers. Unless otherwise noted all quotes are taken directly from the manuscript of “The Day the Earth Stood Still” written in 1951.

1.

Within the film, The Day the Earth Stood Still, there are several representations of a wide variety of social/cultural/political or otherwise institutions- their representations each related back to the general overall uneasy, unclear, and sometimes conflicting climate of 1950s society. One of the institutions that was notably referenced, and largely included was the scientific community, with the inclusion of an Albert Einstein-esk leading character, Dr. Barnhardt, “the smartest man on Earth,” as quoted in the film. The scientific community will be discussed further later on.

Another notable group was the media – specifically newspapers, television, and radio platforms. The movie opens with panic- news anchors making early vague reports of an unidentified flying object going at alarming rates. The movie flashes in and out on various groups of people from places all over the world, tuned in hearing this information as it unfolds. The radio broadcasters are represented as the first and primary line of communication and urgency for the situation. The media coverage is what guides the unfolding of the landing for the viewer of the film. It’s as if you are experiencing it as the world is seeing and experiencing it. In the manuscript “4th Radio Reporter,” as scripted in the manuscript reads “with deliberately controlled calm,” “Here at the nation’s capital, there is anxiety and concern, but no outward sign of panic. As a matter of fact, there are signs of normalcy that seem strangely out of place…” This quote can have multiple interpretations. It could be seen casually, as though the reporter is simply referring to the earliness of events and how we haven’t had the opportunity to see a response or repercussions yet. Or it could be seen as a deliberate referral to the quietness and forced calmness of the government in the wake of this cataclysm, and more broadly speaking, other crisis striking in 1950s reality. The ‘hush-hush’ atmosphere of politics, government, and social dynamics is a key component of 1950s society, it’s referred to in the script as “subdued urgency.”

The next institution would be of course, the military and government. They play a key role in every stage of the movie. The military is represented as cautious- they act a lot like chickens with their heads cut off as well as their hands tied behind their back, if chickens had hands. When Klaatu met with the Secretary of the President and asked to meet with representatives from all the nations, the secretary immediately came up with a mouthful of excuses of the absence of a precedent, awkwardness, the practical considerations, the time involved, and the enormous distances. The immediate disregard of the request and the instantaneousness of his refusal to work out the situation demonstrated the political climate of the 1950s. The “it’s not possible so we’re not even going to try” sort of attitude plagued and considerably stunted the possibility of growth of this decade, ie. the Cold War.

2.

The intervention of the scientific community and the military throughout the film revealed a lot of the same conditions that existed in 1950s society. They combination of the scientific and military influence on the public guided what was true and what was false in society for the common man. “This is not another “flying saucer” scare,” reports “2nd Radio Reporter” in the opening of the film, “scientists and military men have already agreed on that. Whatever this is – it’s something real.” This quote taken from the manuscript of the film denotes the validity of scientists and the military, together, as a source of facts and truth. The two guides of “reliability” within the media for the public. This inclusion of the two groups show their interdependence as well as their conflicts. Military, being the strong-arm for political power and authoritative balance, provides a sense of security for the populous, while scientists and the scientific community provide the backbone for intellectual guidance and academic growth. Both groups are viewed as equally necessary but not equally valued. Both are regarded as important and viable, military is seen as the peace-keepers and the instruments of safety, not the scientists. Military officials have the power of the law and weaponry to influence, while the scientific community only has their minds and their academia. Klaatu sees the potential of the scientific community as communicators of his message of peace, without the use of law or force as the military and government does, and chooses to exploit this avenue via Professor Barnhardt.

3.

The films overall view of human nature is very mixed. One example is the expanded, negative, representation of Tom nearing and throughout the climax of the film. Tom has, throughout the film been represented as a gentleman, looking out for Ms. Benson and courting her- a seemingly ordinary and stereotypical man of the time. He, within the manuscript, was casted as a “personable young man with a breezy manner and considerable charm.” Tom’s image was always intimate, and protective around Ms. Benson. Then, when it meant it the most, his true selfish motivations were revealed. Leading up the climax of the film, Ms. Benson pleads to Tom not to reveal Mr. Carpenters true identity as Klaatu. Knowing the true stakes of the situation she exclaims, “You don’t know what you’re doing! This isn’t just you and Mr. Carpenter. The rest of the world is involved!” He responds, exasperated and sharp, “I don’t care about the rest of the world!” It is revealed that all he cares about is being “the big hero,” getting his picture in the papers, and becoming “the biggest man in the country.” This representation is controversial for the viewer. On one hand, Tom is doing the right thing- technically- by following the law and reporting Klaatu. However, since we as the viewer have a more rounded understanding of the situation, we recognize his narrowmindedness and judge him negatively for it. We see him not as a law-abiding citizen but as a power-hungry narcissist.

This negative representation of Tom, doing legally the right thing but in a way, the obvious wrong thing, and the controversy related to this connects back to the uneasy climate of the 1950s. The dichotomy between blind following, and dissent and delinquency clouded the social interactions of the time and therefore made the likely appearance in the film. The Day the Earth Stood Still, in this scene, actually encourages delinquency from the law and truancy to, in a way, the entire planet on the basis of a depicted and presented “right and wrong.” The connotative view of the situation where Klaatu asks Ms. Benson to commit this form of intergalactic betrayal is positive – we, as the audience, want Klaatu to live and Ms. Benson to help him ultimately deliver his message.

This ethical grey-area situation is common within human society and is subtly referenced several times within the film. It also contributes to the movies overall representation of human nature. Generally, it is seen as good and pure, as Ms. Benson is represented, however it is undeniably aggressive, unpredictably, and situational, as Tom is reflected. Our nature is try to do the right thing but that can be clouded by political, legal, social, personal, or cultural entanglements, our ego, and the situation— It is variable, just as humans are.

4. See above side note

5.

The setting, being in Washington, pushes the film to a more political, and governmental focus. It allows for specific opportunities for the film and its characters to draw in historical events and connect them to the overall plot. One example is when Klaatu visits the Arlington cemetery and is able to discuss openly with Bobby the history of human war and the repercussions it can have on the average/ordinary family in America.

6. See above side note

7.

In one of the first scenes of the movie, when Klaatu is meeting with the President’s Secretary, a key quote is said by the government official, “It’s hard to think of another planet as our neighbor.” This quote relates back to the overall theme of the movie that, nevertheless the circumstances, we must attempt to love thy neighbor. In the movie, Klaatu is referencing other planets but in reality, the film is really hitting on the international affairs of the United States during the 1950s, specifically with Russia and the Red Scare. The overall message that Klaatu tries to persuade is that we must attempt to live peacefully with others even if it is difficult, strange, or seemingly impossible- the effort must be made.