Apocalypse Then: Benefits of the Bomb in Fifties Science Fiction Films

by Robert Torry

To be at all familiar with science fiction cinema is to observe how commonly the genre rehearses traditional religious themes and motifs.[1] One thinks immediately of the theological implications of the mysterious, omnipotent alien presence as the agent of human evolution in *2001: A Space Odyssey* and its sequel, *2010;* of the Christ-like attributes of E.T. and of the alien visitor in *Starman;* of the godlike, benevolent aliens of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *Cocoon,* and even the vaguely Eastern religiosity reflected in the centrality of "The Force" in the *Star Wars* cycle.

Such religious resonances are not, of course, confined to relatively recent films. As has often been noted, the invasion/catastrophe narratives of the fifties quite often employed what is perhaps the most common religious motif in science fiction film: that of apocalypse. The prevalence of this motif in films of the period is hardly surprising. Following the demonstrations in 1944 of the devastating potential of atomic weaponry and the augmentation of international tension produced by Soviet nuclear testing, science fiction films quite often deplored the world threatening capacities unleashed by modern science. In *Them* (1954), rampaging, monstrous ants, the result of mutations caused by atomic testing, threaten human civilization.[2] In *Forbidden Planet* (1956), advanced technology, prematurely wedded to the human mind still enmeshed in primitive, unconscious impulses and aggressions, leads to the destruction of an entire world.[3] One could, of course cite numerous other examples of this tendency, but I wish to direct attention to other films, those that seek in the apocalyptic climate of the period the possibility of an ultimately beneficent outcome.

My purpose here is to contextualize and explore the historically specific apocalyptic visions in three films from the early fifties: *When Worlds Collide, The Day the Earth Stood Still,* and *War of the Worlds.* The importance of these films in particular derives from their historical moment. Each is the product of the period in which the hydrogen bomb was developed and tested, and each in its way discovers in the specter of apocalyptic imminence evoked by nuclear weaponry an opportunity for the accomplishment of the American millennial promise fundamental to our national mythology.

Susan Sontag's influential essay, "The Imagination of Disaster," noted in the

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mid-sixties that fifties science fiction films entail the quickening of terminal expectations in the post-Nagasaki and Hiroshima era. For Sontag, the most disturbing feature of typical examples of the genre lay in their inability or unwillingness to construct a rational, useful response to the apocalyptic possibilities they represented: "What I am suggesting is that the imagery of disaster in science fiction is above all the emblem of an *inadequate response*. . . . [Such films] are . . . a sampling, stripped of sophistication, of the inadequacy of most people's response to the inassimilable terrors that infect their consciousness. The interest of such films . . . consists in this intersection between a naive and largely debased commercial art product and the most profound dilemmas of the contemporary situation."[4]

Sontag condemns in such films the "hunger for a 'good war,' which poses no moral problems, admits of no moral qualifications," and she adduces as a more positive example of the apocalyptic imagination the "radical disaffiliation from society" of the seventeenth-century followers of Sabbatai Zevi, whose energetic withdrawal from what they perceived as terminal circumstances she contrasts with the passivity of the Berliners, who in 1945 calmly awaited their destruction at Hitler's command.[5] Yet in her condemnation of such alleged passivity and such depictions of morally unproblematic warfare, Sontag does not note the extent to which, in some films, imagined combat provides more than a mere guiltless outlet for audience blood lust. She fails to discern the extent to which warfare, symbolic, actual, and threatened, is typically linked in such films to a far from passive employment of the traditional expectations associated with Judeo-Christian apocalypse. In such films we often discover an element of almost impatient desire for what such apocalypticism has always imagined: the benefits to be obtained by massive destruction.

In *When Worlds Collide* (1951) the devastation of the earth by a runaway star, as a handful of Americans escape to build a new civilization on its satellite planet Zyra, forms the basis of a disturbing imagining of the benefits of apocalypse. If the pristine landscape of the planet Zyra greeting the survivors as they open their ship's airlock recalls the "new heaven and new earth" of Revelation 21, such a representation of the New World inhabited by American families in absolute safety from further threat recommends the longing for apocalyptic delivery saturating that text: "The spirit and the bride say, 'come.' And let him who hears say 'come' " (Rev. 22.17). The film's opening credit sequence features an ornate, lightning illuminated Bible opening to Genesis 6.11, and the parallel between Noah's enterprise and that of the small band of chosen preparing to flee the destruction of the earth is continually reinforced throughout the film, both in dialogue and in shots like the one in which the camera tracks slowly past pens of animals, two of each, who will accompany the survivors to Zyra. It is important to note, though, that *When Worlds Collide* reflects a crucial typological understanding of this dominant motif. The bypass of Zyra, the initial catastrophe in the two part drama of earth's destruction, causes devastating floods; the subsequent collision of the earth with the invading star destroys all

that remains in a moment of apocalyptic conflagration. Such a two part plan of destruction, by flood and fire, emphasizes the traditional hermeneutic understanding of Noah's salvation as a type of the exemption from destruction to be afforded the elect at the advent of the final apocalypse. The film's depiction of the ascent of the saved, who rise above terrestrial destruction to begin a new life on the paradisal Zyra, recalls the description in *I Thessalonians* of the rising of the elect at the moment of parousia, the antitypical fulfillment of Noah's salvation: "We who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up . . . to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess. 4.17).

It is important, though, to situate the film's vision of *American* election and salvation in a new world within the tradition specified by Sacvan Bercovitch as continuingly central to American national mythology: that of the faith, initially articulated by the Puritans, in America as "the earth's millennial fourth quarter," a nation vouchsafed a privileged destiny as the site of the culmination of a divinely ordained historical narrative.[6] In this context the post-apocalyptic safety of young Americans in an edenic new world invites our identification of Zyra with the American new world, whose millennial significance is celebrated in the founding myth supplied by the Puritans. *When Worlds Collide,* armed with a typological understanding of contemporary apocalyptic imminence, thus recalls for a mass audience in the first years of the anxiety ridden nuclear era the Puritan belief in an ultimate American glorification.

David Ketterer has noted the presence of such a faith in American apocalyptic potential in the 1933 novel from which the film was adapted: "The incredible coincidences on which the narrative hinges and to which it occasionally alludes, indicate, perhaps, that the book's major import is not to be found in the literal details of the plot. What is suggested is in fact a perfect dramatization of a philosophical apocalypse."[7] If, as Ketterer suggests, the novel's depiction of the destruction of the "old world" and salvation for the few in the "new world" functions as an allegory of American ascendancy over an outworn European episteme,[8] the film produces a simpler, less abstract allegorical message, one registered in its alteration of several of the novel's details.

In Wylie's and Balmer's novel, earth becomes the target of a runaway planet, Bronson Alpha, and its habitable satellite Bronson Beta. The film's transformation of a planet into a star, particularly a star named "Bellus," signals its strategic updating in 1951 of a thirties representation of the mechanism of apocalypse. It is war, allegorically represented by Bellus, that approaches the earth in 1951. In a sequence of particularly overt allegorical implication early in the film, Dr. Hendron, its scientist hero, attempts to convince a United Nations Assembly of the inevitability of Bellus's devastating advent. When the international group of experts merely scoffs at him, the United Nations is revealed to be thoroughly incapable of appreciating, to say nothing of acting in response to, the inevitability of global conflagration. Hendron and his handpicked young Americans are left to retrieve from apocalyptic certainty the promise of a threat-free future in the new world.

The film's transformation of an invading planet into an invading star augments the specificity of its allegory. The years 1950-51 saw widespread discussion in the popular press of the scientific, strategic, and moral aspects of President Truman's decision in January 1950 to mandate the development of the hydrogen bomb. The events surrounding this decision, the Soviet atomic bomb test of 1949, and the realization that confessed spy Klaus Fuchs had been in a position to relay to the Soviets information on preliminary H-bomb research, produced among American policy makers a sense of urgency soon to be heightened by the outbreak of hostilities in Korea. In representing the apocalyptic possibility of nuclear war through the image of the onrushing star, Bellus, the film exploits the most common explanatory device employed in popular accounts of hydrogen bomb research. A photograph caption in an article on the bomb printed in a January 1950 edition of *Life* states: "The sun's energy is generated by the same process of nuclear fusion that will supply the power of the hydrogen superbomb." A *Newsweek* article in February of the same year asserts: "The sun, in sober fact, is a kind of hydrogen bomb," and concludes with this sobering prediction: "Scientists are confident that the U.S. will . . . test hydrogen bombs within a year or so. So will the U.S.S.R."[9]

From the moment that Bellus's deadly trajectory is ascertained, the film employs a number of standard devices constantly to reflect an extreme sense of urgency. A newsboy declares the imminent end of the world from a street corner; pages fly from a calendar as a loudspeaker announces the diminishing number of days before Bellus arrives and urges Hendron's team to "hurry, hurry!" This sense of urgency, reflected in the *Newsweek* prediction of a Soviet H-bomb test in the near future, recalls a statement made by Harry Truman upon learning in 1949 that evidence of a Russian A-bomb test had been obtained (an event his advisors had predicted impossible before the mid-fifties). Truman first asked his informants (as Hendron is asked in the film) "Are you sure? Are you *sure?*" He then declared, "This means we have no time left."[10]

The film's constant display of diminishing time traces the progress of two simultaneous processes: that of Bellus's approach and that of the rush of Hendron and his team to complete a complex technological project (the construction of a spaceship) that will offer salvation for a few at the moment of Bellus's arrival. This representation of concurrent processes, properly interrogated, reveals the disturbing, if slightly disguised, apocalyptic fantasy inhabiting the film. On one hand, Hendron's construction of the rocketship suggests, quite simply, the desire for escape from the imminent conflagration mandated by Bellus's rapid approach. On the other hand, in the context of the contemporary rush to complete research upon and test the hydrogen bomb (first U.S. test: November, 1952; first Soviet test: August, 1953), the film's emphatic employment of the same indices of urgency to specify both the approach of the star and the hurried progress of Hendron's technological enterprise begins insistently to conflate the two processes. Ultimately, the film equates star and spaceship, destruction and American deliverance. When the spaceship, finally completed, is launched at the very

moment of Bellus's arrival, *When Worlds Collide,* released in the midst of frenzied American and Soviet research upon the hydrogen bomb, advocates winning the race against time. It locates in the completion and employment of the superweapon the means of securing American salvation in an unavoidable collision between East and West.

The guilt likely to accompany such an imagining of the selective benefits of apocalypse finds in the figure of Dr. Hendron a carefully orchestrated prophylaxis. As the archetypal scientist, a tough-minded realist who discerns the inevitable arrival of Bellus and presides over the construction of a means of survival for the few, Hendron provides the film with a figure in whom to locate and eliminate potential guilt. It is Hendron who designs the means of salvation for those whose age, health, and skills allow their inclusion in the project. Hendron designs the lottery that selects from among these the few who can escape aboard the spacecraft, and in the last minutes of the film, asserting that the new world is for the young, Hendron remains behind to face death.

More importantly, the lottery Hendron conducts to select those to escape in the ship reveals the fantasy of preordained survival supporting the film's disturbing will to apocalypse. The employment of a lottery to select survivors enacts, initially, the sheer contingency operating in warfare. Only chance discriminates between survivors and victims. Yet Hendron significantly intervenes several times in the operation of chance. He exempts from the lottery his daughter and her fiance; and when it becomes clear that she has fallen in love with David Randall the pilot, Hendron exempts him as well.[11] He similarly exempts from the process of chance a young boy rescued from drowning by Randall: the boy is automatically provided space aboard the ship, as is his dog. Finally, when a death frees a space aboard the ship, Hendron again personally selects the person to fill it: he chooses a young woman initially separated from her lover by the lottery.

Hendron's interventions trace the fantasy of a conflict governed by a process superior to that of mere chance, of a war in which a wise, paternalistic science (in league with divine will) can arrange and assume responsibility for an ultimately beneficial apocalypse. These protected young couples, spared even direct experience of the holocaust (they are unconscious when the earth explodes), are as privileged survivors a synecdoche for the young post–World War II American family, which, despite the apparent contingencies of warfare, has been selected for survival. They achieve safety in the (American) new world following the devastation of the old, a security made complete in one final, and finalizing, encounter with Bellus. *When Worlds Collide*'s narrative of bipartite destruction (first the earthquake and floods produced by Zyra, then the culminating advent of Bellus) imagines an apocalyptic history in which the Second World War serves as mere prologue to a terrible but completely decisive and inevitable eventuality, one that, endured, will procure absolute post-apocalyptic security.

The Day the Earth Stood Still seems to be something of an anomaly among the more typical science fiction films of the period. Klaatu, its benevolent and

cultured interplanetary visitor, is a far cry from the murderous vegetable invaders featured in *The Thing* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers;* his purpose is not the destruction of the earth but rather its salvation and preparation for entrance into an enlightened extraterrestrial community. Such apparent singularity has not gone unnoticed. Judith Hess Wright, lamenting what she sees as the obdurate conservatism of the science fiction film, finds that *The Day the Earth Stood Still,* in refusing to "assert the absolute evil of [its alien visitor] escapes the usual political perspective of the genre."[12] Krin Gabbard asserts that "unlike almost all science fiction films of the 50's, [it] . . . takes a stand against the anti-communist hysteria of the McCarthy era."[13]

Doubtless such observations reflect those aspects of the film that do indeed escape the violent ethnocentrism common to the invasion narratives equating otherness with intractable threat. Klaatu, whose benevolent intentions are clear to the film's sympathetic characters—a war-widowed mother and her son, a scientist free from the hysterical fear gripping most of the inhabitants of Washington—has a good deal in common with his descendants in films of the seventies and eighties, with E.T., Starman, and the angelic aliens of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind.* Like these later films, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* exploits the religious resonances of a visit from above by a wise, powerful, and concerned alien intelligence. As has commonly been noted, Klaatu is carefully paralleled with Christ: he descends from above bearing a message of potential salvation for mankind; he is betrayed by an acquaintance, killed by military authorities, and resurrected. He delivers his message to an assembled multitude and reascends into the heavens, leaving those behind either to accept or reject the guidance he has offered.[14]

Yet such an orchestration of parallels serves a more subtle and divided purpose than that discerned by Krin Gabbard, for whom Klaatu/Christ functions to rebuke the exophobic paranoia born of an unreflective nationalism. While we should admit the correctness of Gabbard's assertion that Klaatu's death at the hands of American soldiers depicts the United States as "an armed camp in which police and military authorities have full rein," and that Klaatu's finally delivered message suggests "no sense in which Russia is a greater obstacle to world peace than America,"[15] such atypical attitudes coexist, as we shall see, with other, more disturbing political sentiments.

Patrick Lucanio has recently augmented the discussion of the film's religious implications as figured in the message Klaatu delivers to the audience he finally obtains just prior to his return to the skies. Here is that message:

> The universe grows smaller every day. And threats of aggression by any group anywhere can no longer be tolerated. There must be security for all, or none is secure. This does not mean giving up any freedom, except the freedom to act irresponsibly. Your ancestors knew this when they made laws to govern themselves and hired policemen to enforce them. We of the other planets have long accepted this principle. We have an organization for the mutual protection of all planets and for the complete elimination of all aggression. The test of any such higher

> authority is of course the police force that enforces it. For our policemen we created a race of robots. Their function is to patrol the planets . . . and preserve the peace. In matters of aggression we have given them absolute power over us. This power cannot be revoked. At the first signs of aggression they act automatically against the aggressor. . . . It is no concern of ours how you run your own planet, but if you threaten to extend your violence, this earth of yours will be reduced to a burned-out cinder. Your choice is simple: join us and live in peace or pursue your present course and face obliteration.

Lucanio, in keeping with his Jungian approach to the material, discerns in this message an invitation to spiritual apocalypse through an acceptance of the "more profound level of consciousness" offered mankind by the extraterrestrial "powers and forces" Klaatu represents.[16] Yet such an emphasis upon the supposed novelty of the "level of consciousness" advocated by our extraterrestrial superiors diverts our attention from precisely what is so familiar in the speech in the context of 1951. Delivered just before Klaatu departs, leaving mankind to work out its fate, this message gestures not merely to the entirely human world from which he has departed, but to the extradiegetic world in which he has never existed, one lacking an alien source of wisdom but in which that wisdom, otherwise obtained, exists. Consider for example the resemblance between Klaatu's threat and the leaflets dropped over Japan following the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which read in part: "TO THE JAPANESE PEOPLE: America asks that you take immediate heed of what we say in this leaflet. We are in possession of the most destructive force ever devised by man. . . . We have just begun to use this weapon against your homeland. . . ." The Japanese were warned in the leaflet to cease resistance or face precisely the fate described by Klaatu.[17]

If Klaatu suddenly and mysteriously appears to instruct mankind concerning an imperfect but effective system of maintaining the peace, the policy recommendations put forth by an equally mysterious "X" in the July, 1947 issue of *Foreign Affairs* appeared with similar suddenness and force. Soon revealed to be George Kennan, a career foreign service officer and Soviet specialist, "X" provided in this famous article, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," the basis for a cold war foreign policy. Arguing that Marxist-Leninism functioned for those in power in the USSR much like a religion, a source of "ideological concepts . . . of long-term validity" considered infallible and inevitably triumphant, Kennan advocated abandonment of the "roll back" fantasies entertained by anti-Soviet hardliners in the military and State Department.[18] Instead he suggested a policy based upon the recognition that the United States would "for a long time . . . find the Russians difficult to deal with," one substituting a strategy of containment for the chimerical hope of an immediate reversal of Soviet gains:

> The Kremlin has no compunction about retreating in the face of superior force. . . . Its main concern is to make sure that it has filled every nook and cranny available to it in the basin of world power. But if it finds barriers in its path, it . . . accommodates itself to them. . . .
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> In these circumstances it is clear that the main element in any United States

> policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient, but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.[19]

Adapting containment as its official Soviet policy, the Truman administration practiced what Kennan preached: "the adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constanty shifting geographical and political points."[20] Following the success in Greece, in which communist insurgents were defeated without the direct intervention of American troops, the first major test of containment took place in the Korean conflict.

The autumn and winter of 1950 was a time of deepening crisis in Korea. In the early summer, Seoul had fallen to North Korean troops. American involvement, initially restricted to tactical support for ROK combatants, now included the commitment of American soldiers to combat, and despite the initial optimism this decision produced, the war was going badly indeed. The Americans, poorly equipped and for the most part without combat experience, were no match for the North Koreans, who initially outnumbered them by twenty to one. Reacting to U.S. involvement, China had committed troops to the conflict: on the Friday following Thanksgiving of 1950, thirty-three Chinese divisions entered the war. By Christmas, despite the host of reservations held by President Truman and most U.S. allies except South Korea, the call for the use of atomic weapons to end the conflict had become a major component of American reaction to the worsening situation. In one Montana district, draft officials refused to induct additional young men until Truman had granted General MacArthur atomic weapons and the power to employ them at will. Truman himself suggested in a press conference that he indeed so supply American troops. (Bowing to the anxieties of nervous allies, especially Britain, Truman later denied that he had made such an implication.)[21]

While nuclear weapons were never employed in the Korean conflict, and while MacArthur's desire to do so was a major cause of his loss of command, *The Day the Earth Stood Still,* despite its aura of pacifism, advocates an American will to use nuclear weaponry to meet communist expansion. The film, through its valorization of the method practiced by Klaatu's advanced civilization for the preservation of peace, advocates abandoning containment as practiced by the Truman administration, a policy depending on restricted counterforce applied with conventional weapons. Indeed, it brings to bear the Christ/Klaatu parallel to provide a "transcendental" authority supporting a strategy of totally destructive response to expansionist behavior.

In carefully constructing the parallels between Klaatu and Christ, and in deferring until the final minutes of the narrative Klaatu's delivery of his message to mankind, the film deploys a strategy of arousing, finally to overturn, viewer expectations. Despite his hints at the dire consequences to befall humanity should it refuse to heed his message, Klaatu seems predominantly saintly and pacific throughout most of the film. He refuses any partisan involvement in Earth's politics, insisting that he will speak only to an international assembly. With Bobby at Arlington National Cemetery, he laments the wasteful barbarity

of war that has deprived his young companion of a father. From the point of Klaatu's initial declaration that he has a message of great importance to deliver to mankind, we are invited to imagine a communication in keeping with his apparently saintly character, perhaps a Christ-like admonition to cease our planetary strife and learn to love one another. This, of course, is precisely what Klaatu's message does not provide. Instead there is merely the stark warning that to extend earth's violence beyond its planetary borders will result in total annihilation.

If Klaatu's Christ-like attributes function to augment the force of his warning through a reversal of our expectations, the same strategy informs his revelation of who actually sustains the interplanetary peace accomplished by the advanced civilization he represents. In "Farewell to the Master," Harry Bates's 1940 novella from which *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was adapted, Klaatu, as in the film, is shot upon landing on earth. Unlike the film, though, he is killed, not merely wounded. The robot with which he arrives (in the novella named Gnut) stands for years immobile in a Washington, D.C. museum. By the end of the narrative Gnut has stirred from this immobility and attempted to reconstruct the dead Klaatu from the physical indices encoded in a recording of Klaatu's voice made by newsmen just prior to his murder. Because of imperfections arising from the primitive nature of the recording devices upon which Gnut has to rely, the recreated Klaatu is flawed and soon dies. Before his death, however, Klaatu reveals to the main character, a reporter, that he was never the one in charge. The story ends with these words spoken by Gnut to the reporter: "You misunderstand. I am the master."[22]

The film similarly exploits the shock value of this unexpected reversal of our assumption that the man is the master, the machine the servant. In Klaatu's revelation that in matters of aggression his civilization has irrevocably ceded all authority to robots like Gort, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* propounds a disturbing solution to what it constructs as the human uncertainty and unproductive restraint characterizing the strategy of containment as practiced in the Korean conflict.

It is not at all difficult to see in Gort, as the force capable of reducing to cinders an aggressor, the emblem of nuclear weaponry. In the landing sequence, following a nervous soldier's attack upon Klaatu, Gort easily disintegrates a number of weapons, including a tank. The point is clear: Gort is that technology capable of rendering all conventional weapons obsolete and useless. In Gort's resurrection of Klaatu, the other, peaceful side of the new technology frequently discoursed upon by defenders of nuclear research in the early fifties makes its appearance, but Gort's main function is that of ultimate weapon as "peacekeeper." If Gnut in "Farewell to the Master" stands unmoving yet aware for years before acting to recreate Klaatu, the film adapts this motif from the original text to indicate the utter simplicity of Gort's behavior. While the Truman administration conducted the limited war so despised by MacArthur and his many sympathizers, forbidding incursions beyond the Yalu River and restricting American troops to

the use of conventional weapons, Gort's tactical options avoid such complexity and restraint. He has only two modes: vigilant quiescence and sudden, complete violence. As the government authorities who attempt first to analyze then to restrain Gort discover, he is totally impervious to all attempts at alteration or confinement. When the conditions are right he acts, as Klaatu explains, "automatically."

While it is possible to construe Gort's unalterable programming as representing the fear of Soviet intervention in Korea ending in uncontrollable nuclear holocaust that so dogged the Truman administration, we should note that Gort's reaction to aggression does not entail the possibility of bilateral destruction. Through Gort the film imagines a single, total, and immediate reaction to aggression, one sufficient absolutely to preclude the possibility of military response. *The Day the Earth Stood Still,* another product of the period of rushed hydrogen bomb development, articulates a fantasy similar to that informing *When Worlds Collide.* It envisions, in the context of that precise historical moment (and despite Soviet atomic bomb capacity and hydrogen bomb research), what history did not and would not allow: the recovery of that brief moment of unchallenged American military superiority and thus, theoretically, of an unobstructed American political will announced by the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

During Klaatu's address to the international assembly of scientists convened by Dr. Barnhardt, a series of reverse shots reveals his intent audience. Four of these shots feature a uniformed Russian; one a uniformed Chinese. These are the only members of the assembly to appear in military clothing. Consider the site of Klaatu's landing, the place from which he speaks to these international representatives: Washington, D.C. Viewed with Klaatu's finally delivered message in mind, the film's early montage sequence preceding his landing subtly equates the wisdom and authority of an enlightened civilization's peace keeping policy with its earthly counterpart. The shots constituting the montage catalog American shrines—The Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln Monuments, the White House and the Halls of Congress. This sequence implies a serial logic, a succession completed when Klaatu's ship lands to take up position among these resonant sites. Indeed, while the ship is immediately ringed by American troops, it is also flocked to by hundreds of tourists who gaze at and photograph this latest addition to the official Washington landscape. If Klaatu's account of his civilization's solution to the problem of conflict describes a United Nations-like cooperative organization of planets, his location as he speaks reflects the military reality of America's preeminent role in the U.N.-sponsored police action in Korea. If Klaatu's civilization, like the Truman administration that had abandoned the hope of a "rollback" of Soviet influence, refrains from involvement in the internal practices of its neighbors ("It is no concern of ours how you run your own planet" declares Klaatu), it is, unlike American policy makers, willing to meet the slightest expansionist overture with unrestrained apocalyptic force.

As the discrepancy between the visions of Armageddon and American

ascendancy exhibited in these two films, and the intractable complexities of the cold war maneuvering subsequent to World War II suggest, *When Worlds Collide* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* operate rather obviously as fantasies resistant to the historical realities of the fifties. They exhibit a radical (if perhaps understandable) reaction to the dismaying onset of the cold war immediately following the global struggle of World War II. In advocating an American will to one final expenditure of massive violence, the films substitute an apocalyptic finality left unaccomplished at the end of World War II for the specter of historical uncertainty evoked by communist expansionism.

If such a vision depended upon a timely exploitation of American military superiority, the Soviet A-bomb test of 1949 and the commonly accepted view in the American scientific community that Soviet H-bomb research was progressing rapidly undermined its very basis. Yet as the films themselves attest, disavowal of such painful actualities was in many quarters the order of the day. The most prominent index of such disavowal can be located in the widely disseminated myth of the atomic "secret." As Miriam and Walter Schnier observe, the public denial of any such secret to the production of the A-bomb made by a number of prominent scientists could not eradicate the fantasy, integral to American post–World War II policy, that such a secret did exist and could be protected:

> How long would it be before . . . the Soviet Union could make atomic bombs? In September, 1944, Vanevar Bush and James Conant had estimated the time as three or four years. During the early postwar period, many former Manhattan Project scientists offered similar predictions that were widely publicized and accepted. . . .
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> Nevertheless, the general public, much of the press, and a good deal of the Congress continued to *think* about the bomb as if it were an American secret weapon that could not be made by any other nation . . . for an indeterminately long time. . . .
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> Instrumental in promoting the obsession with secrecy . . . was the widely held wish—contrary to all rational knowledge or understanding—that the United States might retain its atomic monopoly indefinitely. The wish was father to the ostrich-like fantasy that somehow, through absolute secrecy regarding atomic energy, we might prevent other nations from developing atomic bombs. In a period of frightening Cold War tensions, it was a comforting belief.[23]

The espionage dramas of the late forties and early fifties, the Gouzenko case, the arrest in 1947 of two army sergeants charged with delivering American atomic secrets to the Soviets, the inquisition at the hands of the popular press of Truman administration physicist Edward Condon, and so on, a list culminating with the trial and execution of the Rosenbergs, had the effect of firmly fixing in the minds of many Americans the belief in a mythic atomic secret delivered by traitors into the hands of the Soviet menace.

It was, I suggest, precisely this sense of American military superiority unfairly destroyed, this demonizing of history in which an American ascendancy that should have been was suddenly, unexpectedly, displaced by a grotesque

equality between the powers of light and those of darkness, that is addressed in *When Worlds Collide* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still.* Despite the accepted belief that, the "secret" lost, Soviet researchers could and would easily progress into work on the H-bomb, and despite the fact that the desire for mere parity with the Soviets formed the official rationale for U.S. superweapon research,[24] these films seek to recover and enact the apparently betrayed American apocalyptic promise announced by the Puritans and variously maintained in subsequent renditions of national destiny. Indeed, General MacArthur's plan first to assail the People's Republic of China with scores of atomic bombs then to explode scores more along the Yalu in the belief that the resultant radiation would prevent the movement of Chinese troops into Korea betrays a similar dismissal of actual historical circumstances.[25] The Truman administration, mindful of the nuclear capabilities of Soviet Russia, China's ally, rejected MacArthur's strategy as the fantasy it obviously was.

If the American hydrogen bomb test in November 1952 produced a momentary sense of U.S. supremacy in the arms race, the August 1953 Soviet test merely accomplished what most American scientists had long since predicted. A baleful equivalence in Soviet and American military capacity had been rapidly reestablished. *War of the Worlds,* released in 1953, seeks in the context of the imminent certainty of the Soviet test a desperate maintenance of the affirmative apocalyptic vision articulated in the two 1951 films. While the film's depiction (with all the realism available to fifties special effects technicians) of the horrors of modern warfare conducted on American soil reflects the heightening of anxiety occasioned by Soviet weapons research, its purpose is, ultimately, to imagine even in the horrific circumstances of American conflict with a technologically superior enemy an opportunity for beneficial apocalypse.

When the Martian invaders, destroyed by microbes harmless to humans, crash their aerial war machines at the very door of a church sheltering praying Americans, we realize that the film's subtext is that of religious revival, that the struggle with an implacable other has provided the necessary conditions for divine intervention. In carefully making the point that the Martians have become physically decadent as a result of their overdependence on technology, the film signals its employment of that typical feature of revivalist and apocalyptic rhetoric: the promise of divine discrimination between the self-condemned and those worthy of salvation. As a cold war film, *War of the Worlds* thus neatly reverses contemporary Soviet condemnations of capitalist decadence. The invading other is depicted as unfit for survival, while the film simultaneously advocates a return to traditional, rural American values. The scenes of urban panic and selfishness late in the film as the Martians invade Los Angeles are counterpointed by the faith and courage exhibited by country folk like the scientist/hero Clayton Forrester's love interest. In fact, Forrester, a world famous astronomer, is on a fishing trip as the film opens. Resituated in a rural context, wearing jeans and a plaid flannel shirt (and even attending a square dance) he is thus integrated into the locus classicus of American virtue in preparation for

the ensuing struggle with the invader. Forrester's lover, Sylvia Van Buren, is of course the personification of such traditional values: Forrester is saved at the end of the film as his search for this American Beatrice leads him through the hell of war-ravaged Los Angeles, to the church in which he knows she will have taken shelter, the very church at the door of which the invaders fall dead.

Early in the film, when Sylvia's uncle, a clergyman, is disintegrated by the Martians as he approaches their ship and advocates brotherly love, *War of the Worlds* takes the opportunity to condemn a liberal, less than fully American theology unable to discern in conflict the necessary conditions of theophany, of the dramatic revelation of God's sympathies. That the film was released in the year of the (for some time expected) first Soviet H-bomb test allows us to contextualize its representation of the failure of nuclear weapons to decide the conflict it stages. When the employment of a nuclear bomb fails utterly to halt the Martian advance or even to produce significant damage to their war machines, the film prepares the way for its culminating, reassuring fantasy of salvation. In implying that God himself has intervened on behalf of American civilization, *War of the Worlds* subdues the disquieting specter of Soviet-American nuclear parity. Such an intervention, making nuclear weapons irrelevant to a divinely sanctioned defeat of the godless by the faithful, allows the film to maintain, in the context of the loss of American technological superiority, that spiritual rather than technological assets will decide any Soviet/American conflict.[26]

Following the period of these films, reflection upon the possible benefits of apocalypse became rare indeed in fifties science fiction films. If *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1959) could retrieve from the horrors of nuclear warfare at least the final glimpse of racial cooperation ultimately achieved between white and black survivors, *On the Beach* (also released in 1959) offered instead a completely unsparing vision of the final days of doomed humanity. The sixties were no less severe. In *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) the portrayal of gleeful speculation on the part of the War Room grotesques upon the sexual delights of repopulating America in the safety of converted mine shafts transformed with bitter irony the salvation of the elect motif so seriously entertained in *When Worlds Collide*. In such films the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction, that permanent feature of the decades following the inauguration of the arms race, produced correspondingly bleak visions of the aftermath of nuclear war.

Notes

1. There are a number of useful explorations of this issue. See, for example, in addition to works cited in the course of the essay, Andrew Gordon, "The Gospel According to Steven Spielberg," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 8 (1980): 156-64; Hugh Ruppersberg, "The Alien Messiah," in *Alien Zone*, ed. Annette Kuhn (New York, Verso, 1990), 32-38; and Tony Williams, "Close Encounters of the Authoritarian Kind," *Wide Angle* 4, no. 5 (1983), 23-29.
2. The figure of the monstrous ants provides *Them* with an overdetermined emblem of a host of anxieties. Peter Biskind notes that the creatures can be interpreted as representing the threat of untamed nature, the "antlike . . . Yellow Hordes that

had . . . swamped GIs . . . in Korea, and the Soviets with their notorious slave labor camps," and (since the most dangerous ants are female) the "sex war" precipitated by women's invasion of a "man's world" (Peter Biskind, *Seeing Is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties* [New York: Pantheon, 1983], 131-32). Biskind's catalog is usefully extended when we note the film's rather obvious parallel (strengthened by the ants' location on an atomic test site as the explanation for their mutation) between ants and atoms. The ants (like atoms previously, a minuscule and typically unregarded feature of the natural universe) become, through a literal enlargement evoking the sudden predominance of atomic power in the post–World War II world, an apocalyptic danger.

3. I owe this observation to Biskind. See *Seeing Is Believing*, 108-14, for his very useful discussion of *Forbidden Planet*.
4. Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 436.
5. Ibid., 430-36 (the quotation is from 430).
6. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 113.
7. David Ketterer, *New Worlds for Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction, and American Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), 139.
8. Ibid., 137-38.
9. "The Hydrogen Bomb," *Life*, 30 Jan. 1950, 23; "A Touch of Sun," *Time*, 13 Feb. 1950, 48, 49.
10. William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America 1932-1972* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), 488.
11. Randall, of course, resists his inclusion among those exempt from the lottery; indeed, he refuses to take part in the lottery at all and has to be convinced to accept a place aboard the spacecraft on the manufactured grounds that his skills as a pilot are indispensable. Here the putative logic behind selection for salvation (all those who participate in the project and thus the final lottery have been initially chosen for their necessary skills) gives way to the more emotionally satisfying and ideologically acceptable fantasy of the guaranteed survival of young lovers: the components of the future American family.
12. Judith Hess Wright, "Genre Films and the Status Quo," in *Film Genre Reader*, ed. Barry Grant (Austin: Texas University Press, 1989), 47.
13. Krin Gabbard, "Religious and Political Allegory in Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still*," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 10 (1982): 150-53.
14. Krin Gabbard's article, cited above, observes these and other indications of the film's quite conscious association of Klaatu with Christ.
15. Gabbard, "Religious and Political Allegory," 152-53.
16. Patrick Lucanio, *Them or Us: Archetypal Interpretations of Fifties Invasion Films* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 45.
17. Manchester, *The Glory*, 383.
18. "X" (George Kennan), "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* 25 (1947): 574.
19. Ibid., 572, 575.
20. Ibid., 576.
21. Manchester, *The Glory*, 549. The summary of events in this paragraph is based on Manchester.
22. Harry Bates, "Farewell to the Master," in *They Came From Outer Space: 12 Classic Sci-Fi Tales That Became Major Motion Pictures*, ed. Jim Wynorski (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), 122.
23. Walter and Miriam Schniers, *Invitation to an Inquest* (New York: Pantheon, 1965),

38-39. "Security Through Secrecy," the sixth chapter of this book, provides an illuminating discussion of the myth of the atomic "secret."

By early 1950, public belief in the "secret" had significantly eroded. *Time* reported an AEC revelation of Soviet atomic bomb research as early as 1940, complaining that "The AEC [should have] persuaded millions of Americans not to count on a 'secret' which the whole scientific world knew." ("The Russians Knew," *Time,* 2 Jan. 1950, 54.)

24. In February 1950 *Time* observed that the decision to develop the hydrogen bomb was "essentially a defensive measure. The Russians could build and doubtless were building their own hydrogen bomb. If undeterred by the threat of retaliation in kind [they] could deliver it . . . almost anywhere in the U.S." ("Bitter Cold," *Time,* 13 Feb. 1950, 15.)
25. Manchester, *The Glory,* 550.
26. On the other hand, we may suspect in the film's depiction of the annihilation of the Martians by (to them) deadly microbes another recommendation of apocalyptic weaponry. While the film takes its closing from H. G. Wells's 1897 novel, it is useful to recall that the early fifties saw a significant amount of discussion in the popular press of biological warfare (see for example "Biological Warfare," *Life,* 13 Aug. 1951, 43-49). Throughout the spring of 1952, *Newsweek* and other publications followed the Soviet accusations of American biological weapon use in Korea ("War and Disease," *Newsweek* 17 March 1952, 43; "What Are the Soviets Up to With Their Germ-War Charges?" *Newsweek,* 7 April 1952, 40). While there is no proof whatever that such weapons were used, such a widely reported charge may have instigated in the popular imagination the vision of an equally effective alternative to the use of nuclear devices in the conflict.