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**The Day the Earth Stayed Still:**

**Applying the lessons of Klaatu on Modern America**

In World War2 America raged against the use of concentration camps while the Third Reich continually imprisoned Jews and other minorities to work or die for the purity of the nation. Ironically, America had—itself— imprisoned its own set of foreigners, Japanese nationals, in pursuit of homeland security from enemy espionage. Even the America of the 1940s-1950s is generally known by most people as the time of the Red Scare, where the USSR was caricatured as a pit of socialist vipers, set to poison American culture.

The Day the Earth Stood Still has strong connections to the themes of polarization, racism, and profiling. The 1951 film heavily criticizes the prejudices apparent in our country at the time of the film. Dialogue, lighting, and even casting are all related to this theme within the movie. This idea may not be a new to this medium of entertainment, but when set to a contemporary application, there are shocking realizations about our modern America on comparison to this alternate America.

“In 1994, hardly a time of amicable partisan relations, a majority of Republicans had unfavorable impressions of the Democratic Party, but just 17% had very unfavorable opinions. Similarly, while most Democrats viewed the GOP unfavorably, just 16% had very unfavorable views. Since then, highly negative views have more than doubled: 43% of Republicans and 38% of Democrats now view the opposite party in strongly negative terms.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

This quote from a Pew Research article is just one of many graphed and measured values which illustrate America’s political landscapes as fractured and distant. In such a time, people began to blame politicians for their slow pace and ineffectiveness compared to the previous administration. This example was most poignantly made by Mr. Barly (John Brown) commenting “They’re not people, they’re Democrats”[[2]](#footnote-2) in response to the Truman administration’s inability to capture Klaatu. This active omission of political separatism also jabs the Republican Party for its abrasive associations towards other political parties, especially the Democrats. The theme of rational thinking and reason overcoming self-destructive behaviors is the core message Klaatu (Michael Rennie) conveys in the 1951 version of The Day the Earth Stood Still. For all intents and purposes, the addition the of dialogue is used to reflect something wrong with the government of 1951. It’s somewhat prophetic that 63 years later we are facing similar distresses on Capitol Hill, and we have the numbers to prove it. Personified as an insurance salesman, the film’s very own “Judas Iscariot, Tom Steven”2 sells Klaatu out to the government, and risks the fate of the world for a reward. Even though he is clearly told the consequences of his actions he, “[doesn’t] care about the rest of the world.”2 Tom is our personal antagonist among the main characters as he acts like an amicable American, but will quickly turn hostile and reserved in paranoia. Both Barly and Stevens are signposts to the theme of political polarization.

Today, America is more polarized than ever, and the “childish concerns” that affect the U.S. both internally and externally are shown to be overgrown today. While TDTESS is not any prediction of the future, it is true that the intent of the director was to include political commentary to convey that one’s acumen should not be reserved to irresponsibly ignorant dogma. This cautionary tale applies to all the world and not specifically America. However, the movie points out that if the United States wishes to present itself as a beacon of rationality (through Professor Jacob Barnhardt played by Sam Jaffe), it needs to sweep away the ashes of old animosities. Today, polarization is not only separated into terms of politics, but also the growing wealth inequality in our nation. The 99% rallies were the first of many outcries for attention to the continually growing issue of inappropriately apportioned wealth to a small group of individuals. This issue of poverty is not addressed as much as theme for the pursuit of reason, but when the young Bobby tries to take advantage of Carpenter (Klaatu) by trading a couple dollars for diamonds, it is the first and only scene where Bobby is unlikeable as a character because he is showing Klaatu the more base nature of greed in humans. Being filmed in black and white is consequentially distinguishing between the two colors, however, special effects draw eerie reminders of racial prejudice.

American theologian Tyron Edwards wrote: “Prejudices are rarely overcome by argument; not being founded in reason they cannot be destroyed by logic.” The film expresses a deep yearning to express reason over the “petty” prejudices of earthlings. However, with cases like the “Michael Brown shooting,” and the “Trayvon Martin shooting,” we were inundated with this surge of racial awareness. Groups gather to protest and plead for justice to these victims of racism. The current climate of 2016 is a haze of hatred and confusion as interpretations of these events are spun out of control by a media circus. But, what does it have to do with TDTESS?

Jittery from the news, the boarders see Klaatu in the dimly lit entrance-way where, “they see only a dark, ominous-looking, back-lit silhouette that immediately links [Klaatu] to the television reports.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The purpose of shadows is to convey some sort of terror or sense of dread in the situation. At the time, invasion films typically demonize their alien characters with such cheap effects so that an association of malevolent intent is established. However, this dark figure that the boarders fear is actually the potential savior of humanity or, in the vein of rebirth, a Christ-like figure. Like Jesus, Klaatu dies at thirty-five and can be reborn, but he is also a herald of doom, so long as humanity carries on with its present course of action. This hysteria is most present by TV commentator Gabriel Heatter as he urges to his viewers that, “the monster must be found. He must be tracked down like a wild animal; he must be destroyed.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

An alien being persecuted by the popular media is a classic trope of 1950s sci-fi, because the defeat of this antagonistic force is a reminder of how we are working together to preserve our way of life… such as it is in the 1951 film. However, Klaatu “come[s] in peace” as a messenger, which is unfortunate that the message is an open threat of annihilation. Despite that, the general public fears Klaatu for the simple fact they have no understanding of him as a being. Misunderstandings start to become apparent, as Bobby states, “He’s got a square head –and, three great big eyes”[[5]](#footnote-5)! Bobby has no clear understanding of this alien visitor, but he still remains a lovable character despite prevailing his incomprehension of the darker notions that surface among the boarders. This idea of racism and its focus as a theme make TDTESS iconic in its representation of humans as the problem and the alien as a solution. This logical thinking seems to have escaped the current generation at this time of national uproar for justice. The real animal is the humans who rely on their base fears to cloud their sound judgment. This movie is a reflection of a society disturbed by inappropriate propaganda and misinformation. And even today these problems remain an issue that humanity faces within itself. However, the catalysts of our demise are not all fully addressed. Racism has taken on a new term called profiling, the practice of targeting individuals based on presumptions and unconfirmed information.

“The casting of Jaffe in the role made Barhardt even more controversial as a character. The anti-communist purges that swept Hollywood in the late 1940s and early 1950s were at their very height, and many actors, directors, and screenwriters had be blacklisted for suspected communist sympathies… Jaffe was among those suspected of having such sympathies, causing the films casting director to ask that he be replaced in the role of Barnhardt for that reason” [[6]](#footnote-6)

Even the actors were a threat to the development of the movie. The 1940s-1950s was known as the time of the Red Scare. HUAC combed and uprooted the lives of normal people for the same reason we imprisoned the Japanese in internment camps during the World War 2.In the film, Cold War paranoia took hold in the American mind and laid roots. Men like Professor Barnhardt and Klaatu are great, but they are generally isolated and ostracized because they are far too incomprehensible as figures. The inability for people to conceptualize these individuals is what leads to false assumptions. This film is revealing of, “the profound alienation of man in our ridiculous society”[[7]](#footnote-7) by examining the relationship that Barnhardt and Klaatu share with the rest of the world. What does it have to do with today?

Although America has made great strides in curbing our severe racism, it has a long way to go before we can consider our nation tolerant. In the wake of 9/11 America has become more fearful of terrorist. It has come to such a level of disturbing profiling that even regular people are profiled on their style of dress, their religion, and especially their national identity. This is odd because Klaatu adopts the innocuous figure of Michael Rennie as “Carpenter.” However, Klaatu is still consistently profiled by Bobby, the military, and especially Tom Stevens. Persecution of any group is a very big theme in this film, but the misunderstanding of it all is what drives the plot forward, and rational thought backwards. “And the threat of aggression by any group, anywhere, can no longer be tolerated. There must be security for all or no one is secure.”7 The American culture is founded by the phrase, “All men are created equal.” However, the apparent disparities that infest our nation are made clear from our excessive TSA measures, to the IRS profiling Republicans. Klaatu’s warning are becoming more and more relevant to this growing awareness that there is something wrong with our country, and more importantly humanity.

Since this film, has America become more rational? While America has seen civil rights, gay rights, and women’s equality improve, there is much more needed to be done. We no longer openly segregate blacks and minorities, but we still profile them for police searches, zone them off to specific school districts, and mark them as parasites of our benevolent country. Tensions to Russia’s aggressive campaign in Ukraine have produced sanctions and denouncements; a resurrected shade of the USSR which terrified the citizens of TDTESS. Our Homeland security, while effective, now targets individuals of Arabic descent and Islamic faith as potential enemies of the US. The shootings of unarmed black children have sparked protests across the world because there was never any real closure, just a media menagerie. It is the same as the film. Klaatu leaves with his warning to all of humanity which leaves the story without closure and without any definite answer if the human race can really separate itself from more basic functions. Historical events preceding the film would suggest that Klaatu is eventually right about humans being aggressive and self-destructive creatures.

However, the idea that humans are in a perpetual decline is a vision promoted by today’s massive media presence. It is hard to think the world is a place of rational individuals when a deluge of demonizing documents about the racial injustice of America or the brutal killings in the Islamic State. Even in the film the media bandwagons on the presumption that our alien visitor is missing on Earth for nefarious reasons, none of these being true, simply because he has information that he cannot disclose but only to a group of logical people. Facing both polarized politicians and supporters, aggressive reactions from the misinformed (or misguided), he is profiled as a “monster”: Klaatu dies and is reborn just to leave the Earth with a clear warning and statement that all of humanity depends on our constant pursuit against “aggressive behavior” and towards “more profitable enterprises.” We are left to ask whether we can grow beyond our baseness. On that subject we return to Jaffe’s situation with being a blacklisted actor but he was “Backed by Zanuck, producer Blaustein insisted on keeping Jaffe in the role, though it would be his last appearance in American film for seven years.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Everything about TDTESS has a hand in being commentary for mirroring the irrational nature of man in the manifestation of a mass hysteria over a foreign and unknown force. The fact that the National Guard shot Klaatu first was the first of many misinterpreted actions fueled by baseless accusations.

Can it be fixed, and can human be civilized enough to exist in a universe as beings of rational thought? Like the issue with Jaffe’s possible exclusion from the film, it is hard to tell how the changes went. We may succeed to continue progressing, but human fear will influence us, so long as we are left unchecked with our free will. The irony of being free from all illogical thought is that we must sacrifice our willingness to be creatures of aggression. Despite the good intentions of mankind, the hard truth is that man is still an animal of basic emotional and physical drives that has temporarily tamed itself to live in our modern world.

Klaatu has warned us of our regressive tendencies. He has left the Earth and at the end of the film we are left to question the logic of our decisions and temper our reactions. Today, Klaatu may be more right than ever about the world’s current situation, we may be in a freefall of hatred and ignorance which will inevitably destroy us. Continuing boughts of polarization in United States politics, racism in Missouri, and profiling on the streets are what has exacerbated the American fervor for change.

1. "Political Polarization in the American Public." *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press RSS*. Pew Research, 12 June 2014. Web. 08 Dec. 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Booker, M. Keith. *Alternate Americas: Science Fiction Film and American Culture* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Lucanio, Patrick. *Them or Us: Archetypal Intrepetations of Fifties Alien Invasion Films*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Booker, M. Keith. *Alternate Americas: Science Fiction Film and American Culture*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sardar, Ziauddin, and Sean Cubitt. *Aliens R Us: The Other in Science Fiction Cinema*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Booker, M. Keith. *Alternate Americas: Science Fiction Film and American Culture* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Johnson, William. *Focus on the Science Fiction Film*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Booker, M. Keith. *Alternate Americas: Science Fiction Film and American Culture*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)