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Atomic Bomb Blues: Myth and Melancholy in

American Science Fiction Film of the 1950s

PhD in Media and Communications

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Declaration

Declaration of Authorship: I, James Bruce Williamson, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: ████████████████ Date: 07/06/2019

Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to my parents.

Abstract

Through a series of close readings of six Hollywood science fiction films of the 1950s, this thesis investigates the genre's representation and rendering of social and political concerns specific to the historic moment through its repurposing and reimagining of mythic and archetypal narrative structures, conceptualised here as a corresponding phenomenon to the growth of interest in those areas of study within the academic community, for instance in the work of Campbell, Jung, and Frye. It establishes how this relationship is articulated in the form of a particular melancholic tone and attitude that contrasts with the ostensible stability and triumphalism of both the genre and American culture in this period, a melancholy that is apparent in the contemporary commentary of I.F. Stone and in the cybernetic theorising of Norbert Wiener. With an inductive method that connects formal and structural readings, grounded in a consideration of cinematic language and generic conventions, I address these recurring thematic concerns of the contemporary cultural and intellectual milieu that are also apparent in this selection of films. The thesis thus identifies direct adaptations of, and homologies with, prominent constellations of academic and popular thought in America at this time as they emerge through the corpus, and thereby argues for the value of such comparative analysis. The readings therefore address such phenomena as the popularity of Freudian psychology, the development of cybernetics, and the evolution of structural thought, identifying a clear bridge between these immediate historic and cultural concerns, and the functioning of the science fiction genre in cinema at this point in its own evolution. In so doing, it also lays the groundwork for a new history of science fiction film, suggesting a triangulation of the genre's relationship with parallel social, cultural, and political trends through consideration of the mythic and the melancholic.

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Images licensed under Terms of Fair Use. Film stills are from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, 20th Century Fox DVD (2005); *The War of the Worlds* Paramount Pictures DVD (2005); *Forbidden Planet*, Warner Bros. Home Video (2007); *This Island Earth* Universal Pictures DVD (2008); *Them!*, Warner Bros. Home Video (2002); and *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, Universal Pictures DVD (2005).

Figures 3, 8, 10 and 14 excluded from Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO) database version of this thesis out of respect to copyright. Source links are included below.

The Day the Earth Stood Still theatrical poster: https://img.moviepostershop.com/the-day-the-earth-stood-still-movie-poster-1951-1020143828.jpg [last accessed 03/06/2019].

Forbidden Planet theatrical poster: https://img.moviepostershop.com/forbidden-planet-movie-poster-1956-1020516260.jpg [last accessed 03/06/2019].

Photo of Louis and Bebe Barron in their studio, January 1st 1956, by Walter Daran, hosted by Effectrode: https://www.effectrode.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/louis_and_bebe_barron_again.png [last accessed 03/06/2019].

Europe After the Rain II by Max Ernst, in the custody of Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford CT: https://www.thewadsworth.org/wp-content/gallery/euroart/max-ernst_1942.281_top25_web.jpg [last accessed 03/06/2019].

Introduction

On 8th August 1955, private journalist I. F. Stone published an article in his independent newsletter entitled 'Note to the Rest of the Universe'.[1] Written in response to White House Press Secretary James C. Hagerty announcement of the United States' intention to launch two "small Earth circling satellites" before the end of the decade,[2] this was the piece Stone chose to frame his narrative of the whole era, a collection of articles strikingly entitled *The Haunted Fifties*. Presented as an "Overture" to a decade's worth of observations and responses to the concerns and troubles of the era, ranging from Eisenhower's presidential style to McCarthyism, segregation, the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction, the Korean War, and the emergence of Khrushchev and Kennedy, the note was a satirical warning to any intelligent life from other planets, advising his imagined alien readers to "Beware in time. This is a breed which has changed little in thousands of years. The cave dweller who wielded the stone club and the man who will soon wield an interstellar missile are terribly alike." Ironic in tone, the article nevertheless presents a cosmic view of human history which places the struggle between the USA and USSR not only in the context of encounters with alien civilisations, but also "Homer, or the Sagas, or the Bible, or the Koran." By these mythic comparisons he means no compliment, describing the world's two superpowers as "rival tribes" each of which might deploy "weapons which could destroy all life on earth except perhaps mosses and fungi." [3] There is a deep melancholy here, that human nature is so profoundly flawed that no advance in scientific understanding or technology can heal the wound; that it compounds the problem rather than helping to resolve these issues. Stone deploys the language of science fiction and mythology to articulate this profound concern regarding the advancement of genuine science and technology, and their comingling with the fraught politics of the era. The impulses and behaviours at fault are as old as human society itself, he argues. Yet the very idea of 'A Note to the Universe', even as satire, suggests a shift in humanity's sense of its place in the cosmos. This shift is understood through a science-fictional imaginary which blends contemporary thought with archetypal storytelling traditions that, through various translations and evolutions and reinterpretations, have been traced back to antiquity. This thesis situates and analyses that imaginary as it is expressed through six Hollywood science fiction film of the 1950s, unveiling the relationships between their invocations of mythic thought, contemporary cultural and political concerns, and the melancholic tendencies of the era, proposing a new reading of this vital moment in the development of the genre in cinema.

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[1] I. F. Stone, 'A Note to the Universe', *The Haunted Fifties* (London: The Merlin Press, 1964), p. 3.
[2] James Schefter, *The Race* (London: Arrow Books, 2009), p. 4.
[3] Stone, 'A Note to the Universe', p. 3.

Scope of the Thesis

Research Questions

Over the past few decades, the science fiction films of the 1950s have gone from a significantly neglected body of works within the study of both cinema and SF, simultaneously overlooked and looked-down-upon, to a site of considerable debate within the scholarship of these fields. Early substantive critical overviews included Kingsley Amis's *New Maps of Hell* and Susan Sontag's 'The Imagination of Disaster',[4] while later attempts to categorize, schematize, and contextualize the genre in this period greatly expanded towards the end of the 20th Century and into the beginning of the 21st. Peter Biskind's chapter 'Pods and Blobs', part of his overall coverage of the period in Hollywood, [5] has become, like Sontag's concept of 'disaster', a key touchstone of critical discussion. Many later commentators have responded to his parsing of the films through a historicising rubric built around the centrist politics of the era,[6] whether positively or negatively. Among these responses, Jerome F. Shapiro provides a particularly distinctive contrast, emphasising the genre's mythic and folkloric lineage, and identifying the science fiction film of the '50s as simply the latest iteration of a tradition of storytelling which can be traced back to stories of metamorphoses and monsters, to the Flood myths of Mesopotamian and Levantine cultures: a mythic language of the apocalyptic.[7] For Shapiro, the period details, even the medium of film itself, are merely the modern clothing of an antique form, while for Biskind it is the period details themselves which are most significant and revealing, with the invocation of apocalyptic language merely a co-option of myth for political ends.

Biskind and Shapiro provide a useful outlining of two commonly recurring approaches to the study of these films. Evident in Shapiro's work, but present in some degree going back to Amis and Sontag there is an emphasis on the archetypal quality of these films, invoking mythic thought and narrative to articulate their place and function in contemporary culture.[8] Biskind and others in the same tradition focus on placing the films historically, especially against the background of sociological shifts in American culture and politics, the emergence of the Cold War, and profound

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[4] Susan Sontag, 'The Imagination of Disaster' [1961], *Against Interpretation* (London: Penguin, 2009); Kingsley Amis, *New Maps of Hell* (London: Penguin, 2012 [1960]).

[5] Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1983).

[6] Founded on such contemporary sociological works as William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (Harmondsworth, MDX: Penguin Books, 1967 [1956]).

[7] Jerome F. Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[8] The bomb, considered more broadly as cultural symbol, has been an appealing subject for myth criticism, for instance in Ira Chernus, *Dr. Strangegod*, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1986), and Spencer R. Weart, *Nuclear Fear* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

concerns over the Atomic Bomb.[9] To some extent emerging out of this historical and sociological line of inquiry, but also linked to the archetypal and mythic, is a third concern that centres the psychological themes in these films and their reflection of contemporary trends and underlying, deeply-encoded human behaviours and obsessions.[10] There remains, of course, a wider spectrum of approaches, ranging from those that emphasise questions regarding the nature and definition of science fiction film,[11] to the function and evolution of genre more broadly, to examinations of the specific the roles of sound design and special effects.[12] Finally, and prominent in recent scholarship of both film studies in general and science fiction films in particular, are approaches that centre the development of the industry in terms of the realities of, and trends in, histories of production.[13]

The goal of this project, however, is precisely to return to the text and meaning of the films themselves, to explore the interpretations that these theoretical approaches have revealed, and confront the sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting, historic, mythic, and psychological resonances. The intention is to conduct this analysis not by prejudicing any one conceptual approach over the others, but by examining their relationships to each other as expressed in the narratives, themes, and imagery of the films themselves. This has led me to a series of questions regarding the

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[9] Many early writers on the genre, including Sontag and Amis, critiqued its inability to speak to the political realities of the day. French filmmaker Pierre Kast stands out in praising the politics of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* in 'Don't Play with Fire', *Focus on the Science Fiction Film*, ed. William Johnson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972). More recently, Marc Jancovich renewed criticism of both that film, and of Biskind, from a historical and political perspective in his 'Re-examining the 1950s Invasion Narratives', *liquid metal*, ed. Sean Redmond (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), pp. 325-336. The broader geopolitical landscape, and the overall evolution of American culture in the post-war period, is meanwhile emphasised in the approaches of David Seed, *American Science Fiction and the Cold War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), M. Keith Booker, *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), and Susan George's *Gendering Science Fiction Films* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[10] A classic of this approach is Margaret Tarratt's Freudian interpretation 'Monsters from the Id' [1970], *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant, 346-365, (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2003), while Patrick Lucanio provided a Jungian alternative in *Them or Us* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), which emphasised the archetypal elements of the alien invasion genre. More recent examples include Cyndy Hendershot's *Paranoia, the Bomb, and 1950s Science Fiction* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1999) and Victoria O'Donnell's 'Science Fiction Film and Cold War Anxiety', *The Fifties: Transforming the Screen 1950-1959*, ed. Peter Lev (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 169-196.

[11] Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); J. P. Telotte, *A Distant Technology* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1999) and *Science Fiction Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Errol Vieth, *Screening Science* (London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2001), Christine Cornea, *Science Fiction Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

[12] Matthew J. Bartkowiak, ed. *Sounds of the Future: Essays on Music in Science Fiction Film* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company, 2000); Philip Hayward, ed., *Off the Planet: Music, Sound, and Science Fiction Film* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2004); Albert J. La Valley, 'Traditions of Trickery: The Role of Special Effects in the Science Fiction Film', in *Shadows of the Magic Lamp: Fantasy and Science Fiction in Film*, and ed. George Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), pp. 141-158; Michele Pierson, *Special Effects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002);

[13] Joyce A. Evans, *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998); Bradley Schauer, *Escape Velocity* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017); and John Rieder, *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017).

relationship between *myth* and *history* as they apply to these films: how are the social and cultural traumas inflicted by the use of nuclear weapons reflected in both the iconography and narratives of science fiction film and also, relatedly, within the intellectual and academic constellation of the historical period? How can we identify and characterise a homological relationship between the *melancholy* expressed through the apocalyptic anxieties of science fiction film, and theoretical projects such as structuralism and cybernetics which sought to connect modern society with its past, to order its present, and stave off an uncertain future? In what degree do these films function as both a unified mythology of the bomb, and a discrete series of political statements about the bomb? Furthermore, to what extent does the bomb itself come to stand in symbolically not only for the whole devastation of the world wars, including the Holocaust, but also the broader technologized estrangement of modern life? Finally, are the films not merely a modern instance of a primal process of cultural adaptation and adjustment dealing with a new scale of existential (and, indeed, existentialist) threat, but rather, exactly because such concerns were previously the domain of religious apocalyptic traditions and are now realised through scientific and technological advances, are they also something specifically of and for their time?

The issues identified here will open up an avenue for discussion on a more general theoretical level regarding the limitations and possibilities of film studies itself, and what can and cannot be accomplished through close reading and analysis. It is the question of whether we should regard films as discrete formal works, as Bordwell has suggested, or as more complexly enmeshed subjects, individual points of an echoing network of voices, in conversation with each other and the world around them. Are these films, therefore, in themselves noteworthy responses to the political and cultural situation of the period, and should their merit be measured in these terms? Ultimately, then, can and should films be seen as an expression of their period? The approach of this project to answering such questions will be to perform a series of close readings of the following selected corpus of specific films: *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (dir. Robert Wise, 1951), *The War of the Worlds* (dir. Byron Haskin, 1953), *Forbidden Planet* (dir. Fred M. Wilcox, 1956), *This Island Earth* (dir. Joseph M. Newman, 1955), *Them!* (dir. Gordon Douglas, 1954), *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (dir. Jack Arnold, 1957). These readings will be informed by connecting them with related theoretical frameworks, such as Northrop Frye's project of structuralist mythopoesis,[14] or Norbert Wiener's cyberneticist response to the problem of entropy.[15] These will be situated against other contemporary viewpoints and later commentaries, such as Claude Shannon's more probability-

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[14] In particular, Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NH: Princeton University Press, 1957).
[15] In Wiener's *Cybernetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1961 [1948]) and *Human Use of Human Beings* (London: Free Association, 1989 [1950]).

focused approach to cybernetics,[16] or Tzevetan Todorov's subsequent critique of Frye and his own counter-proposal for a structuralist approach to genre.[17] Each connection will be identified and produced by the observations that emerge from a particular reading, incorporating analysis of the social and intellectual climate of the historical period through a process of induction – aware of, but not deliberately imposing viewpoints from, the 21st century perspective. My original contribution to knowledge is, therefore, to offer a new interpretation and thematic analysis of the American science fiction films of the 1950s via in-depth close readings that re-centre the original mythic and structural dimensions with which the films were regarded critically.[18] The readings re-contextualise these aspects as, themselves, phenomena situated within, and emerging from, the historical environment of the era, and the particular tone and tenor of melancholy which inflected culture at this time. This thesis will thus also provide a foundation from which to examine the dynamics of the genre's evolution beyond this period, in relation to the key concepts outlined here, for the purposes of future study.

For seventy years, nuclear war has been consistently present as a plausible possibility. That possibility defined decades of geopolitics following the catastrophic conclusion of the Second World War. Even after the fall of the Soviet Union, the question of nuclear proliferation continues to be one of the most troubling concerns facing the international community. It has continued ever in suspension, as an abstraction, unrealised but always realisable under the right (or wrong) circumstances. To address it, it is necessary to imagine it. As Derrida stated, "the phenomenon is fabulously textual … to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it." He continues: "total nuclear war … as a hypothesis, or, if you prefer, as a fantasy, or phantasm, conditions every discourse and all strategies. Unlike the other wars, which have all been preceded by wars of more or less the same type in human memory (and gunpowder did not mark a radical break in this respect), nuclear war has no precedent. It has never occurred, itself; it is a non-event."[19] In other words, it is the stuff of science fiction, an invention akin to "a myth, an image, a fiction, a rhetorical figure, a fantasy, a phantasm" – and yet it has had, and

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[16] This study is indebted to N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999) for its basis of understanding of the development of different strands of cybernetics.

[17] Tzevetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, trans. Richard Horward (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).

[18] There has, of course, be an emphasis on this dimension on the field of fantasy studies, for instance the work of John Clute, who explicitly rejects Todorov and build on his own Northrop Frye-esque model of the fantastic in 'Beyond the Pale', *Conjunctions*, No. 39, (2002), p. 424; pp. 429-430, and by Farah Mendelsohn, who synthesises the work of Clute and others in the aid of recognising a 'language' of fantasy in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), pp. xiv-xv.

[19] Jacques Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)', trans. Porter and Lewis, *Diacritics*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Nuclear Criticism (Summer, 1984), p. 23.

continues to have, real consequences.[20] The emphasis on, and repetition of, "fantasy, or phantasm" as a figure of speech is, no doubt, deliberately revealing. I.F. Stone was correct in his characterization of the '50s as haunted, and there has been no successful exorcism since.

Science Fiction Literature

The concern of this study is science fiction film, bearing in mind that the state of the genre was complex due to its already divergent evolution in different media. As Christine Cornea points out, drawing on Brooks Landon, there is potentially significant value in emphasising "the sovereignty of the *image* in film as opposed to the *idea* in science fiction literature."[21] The latter has, historically, tended to be privileged among critical discourse,[22] as the genre was essentially codified in print rather than celluloid, and it is worth noting the connection and contrasts between these divergent strands to set the scene for the discussion of the genre in film. Most obviously, the so-called 'Golden Age' of science fiction began earlier in literature than it did in cinema, with the emergence of authors such as Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, and Robert A. Heinlein in the 1940s. For example, the production of the film *Destination Moon* (1950) inaugurated the new era of science-fiction cinema – its screenplay was written with input from Heinlein, and drew from elements of his 1947 novel *Rocket Ship Galileo*.[23] However, as Richard Hodgens argued at the end of the decade, that film, with its attempt at realistically depicting a lunar voyage, was not representative of the direction in which science fiction film would develop, much to his chagrin.[24] There is, overall, a significant divergence between the evolution of the genre in its cinematic form and the literature in this period, with the latter enveloping a wider range of narratives, from the 'hard sci-fi' *Destination Moon* was attempting an imitation of, to the reams of space opera that continued in the tradition of the earlier pulp science fiction such as E. E. "Doc" Smith's *Lensman* series, [25] and films serials like *Flash Gordon* (1936). For all of *Destination Moon*'s pretentions towards scientific verisimilitude, however, it retains the same fundamentally juvenile attitude towards the dangers of space travel as the earlier pulps, a 'boy's own adventure' cloaked in quasi-militaristic heroic masculinity.

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[20] Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)', p. 23.
[21] Cornea, *Science Fiction Cinema*, pp. 4-5; Brooks Landon, *The Aesthetics of Ambivalence* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press 1992), p. 14.
[22] Most notably in the work of Darko Suvin, whose influence will be discussed in greater depth below.
[23] Robert Heinlein, *Rocket Ship Galileo* (New York: Scribner's, 1947). The actual release of *Destination Moon* came one month after *Rocketship X-M*, rushed into production by Lippert Pictures to take advantage of the publicity surrounding the former film, per Bill Warren, *Keep Watching the Skies*, Vol. 2 (2010), pp. 708-711.
[24] Richard Hodgens, 'A Brief, Tragical History of the Science Fiction Film', in *Focus on the Science Fiction Film*, ed. William Johnson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 80.
[25] The initial instalments of which were first collected in E. E. "Doc" Smith, *Triplanetary* (Reading, PA: Fantasy Press, 1948).

However, this does not mean the two mediums of film and literature developed completely separately from each other. Of the corpus of films examined here, two are adaptations from the literature of the same period: *This Island Earth* being based on a series of novellas compiled in 1952 into a single work of that name by Raymond F. Jones, and *The Incredible Shrinking Man* being based on the 1956 novel *The Shrinking Man* by Richard Matheson.[26] In the latter case, the film hews relatively close to the novel, with a screenplay composed by Matheson himself. The differences between the two versions of *This Island Earth* are, by contrast, numerous and significant, from the identity and nature of the aliens to the protagonist's relationship to them. These adaptational relationships will be acknowledged in the relevant chapters, however for current purposes it is sufficient to note one of the most frequent and revealing distinctions between film and literary versions: the scale of action. In *This Island Earth*, for example, the fate of 'only' two planets is at stake while, over the course of Jones's novellas, the scale expands to encompass galaxies in conflict. This is a consistent trend with regards to the contrast between science fiction literature and film in this period. Indeed, Ray Bradbury's depiction of a failed Martian colonisation project *The Martian Chronicles* (collected 1950) goes far beyond jaunts to other worlds depicted in *Forbidden Planet* and *This Island Earth*. Meanwhile, Arthur C. Clarke's alien visitation in *Childhood's End* (published 1953) transforms the human race more radically than anything in *The War of the Worlds*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* or similar 'incursion' films. Finally, nothing in science fiction film attempts to approach the cosmic scope of the collapse of galactic civilization and the efforts to preserve it in Isaac Asimov's original *Foundation* (collected 1951-1953) stories.

Certainly the technical limitations of the pre-Industrial Light and Magic-era special effects play a significant role here, but such concerns did not prevent films of earlier eras from attempting ambitious representations of futuristic worlds and, by the standards of the time, advanced forms of transportation – from *Metropolis* (1927) in Germany, to *High Treason* (1929)and *Things to Come* (1936) in Britain, to Hollywood's own flawed attempt at the future city subgenre in *Just Imagine.*[27] The '50s films tend to shy even from this, largely avoiding attempts to depict either the future of the

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[26] Raymond F. Jones, *This Island Earth* (Huntsville, AL: Thunderchild Publishing, 1980); Richard Matheson, *The Shrinking Man* (London: Gollancz, 2014). All but one of the films in question are adaptations of one kind or another. *Forbidden Planet* is loosely based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; *The War of the Worlds* is based on the H. G. Wells novel of the same name (originally published in serial format in 1897), and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* on the 1940 short story 'Farewell to the Master' by Harry Bates, published in *Astounding Science Fiction*, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 58-86. Only *Them!* is not specifically based on a previous work.

[27] This is not to say that there were not vastly different scales present between the nascent science fiction film genre and literature even then, as demonstrated by Olaf Stapledon's cosmological novels *The Last and First Men* (London: Gollancz, 1999) and *Star Maker* (London: Gollancz, 1999), originally published in 1930 and 1937 respectively.

earth or functioning interplanetary and interstellar civilizations.[28] The futuristic city is either replaced by, or repurposed to work in concert with, the idea that *the future is already here*. The films are not simply products of the limitation of their time, but exist within and help illustrate this wider context. Indeed, in *The War of the Worlds*, *This Island Earth*, and *Forbidden Planet*, the actual technical facility for depicting alien armies, interplanetary voyages, and vast alien spaces is effectively demonstrated. The gap between science fiction literature and film in this period is not just down to the limitations of special effects, but rather the actual structures of the cinematic narratives which come across as relatively limited in scale compared to the science fiction literature of the period. Even the exception of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, though it gestures towards a wider cosmic universe, ultimately reverts to the question of one small planet's fate, grounded in the present concerns of the 'now'. Science fiction film in the 1950s therefore had a distinct character from other permutations of the genre in the period, and while an extensive comparative analysis could be most instructive, it would be beyond the remit of this study, which is specifically engaged in the consideration of the relationship between film as a mass entertainment medium and the culture that produced it.

Periodisation
The intent in defining the period of study for this thesis was to consider primarily the permutations and shifts within the genre itself and its presence on film, but with refence to more general social and historical considerations. This does of course extend to the industry itself, and though this is not the primary focus of this thesis, it is necessary context for the task of periodisation. According to Peter Lev, "The changes of the 1940s and early 1950s in Hollywood", which emerged out of such factors as the rise of television, the Paramount anti-trust consent decree, and the disruption wrought by political forces, "brought a share of instability, unemployment, even panic; but they also pushed the industry toward a different, more entrepreneurial, model of filmmaking."[29] It is significant that Lev traces these influences back through the previous decade for, as John Belton noted in his introduction to *Widescreen Cinema*, there is an intransigency to periodizing even when covering the purely technical side of the history of cinema: "Cinerama, CinemaScope, and other widescreen systems did not emerge magically from the head of Hollywood; their success in the mid-1950s did not occur in a historical vacuum but against a background of earlier failure."[30] Given the already observed synchrony between these technical attempts to adapt cinema to changing social

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[28] In this context, invocations of the technological city of the future in everyday life and advertising media, such as Disney's Tomorrowland theme park, come across more as a throwback to a previous era of science fiction imagery and iconography than something that interrelates with the films of the era.
[29] Peter Lev, 'The American Film Industry in the Early 1950s', *The Fifties: Transforming the Screen* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), p. 32.
[30] John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 5

and economic pressure, and the rise of special effects-driven projects including science fiction film, this historical contingency does add force to Bordwell's argument on the difficulty of tracing the existence and popularity of a certain film or set of films to a 'Zeitgeist'. Yet, just as technical advances alone do not explain the rise of widescreen cinema, nor do they solely account for the emergence of science fiction film. As Belton states, "I view technological, economical, and ideological demands not so much as monolithic forces, working in conjunction to drive the development of widescreen, but as mechanisms that are 'multi-lithic.'" [31] What can be acknowledged, then, as background for this study is the convergence of elements of this 'multi-lith' which had, as one of its results, the inauguration of science fiction film as a mass-produced cinematic genre for the purposes of general consumption.

But it still must be specified what, precisely, is meant by terming the period of study the 1950s, and how this is situated in the historical structure known as the Cold War in its various phases, and the reasoning for limiting the study to this decade. In economic terms, Eric Hobsbawn identified the first stage of the Cold War as lasting into the mid-1970s, at which point the 'Second Cold War' began. [32] For Giovanni Arrighi, the first phase comes to a close in 1968, with a further transitional period lasting, again, until 1973. [33] This period would be much too broad for the purposes of this thesis, with an excess of ground to cover within the body of film during the time, and the significant lulls and mutations that occurred within the genre of science fiction film itself over this broader period would need to be addressed at length. Yet Hobsbawn also notes an earlier shift in the dynamic, with particular significance on the American side: the escalation of the Vietnam War. [34] Arrighi, too, cites 1964 as the beginning, naturally, of a massive increase of US military expenditure abroad. [35] In domestic terms, Jameson argues that the "late 1940s or early 1950s" was a key moment in the coalescing of the postmodern and late capitalism in America after the Second World War, although it was the 1960s that were "a key transitional period … in which the new international order is at one and the same time set in place and is swept and shaken by its own internal contradictions and external resistance." [36] The 1950s, for Jameson, served as something of a deep breath before the plunge, and Sobchack directly connects this formulation with science fiction in this

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[31] Belton, *Widescreen Cinema*, p. 6.
[32] Eric Hobsbawn, *The Age of Extremes* (London: Abacus, 1995), p. 244.
[33] Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 297-299.
[34] Hobsbawn, *The Age of Extremes*, p. 244.
[35] Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, p. 297.
[36] Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in *Movies and Mass Culture* (1996), ed. John Belton, p. 187.

period, stating that "The films of the 1950s dramatize the *novelty* of multinational capitalism."[37] Finally, according to Paul Boyer, a major cultural shift in attitude towards the atomic bomb also occurred around 1963, through the combination of 'euphoria' following the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the eventual ratification of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, and the increasing focus of anti-war efforts on Vietnam, resulting in a 'nuclear apathy' which he termed 'The Big Sleep'.[38]

Therefore, for my purposes, the 'Early Cold War' can be summarised as the period from the end of the Second World War until the start of America's involvement in Vietnam, a kind of 'Long 1950s'. This seems to be echoed by the chronology of Atomic Age films put together by Bryan Fruth et al., covering a full two decades from the first atomic test in 1945 until 1965. This chronology clearly demonstrates an increasing prominence of science fictional depictions on the subject from 1950 onwards. However, it also indicates a tailing off by the time of the late '50s and early '60s, in advance of the transitional moment highlighted by Hobsbawn, Arrighi, and Boyer. By the turn of the decade, the majority of the science fiction films still in production were increasingly being made by Poverty Row studios rather than by the majors, suggesting a significant downwards shift, at least within Hollywood itself, in the perceived cultural – and financial – potential of the genre.[39] In the course of charting the history of literary science fiction (expanding and modifying Isaac Asimov's original chronology), Jameson parenthetically notes that, with regard to the six periods he identifies, it must not be forgotten "that they overlap, and that each new one retains the formal acquisitions of the previous ones, and also that the dates are merely symbolic".[40] The intent, then, is to articulate a self-consciously symbolic period that intersects and overlaps with the established, observed historical patterns, but is primarily driven by the arc of the films themselves. While, for the purposes of close examination of the case studies, the earliest film of my corpus is *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), and the last is *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957), if it is assumed the first and final marker of the whole period to be symbolic, then *Destination Moon* (dir. Irving Pichel, 1950) clearly heralds the arrival of the genre on the scene and *On the Beach* (dir. Stanley Kramer, 1959) the last successful attempt to use it to articulate a serious political point. Lingering at the far end of the historical period *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), if too late and, perhaps, entirely too satirical to be the last

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[37] Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 300 – emphasis in the originally text.
[38] Paul S. Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 355-358.
[39] Bryan Fruth et al., 'The Atomic Age: Facts and Films from 1945-1965', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 23:4 (1996), 154-160.
[40] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 93.

word in this reconstruction of the genre's 'intertext', at least suggests itself as a final punctuation mark – a full stop or, rather, an exclamation mark.

Key Concepts

In order to address how the science fiction films of the 1950s are situated in their period and subsequent surveys of the genre, it is necessary to acknowledge that the fundamental concepts which have often characterised these later discussions are themselves loaded with a multiplicity of potential meanings. Indeed, the very concepts of mythology and history are sufficiently broad to require clarification. The intent in this section is not to offer strict definitions, but rather to provide an assemblage and an exploration of these central ideas, their relationship to each other, and their expression in the existing literature regarding these films, in order to set the terms for the ensuing analyses and arguments. To begin with, partly because of its fantastical qualities, and seemingly in spite of its ambitions to be genuinely scientific, science fiction has always had one foot in the realm of the *mythic*, a modern reworking of traditional archetypal storytelling repurposed to carve out new cosmic schemas for the modern age. Conversely, in any discussion of a body of work in the context of the specific period and place of its origin, it is necessary to engage in some delineation of the *historic*, to deal with the politics, the social environment, and the technological state which characterises an era. The distinction between these two concepts and the clusters of ideas and terminology around them has defined much of the existing literature on the present subject, and addressing that complex debate with the goal of moving it to a new plane, is central to the interests of this thesis. It is therefore appropriate to sort through their meanings and associations here at the outset. Finally, there is the notion that there is a *melancholic* strain of thought, and a deep well of feeling, expressed in surprising ways through these films. It could be considered an interleaving of personal and political history represented by various attempts to reckon with the disruptions and traumas of the modern age, occurring on incommensurately massive and minute scales, expressed through recurrence and transmutation of certain archetypal narrative forms and mechanics.

The Mythic

The idea that science fiction, and its cinematic incarnation specifically, operates in some capacity as a *mythic* form, or being influenced by, or imitating myth, goes back to the earliest critical studies of the genre. Influential writers on the subject such as Susan Sontag and Kingsley Amis, whose 'Imagination of Disaster' (1964) and *New Maps of Hell* (1960) respectively form two of the earliest influential works here, both reference this connection directly. Other later commentators, such as Jerome F. Shapiro in his *Atomic Bomb Cinema* (2002) have followed in kind and with greater focus on this connection. As noted previously, conceptions of myth were themselves being developed and theorised in the post-war period, both in the European structuralist school by figures like Claude

Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, and in the North American school of writers such as Northrop Frye and, notoriously with regard to the future production and study of science fiction film, Joseph Campbell.

In the case of critics like Frye and Campbell, there is a significant concern demonstrated for the uncovering and definition of mythic *archetypes*, ancient constructions of characters and narrative devices that continue, through their sheer pervasiveness if nothing else, to inform modern literary storytelling – Campbell took this to an extreme with his codification of the monomyth in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).[41] Sontag and Amis, for example, both recognise in science fiction film and criticise it for its own recurring archetypes, plot elements and stock characters that seem to be repeated endless across the genre. This confluence of generic concerns with broader intellectual developments of the period is one of the crucial areas of interest for this study. Of course, not all such archetypal elements are going to be traceable back to genuine mythology – many if not most will be 'merely' generic, archetypal only in the sense of being broadly drawn and overly familiar. However, there are cases where the films gesture towards not only such specifically mythic archetypes, but also to a more fundamental narrative language of *mythopoesis*. In such cases, the films attempt to connect the events onscreen to a broader sense of cosmic scale and purpose, constructing a world, and a world-view, that deliberately invokes the mythic.

Indeed, Sontag's essay 'The Imagination of Disaster', one of the earliest and most influential critical analyses of science fiction film, was replete with allusions to the genre as following in ancient, mythical tradition.[42] Many subsequent works in the field are elaborations on, or responses to, Sontag's argument, and the themes she identifies recur throughout discussions of the genre. The title of the essay is itself telling of her approach: it is deliberately not labelled as a study of what makes science fiction 'science fiction'. Instead, it is an excavation of the hidden core of the genre as it came to be represented on screen in the era in which she was writing. Sontag does not seek to reconcile the paradox that fiction will almost always rub against actual scientific knowledge and

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[41] It was not just in North America that such interest was on the rise – Campbell's explication of his monomyth was preceded by Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961 [1948]) and his speculation of a prototypical matriarchal religion, which demonstrates a similar inclination towards mythopoetic aetiology, but developed along a distinct set of interests and concerns emerging from a more Anglo-European context. The following decade, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes helped define the Continental structuralist approach to mythological and cultural studies with *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) and *Mythologies* (1957) respectively.

[42] In his review of previous critical approaches to the genre, prominent science fiction critic J. P. Telotte devotes a specific subsection to Sontag and her impact, describing her essay as "one of the most important contributions to the study of science fiction film." – J. P. Telotte, *Science Fiction Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 38.

method, what J. P. Telotte would later term "the problematic logic built into the form's combinatory designation – that is, as science and fiction, as fact and fabrication".[43] On the contrary, she argues that "Science fiction films are not about science. They are about disaster, which is one of the oldest subjects of art. In science fiction films disaster is rarely viewed intensively; it is always extensive. If you will, it is a question of scale."[44] In other words, according to Sontag, science fiction film does not generally portray the individual emotional experience of characters who are confronted with a world-changing, or world-ending, event.[45] It is the *spectacle* of the event that is at the centre of audience attention, and the simplicity and directness of that goal is, for Sontag, an essential part of the consideration of what science fiction films can and cannot do.

Although these science fictions films may be intriguingly emblematic of the divide between the personal scale and the cosmic, a key criticism in Sontag's analysis questions how pertinent such representations can actually be. Since science fiction films are not actually interested in science and the role it plays in society (and vice versa), they cannot actually perform deliberate critiques of contemporary politics or culture, and so properly diagnose the ills of the historical present:

> There is absolutely no social criticism, of even the most implicit kind, in science fiction films. No criticism, for example, of the conditions of our society which create the impersonality and dehumanisation which science fiction fantasies displace onto the influence of an alien 'It'. Also, the notion of science as a social activity, interlocking with social and political interests, is unacknowledged.[46]

For Sontag, this failure is significant because of the way science fiction film uses the subject of planetary catastrophe as its canvas, with overtly mythologized fears of technology gone wrong ('black magic') and alien invaders (both 'dehumanized' and 'dehumanizing') as favoured subjects.[47] Though science fiction film may depict such calamitous events, the overwhelming scale of those events as they are depicted renders the films unable to identify their relationship to the wider socio-political context. This unresolvable conflict is at the heart of Sontag's most significant pronouncement in this essay: "What I am suggesting is that the imagery of disaster in science fiction is above all the emblem of an *inadequate* response."[48] For Sontag, in the end, science fiction films of the period raised the spectre of a primal fear which they could not hope to exorcise.

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[43] Telotte, *Science Fiction Film*, p. 3.
[44] Sontag, 'The Imagination of Disaster', p. 213.
[45] She does, however, note *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957) as an exception to the trend – *Ibid*., p. 215.
[46] Sontag, 'Imagination of Disaster', p. 223.
[47] *Ibid*., pp. 219, 221.
[48] *Ibid*., p. 224 – emphasis in the original text.

According to Jerome F. Shapiro, writing at the turn of the millennium, representation of the bomb and political responses to it within the films are simply a heightened context for the renewed expression of something much older. Seeming to paraphrase Susan Sontag, but altering the terminology to be even more explicitly religious and mythological, Shapiro states:

> … the essential element of atomic bomb cinema is the *apocalyptic imagination*; filmmakers use this to structure their narratives and explore a wide range of ideological issues. These films, moreover, express the Jewish apocalyptic tradition, which exhorts the restoration of a fractured world more than they express the dominant Messianic Christian tradition's focus on the hereafter."[49]

What Shapiro's argument underlines, even more emphatically than Sontag's, is not only that narratives of large-scale destruction are hardly a uniquely American phenomenon, but also that they are significantly venerable. Through his idiosyncratic new genre definition which formulates its different representations 'vertically' through multiple periods (though in so doing he is also attempting to collapse this vertical temporality into a single point of mythic and spiritual meaning), Shapiro attempts to demonstrate how such narratives preserve and spread knowledge of the basic, yet eternal, truths of human existence, hidden just below the surface of everyday life.

An older but strikingly positive approach, specifically to the alien invasion films on the 1950s,[50] is that of Patrick Lucanio who, like Shapiro, also identifies science fiction film with a form of mythological narrative.[51] Unlike Shapiro, however, Lucanio draws upon a particularly Jungian concept of myth in his 'archetypal' analysis of the alien invasion movies of the 1950s. He divides the genre into a traditional Jungian opposition of the rational and irrational through the figure of the protagonist ("usually the scientist hero"), in line with what he refers to as the 'classical' and 'Promethean' models.[52] Like Sontag, and the Russian formalists going back to Propp,[53] Lucanio draws up sets of common motifs or tropes that the narrative of the films repeats across these two alternative models, explaining how they interact and function across the full range of the particular subgenre. Notably, he claimed that due to its rapid proliferation, "the alien invasion genre did not need decades to establish conventions. The conventions were accepted immediately, and

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[49] Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema.*, pp. 5-6.
[50] Which Mark Jancovich credits with challenging the traditional narrative of the subgenre as predominantly pro-military – 'Re-examining the 1950s Invasion Narratives', in *liquid metal*, ed. Sean Redmond (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), p. 325.
[51] Patrick Lucanio, *Them or Us* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 20
[52] *Ibid.*, p. 21; p. 25.
[53] See: Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009 [1928]).

iconography is the reason."[54] The alien invasion film is, therefore, not a hybrid between horror and science fiction, but "a wholly integrated subgenre of science fiction film replete with all the meaning and value inherent in the science fiction genre itself."[55] For Lucanio, such films were *sui generis*, clearly of a larger group identifiable as 'science fiction', but equally of their own distinct nature, offering an uncompromised archetypal structure that also reflects the contemporary American psyche.

A more nuanced view is offered by Bruce Kawin who, drawing upon the developments of the past few decades in genre studies, sees science fiction film as part of a broader process, one which invariably entails cross-pollination with other genres.[56] In an era when science fiction films frequently resorted to so-called 'bug eyed monsters' for spectacle, and horror films used science fictional explanations for their uncanny events, Kawin identifies the ideological positions in play as being clearer points of distinction than the iconography of the films.[57] Films which align themselves with a positive outlook on the gaining of knowledge, with breaking down barriers, with approaching whatever Other is in play peacefully, and such intellectual approaches being narratively rewarded, are aligned with the ideology of science fiction; while films which are based in valid fears of the unknown and alien are aligned with horror. Both genres share in an interest in experiences which disturb or depart from a familiar context, but deal with this in opposite ways: "Horror and science fiction, then, are different because of their attitudes toward curiosity and the openness of systems, and comparable in that both tend to organize themselves around some confrontation between an unknown and a would-be knower."[58] Despite his focus on ideology and genre processes, for Kawin there are also deeper resonances at play, which shape and are shaped by, the contemporary concerns of the films.

Taking *Forbidden Planet* as an example, in terms that echo Sontag, Kawin articulates the narrative as one of white magic triumphing over black and, significantly, describes the narrative as a "myth of human adaptability", a concept drawn from Joanna Russ.[59] This itself is a term which seems to run directly against what critics such as Sontag (and later Darko Suvin, whose influence will be addressed below) argue mythic, or myth-derived, narratives are capable of addressing.[60] Russ herself takes on and centres the damaging nature of many of the foundational myths and their associated

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[54] Lucanio., *Them or Us*, p. 56.
[55] *Ibid*, p. 20.
[56] Bruce K. Kawin, 'Children of Light', in *Film Genre Reader III* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2003), p. 330.
[57] *Ibid*.
[58] *Ibid*., p. 335.
[59] *Ibid*., p. 336.
[60] See: Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).

recurring tropes which dominate Western European narratives, among others. As described by Russ, myths are "are dramatic embodiments of what a culture believes to be true, or what it would like to be true – or what it is mortally afraid may be true."[61] According to this definition, then, science fiction, if not directly identifiable with myth, is a site on which myth can play out. However, it must be acknowledged that such a broad definition of myth, and its use as an interpretative tool, has been specifically contested, not just on ideologically grounds of myth as an inherently conservative force, but on whether myth can speak to anything other than itself.

Jean-Luc Nancy has convincingly argued that myth *qua* myth is, itself, a mythic construct at this juncture. Echoing Russ, and students of myth from Campbell, Lévi-Strauss, and Frye onwards, he states "We know the scene: there is a gathering, and someone is telling a story … Our societies, they have told us, derive from these assemblies themselves, and our beliefs, our knowledge, our discourses, and our poems derive from these narratives"; yet "we also know that this scene is itself mythic."[62] For Nancy, therefore, "When we speak of 'myth' or of 'mythology' we mean the negation of something at least as much as the affirmation of something. This is why our scene of myth, our discourse of myth, and all our mythological thinking make up a myth: to speak of myth has only ever been to speak of its absence."[63] Thus the call to myth is, itself, a melancholic act, something that can be addressed in Russ's terms. This dynamic is addressed directly through acknowledging the development and popularisation of the concepts of myth and mythic archetypes as a contemporaneous process occurring alongside the emergence of the genre in this period, reflecting a mutual melancholic longing. The thesis therefore reconsiders and refreshes the importance of the critical relationship between science fiction and both structural and psychoanalytic approaches to the concept of the mythic, here considered as a living form of speech, one distinct from but comingled with the historic.

The Historic

The 'present-ness' of the genre in this period is not in itself anathema. Science fiction often imagines the present as history – or at the very least, as *historic*. The science fiction films of this era, with their frequent emphasis on the immediacy of their events, offer up the spectacle of unprecedented moments of historic change. From the first journey to the moon, Mars, or extra-solar planets, through first contact with aliens both benevolent and hostile, to explicitly marking the accession of new technological, scientific, and political orders, even in unintentional and indirect ways these films

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[61] Joanna Russ, 'What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write', in *To Write Like a Woman* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 1995), p. 81.

[62] Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Myth Interrupted', *The Inoperative Community*, trans. and ed. Peter Connor, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 43-45.

[63] *Ibid.*, p. 53

are nevertheless engaged with, and predicated on, often unspoken notions of the historic – even as they are, inevitably, products of a particular moment or era in history. Hence, the concern with history here is twofold: first of all, how a sense of history is represented and related in these films textually, and secondly how these films are situated *contextually*. There is a distinct tradition of examining the science fiction films of the 1950s specifically through the lens of political history. Biskind's *Seeing is Believing* is a prominent example, in which he broadly categorises films of various genres through their depiction of conformity and consensus, grounded in the power balance between liberals, conservatives, and centrists particular to the historical moment.[64] In science fiction, this is often represented by the conflict and common causes between scientists and the military.[65] Jancovich, too, bases his later analysis of the genre – and his critique of other interpretations, including Biskind's – in relation to their expression of political ideology and contemporary social mores in his 'Re-examining the 1950s Invasion Narratives', collected in Sean Redmond's *liquid metal* (2004). Here we have encountered a confluence of two of the 'levels' of history in French historian Fernand Braudel's terms. There is much discussion of this *political* history, the history of 'events', of "surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs" – for example in the specific and ephemeral iconography and visual style of the moment (from automobile design to fashion and home furnishings), or the momentary tremors of 'current affairs' that form part of a much larger pattern.[66]

However, for Braudel, this was only the final layer of what he understood as history, and we see here, too, concern for the second level, references to the cultural and political status of science, or the religious belief and spirituality, in the mid-20th century. This is indicative of what British historian H. R. Trevor-Roper summarises as 'the more mobile history of social forms, the history of different human groups … all equally determined, at least in part, by the obstinate physical matrix which encloses them".[67] Observation of such elements is most apparent in writing that foregrounds the 1950s as a period that anticipates the more radical social changes that would occur in ensuing decades, such as the later chapters of Lewis Mumford's *The City in History* (especially 'Suburbia – and Beyond), or Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak's *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*.[68] Together, such texts, that are now closer to the period they were addressing than to the present day, raise the issue of how our notions of history and of a particular historical era are always

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[64] Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1983), pp. 14-15.

[65] *Ibid.*, p. 103.

[66] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, trans. Siân Reynolds (London: Collins, 1972), p. 21.

[67] H. R. Trevor-Roper, 'Fernand Braudel, the Annales, and the Mediterranean', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Dec. 1972), p. 475.

[68] Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: MJF Books, 1989 [1961]), pp. 482-525; Douglas T. Miller and Marion Novak, *The Fifties* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977).

constructed from the perspective of the present, whether that is immediately after the period, two decades on, or more than half a century later. Underlying these, however, there can be considered a more fundamental level, that of the *longue durée*, characterised by the evolution of the relationship between human civilizations and their physical environment over spans of centuries and millennia. It is precisely a confrontation with the deepest level of history where science fiction films – especially those that deal with dead and dying alien civilizations, but also those that attempt to contextualize contemporary technological advancement within the history of humanity itself – draw upon both mythic imagery and melancholic language to attempt to square such vast timescales with the limits of human perception and feeling.

The relationship between science fiction and its historical context is at the centre of Biskind's attempt to re-evaluate the two-way relationships which he proposes that the Hollywood films of the '50s – not just science fiction films – demonstrate as exemplary products of that era and how they then, either consciously or unconsciously, promulgate the 'world-view' which gave them their meaning. His project takes a discrete period and an expansive range of Hollywood films across a variety of genres and attempting to isolate what is consistent across productions of radically divergent politics (or, even, productions which criticise and disavow the very notion of radically divergent politics). For him, the relationship does not simply go in one direction; he is not concerned with films purely as signifiers for the broader social and historical trends of the period. Individual films are treated as self-contained but active agents in society, with their own purpose divorced even from that of the director.[69] As Biskind clearly states in his introduction, he is "interested in what film tells us about society and what society tells us about film", deliberately engaging with the circular relationship of meaning and interpretation which Bordwell rejects.[70]

To this end, he identifies two other key 'products' of the period which have an overriding significance, and are therefore definitive for the politics of the films themselves: the concept of consensus and, pointedly, the advancement of atomic weaponry itself.[71] For Biskind, "Consensus, the shared agreement between corporate liberals and conservatives (however reluctant) on fundamental premises of pluralism, was – outside, perhaps, of the H-bomb – the fifties' most important product."[72] But while Biskind is interested in American cinema in the '50s as a whole, with

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[69] Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, p. 5.

[70] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[71] There is, therefore, some overlap between the distinctions found by Biskind in his diagnosis of which films of the era are progressive and which are conservative and Kawin's approach. Both he and Kawin identify the relationship between the military and scientists, of who is dominant and whose world-view is proven correct by the events of the film, as a telling site of ideological influence. See Kawin, 'Children of Light', pp. 334-335.

[72] Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*., p. 20.

consistent and identifiable concerns that recur across the corpus, he also emphasises its diversity. Contrary in particularly to Shapiro's 'vertical' approach, explicitly and extensively critical of Biskind, he takes his discrete period and proceeds to work out how the full range of genres fit 'horizontally' into the whole picture, demonstrating stories are time capsules which reflect their historical moment and attempt to influence it. For both Biskind and Shapiro, however, there are codes to be solved and systems of meaning to engage with beneath the surface of these texts, which they posit can allow access to a different level of understanding of films and the cultures which produce them.

However, Biskind's analysis has come under criticism not only via Shapiro's position that he is wrong to focus solely on the immediate political and social context, but also that, according to Jancovich, he profoundly misreads science fiction's interaction with this environment. Jancovich takes Biskind to task explicitly for his reading of *Them!* which he, like Shapiro, sees as far less patriarchal and enforcing of traditional gender roles than Biskind makes it out to be. Like Shapiro, Jancovich sees the treatment of the alien and inhuman not as an anthropomorphic stand-in for prejudice against the contemporary political or cultural bogeyman, but more pointedly, to "privilege certain communal values in opposition to the 'dehumanising' domination of scientific-technical rationality."[73] For Jancovich many of these films, in fact, go beyond the 'permissible edge of dissent' described by Biskind and into a subtle but complete subversion of the modern programme of "scientific-technical rationality" which dominated America since the rise of Fordism.[74] Jancovich, in fact, rejects the assumption that Biskind operates under, that there is something of a dialectic here, embodied by balancing scientific and military interest.[75] For Jancovich, these films are not suspicious of the nebulous foreign other, or even the specific threat of communism, but rather the cultural changes that come with technological and scientific advancement.

This, for J.P. Telotte, is one of the core aspects of the genre. Telotte certainly acknowledges the significance of Sontag's work. However, where she distances science fiction film from the actual practice and experience of science and the scientific community, Telotte is much more concerned with the resemblances between science fiction film and the real, ongoing historical development of our scientific, technologized society. Tellingly, he states that science fiction film "commonly proposes the sort of "what if" game in which scientists are typically engaged as they set about designing experiments and conducting research: extrapolating from the known in order to explain the unknown."[76] While Sontag focusses on the distance between science fiction film and scientific

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[73] Jancovich, 'Re-examining the 1950s Invasion Narratives', p. 326.
[74] *Ibid*., pp. 325-326.
[75] Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, p. 103.
[76] Telotte, *Science Fiction Film*, p. 3.

fact as well as scientific method and culture, Telotte emphasises points of commonality, the intersections and reflexive actions which cross the divide between scientific fact and science fiction over the course of their respective historical evolutions.[77] For Telotte, science fiction cinema and actual developments in scientific understanding and technology even share in a form of cultural distancing, a reluctance to fully engage with and take ownership of the changes that science and technology have effected in society. One site of debate regarding science fiction films therefore becomes the question of their instrumentality, in terms of both their purpose and how they work accomplishing this, raising questions about how the genre's preoccupations manifest themselves on screen and the relationship this representation has to the implicit goals and ultimate effects of the films both individually and as a group.

The Melancholic
There has, historically, been a frequent turn to employing psychological approaches to analysing these films, notably in Margaret Tarratt's unpacking of their Freudian themes in her article 'Monsters from the Id', whose title is itself a direct reference to *Forbidden Planet* and the film's own debt to Freud.[78] Patrick Lucanio, per above, adopted a Jungian approach in his analysis of alien invasion films *Them or Us*.[79] It is little wonder such psychological, and in particular psychosexual, approaches were so appealing. Of the six films selected for this project's case studies, four (*The War of the Worlds*, *This Island Earth*, *Forbidden Planet*, and *Them!*) depict a budding-but-chaste heterosexual romance between male and female leads occurring against the narrative backdrop of encounters with the unfathomably alien Other. One (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*) is suggestive of romance, but stops short at confirming it in order to maintain the asexual purity of its alien, and quasi-angelic, male lead. The last (*The Incredible Shrinking Man*), discretely but incontrovertibly depicts the collapsing of a marriage under the weight of the protagonist's unusual affliction that symbolically and literally unmans him. It is precisely in the contrasting of such personal emotional development against the threat of destruction on a cosmic scale that a note of melancholy, whether repressed or excavated and explored, begins to slip in: *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The War of the Worlds* both feature an Earth under threat of destruction from alien forces; *Forbidden Planet* and *This Island Earth* both have dead or dying alien worlds serving as a setting for the action; *Them!* and

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[77] Mere scientific error or obsolescence does not necessarily reduce the value of science fiction for this purpose. As Roger Luckhurst suggested, "sf might be regarded as the cultural record of these multiple, speculative possibilities" that are discarded as science itself advances. See: Roger Luckhurst, 'Pseudoscience', *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould et. al. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p 405.
[78] Margaret Tarratt, 'Monsters from the Id', p. 346.
[79] Meanwhile, Vivian Sobchack noted the repressed asexuality of much of the genre in 'The Virginity of Astronauts', collected in Annette Kuhn's anthology *Alien Zone* (London: Verso, 1990), 103-115.

The Incredible Shrinking Man portray the natural world turning hostile because of the effect of human-made radiation – but with a delayed effect that offsets the films' insistent 'nowness'.

However, it is the frequent recourse to offsetting the inconceivable *trauma* of mass devastation and death with the individual, personal salve of a developing relationship – which nevertheless remains impossibly incommensurate with the scope and scale of surrounding events – that gives these films a specifically melancholic aspect. It is precisely the question of scale (which Sontag was to seize upon in relation to science fiction film specifically a scant few years later) that influential early film critic Rudolf Arnheim identified as central to the complex and, in his characterisation, profoundly melancholic relationship between cinema and the representation of reality in his 1960 review of Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film*, 'Melancholy Unshaped'. In response to Kracauer's emphasis on the essentiality of realism in film, and that the 'flaw' of unrealistic films is that they remind us of their artifice, Arnheim argues that "when we look at these flaws dispassionately, we are likely to conclude that they occur not because those films are not realistic but because they have failed to eliminate realism sufficiently."[80] In other words, they have failed precisely because they have reminded us of our own world, removing us from the world of the film. For Arnheim, however, the problem of realism is suggestive of a far more fundamental issue with cinema and its place in modern culture. It is here that the relationship becomes, for him, a revealing site of significant melancholy: "genuine realism consists in the interpretation of the raw material of experience by means of significant form, and that, therefore, a concern with unshaped matter is a melancholy surrender rather than the recovery of man's grip on reality."[81] Of course, Arnheim does not specifically address the science fiction film of the previous decade, which would occupy an odd place in his melancholic schema, neither concerned with reconstructing a recognisable 'everyday' reality, nor particularly interested in the genuine unshaped material of existence.[82]

Yet, by adopting an approach that analogically connects the significations of these films to their contemporary milieu, the films can indeed be read as engaging in a similar process – for they, frequently, show a similar anxiety to Arnheim, that "we are witnessing the last twitches of an

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[80] Rudolf Arnheim, 'Melancholy Unshaped', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 21, No. 3, (Spring 1963), 293.

[81] *Ibid*., p. 297.

[82] This relationship is one ripe for further study beyond the period of this thesis and the time of Arnheim's writing, however. From the emergence of an 'arthouse science fiction' with Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), as well as Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1971) and *Stalker* (1979), to the rise of a 'science fiction gothic-noir' with Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982), with all their respective descendants in the 20th and 21st centuries, there is potential for sketching out a relationship between different manifestations of the genre and an active interest in the melancholic concern with material shaping and un-shaping which Arnheim outlines.

exhausted civilization."[83] In this, he goes beyond the initial discussions of the concept of melancholy conceived of by Kracauer and Freud as incomplete mourning.[84] For Arnheim, a completed mourning might be possible in the process of "cleansing the mind of all shapes" by which means "we are approaching the nadir which we must touch to rise again." [85] The object that is lost is reality, that is to say objectivity itself, and only by accepting this can culture, paradoxically, be liberated from the desperate absences of modern life. Arnheim is here painting on a broader canvas than that of Freud, in his earlier work on melancholy, and even Kracauer. In so doing, he offers the fascinating speculation that melancholy, "valid for individuals, might also apply to phases of civilisation."[86] Despite Arnheim's quite distinct and specific interests regarding the relationship between cinema, art, and reality, his repeated concern for the fate of civilization clearly invites analogical comparison to such science-fictional figures as the Martians of *The War of the Worlds*, the Krell of *Forbidden Planet*, or the Metalunans of *This Island Earth*.

In Freudian terms, what the films often depict is, consciously or not, failed attempts at mourning – mourning which, even for the victims of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, might have been possible if the post-war world was truly characterised by consensus and peace. Instead, it was frequently characterised by fears of a precarious and potentially apocalyptic future, expressed through anxiety and paranoia, two terms which have frequently been used to describe the genre in this period, as for example by Hendershot and O'Donnell.[87] Combined with the incommensurability of suburban satisfactions with the scale of the horrors of the immediate past and the potential future, these could be considered symptoms of a melancholic strain of feeling, a pathology, within the culture was uniquely situated in the newly geo-politically and technologically empowered United States. This contradiction necessitated the creation of an image of security and stability which, as

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[83] Arnheim, 'Melancholy Unshaped', p. 297.

[84] In drawing on Kracauer directly, Arnheim does not cite Freud by name, but he nevertheless follows in the tradition of Freud's characterisation of melancholy, as he distinguishes it from the process of 'successful' mourning. According to Freud:

> … melancholia contains something more than normal mourning. In melancholia the relation to the object is no simple one; it is complicated by the conflict due to ambivalence … In melancholia, accordingly, countless separate struggles are carried on over the object, in which hate and love contend with each other; the one seeks to detach the libido from the object, the other to maintain this position of the libido against the assault.

Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' [1915], *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XIV* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 256

[85] Arnheim, 'Melancholy Unshaped', p. 297

[86] *Ibid*., p. 298; Freud, meanwhile, began to substantially investigate psychology on a societal scale in 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego' [1921], *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XVIII* (London Vintage, 2001) and *Civilisation and its Discontents* (London: Hogarth Press, 1963 [1930]).

[87] Hendershot, *Paranoia, the Bomb, and 1950s Science Fiction*; O'Donnell, 'Science Fiction Film and Cold War Anxiety'.

Mary Caputi argues, remained potent up to, and throughout, the rise of neoconservatism in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.[88] Indeed, for Caputi, the very concept of 'the 1950s' is itself laden with a weight of mythic nostalgia that is founded in a deep wellspring of melancholia; it is "a figure of speech, a trope that highlights the profound anxieties surrounding [American] self-definition".[89] Yet this is not purely the creation of politicians and pundits in later decades; the 1950s were, in essence, 'always already' mythic in their significance for American identity.[90] Strikingly, Caputi points directly to "the copious supply of 1950s science fiction films" as evidence of "the consuming, ubiquitous paranoia of a clearly defined American goodness under attack by a foreign enemy."[91] The period was primed by the melancholy of its own historical, political, and economic moment that simultaneously insists on the absolute strength and terrible vulnerability of the Edenic American project.[92]

Caputi's reference to the 1950s as a *figure of speech* is no accident – she draws directly from Julia Kristeva's works on the subject of melancholy with both her conception of its fraught relationship with temporality and the central significance of language, which "makes it possible to experience some semblance of reconnection to the ineffable past".[93] Indeed, Kristeva devotes the second chapter of her generative book *Black Sun* to the effects melancholia and depression can have on speech and language, and conversely the effects the symbolic and the imaginary have on our fundamental biological and neurochemical processes.[94] For Kristeva, the complex and fraught network of relationships between time, loss, memory, melancholy, and our ability to speak of, or represent, these phenomena, is schematized through "a linguistic and temporal phenomenology [which] discloses … an unfulfilled mourning for the maternal object".[95] Despite the symbolic importance of the Freudian maternal figure here, however, this object can extend not just to an individual, but to a community: "When I say that the object of my grief is less the village, the mother, or the lover that I miss here and now than the blurred representation that I keep and put together in the darkroom of what thus becomes my psychic time, the depressed person is necessarily a dweller in the imaginary realm."[96] Moreover, in conceptualising and addressing 'the fifties' in such terms,

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[88] Mary Caputi, *A Kinder, Gentler America*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

[89] *Ibid.*, p. 1

[90] *Ibid.*, p. 31

[91] *Ibid.*, p .13

[92] *Ibid.*, pp.16-18

[93] *Ibid.*, p. 31

[94] Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 37-8

[95] *Ibid.*, p. 61

[96] *Ibid.*; for Klaus Mladek and George Edmondson, this can also be reversed – the social or communal subject grieving for the lost or imaginary object as a political act. See 'A Politics of Melancholia*, A Leftist Ontology* ed. Carsten Strathausen (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 208-233.

Caputi echoes Arnheim's application of melancholy to 'phases of civilisation', but in a more focused and specific manner.

According to Kristeva, melancholy can be seen in linguistic terms, as a language of trauma, which for Caputi can be used to interpret the mythological aspect of 'the fifties' and its presence in subsequent neoconservative politics. Klaus Mladek and George Edmondson extend the political dimension of this argument further. Here, melancholia is not the problem, but a potential solution, as long as it is embraced as a phenomenon that by its nature cannot be resolved. It is an indelible mark, an un-healing wound, that challenges both those who would leave the past behind and those who would revel in it: "Melancholia, like fidelity, declares that our past is not done, that it can never be done, that the dead cannot be killed."[97] Melancholy is, in other words, a form of *haunting*, an insistence on the presence of the dead. With their threatened and threatening, dead and dying worlds, that these films engage with such haunting on such paradoxical scales is central to the unique insight they offer. The destruction of Altair IV, more so than the union of Commander Adams and Altaira, is among the strongest gambits made towards a reckoning with past horrors, both personal and cosmic, to be found in the corpus. Yet it, too, is an act of erasure. For all its millenarian gloss, *War of the Worlds* at least allows the ruins of its catastrophe to endure. The allure of this era of science fiction film isn't the triumph of technology or its subversion, which so frequently feature in depictions of utopias and dystopias, but rather the pressing questions of "was it worth it?" and "what happens next?" [98] – the former a utilitarian question which has become indelibly associated with Truman's decision to use the bomb in order to end the war in the Pacific.

These are questions which appear to be entirely typical of the genre, but in its formulation is ultimately more founded in the consequences of the present and recent past than in the possibilities of the future. Melancholia may be motivated by an act or event in the past, but exists as a present of sorts in the ego, creating an uncanny temporality where the event should be something in the past, mourned and buried, but instead exists in the present as an unsuccessful, repressed mourning. Significantly, the image which Arnheim invokes in his portrayal of a culture which has completed its mourning of itself is of "the unworldly shadows of the Odyssey, eager to drink from the sacrificial blood so that scenes of life might come back to them once more." There is a distinct air of religiosity and even mysticism in this call to ritual here, inflected with the mythic scope of Homer, the call back to classical narratives itself hinting at, perhaps, a fundamentally reactionary quality to Arnheim's conceptualisations of melancholy, reality, and art. Certainly, expressed within these films there is a

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[97] Klaus Mladek and George Edmondson, 'A Politics of Melancholia', p. 227.
[98] This is, in essence, the sort of question Rudolf Arnheim attempts to address in his review of Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film* (1960), but towards modernity as a whole.

fear that it is not only impossible to fix the terrible events in history such as Hiroshima, or to come to terms with the reality of them, but that it might been providentially unavoidable, and thus enters an almost Calvinistic sense of the inevitable; that just as the act was preordained, so too is the punishment, that this generation might be the last, and will suffer the ultimate loss.

For Mladek and Edmondson, by contrast, "The crux of melancholia … is precisely that loss is unavowable, unconscious, and therefore radically unknown. For the melancholic, nothing is ever lost in the sense of having once been possessed, and so whatever remains of an object is unknowable".[99] In Arnheim's depiction, desiccated by the diffusion of artistic representation, the collapse of self-knowledge, it is the living who are ghostlike, desiring to be re-corporealized; his attempt to imagine an escape from melancholy itself becomes melancholic. Drawing on Walter Benjamin and Franz Kafka, however, Mladek and Edmondson instead embrace the double-ness, the ambiguity, and the prevarication of ghosts, and of melancholy itself: "Politics is not only the sphere of the undead, the specter. It is also the state of the pathetic, the anxious, the hesitant, the in between." Here, the goal is not the completion and the return to vitality that Arnheim's shadows embody (or, rather disembody). Rather, melancholy itself, properly identified, understood, and seen for what it is, remains far more valuable in its ability to truly engage with incommensurable loss without seeking to resolve or overcome it. The goal, then, is not to appropriate melancholy in order to construct a deliberately redemptive reading of these films – that would simply be another kind of imposition – but rather, to explore the spaces within this set of narratives where melancholy is expressed, and how these expressions interact with the construction of mythic and historic elements and meanings.

Methodology

Science Fiction Studies

The acknowledgement that science fiction film presents fundamental difficulties and ambiguities in formulating its very definition has, itself, become a commonplace feature in the introductions of critical and academic writing on the subject.[100] It is significant, however, that one of the most ambitious attempts to identify a consolidated, ideological core to the genre specifically places 'true science fiction' against 'myth'. In his preface to the *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Darko Suvin identifies two opposing trends within the literary genre of science fiction: a "potential cognitive tendency" which "is allied to the rise of subversive social classes and their development of more

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[99] Mladek and Edmondson, 'A Politics of Melancholia', pp. 210-211.

[100] As Christine Cornea observes in *Science Fiction Cinema* (2007), p.2: "There are almost as many definitions of science fiction as there are critics who have attempted to define it as a genre." Errol Vieth devotes much of the first chapter of *Screening Science Fiction* (2001), pp. 3-38, to the vast 'web' of different definitions of the genre, and the difficulty in identifying a core essence of the genre is, of course, central to Sobchack's approach in *The Limits of Infinity/Screening Space* (1980/87).

sophisticated productive forces and cognitions"; and a "mystifying escapism" which, conversely, is "steeped in the alienation of class society and in particular by the stagnation of a whilom subversive class." The former supports the '*cognitive* estrangement' on which Suvin places so much significance, allowing science fiction to construct a unique form critical engagement with contemporary norms through a '*novum*' (which distinguishes the SF narrative from empirical reality), while 'mystifying escapism' is clearly depicted as a negative, repressive tool of political and social orthodoxy.[101] It this concept that "determines Suvin's ruthless demarcations between genres, so that fantasy, Gothic, and horror are all degraded forms because they refuse enlightened critique and indulge the very superstitions that modernity is meant to eradicate."[102] In Suvin's words, "Mathematically speaking, myth is orientated toward constants and SF toward variables". The former for him is inherently conservative, the latter allowing for progress and change.

Unlike the more fluid approach to genre studies later developed by Steve Neale and Rick Altman,[103] Suvin's vision of science fiction as a genre is extremely rigid and uncompromising; marginal cases (including seminal texts such as Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*) are dismissed as 'science fantasy'.[104] For Suvin, this logic prevents generic terminology from becoming too vague and imprecise, ring-fencing the genre both from 'contamination' by allegedly more retrograde genres, and also from the criticism of being mere escapism. However, as Roger Luckhurst points out, "it is also a logic that prescribes a death. The *cordon sanitaire* of legitimacy constricts so far as to annihilate SF".[105] Approaches such as Suvin's elide and ultimately erase the issues surrounding the complicated and contradictory nature of the genre, causing him to "falsify genre history by separating 'proper' sf from the sort of Gothic and fantasy fictions with which it has always been entwined", and constructing an idealised view of that history which is a particularly ill fit for the Hollywood science fiction cinema of the 1950s.[106]

Instead, we may treat the genre tropes and features which are 'foreign' to Suvin's stated ideal of an SF predicated on 'cognitive estrangement', not as an infection to be cured and an infection to be sterilised, nor as a Hermetic truth revealing the secret nature of the genre, but rather

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[101] Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, p. *ix*; see p. 63 onwards for more on the 'novum'.
[102] Luckhurst, 'Pseudoscience', p. 43.
[103] See: Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2000) and Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 2000), both drawing from their respective earlier works on the subject, such as Altman's 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Genre' and Neale's 'Questions of Genre', both collected in *Film Genre Reader III* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2003), pp. 27-41 and 160-184 respectively. See below for further detail.
[104] Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, p. 69.
[105] Roger Luckhurst, 'The Many Deaths of Science Fiction' (1994) via
https://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/62/luckhurst62art.htm [accessed 10/10/18]**.**
[106] Luckhurst, 'Pseudoscience', p. 404.

as contrapuntal voices. They are part of a wider interaction of different world-views and modes of narrative thought and representation; the scientific mimesis and "realistic irreality" of science fiction existing alongside, overlapping with, pushing back against, drawing from this older, ritual mode of mythopoesis.[107] Borrowing from Todorov, we might say there is a different form of narrative suspension in play here,[108] a hesitation not dissimilar to that between the uncanny and the marvellous, save that it is not resolved by considering solely the end of the narrative (which in Hollywood genre films is often formulaic) but the whole work within a larger context. For indeed, "the interval is sf's natural habitat."[109]

From Suvin, however, Fredric Jameson draws upon the idea of cognitive estrangement as an intellectual and rational process which occurs through narrative, and which provides a kind of structure for the re-evaluation of contemporary normativity, a process which means "that therefore the reception of SF ultimately includes the social".[110] Yet where, for Suvin, the superficial realism of science fiction is central to its effect, revealing its true interest in, if not the empirical world itself, then at least a world-view that depends upon rationality, for Jameson this relationship is more complicated. He agrees with Suvin that science fiction as a whole is not predicated on extrapolation, but rather has "another, far more complex temporal structure: not to give us "images" of the future – whatever such images might mean for a reader who will necessarily predecease their "materialization" – but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present."[111] But Jameson couches this feature as being *concealed* by science fiction's "apparent realism, or representationality", suggesting that there is, if not friction, then at least an intricate layering in the narrative structure of science fiction, that its different mechanisms do not all reveal themselves in the concept of cognitive estrangement or defamiliarization, however crucial it may be to the genre. This lays the groundwork for Jameson's conception of the social imagination as being responsible for collectively constructed fantasies of both past and future, which are not "merely" mythical, archetypal and projective", but which instead, for Jameson, present a form of narrative that has a specific function in culture, and can and should be read with reference to this social context.[112]

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[107] Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, p. viii.
[108] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 41.
[109] Luckhurst, 'Pseudoscience', p. 405.
[110] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, p. 63.
[111] *Ibid.*, p. 286.
[112] The reference to fantasies of the past as well as the future is not merely an aside, but a clear reference to George Lukács' *The Historical Novel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962 [1937]). The emergence of this early genre in the 18th and 19th centuries Jameson therefore sees as anticipating that of science fiction in the 19th and 20th – Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, pp. 284-286.

As he states in direct reference to the anthropological work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, rather than being concerned with distinctions between a subjective fantasy and objective reality, "A theory of some narrative *pensée sauvage* – what I have elsewhere termed the political unconscious – will, on the contrary, want to affirm the epistemological priority of such "fantasy" in theory and praxis alike."[113] Jameson negotiates this claim by identifying the goal of this theory as the identification of "traces" of the political unconscious in *both* "high" and "mass" culture. As he stated when originally laying out the concept, "The assertion of a political unconscious proposes that we undertake such a final [political] analysis and explore the multiple paths that lead to the unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts."[114] However, he makes it clear that whatever specific trend or phase might be identified for discussion within the broader socio-cultural-political framework, as far as it might be detected and woven together into a greater narrative that is historically distinct and theoretically coherent, is nevertheless not an object to be discovered intact and whole and pre-rendered – it, necessarily, a construct produced by the mediating process of the reading itself.[115]

Thus, Jameson identifies the key question regarding science fiction as less a matter of definition than operation. Similarly, Telotte defines what he, like Annette Kuhn, terms the instrumentality of science fiction film: "more interesting, and probably more important, than what a film genre *is* is the question of what, in cultural terms, it *does*.[116] For his approach to the close analysis of the genre he has selected, as a kind of cross-section, Telotte arranges them in a three-part structure which tells us about not only their common semiotic markers, their particular shared tropes and themes, but also how these different interests affect what the films *do* in relation to their portrayal of our culture and ourselves, on both an individual and species-wide level:

> … we need only consider the three large-scale fascinations of the genre: first, the impact of forces outside the human realm, of encounters with alien beings and other worlds (or other times); second, the possibility of changes in society and culture, wrought by our science and technology; and third, technological alterations in and substitute versions of the self.[117]

These categories of collected interests, or fascinations as he calls them, Telotte labels as the "*marvelous*", the "*fantastic*", and the "*uncanny*" respectively.[118] With regard to, specifically, science

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[113] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, p. 282.
[114] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 5.
[115] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, p. 283.
[116] Telotte, *Science Fiction Film*, p. 18 (emphasis in the original text); Annette Kuhn, 'Introduction', *Alien Zone* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 1.
[117] Telotte, *Science Fiction Film*, p. 12.
[118] *Ibid*.

fiction films of the '50s, these three fascinations have a clear, though not exact and certainly not complete, relationship with the three common plot structures.

Of course, Telotte notes that his "three themes … are hardly the only ones to be found in the genre – the form is, as we have already noted, simply far too flexible to be fully accounted for in this way; nor are they … really exclusive to one branch or another."[119] The fascinations Telotte describes appear throughout the history of science fiction film in mixtures and formulations, but even more so at this particular early stage of the development of the genre as a discretely recognisable entity, but also one which must always be recognised as fluid, with permeable borders between categorisations existing both internally and externally. It is central to Todorov's original definition of the fantastic in his study that it exists in a precarious, liminal state. It is a question, not an answer, and requires the existence of an ambiguity that must be resolved at the conclusion of the narrative.[120] This characteristic of Todorov's particular conceptualisation of the fantastic as a genre necessitates the idea the fantastic must be resolved *into* something else, namely the uncanny or the marvellous – a return to a now-haunted experience of reality, or a complete break from it.

In purely functional terms, the significance here is that while, for Todorov, genre must correspond to observed phenomena (and this is the centre of his critique of Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*) and therefore must have a solid foundation in the works themselves, it is also a transient object whose nature can be altered even within the context of an individual work. However, there is a potentially greater significance here than the merely functional. Through the lens of the uncanny viewed as specifically the haunting of the mundane by the fantastic, or marvellous as the full embrace of the world of fantasy, Todorov's categories are, if not reminiscent, then at the very least comparable with the language of melancholy and mourning – especially situated, as here, in the context of both the tangible world of the historic in all its layers, and the symbolic, self-realising speech of the mythic.

Drawing from Telotte and Todorov, then, I have identified within the science fiction films of the period three distinct subgenres. These subgenres are: 'Alien Incursions' (whether benevolent or antagonistic), 'Cosmic Excursions' through space (and, occasionally, time), and the 'Uncanny Metamorphoses' of the human or animal body (almost invariably caused by radiation). While often sharing iconography and common narrative tropes, they also cover a significant range of attitudes, both towards atomic technology and broader social and political issues of the era. It is for this reason I have chosen to pair up two separate films for each of my case studies, to offer a greater contrast in

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[119] Telotte, *Science Fiction Film*, p. 23.
[120] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 41.

the analysis and interpretations of these films and how they respond to the contingencies of their design, as well greater social narratives threaded throughout the genre. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The War of the Worlds* fall clearly into the Alien Incursions category; *Forbidden Planet* and *This Island Earth* into Cosmic Excursions; and *Them!* and *The Incredible Shrinking Man* into the Uncanny Metamorphoses subgenre. These pairings are intended not as complete summaries or absolute dichotomies of their respective subgenres, but as significant instances where there are clear resonances as well as contrasts. While not a comprehensive survey, I believe that this structure builds into the project some allowance for the vagaries and mutations within the genre of science fiction film and, furthermore, the very conception of genre itself.

It would be an exaggeration to suggest that these triads are exactly congruent, that the uncanny maps onto the historic, the marvellous onto the mythic, or the fantastic onto the melancholic. However, approaching these films, not just with Telotte's fascinations, but also with Todorov's original structural *processes* in mind allows for an arrangement and deployment of analysis that can engage with questions of the relationship between the historic, the mythic, and the melancholic – and indeed, the relationship between structure and process in science fiction film. In this context, the fantastic is can be viewed as a narrative and formal mirror of the melancholic: both are processes marked by hesitation and suspension, where completion alters and potentially collapses their meaning. The fantastic may then become a way of addressing melancholy and mourning through these gestures of hesitation, even though it may sometimes be, as in the case of many of the science fiction films of the 1960s, garbed in the most surprising of raiment.

Approaches to Genre

The roots of the mass cultural phenomenon of the 1950s Hollywood science fiction film, in terms of the narrative and thematic motifs of its 'megatext', clearly do not solely reside in the classical academic genres such as satire, romance, or the epic.[121] These roots are certainly evident both in obvious cases, like *Forbidden Planet*, or in a more sublimated fashion, as in *This Island Earth*. More than this, however, the contemporary study of myth, archetype, genre, and narrative, as they emerged and developed in the work of such figures as C. G. Jung, Northrop Frye, and Joseph Campbell, are themselves a product of the same milieu as these films.[122] That is to say, if these intellectual and academic theories help reveal the structural and thematic resonance that these films have with their cultural and historical context, then the reverse can be equally true. This is all

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[121] Rieder, *Science Fiction and the Mass Culture Genre System*, p. 4
[122] As referenced earlier, Lévi-Strauss and Barthes were also producing some of their most influential work in this period, but it is beyond the remit of this thesis, and to some extent the international presence of the genre in this period, to extend the study to the Continent.

the more the case precisely because of the contrast provided by the unselfconscious manner in which these films represent the concerns, anxieties, and hopes of their present moment. This is not by any means to dismiss John Rieder's valuable clarification of the two types of genre structure historically present in the academic discourse surrounding science fiction – for, as he points out, there is a significant distinction between the classical-academic and mass cultural genre systems with regard to both their definitions and operations.[123] However, for films that are so often treated as either modern emanations of antique mythological structures and archetypes, or as depoliticised and yet at the same time profoundly ideological products of a specific historically- and culturally-located capitalistic society, their histories coincide in the ongoing development of the theorisation of genre and myth.

Clearly we have encountered wider methodological questions of genre studies than simply the definition of science fiction, where, as Rieder notes, there has been a significant shift from the mid-80s,[124] when a concern for the nature of genres studies was a central issue addressed by Rick Altman in his influential article 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre' in which, while acknowledging the breadth of these labels, he sorts previous formulations of genre theory, and genre itself, into two strands.[125] With regards to the development of theoretical paradigms, he first identifies what he terms the ritual approach (which is directly influenced by the work of Lévi-Strauss), which sees genres as direct expression of audience desire. Then there is the ideological view, which sees genres as targeted impositions by Hollywood onto the audience. We have already seen something of this divide in the Key Concepts section, and Biskind in particular stands as a ready example of the ideological, while Tarratt and her recourse to psychoanalysis, for instance, is more suggestive of the ritual. This model is later expanded on by Annette Kuhn in her introduction to *Alien Zone*, where she divides the aforementioned "cultural instrumentalities" of science fiction criticism into five categories: *reflections*, similar to the ritual; *ideologies*, almost identical to Altman's definition; *repressions*, a more psychoanalytic approach in the vein of Lucanio or Tarratt; *spectators*, dealing with the 'pleasure' of viewing; and *intertexts*, which brings the discussion into the realm of "cultural meanings and social discourses."[126] Kuhn's framing is valuable not least for the range of approaches she lays out, acknowledging various and competing factors both in a text-in-itself and in the process of reading.

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[123] Rieder, *Science Fiction and the Mass Culture Genre System*, pp. 3-4
[124] *Ibid.*, p. 13.
[125] Altman, 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Genre', p. 31.
[126] Kuhn, 'Introduction', *Alien Zone*, p. 10.

For Altman, the ritual (or reflectionist) and the ideological correspond respectively to the semantic and the syntactic constructions of genre. The semantic view is ultimately concerned with what he terms "the genre's building blocks", consisting of shared views, iconography, costuming, set design and other visible details of production. The syntactic view, meanwhile, involves attempting to identify and position the underlying structural logic of the particular corpus of films.[127] The semantic is primarily descriptive in nature, and risks a static superficiality which has 'broad applicability' but invites no great depth of reading into the texts, potentially falling into a simple enumerating of common features. The syntactic, with its more systematic and conceptual approach, invites greater debate and analysis in evaluating a genre and the films which comprise it along ideological lines, but can, conversely, turn towards the exclusionary, and thus may be either dismissive towards genre as a whole, or alternatively turns the enterprise into a gatekeeping activity. Drawing lines in the sand between horror and science fiction, between science fiction and fantasy, becomes an ideological end in itself, rather than a means by which to enable more focused discussion of the films, of their meaning and their place in the culture. The ultimate expression of this is not, in fact, Biskind, but Suvin and, to a lesser extent, Kawin.

Unsurprisingly, Altman does not see either option as satisfactory, hence his call for a synthesis: "I maintain these two categories of generic analysis are complementary, that they can be combined, and in fact that some of the most important questions of genre study can be asked only when they *are* combined."[128] This is particularly significant in relation to science fiction film where, as Sobchack has pointed out, iconographic classification is even more problematic due to the fluidity of settings and 'iconic objects' within the genre, and which Rieder argues remains an issue up until the present day.[129] This means that the significance of such objects (the examples Sobchack gives include not only the 'New Planet' and the 'Robot', but specifically 'Radioactive Isotopes' and 'Atomic Devices') are not only inconsistent across different films within the genre, but are also part of the recurring problem of the blurred boundaries of the genre itself, which happily borrows terms from the lexicon of other genres, and is borrowed from in turn. Science fiction iconography, seen in this light, demands to be interpreted in the context of Altman's synthesis of the semantic and syntactic, where it can be placed in the context of a greater semiotic structure and compared with other iterations as part of an ongoing conversation surrounding its role and meaning. As he goes on to state, "The structures of Hollywood cinema, like those of American popular mythology as a whole,

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[127] Altman, 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Genre', p. 31.
[128] *Ibid.*, p. 34.
[129] Sobchack, *Screening Space*, pp. 87-88; Rieder, *Science Fiction and the Mass Culture Genre System*, pp. 14-15.

serve to mask the very distinction between ritual and ideological functions. Hollywood does not simply lend its voice to the public's desires, nor does it simply manipulate the audience." [130] In this sense he is suggesting a turn towards Kuhn's category of the *intertext*, towards examining the formation and operation of these multifarious strands of culture weaving in and out of cinematic production itself, but all the while remaining grounded in the formal constructions of genre.

As a still-emerging genre in this period, therefore, it is important to bear in mind this evolving relationship between the icons of a science fiction and its various forms of underlying narrative logic, how one may feed into the other and alter or create meaning and significance that did not exist before, and how this internal relationship exists in a wider context of production and audience response, makes genres not fixed and immutable, but malleable and even evolving: "… most genres go through a period of accommodation during which the public's desires are fitted to Hollywood's priorities (and vice versa)." [131] This is echoed by Steve Neale, when he argues that "It may at first sight seem as though repetition and sameness are the primary hallmarks of genres, as though, therefore, genres are above all inherently static. But … genres are, nevertheless, best understood as *processes*." [132] Yet the reality is even more complex, as Neale himself draws attention to in his later work.

In his explanation of how genre interacts and is affected by the fortunes of Hollywood as a whole, Neale highlights that the '50s was a period of decline and adaptation in the operation of the American film industry, due to both internal and external factors which resulted in the collapse of the studio system. [133] From a production and financial perspective, the potential appeal of the sci-fi film as a widescreen spectacle, in an era which saw the rise of home television and falling cinema audiences, can clearly not be ignored. Yet in this thesis I suggest, while it is important to avoid taking these industrial details as merely incidental, that clearly does not mean a particular genre should be sectioned off from wider cultural trends of the period, whether within cinema or beyond. Neale himself acknowledges this towards the end of *Genre and Hollywood* where, in his observation that the paranoia often attributed to science fiction film exists throughout various genres of the period, which he nevertheless identifies as an attitude reflective of that period of filmmaking, rather than of the particular genre itself. [134]

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[130] Altman, 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Genre', p. 37.
[131] *Ibid.*, p. 37.
[132] Neale, 'Questions of Genre', p. 171.
[133] Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p. 242.
[134] *Ibid.*, p. 254.

Problems of Method

However, the notion that film itself – or any text – might describe more than the mode of its medium and genre at a particular moment of their own development has itself been the subject to significant criticism. The question of the extent to which texts are reflective of their period very much concerned critics like Umberto Eco and neo-formalist film theorists such as David Bordwell, who cautioned against over-use of analogy as an interpretative tool, or condemned attempts to read texts as expressions of a 'Zeitgeist'. The essence of Eco's and Bordwell's criticisms is that such interpretation is a matter of finding the hidden code which, once discovered, would reveal the true significance of the work – not just a code, but a codex, which solves all questions of meaning in relation to itself. We have seen permutations of this, in very different forms, in the approaches of Biskind and Shapiro. Eco refers to it as "The syndrome of the secret", and the medical and diagnostic terminology here is judiciously chosen. He traces this 'syndrome' back from contemporary postmodernist approaches to a combined "Hermetic and the Gnostic heritage" which sees the knowledge of such secrets as a particular source of power.[135] This problematic legacy is then further exacerbated for Eco by the nature of analogy itself. He, of course, acknowledges that "It is indisputable that human beings think (also) in terms of identity and similarity." However, the very reality that "each of us has introjected into him or her an indisputable fact, namely, that *from a certain point of view everything bears relationships of analogy, contiguity and similarity to everything else*" is, for Eco, sufficient reason to use caution in the field of analogy and signification, as it is not only in our nature to seek to find such links, but to construct them for ourselves when we cannot. [136]

This is, in part, what Bordwell sought to address in certain sections of his *Poetics of Cinema*, and which he later followed up on in pieces such as his blog post 'Zip, zero, Zeitgeist'. One of the key points he makes is how easily the desire to use films, being artefacts of mass culture, to talk about society risks a basic logic fallacy, because "it easily becomes circular. (All popular films reflect social attitudes. How do we know what the social attitudes are? Just look at the films!) We need independent and pretty broadly based evidence to show that some deep needs of the audience exist and are being addressed by a film." [137] Bordwell's concerns about reflectionist criticism also resound with Eco's concerns surrounding the potentially endless referentiality of analogy. [138] As is the case with Eco's critique of analogy, Bordwell is not attempting to deny the existence of the fundamental

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[135] Umberto Eco, 'Interpretation and History', in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) pp. 38-39.
[136] Umberto Eco, 'Overinterpreting Texts', in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 48 – emphasis in the original text.
[137] David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 30.
[138] *Ibid*., pp. 31-32.

relationships in play here, or claim that films exist in some kind of cultural sensory deprivation chamber: "This isn't to say that society has no impact on films. Of course it does. But that impact isn't single or simple." Rather, it is a question of how we proceed with accessing or re-constructing those relationships. For Bordwell, "causal explanation in poetics can best proceed in steady steps, moving from the artwork to the proximate conditions of production (agents, institutions, and communal norms and practices). These in turn may be influenced by both immediate social causes and longer-term preconditions, we have to look and see exactly how."[139] As with Eco's stipulation of three criteria, these are certainly not unreasonable concerns to bear in mind, and Bordwell's approach does, in fact, have certain further resonance with Neale's previously discussed view on the evolution of genre in Hollywood.

Nevertheless, it is, I believe, fair to note that the examples which Bordwell and Eco both use to identify their own respective concerns with forms of 'overinterpretation' are demonstrative of not just an allegedly flawed concept of the relationship between media and culture, but a clearly flawed practice. The example of the *New York Times* feature Bordwell discusses in 'Zip, zero, Zeitgeist' is not merely failing to 'proceed in steady steps' from the proximate details to the bigger picture, but essentially neglecting to do any due diligence on film production at all, appearing to assume that films spring fully-formed onto the screen (in part, as Bordwell notes, this may be because the columnists in question do not take the films they are discussing particularly seriously).[140] This offers a clear explication of Bordwell's fundamental concerns surrounding the attempt to place films as part of a wider context from the top down, and it does no harm to be reminded that "a large part of any movie is the result of will and skill, not the passive reflection of vague social turmoil."[141] Even in cases where the film is attempting to overtly address current politically or culturally relevant themes, "The filmmaker may claim to be tapping the Zeitgeist, but it's really the Zeitgeist as she or he understands it. It's not the public expressing itself spontaneously and unselfconsciously through the movie."[142] Bordwell, then, rightly warns us against the risk of imposing, rather than discovering, meaning within the text of the film.

The examples Eco uses present a slightly alternate problem, in particular his discussion of Gabrielle Rossetti's reading of Dante, where the issue is not one of trying to connect the broad subject of the material to a contemporary cultural moment, but rather finding clues that link the

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[139] David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, p. 32.

[140] David Bordwell, 'Zip, zero, Zeitgeist', http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2014/08/24/zip-zero-zeitgeist/ [accessed 07/03/2015].

[141] *Ibid*.

[142] *Ibid*.

work to a conceptualisation of Masonic tradition that extends back into the mists of time (and, as per Bordwell's identification of the circularity of similar arguments, thereby prove the historical existence of that tradition).[143] In the one case, we have a contemporaneous political sensibility being pressed down upon a group of works in the name of 'relevance', forcibly configuring them into a broader picture of what is happening in the present moment. In the other, there is a desire to find a link to a movement that the interpreter conceives of as almost outside of history (perhaps because it is). We have seen the criticism of science fiction films in this period extend in both directions when, in fact, neither is completely satisfactory, that they too easily fall into the traps of reaching for obvious resemblance, slotting in works with obvious comparisons with no mind paid towards the realities and timescale of production.

A formal approach based in poetics, then, serves as a way of beginning, of grounding the selected works for an analysis based in filmmaking as a technical and artistic practice, not a magical conjuring. But this does not mean we must then abandon any ambition towards orientating the films in relation to their conception and reception in the wider cultural and historic context, or uncovering how the mutations in genre narratives and iconography can accumulate their own significance through a kind of cultural feedback loop. Jonathan Cullen argues that what is called 'overinterpretation' by Eco functions, at its best, similar to the way linguistics "does not seek to interpret the sentences of a language but to reconstruct the system of rules that constitutes and enables it to function". The purpose of setting an analysis of a text in a broader systemic context is not to ignore its immediate functionality, but rather "is an attempt to relate a text to the general mechanisms of narrative, of figuration, of ideology, and so on."[144] It is, to put it in Eco's terms, not about figuring out what the text's model reader (or audience) is supposed to be, and what the text is attempting to communicate in those terms, but to try and establish the means by which such a model can and is constructed in the first place. Inspired by Barthes (who he describes as "congenitally given to hesitating between poetics and interpretation"), Cullen argues:

> A method that compels people to puzzle over not just those elements which might seem to resist the totalization of meaning but also those about which there might initially seem to be nothing to say has a better chance of producing discoveries … than one which seeks only to answer those questions that a text asks its model reader.[145]

The investigation is not, then, just an interpretation of a series visual texts in an attempt to 'decode' them, so as to reveal a deliberately or even subconsciously hidden meaning or purpose. It is, instead,

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[143] Eco, 'Overinterpreting Texts', pp. 53-60.
[144] Jonathan Cullen, 'In Defence of Overinterpretation', *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 116.
[145] *Ibid*., p. 122.

to explore, to the extent knowledge and thought permit, the exact nature of the relationship between the composition and reception of these specific films, and the interaction this corpus has with a broader response to a particular historical moment. It is entirely concerned with how the contingent factors, Bordwell's 'proximate conditions', interact with a system under the pressure of tumultuous, if momentary suppressed, historical transition.

Negotiating the role of analogy in narrative and meaning does not have to be a hurdle in this endeavour, but instead can offer a potentially invaluable resource. As Stafford has insisted, analogy is not just a trap of endless reference, nor just a comforting and accessible way of sidestepping the problem of constructing meaning, but an engagement with the problem itself:

> Analogy – whether in myth, philosophy, religion, history, or aesthetics – grappled with the problem of how to conjoin an accumulated body of practices to the shifting present and elusive future. Within this developmental, not revolutionary, framework, the birth of the new was always apparitional, the astonishing product of an artful combination of preexisting elements. This generative potency … was conceived basically in sexual and magical terms. Transformation always arose at the intersection of constancy with instability.[146]

What an analogical approach sheds light upon is the way we conceive of and deal with change. It exists at and coordinates the nexus point of recorded tradition and emerging experience, providing the method for sorting through new data, of attaching significance and meaning to anything we encounter. Rather than being a redoubt of Hermetic cryptology, "In analogy, resemblance is first and foremost a matter of mimesis, of clothing, rather than veiling, ideas."[147] It allows us to address a film as an *instance*, significant in itself, but not cut off from its context. The subject of analysis neither absorbed incorporeally into an all-encompassing Zeitgeist, nor sealed within the bunker of formalism. Rather than imposing meaning, it permits a process of working outwards from the text through induction.

Analogy, thereby, offers a means by which we can understand and relate not just knowledge already attained and established within a culture, but also offers a paradigm for discussing the new, the mutable, and the transformational. In this we can observe perhaps the value of the concept to a reading of the science fiction films of the 1950s. Here too we can see a surprisingly moment of contact, or covalence, between Stafford and Bordwell here, despite their very different approaches:

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[146] Barbara Stafford, *Visual Analogy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), p. 133.
[147] *Ibid*., p. 109.

> We understand mass-market films better when we see them as, sometimes opportunistically, grabbing material from the wider culture (whether that material reflects mass sentiment or not) and transforming it through narrative and stylistic conventions. That transformation, or rather transmutation, is central to the artistry of popular entertainment.[148]

It would not do to overstate this momentary affinity. Indeed it, too, might be accused of being just such a 'loose and intuitive connection' between two very different orders of thought. Yet, from a certain point of view, what Bordwell is describing is exactly the kind of evolutionary, developmental *process* which, for Stafford, defines analogy as a system of meaning. It is a process that occurs through action, through the mixture of intent and accident, at the point where they meet accrued influence and systemic conditions. We can, I believe, still embrace Bordwell's suggestion that "Instead of reflection, better to think of refraction, the bending and reconfiguring of social themes under the pressure of filmmaking traditions" without abandoning analogical reasoning, connecting it to a wider interpretative model founded in induction. Such an inductive process may synthesise a formal textual analysis and narrative semantics with not only an iconographic and ideological syntax, but also a sociological perspective which nevertheless acknowledges the limitations of its purview.

Chapter Breakdowns

Chapter 1: Alien Incursions

In the first pair of films selected for a close reading case study, both the interplanetary peacekeepers of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and the genocidal enemy of *The War of the Worlds* (1953), reference the threat of nuclear conflict and planetary annihilation in the context of the present day, placing current world superpowers under the threat of cosmic colonisation. These films are analysed by grounding them in their formal and narrative construction, before examining them as alternately as mythic and archetypal narratives in contrast to how they address or react against their contemporary political, social, and technological context. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* will be analysed through the narrative positioning of its unusual alien protagonist Klaatu, foregrounding how the narrative treats him and tracing the significance of his most important relationships. Then, focusing on the menacing figure of the robot Gort, the reading will expand outwards towards a consideration of the film's use of religious and mythic archetypes, and how their application to its underlying secular, political address attempts to tackle the problem of the bomb head-on. The treatment of *The War of the Worlds* will then invert and mirror the process followed in the first half of this case study, placing the investigation of the social and political investigation, here, as context for the archetypal forms the comprise the narrative. The use of a traditional approach to plot and

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[148] David Bordwell, 'Zip, zero, Zeitgeist'.

storytelling as a foundation for a unique and distinctive special effects display is foregrounded here. Between the two halves of the case study, this chapter attempts to draw together the mythological strands of thought, the psychosocial debris, which coalesce around the use of the bomb and the associated melancholic disquietudes of post-war technological civilisation.

Chapter 2: Cosmic Excursions
In the second case study, the project looks at two films which both cast their dramas against the vast, cosmic scale of journeys to distant planets – invariably sites of grievous destruction, unfathomable loss, in other words, of melancholic regrets and anxious fears. However, the structure of their narratives, and the way this central conceit is experienced by the characters, unfold in very different ways. *Forbidden Planet* (1956), loosely based on *The Tempest*, uses Shakespeare's play as a foundation for engaging with issues surrounding the destructive potential of technology and humanity's inclination towards misuse of such power, casting present concerns onto the canvas of a distant planet. Notably, the film deliberately incorporated elements of intellectual discourse popular at the time, whether they had been present in the culture for decades, like psychoanalytic theory, or were still emerging, as in the case of cybernetics. Meanwhile, in *This Island Earth* (1955), an adaptation of a contemporary science fiction novel, the narrative is structured around a steadily unfolding engagement with the genre itself, with the protagonist's investigations of strange technology, and a sinister scientific retreat, resulting in an encounter with alien life and worlds – a journey through genre. *Forbidden Planet* thus provides an opportunity to witness the complexities and contradictions of the relationship between academic concepts and their popular representation through such distinctions as the gap between Wiener's original conception of cybernetics and the Barrons' reinterpretation of cybernetics in their soundtrack art. *This Island Earth*, on the other hand, allows us to investigate the functions of both science fiction film specifically and genre itself as a system of taxonomy, and consider the equally complex dynamics within a genre between internal formal traditions and external historical influences. Both films are therefore illustrative of the reflexive relationship between how science fiction film was conceived and how science fiction film actually operated in the context of the cultural milieu of the '50s and the intellectual constellation of that era.

Chapter 3: Uncanny Metamorphoses
In the third case study, both selected films depict the upsetting of the relationship between humanity and the natural world through distortions in size and scale. *Them!* (1954) represents this through the monstrous figures of its giant ants, identified within the film as having been mutated by the very first atomic test explosion. Meanwhile, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957) conversely depicts the miniaturisation of its human protagonist, caused by contact with a combination of

radioactive mist and insecticides. This investigation therefore contrasts these films in relation to beliefs concerning, and imaginative depictions of, the fantastical effects attributed to radiation and the bomb's wider impact on the world. The discussion of *Them!* is grounded in the relationship between this potential new world order, embodied by the ants, and the resilience of the systematic, organised endeavours of its human characters, all representatives of interlinked institutions. The film foregrounds an ideal of civic duty and collective collaboration, coupled with the celebration of individual bravery and ingenuity, as the means by which human civilisation can be preserved. It is notable in this context that, outside of a few gestures towards the uncertainty of the future, *Them!* is the least melancholic in tone of the films here analysed. Conversely, the isolation of the protagonist of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* is illustrated throughout the film through the profound and never-resolved failings of communication and comprehension between him and his family, as well as scientists and others who try to help. His individual melancholy is pervasive and inescapable, not despite but because of the film's inverting of science fiction's traditionally larger scale. Through their harmonies and dissonances, the films in this case study provide an opportunity to investigate the extent to which the bomb and its associated signifiers, such as radiation, depict and dramatize other cultural anxieties, specifically issues surrounding gender and domesticity or fear of the culturally and biologically other, while equally suggesting how such broader issues might be used to dramatize a response to the bomb itself.

Conclusion

Informed by the case studies, and the reframing of the pertinent theoretical issues which have arisen through them in the chapters so far, the conclusion will return to confront the fundamental questions first addressed in the Key Concepts and Methodology sections. It will develop a deeper response to the challenges set forth by Bordwell, Eco, and other critics regarding the question of interpretation, as well as Sontag's and Suvin's charges against science fiction film in particular. It will lay out a coherent model of the relationship between myth, history, and a form of social melancholy, and how they function in relation to each other at a specific cultural moment – here at the disquieting '50s, troubled despite the apparent American triumph in economics, politics, and war. Finally, it will respond to the key question of the possibilities and limits of interpretation which lies at the root of the thesis, and reframe the place of these films in the history of science fiction cinema, and the genre in relation to the medium and culture more broadly.

Chapter 1: Alien Incursions

As laid out in the methodology, this thesis begins with an examination of two films which both portray "the impact of forces outside the human realm" on a recognisable contemporary America, but in a radically divergent manner.[1] Based on Harry Bates's 1940 short story 'Farewell to the Master',[2] *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was directed by Robert Wise and released in 1951 by 20th Century Fox. The film is a science-fiction drama constructed around the arrival of alien visitor, Klaatu (Michael Rennie), and his interactions with the people he meets after his spaceship lands in Washington DC. Accompanied by the robotic behemoth Gort, Klaatu comes as an emissary from a community of other worlds, who have become concerned that humanity's technological advancement now threatens an established interplanetary peace, but his overtures are rejected by the political establishment due to the cynicism and self-interest of Earth's governments. He therefore escapes the custody of the US government and hides out at a city boarding house; develops friendships with a war widow and her son; and allies himself with a respected scientist. Tracked down once more by the military, he is mortally wounded and, before he and Gort return to outer space, finally delivers his warning to the world community through a gathering of scientists and other intellectuals. The depiction of the alien visitors is complex and occasionally contradictory, with Gort in particular acting as protector of both Klaatu and interplanetary peace by fulfilling the role of a traditional movie monster. However, despite the destruction which is explicitly depicted and implicitly threatened by alien forces, the film clearly falls on the side of the necessity of the message they bring.

Far less ambiguous by comparison is the role of the Martians in 1953's *The War of the Worlds*, directed by Byron Haskins and produced for Paramount by George Pal, who had previously ventured into science-fiction film with *Destination Moon* (1950 dir. Irving Pachel) and *When Worlds Collide* (1951 dir. Rudolph Maté). By working with notable science fiction author Robert Heinlein to bring *Destination Moon* into existence, Pal is often credited as having ushered the genre into the era of its greatest and most rapid expansion, though as noted in the introduction, commentators such as Richard Hodgens argued that very few of the films which followed resemble the attempts Pal's films made at taking such notions as journeys to nearby planets and planetoids or conflicts between worlds and their populations 'seriously'.[3] Here, just as in H. G. Wells's 1898 novel,[4] the Martians are

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[1] J. P. Telotte, *Science Fiction Film*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 18.

[2] Harry Bates, 'Farewell to the Master', *Astounding Science Fiction*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (October 1940), pp. 58-86.

[3] Richard Hodgens, 'A Brief, Tragical History of the Science Fiction Film', in William Johnson, ed. *Focus on the Science Fiction Film* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 80.

[4] H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds*, in *Classic Collection* (London: Gollancz, 2010), pp. 203-364.

conquerors whose military technology vastly outstrips that of any earthly imperial power, whether embodied in a British ironclad warship or an American atomic bomb.

As Liz Hedgecock observes of the original novel, "The Martian's exodus from their dying planet parallels Britain's anxious expansion [in the late 19th century] into new territories; expansion proves survival which proves a fit nation."[5] Whereas Klaatu makes his regrets about the possibility of violence quite clear, the Martians show a complete disregard for human life, and are devoid of any individual personalities on which can be displayed emotions such as regret or even hatred. The film traces the path of their conquest of California, standing in for the world at large, primarily from the perspective of another respectable scientist figure, Clayton Forrester (Gene Barry), with only brief glimpses of the greater conflict. Never is the possibility of diplomacy presented as viable, and in the end, humanity is only saved because the Martian forces are wiped out thanks to their intolerance of earth's microbes – a victory the film, contrary to the religious scepticism of Wells's novel,[6] credits to God.

In both cases, the aliens are not permitted to remain on earth, but where Klaatu's mortal wound is a beneficent sacrifice, the fate of the Martians seems, in so far as their position or agency is considered at all, a punishment for their moral and cosmic transgressions. However, the aim of specifically pairing of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The War of the Worlds* together is not to produce simple, binary contrasts within the depiction of contemporary politics and approaches to the Other, a morality meta-play of good aliens versus bad, of filmmakers open-minded and closed, of celebrations of the power of communication versus visions of entropic destruction. The intent is not even to set a dialectic of the mythic and the historic – though the films in question obviously have drastically different relationships with those fundamental concepts. Rather, the goal is to set up a mirror that reflects and refracts not just what attitudes and themes are being manifested, but *how* the variations in the narrative and thematic are arranged, identifying the points of commonality as well as distinction. The gestures of questioning and reassurance in these two films, of challenges to and reassertions of the cultural traditions and ideological structures of post-war America, are in part fascinating because they are drawn in part from the same wellspring of melancholic longing.

Operating on this level, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* presents a political narrative, addressed to the historical moment, but clothed in the vestments of the archetypal and mythic. To put it

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[5] Liz Hedgecock, '"The Martians Are Coming!": Civilisation v. Invasion in *The War of the Worlds* and *Mars Attacks!*', *Alien Identities: Exploring Differences in Film and Science Fiction*, eds. Deborah Campbell, I. Q. Hunter, Heidi Qaya, and Imelds Whelehan (London: Pluto Press, 1999), p. 107

[6] Particularly expressed in the character and fate of the curate. See: Wells, 'The Death of the Curate', *The War of the World* Book II Chapter IV, pp. 324-332.

another way, its generic vocabulary is science fiction, its grammar mystical and religious, but the core of the message it is trying to convey is clearly born out of contemporary political concerns, framed by material historical realities. Klaatu may descend from the heavens with profound wisdom, but it is a wisdom directed towards the specific environment of the early Cold War. *The War of the Worlds*, on the other hand, offers not only a drastically different representation of the alien other, but a fundamentally very different way of formulating an alien encounter against the backdrop of the early nuclear age. The narrative is certainly framed historically, garlanded with a fear of the devastating power of technological warfare that is born of a specific moment in time; in the deep, overlapping shadows of Pearl Harbour, Hiroshima, and the Holocaust. Yet the bones of this version of story, the core aspects of its meaning, are built on archetypal themes of faith, marriage, communion, and divine grace. The symbolic vocabulary remains that of science fiction, just as in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, but the contemporary motifs of modern warfare and refugee evacuations are suborned to the service of an archetypal framework through which they can be understood in, essentially, Biblical terms. The point is, therefore, not to position this pairing of films as universally and systematically subordinate to either an epochal Zeitgeist or to a set of eternally re-inscribed archetypes. Rather it is to sketch out and explore the exchange between the thematic and conceptual elements in play in these instances, rarefied directly because of the freedom with which they are rendered by the broad imaginative vocabulary of science fiction.

The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951)

More Troublesome Than Oppenheimer: Dramatis Personae
Whilst primarily a character drama rather than a spectacular special-effects picture (though, like its use of archetypes, the film is happy to employ special effects to further its objectives), the themes of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* play out through the relationships and encounters between its characters, and it is these associations which give the narrative its shape. This is, then, the lens through which it will be initially surveyed and understood formally and mechanically, before endeavouring to expand upon this basis with a broader discussion of its political address and its appropriation of archetypal forms. The film is constructed around the alien Klaatu's interactions with the ordinary humans he meets, usually but not always from his perspective. Indeed, the focalisation of the film's actual narrative viewpoint shifts a number of times, though always with Klaatu as its central referent. The first sequence, lasting for about twenty minutes, shows his initial contact with the authorities in Washington DC, and here the narrative takes a mostly objective view, never staying with one perspective long enough for the audience to develop an association with any particular observer of this extraordinary event. The first substantial interaction Klaatu has that we see – besides being shot by a panicked soldier – is with Mr. Harley (Frank Conroy), the Secretary to

the President. We accompany Mr. Harley as he enters the hospital room where Klaatu is being held, and the camera does not initially allow us to see the alien's face. It is only after Klaatu offers Mr. Harley a seat that we finally get a clear view of this stranger to our world, who nevertheless looks precisely like a white male in his forties. Following this first exchange, our sympathies are guided towards the alien Klaatu and away from our fellow human. Once Klaatu has made his desire to speak to every world leader simultaneously and without exception, and Mr. Harley conveys his profound scepticism, their conversation comes to a close. However, the camera does not exit with Mr. Harley as it came in with him, but lingers on a contemplative Klaatu. This is a clear set-up for their following encounter, which completes the transition of the audience's sympathies from the world-weary and pessimistic human politician, to the reserved but determinedly optimistic alien.

Their second and final scene together follows the same pattern as the first, with Mr. Harley showing evidence that Klaatu's demand is unfeasible, and the alien restating his disinterest in the Earth's internal political squabbling. Throughout these scenes Mr. Harley is presented as cynical yet competent, certainly neither an idiot nor an evil man, but nevertheless profoundly limited by the vagaries of Earth's geopolitical structure; limits which the audience is encouraged to join Klaatu in seeing past. Further hammering home the transition are two point-of-view shots from Klaatu's perspective: one of the view from the hospital room's window, and another of the door after it is locked. Both serve to clue the audience into Klaatu's next course of action: to walk amongst the people of Earth (or, at least, Washington DC) by escaping his comfortable confinement. This serves a narrative purpose, signposting the reveal of Klaatu's escape, but it can only do this by inviting a higher level of sympathy with the character and his position. Mr. Harley, meanwhile, exits both the hospital and the plot, and does not return. His interactions with Klaatu, and his role in the film's narrative, have come to the end of their assigned purpose, illustrating the impossibility of Klaatu's goals aligning with the established earthly powers. All of Klaatu's future interactions with the government occur through encounters with the military as a fugitive. This is largely significant for the necessity of ruling out any chance for Klaatu to work with the American political establishment and, more broadly, that of the conventional geopolitical world-system of nations with competing interests. Yet the language the film uses here, both in dialogue and its visual emphasis, is of particular importance to how it frames Klaatu and his critique of human affairs.

The glance out of the window is a key moment in this early sequence, and while it might be interpreted as hierarchical, with Klaatu looking out over the people from above, its focus is not on his power, but his open-minded curiosity, a visual accompaniment to his optimistic challenge to Mr. Harley's cynicism. It is significant that the view is of a hospital courtyard: his view is of people helping each other, of *care*. It tells him, and reminds us, that there is more to humanity than the

fear, pettiness, and cynicism he has so far been exposed to. In a significant interruption of the film's focalisation on Klaatu at this juncture, the onscreen action elides the details of how he actually frees himself from his confinement in the hospital. We see the response of his military guards, but not his own planning or execution of any deceptive scheme or stealthy exfiltration. The film is fundamentally uninterested, at this early stage, in such scenes of suspense. Instead we catch up with Klaatu following his escape, trying to find a place to hide out while the authorities scour the city. Assuming the portentous name of 'Mr. Carpenter' (a particularly unsubtle reference to Christ's profession before beginning his public ministry in the Synoptic Gospels), he becomes a resident at a city boarding house and begins to get to know the other residents there, especially widowed mother Helen Benson and her son Bobby. It is with Bobby that Klaatu explores Washington DC, and the middle section of the film is largely structured around their growing friendship. It is Bobby who is ultimately responsible for leading Klaatu to Professor Barnhardt, a prominent scientist who becomes the alien's key ally in spreading the message he has arrived on earth to deliver. This middle act culminates in Bobby's discovery of Mr. Carpenter's true nature by following him to the alien spaceship. Following this, like Mr. Harley before him, Bobby vanishes from the narrative, his last words childishly but powerfully condemning the scepticism of the adults around him, and the final section of the film is subsequently built around Klaatu and Helen, and their growing understanding of each other after she comes to terms with his true identity.

Recognising not only the structure of the film's narrative, but also the emphasis placed on these different segments, is vital to parsing between the various claims that have been made regarding its political message and overall world-view. Biskind, for instance, strikes upon Barnhardt as a figure of particular significance, in all his dishevelled Einsteinian splendour, and certainly the figure of the scientist is an important one to examine. The film goes out of its way to play up his significance in its world, suggesting via Bobby's innocent wisdom that he is in fact the modern-day equivalent of Abraham Lincoln as both an intellectual and moral leader (a characterisation of the martyred 19th century president which Klaatu, and by extension the film, certainly buys into). As Biskind notes, Einstein, who Barnhardt so closely resembles, "was never a favorite of the authorities; he was even more troublesome than Oppenheimer."[7] Like Clayton Forrester, the scientist hero of *The War of the Worlds*, Barnhardt's prestige is in significant part established in his connection with the work on developing the atomic bomb. This endows his judgement with an additional layer of significance: of Klaatu's feat in disabling all non-vital human electronics, Biskind observes that "The professor is impressed; after all, he invented the atomic bomb, and he knows power when he sees

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[7] Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1983), p. 153.

it."[8] Yet, as Glen Scott Allen highlights, Einstein suffered from negligible public backlash compared to Oppenheimer and the other atomic scientists, perhaps due to his more indirect connection to the Manhattan Project itself, and the fact that despite being a theoretical physicist, he somehow more closely matched, in Allen's formulation, the role of the benevolent 'master mechanic' than the threatening 'wicked wizard' in the public imagination.[9]

Figure 1 – *The Day the Earth Stood Still:* **Klaatu meets Professor Barnhardt.**

Essentially, by resembling Einstein, Barnhardt is positioned clearly as not only intellectually brilliant, but a safe and moral pair of hands when it comes to science and technology (so often conflated in the public mind), and his more direct connection with the invention of the atomic bomb is, essentially, just an inevitable matter of simplifying things for the audience.[10] Yet Barnhardt, for all his prestige, wisdom, and knowhow, is not the hero of the film's narrative, or even one of its secondary viewpoint characters like Bobby or Helen. The scene where he responds to Klaatu's global stunt of negating all non-vital electricity for half an hour is the only one where he provides the focal

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[8] Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, p. 153.
[9] Glen Scott Allen, *Master Mechanics & Wicked Wizards* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), pp. 89-91.
[10] *Ibid*.

point – and that, essentially, is part of the wider montage sequence depicting the worldwide reaction to the eponymous 'Day the Earth Stood Still'. The actual purpose of Barnhardt in the story is twofold: to give the audience further confirmation of Klaatu's genius, authority, and virtue; and to provide an allied figure of influence and means (if not outright authority) outside of the conventional nationalistic politics which Klaatu disparages. Barnhardt is the mechanism for the gathering of intelligentsia at the end of the film, a role which allows Klaatu to complete his mission of spreading his cosmic warning to all humanity. In other words, Barnhardt's role in the *story* (the events that occur within the diegesis) is highly significant, but his actual involvement in the *plot* (the events as they are relayed to the audience) is largely peripheral.[11] It is Klaatu who remains the key to unravelling the film's significance and its signification, and to properly understand his place in the narrative, and the way his character is framed by frequent resort to generic motifs and archetypal forms, we need to re-trace our steps back to the film's opening moments.

The Klaatu/Gort Dyad I: Angels in America
The montage which opens *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is essentially in two distinct halves with their own specific tenor, like the partnership at the heart of the narrative, and the thematic underpinnings of the film itself. The title and credits sequence emphasises the cosmic backdrop of the story, with images of stars, galaxies and nebulae. A little over a minute in, the earth and moon appear, and finally the film performs a series of cuts that lead us into the earth's atmosphere and finally to footage from an aircraft in flight, followed by a dissolve to a radar dish. Here the shift can be detected in the score, which moves from a slow-paced, eerie warbling, to a more frenetic beat, marking the beginning of the second half of the montage. This latter half accomplishes two different objectives: firstly, establishing the global *stakes* of a story which largely takes place within the boundaries of a single city; and secondly, emphasizing the *reality* of the events unfolding on-screen. A quartet of prominent and respected real-life journalists (Elmer Davis, Gabriel Heatter, H. V. Kaltenborn, and Drew Pearson) are brought in to attest to this authenticity. As Davis informs his fictional audience, and by extension the real audience of the film, "This is not another flying saucer scare. Scientists and military men are already agreed on that. Whatever it is, it's something real." Yet the very nature of the event – the arrival of an alien spaceship on Earth – clearly labels it as science fictional, outside the realm of realistic or naturalistic storytelling, following the expectations put in place by the title and credits sequence in the first half of the montage.

These feints at notions of realism are less to do with any claims with regard to the story's plausibility, and more a declaration of narrative intent. It is a statement of the film's atypicality, that

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[11] As per David Bordwell & Kristin Thompson's basic definitions of these two fundamental aspects of narrative in *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013).

this is not a spurious 'alien story', that it should be engaged with on more intellectual terms – and yet it remains, in Northrop Frye's terms, within the broad church of romance, which is distinguished by "the tendency … to displace myth in a human direction and yet, in contrast to "realism," to conventionalize content in an idealized direction."[12] In these terms, Klaatu can be seen as a modern, science fictional reimagining of the romantic hero: more than human, but not quite a literal god. Outside of demonstrations of his intelligence, his feats are performed remotely through the technology of his spacecraft, and the power he represents is more directly embodied externally in the robotic figure of Gort. He is demonstrative of Frye's principle of displacement as it operates in the genre of science fiction: "what can be metaphorically identified in myth can only be linked in romance by some form of simile: analogy, significant association, incidental accompanying imagery, and the like."[13] Klaatu is not himself divine, but he is linked to both a divine grace and divine power through associative relationships that Frye identifies as characteristic of romance. He is neither a sun-god nor a tree-god – or even a space-god – but the journey his character takes over the course of the film is clearly and directly comparable to myths of divine visitation, of resurrection and cosmic redemption.

Indeed, one of the most commented-upon aspects of the film is Klaatu's role as a heavenly figure, on the boundary between the angelic and the messianic. Ruppersberg singles him out as the modern ancestor of a whole procession of alien messiahs throughout the science fiction film narratives of the 1960s, '70s and '80s.[14] He goes on to note that "Underlying the motif of the alien messiah is the mythos of the Christian messiah, begotten by the divine Jehovah on a mortal woman, sent to redeem a sin-ridden humanity and to offer immortality." Ruppersberg is, perhaps, overly focused on Christianity as the source of messianic mythology, since that tradition is, of course, based in the Judaic tradition where, as understood by Walter Benjamin, "every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter."[15] Nevertheless, Ruppersberg insists the Christian messianic mythology is more accessible "to the popular mind" than other forms, but that in any case "[in] whatever form, the messiah is an expression of transcendence, from the first stage of vulnerability and closure to the second stage of transcendence and openness."[16] The arc of Klaatu's character, his purpose within the story, further reinforces the connections the narrative has with Frye's analysis of romance and its relationship to myth. For Frye, the messianic arc is the blueprint

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[12] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 136-137.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 137.
[14] Hugh Ruppersberg, 'The Alien Messiah', in *Alien Zone*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London: Verso, 1990), p. 32.
[15] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (New York: Schocken Books, 1999), p. 255.
[16] Ruppersberg, 'Alien Messiah' pp.33-34.

for the romance narrative: "the hero of romance is analogous to the mythical Messiah or deliverer who comes from an upper world, and his enemy is analogous to the demonic power of a lower world."[17] Klaatu's quasi-preternatural status as an alien, as being literally from and of the heavens, and the purity which is associated with his utopian civilization, would seemingly mark him as being closer to the level of myth than the film's own opening rhetoric would have us believe. Unlike a classic protagonist of romance, he has no single opponent in his quest to save the people of earth from themselves, and the strange partnership he has with the film's 'monster', Gort, emphasises that he is no two-fisted pulp hero like Flash Gordon or Buck Rogers. However, in a sense, this emphasises, rather than detracts from, his quasi-mythic status. His enemy is not some *being* who represents the 'lower world': it is the lower world itself. It is the pettiness, greed, fear, and cynicism which he encounters from his first moment of stepping out of his interplanetary vessel.

In this context, Klaatu's means of entry into the world from the heavens takes on an additional significance, one which has resonance with the archetypal theories of the time, in in the psychological archetypal work of Jung as well as the structuralism of Frye. The key connection here is the emphasis Frye places on the importance of the literal or metaphorical birth of the hero as the first phase of romantic myth. "The first phase is the myth of the birth of the hero … The infant hero is often placed in an ark or chest floating on the sea." Klaatu does, in fact, arrive on Earth by means of such a vessel, though he springs, Athena-like, fully formed into the world (in the hospital, he informs his human doctors that, despite appearing in his forties, his true age is seventy-eight). Of course, he comes not from the sea, as is typical for Frye's interpretation, but from the sky; from the heavens. These variations from the typical romantic structure are not necessarily random, however. As Frye notes of the image of the child in the sea, "Psychologically, this image is related to the embryo in the womb, the world of the unborn often being thought of as liquid." Klaatu arrives on Earth not through the material and messy process of a metaphorical birth, but by means that are, in archetypal terms, coded as divine and pure. Frye suggests this, noting the connection between the earth, the human soul, the celestial spheres, and a mediaeval Christian notion of deity:

> The symbolism of alchemy is apocalyptic imagery of the same type: the center of nature, the gold and jewels hidden in the earth, is eventually to be united to its circumference in the sun, moon, and stars of the heavens; the center of the spiritual world, the soul of man, is united to its circumference in God.[18]

They may not share the circular form of the sun, moon, and stars, but Klaatu's use of diamonds as currency echo this cosmic relationship, testifying to his status as the bridge between earth and

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[17] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 187.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 146.

heaven, as well as symbolizing once again his purity and innocence – not to mention standing as testament to the fabulous wealth of the utopian civilization to which he belongs.
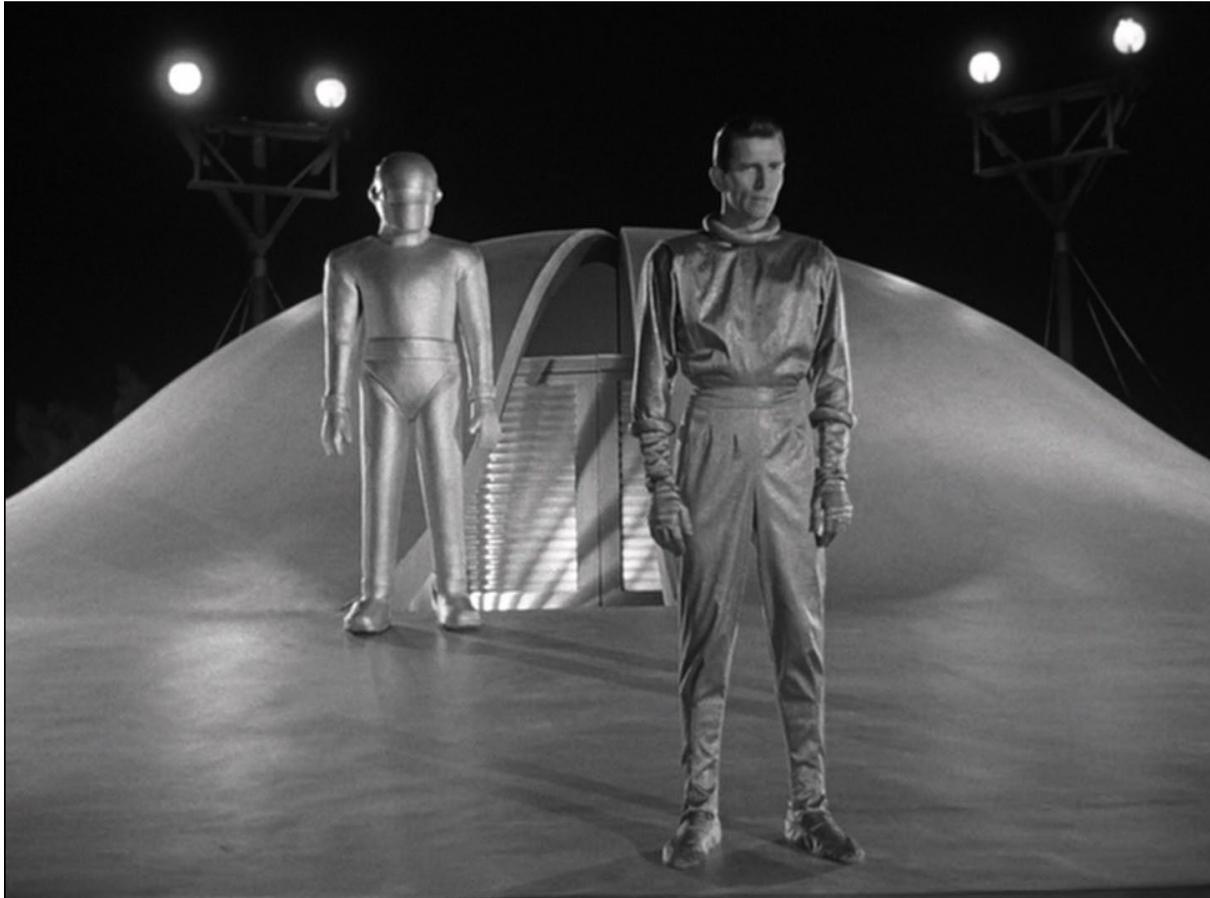
Figure 2 – *The Day the Earth Stood Still:* Klaatu and Gort.

In his own study of the flying saucer phenomenon, Jung takes the connection between soul, planets, and UFOs much further, subjecting what he referred to as "figures in rumour" to "the same principle as dream interpretation".[19] His analysis leads him to the conclusion that "God in his omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence is a totality symbol *par excellence*, something round, complete, and perfect…. On the antique level, therefore, UFOs could easily be conceived as 'gods'."[20] Furthermore, Frye himself believed there was a strong connection between mythic archetypes and the kind of dream analysis that Jung is here repurposing: ""The quest-romance has analogies to both rituals and dreams, and the rituals examined by Frazer and the dreams examined by Jung show the remarkable similarity in form that we should expect of two symbolic structures analogous to the same thing."[21] Klaatu's entry via flying saucer may thus be interpreted as the archetypal birth vessel, one which signifies his spiritual purity and disconnection from human

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[19] C. G. Jung, *Flying Saucers* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 15.
[20] *Ibid*., p. 17.
[21] Frye*, Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 193.

corporeal concerns and weaknesses. This is even echoed in the shape of the narrative itself, where Klaatu's story shares with Frye's model romantic narrative a certain cyclical nature, which he describes in the sixth phase, or *pensoro*, of the romance. For Frye, often in the context of a cosmic disaster analogous to ancient flood myths (which he himself cited as being popular in science fiction and which, though it does not appear, is notably threatened in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*), the narratives often return to the same sense of storm-tossed isolation that they began with "around again to the image of the mysterious newborn infant floating on the sea."[22] And indeed, Klaatu, in his own way, sheds his human associations and once more seals himself in his spaceship to traverse the barrier between the earth and the heavens. That he may, perhaps, physically pass away on the journey due to the injuries he sustained on Earth merely serves to emphasise the ambiguity of the romantic displacement which occurs in the film between the mythic Ptolemaic cosmos that now resides in metaphor, and the post-Copernican scientific universe the narrative purports to be based in.

However, despite the clarity with which symbolism surrounding Klaatu and his behaviour mark him as a desexualised being of pure intention, the nature of the future which Klaatu comes to earth in order present and represent in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is deeply divided at its core. It combines elements of a technological utopianism emerging out of Fordist scientific rationalism with a revelatory millenarianism founded in Judeo-Christian myth and theology. Klaatu is both compassionate messiah, whose tolerance of humanity's flaws comes at the cost of his life, and an accomplished scientist, with knowledge outstripping even that of the film's Einstein-proxy, Barnhardt. The intersection of these two facets is further complicated by the film's idealisation of reason as a core virtue and its corresponding denunciation of certain forms of emotionality and corporeally governed experience. Both Biskind and Tarratt have observed the way the film's complex, even contradictory, attitudes towards the relationship between humanity and technology seem rarefied in the ambiguous figure of Gort. Biskind summarises Gort's role in the film with an emphasis on the primal destructiveness which he threatens:

> When Klaatu is harmed, Gort runs amok, and his first move after his master is "killed" is to stalk pretty Helen Benson. Gort and Helen are, of course, a replay of King Kong and Fay Wray with one crucial different … King Kong, from darkest Africa, was the very avatar of a monster from the id if there ever was one, while smooth and shiny Gort, easily as dangerous, looks like it just dropped off the assembly line. Without the restraint of reason, technology is as dangerous as nature run wild. [23]

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[22] Frye*, Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 203.
[23] Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, pp. 157-158.

It is worth noting that just before Gort threatens Helen, he dispatches two soldiers with lethal force, where before he targeted only weapons and vehicles. Despite his long periods of inaction, the robot has a persistent, unnerving presence throughout the movie, from his dramatic entrance following his companion's initial injury, through the military's attempts to contain him with a new kind of plastic 'stronger than steel', to his revival in response to Klaatu being fatally wounded and the subsequent retrieval of the body.

The shift in behaviour that accompanies this latter activity is, no doubt, primarily to elevate the danger he poses as the film reaches towards its climax, but it also serves to illustrate Gort's dual nature. In dealing with the soldiers he is cold and dispassionate, obliterating them without ceremony, remaining a true robot. With Helen, he closes in on her, looms over her like a monster from a classic Universal Studios horror film. He leers at her with his literally harmful gaze, the camera emphasising his massive size and her vulnerability, before she disarms it with the phrase Klaatu taught her. Even then, it seems to overpower her before carrying her inside the spaceship. For Tarratt too, Gort "seems to represent man's violence and even his sexuality …." Her suggestion is that the way the robot seems to stand in opposition to everything the narrative praises about Klaatu is entirely the point: "The film suggests a concept of an ideal man separated from his most primitive instincts, using them only as a source of energy to aid his 'higher' civilized aims."[24] Gort, in part, represents a technologized disassociation between 'man' and his basest impulses, allowing them to be controlled and directed towards the Universal Good, a triumph of self-mastery embodied by the asexual Klaatu. Taken together, however, this marks Klaatu and Gort as figures of Freudian repression, the first two points in a triangle of (implicitly, in Gort's case) male characters whose behaviour sketches out different extremes of behaviour as filtered through the lens of a 1950s American view of sexuality.

There is, clearly, a conflict between Gort's ambiguous nature as a monstrous figure, identified and discussed by Tarratt and Biskind, and the romantic archetypal narrative as laid out by Frye. In the quest-romance, "The central form … is the dragon-killing theme exemplified in the stories of St. George and Perseus", Frye tells us. This dragon, or sea-monster, or leviathan "seems closely associated with the natural sterility of the fallen world". He identifies this with the Christian mythological narrative of the Book of Revelation, where it is the messiah's role to defeat "the dragon Satan" and restore, or renew, the world.[25] Here, then, the unusual nature of Klaatu and Gort's

[24] Margaret Tarratt, 'Monsters from the Id', in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2003), p. 356.
[25] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 189.

relationship becomes all the more apparent, and Klaatu's asexual nature seems all the more conspicuous. Gort is certainly coded as monstrous through cinematic expression, particularly in the framing of his threatening behaviour towards Helen which, as Biskind's commentary suggests, mirrors the salacious threats of so many movie monsters against damsels in distress.[26] Yet Gort is not the dragon who plagues the land before the arrival of the hero-messiah; he is not Cetus of the Perseus myth, or a Grendel-figure which some Beowulf must cross the seas (or the skies) to fight. Instead the film's symbolic saviour brought the 'monster' with him. They are partners, with a complex relationship of power and authority governing their behaviour while on Earth, a heavenly dyad embodying the Biblical 'power and glory' of Yahweh and Christ, but filtered through the language and iconography of science fiction.

Klaatu, for his part, is no Dr. Frankenstein; he is never conscience-stricken over the damage such an artificial creation, brought into being by fantastic science, comes to cause – he is simply regretful of the supposed necessity of such action. We have seen, too, that despite his resurrection, Klaatu does not claim for himself or his robotic companion any usurpation over the powers of life and death which he is careful to remind his audience (made up of Helen and by, extension, that of the film) are within the remit of "the Almighty Spirit" alone. It is also significant that Gort is never physically defeated or overpowered, but simply appeased or disarmed verbally by the famous command which Klaatu teaches Helen: "Klaatu barada nikto". That Gort is directed by means of a spoken control phrase certainly suggests a more advanced technology than America in the 1950s possessed, but it is also reminiscent of magic words or incantations, perhaps even a verbal counterpart to the inscribed *shem* of golem stories (though here inverted, disarming the artificial creation rather than activating it). Gort as a technological golem certainly chimes with Tarratt's reading of the robot as the rational displacement of the violent male id, especially given the appearance of jealousy and frustrated desire as recurring themes in golem stories, including Paul Weneger's influential cinematic retellings of the legend. Yet we must remain cautious, for myth, as Nancy borrows from Schelling, is "tautegorical", so that "it says nothing other than itself and is produced in consciousness by the same process that, in nature, produces the forces that myth represents."[27] Despite their overtures to archetypal figures and mythological structures, Wise and his filmmaking colleagues were, instead, quite deliberate about establishing both breadth and specificity in their address to their contemporary moment.

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[26] Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, pp. 157-158.
[27] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 49.

The Klaatu/Gort Dyad II: The Power Elite

Just like the film's mythic and archetypal motifs, the film's approach towards dramatizing the issues of its historical moment are founded, naturally enough, in the character dynamics of Klaatu, Gort, and the ensemble of characters that they encounter, and who encounter them. Here it is significant that, though Klaatu and Gort form a distinct dyad, there is a third piece of the psychosexual puzzle outlined by Tarratt in the form of Helen's jealous and selfish boyfriend Tom Stevens, "the imperfect human male, a mixture of outward politeness and inner violence" who stands in contrast to both Klaatu's mission to "warn men against the violence of their lives", and his nature as a "gentle asexual figure."[28] The difference between the two is highlighted by their respective treatment of the child Bobby. Tom, interested only in the development of his sexual relationship with Helen, insists they do not take the child with them on their arranged date so that he can enjoy a more private time with her, while Klaatu cheerfully volunteers to look after him while they're gone. Tom is eager to take him up on the offer, but as Bobby and Klaatu bond, he begins to see his would-be patriarchal position with the Bensons being undermined. There is an implication that Tom's later betrayal of the real identity of 'Mr. Carpenter' to the military is as much retaliation for this perceived threat to his relationship with Helen as it is an act of indulgent self-promotion. Indeed, the two positions are co-mingled, as Tom claims that once he becomes famous for the capture of the alien, Helen will see things differently.

This is a familiar dynamic, of the jealous man threatened by the arrival of competition, perceived or actual, and responds in such a way to heighten the drama of the situation, to steer the narrative towards conflict, even if the jealous man himself does not perform the violence. More specifically, however, Tom highlights how human emotional insecurity infects our decision-making not only in the realm of personal relationships, but in matters of political or even cosmic import, and in fact pointing out that we often encounter grave difficulty in distinguishing the latter from the former. This is, in fact, at the centre of Jancovich's political critique of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, which he condemns as "a far more authoritarian film [than *The Thing from Another World*]. Its criticism of American society is simply that it is not rational enough, and it calls for the repression of individual feelings, interests, and desires, all of which are simply defined as both irrational and destructive."[29] Here he does open up an intriguing avenue for investigation, as his charges resonate with C. Wright Mills's critique of American power structures in *The Power Elite*, originally published in 1956. As Mills observed in his chapter on the emergence of corporate executive culture,

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[28] Tarratt, 'Monsters from the Id', p. 356.
[29] Mark Jancovich, 'Re-examining the 1950s Invasion Narratives', *liquid metal*, ed. Sean Redmond, (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), p. 333.

"Americans like to think of themselves as the most individualistic people in the world, but among them the impersonal corporation has proceeded the farthest and now reaches into every area and detail of daily life."[30] Far from being a condemnation of ruthlessly capitalistic values such as Mills identifies, Jancovich instead suggests that *The Day the Earth Stood Still* unconsciously buys into a modern rationalist program predicated on an intellectualised elitism which is profoundly anti-democratic and belligerently imperialistic.

Certainly, the film's social and political scope has its limitations in terms of addressing the distribution of power within the America of 1951. Most tellingly, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*'s Washington, D.C. is a largely white city, and Klaatu's exploration of the city fails to encounter or address the issues of segregation or migration. Partly this is an issue of timing. The total population of the District in the 1950 Decennial Census, including non-urban areas, was recorded as 802,178. Of the recorded inhabitants, 517,865 were white (of whom 39,497 of were classified as Foreign Born – no doubt including 'alien' diplomats) and 280,803 were black.[31] By 1960, however, the population had shifted such that 411,737 inhabitants were black, while only 345,263 were white. The overall population of the Distract had, meanwhile, fallen by nearly 40,000 people to 763,956.[32] This was, of course, part of a wider national phenomenon, occurring over the course of the '50s, in which two million black Americans moved out of the rural South and into urban areas, while the former white urban population increasingly left for the suburbs.[33] Even had the filmmakers wanted to*, The Day the Earth Stood Still* could not have fully depicted an event on which it only stood on the cusp. But even its own liminal moment it does not see clearly; nothing at all is made of the all-white boarding house, or the whiteness of the police and military tasked with defending the capital from an alien intruder, and nor does Klaatu observe any distinction between how humans treat each other based on the colour of their skin. The brief glimpses of a black service staff member leaving an elevator, and the choice of that elevator as a hiding place where Klaatu and Helen can talk unobserved (at the moment, curiously enough, that the eponymous event of the film occurs in which the world is stripped of electrical and metaphorical power), is the closest the film comes to engaging with, or at least acknowledging, systemic social inequality and internal political struggles, rather than struggles between nations and worlds.

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[30] C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 120.

[31] U.S. Census Bureau, *Census of the Population: 1950*, Vol. 2*. Characteristics of the Population* (1953), 9-11 via https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1950/population-volume-2/35659257v2p9ch2.pdf [accessed 07/12/18].

[32] U.S. Census Bureau, *Census of the Population: 1960,* Vol. I, *Characteristics of the Population* (1964), 10-11 via http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/35675360v1p10.zip [accessed 07/11/18].

[33] Douglas T. Miller & Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*, p. 193.

For Jancovich, the authoritarianism he perceives in the film is but one way in which it stands as symbolic of the negative aspects of American progressivism in the middle of the Twentieth Century. Indeed, here he does find a perhaps inadvertent commonality with Biskind, who suggests that *"The Day the Earth Stood Still*'s respect for intellect makes heroes of professors and aliens … and creates a top-down hierarchy. The intellectual elite are the only people smart enough to hear Klaatu's message."[34] While disagreeing with broad swathes of Biskind's analysis, Jancovich takes up this point, putting this aspect of the film's world-view in even starker terms:

> For Klattu [sic], and for the film, individual and national interests must be put aside in favour of the Universal, but the Universal is not an interactive community based on shared interests. It is an abstract, rational and totalising order to which individuals and nations must surrender themselves. It is vertical, rather than horizontal, in its organisation.[35]

Despite being one of their few points of agreement, however, this argument focuses overly on the characterisation of Klaatu's utopian homeworld as described in a handful of lines, rather than the values which Klaatu, and the film, show through the action of the narrative as a whole. While the film certainly invokes the spirit of the relatively recently-founded United Nations and the Security Council, it also specifically rejects in its first act the internecine squabbling and self-interested posturing that, as recounted by Paul Kennedy, was present throughout the existence of its predecessor, the League of Nations, and in different, more deliberately constructed ways from its own inception.[36] What both Jancovich and Biskind fail to fully address are the questions of with whom Klaatu, and by extension the film's narrative and the thematic arguments it supports, actually chooses to spend his time. Barnhardt is a useful ally, and something approaching an intellectual peer for the alien, but as we have seen, the film does not dwell on their interaction, or on Barnhardt's importance to the story. Gort is certainly significant symbolically, and he is present from the film's opening to its conclusion, but given his nature, and the fact he spends most of the narrative motionless in the middle of a Washington D.C. park, his relationship with Klaatu is far from a focal point for the audience's sympathies, despite his importance. It is, in fact, the most ordinary of people, the widowed Helen and the young Bobby, with whom Klaatu develops the most significant relationships, and losing sight of their importance can lead to a significant misreading of Klaatu's methods and his goals.

Indeed Klaatu's ideology, his people's method for achieving peace (and the perspective of the film, since it is true that Klaatu's point of view generally goes without legitimate criticism), was

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[34] Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, p. 154.
[35] Jancovich, 'Re-examining the 1950s Invasion Narratives', p. 333.
[36] Paul Kennedy, *The Parliament of Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), pp. 26-27

accused by Jancovich not only of authoritarianism, but specifically of anticipating the formulation of the concept of 'mutual assured destruction' (MAD) by John von Neumann, who infamously argued for the necessity of the United States to maintain (and, preferably, exceed) parity with the Soviet Union's nuclear weapon capacity in order that the response to any first strike would be sufficiently devastating such that neither side could survive to claim victory. [37] There is, however, a significant problem here, which becomes clear by contextualising Klaatu specifically in the multilateral-unilateral debate surrounding America's geopolitical role in the world after the Second World War and in particular how it should approach co-existence with the Soviet Union. The ideology that gave rise to MAD, the virulently anti-communist stance to which von Neumann subscribed, was one of the most significant manifestations of the unilateral point of view that developed under the Truman administration, which deliberately portrayed world politics in a binary state, as a battle for supremacy between two power blocs and their dominant ideologies.[38] As Andrew J. Falk notes, this debate was hardly alien to Hollywood, which as early as 1946 had become a site of activism against atomic weaponry, with progressive filmmakers and actors overtly allying themselves with the One World cause espoused by scientists such as Einstein and Oppenheimer.[39] Wise himself was unequivocal about the intent behind the project: "It was very obvious that the film was making a political comment. All of us involved in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* were very concerned about the threat of atomic war."[40] Jancovich's characterisation of Klaatu and his policies would necessitate categorising him firmly on the unilateralist side of the debate.

This is clearly inconsistent with not only the implications of Wise's statement, but more importantly, it conflicts with Klaatu's behaviour and the way he actually engages (or rather, refuses to engage) with international politics. Klaatu is, in fact, a multilateralist icon, his mission necessitating an unprecedented level of global co-operation that demands a surrendering of national pride towards a greater good, namely, the survival of all humanity. The description here of Klaatu as 'icon' rather than 'model' is deliberately chosen; no human being can realistically adopt Klaatu's position because no human being can come by his level of outsider status honestly. Nor, as we have seen, are Klaatu and Gort colonisers or imperialists: they are divine judges and messengers, quite separate from any earthly arrangement of authority. It is, therefore, *only* by reckoning with Klaatu's archetypal role and his foundation in myth that we can properly place him in his historical

[37] Jancovich, 'Re-examining the 1950s Invasion Narratives', p. 335.
[38] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes* (London: Abacus, 1995), pp.229-30; Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 295-6.
[39] Andrew J. Falk, *Upstaging the Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), p. 64
[40] Robert Wise, quoted in Allen, *Master Mechanics & Wicked Wizards*, p. 95.

context. Thus, the answer to Jancovich's charge that Klaatu and Gort represent a totalizing universal order that permits no dissent is, simply and obviously, that such an order is not intended to be taken as a literal program that should (or even could) be enacted.[41] The utopia from which they hail from and represent is *ideal* in the original sense of metaphor. To suggest that the movie is advocating for annihilation in response to any perceived infraction against the universal order is a case of deliberately extending the metaphor beyond its semantic breaking point.

https://img.moviepostershop.com/the-day-the-earth-stood-still-movie-poster-1951-1020143828.jpg [last accessed 03/06/2019]
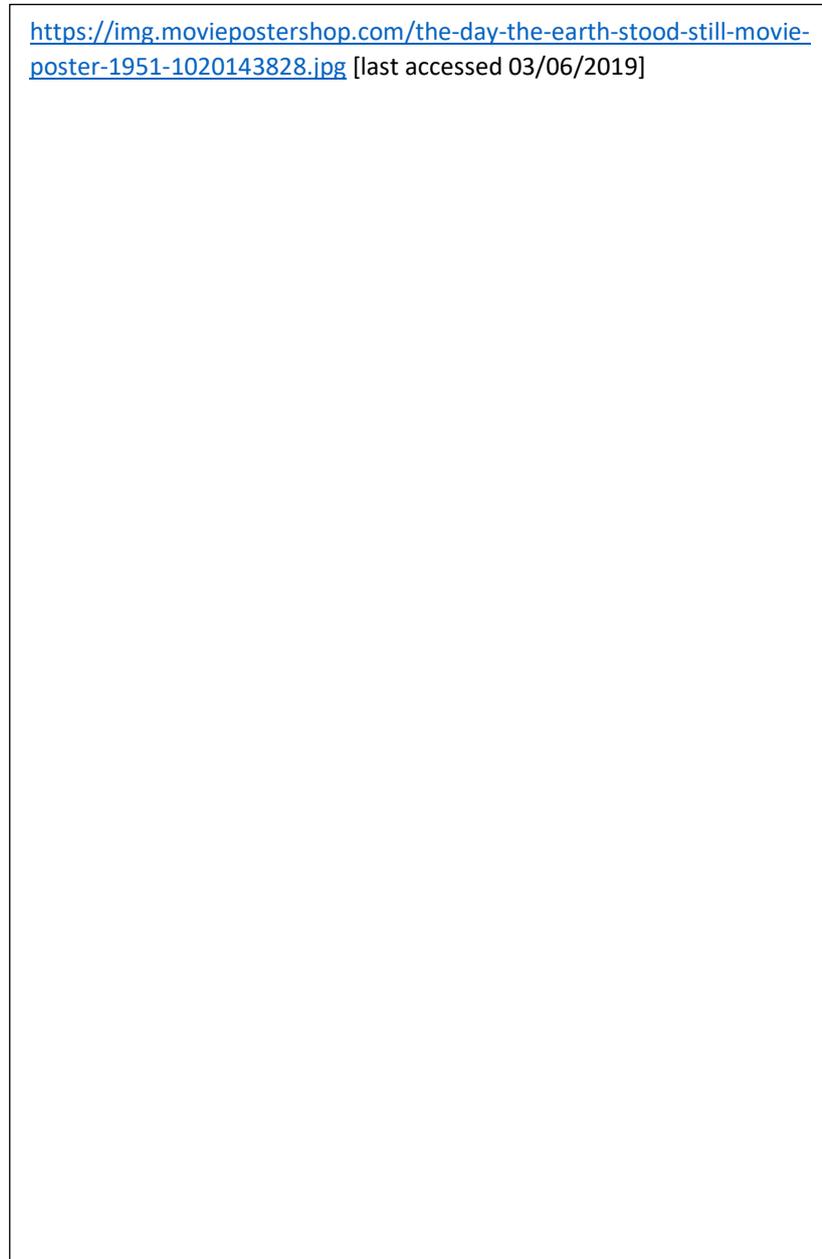
Figure 3 – *The Day the Earth Stood Still* theatrical poster.

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[41] Jancovich, 'Re-examining the 1950s Invasion Narratives', p. 333.

The role of violence in the film, especially as an enactment of state power, must therefore be understood through Gort, who is, as we have seen, both a rationalised, technological policeman and a sexually imperilling monster. It seems almost redundant to point out that he reflects an undercurrent of profound anxiety towards institutionalised violence and the deployment of scientifically-enabled modern armaments. He is a quintessential manifestation of the notion of necessary evil, a practical engineering solution to the apparently insurmountable moral problem of the modern paradigm of total war and the need for absolute security. Gort may be born out of the same post-war environment of constant threat which Mills identified as the reason for the rise of the 'warlords' among the military-economic-political trifecta he schematized; the "men without lively imagination [who] are needed to execute policies without imagination devised by an elite without imagination". [42] Yet the solution presented here is very different from the one that was gradually shifting the balance of power in Washington and throughout the country, forming the modern "power elite of America".[43] Though *The Day the Earth Stood Still* has been criticised for the way it presents such an 'extreme' method as a robot capable of planetary annihilation as the solution to the problem of returning to a state of peace, it remains inaccurate to suggest that the film's depiction of the employment of such a figure presents a thoughtless paean to authoritarianism in any kind of traditional political sense. Gort is identified as a kind of policeman rather than a soldier for a deliberate purpose, and it is not meant as an attempt to reflect on the character of American law enforcement (who are far too absent from the narrative for such a comparison to be intended or valid), but rather as a statement regarding the scale and the limitations of Gort's role in the cosmic society from which he and Klaatu originate. Gort is not a general any more than he is a soldier; he is, rather, an arbiter of cosmic justice – in this function he may be absolute, but in a sense this limits him as much as it empowers him.

Gort, then, represents a surrendering of power and control, of the ability to do violence, in a way not comparable to any terrestrial institution, even (or, perhaps, especially) the recently-formed United Nations. The endowment of such authority and institutionalised violence in Gort does not place him at the peak of the social and political structure of Klaatu's world(s) – he is not truly one of the power elite of the cosmos – but rather, he is monstered by it. Indeed, Gort's robotic-yet-predatory nature, his multiple overlapping valences of inhumanity, is part of the point. Gort is presented as inhuman because the violence (at least, on this scale) which is his role to perform is inhuman. It is therefore important that, in contrast to how the military are shown taking control of the situation from the government side as soon as Mr. Harley steps out of the picture, Gort remains

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[42] Mills, *The Power Elite*, p. 196.
[43] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

answerable in some degree to those who know the words of power, whether they be his companion from outer space or a normal human woman. When it comes to implacable alien robots, speech proves mightier than any firearm. Gort, despite being identified as part of the ultimate authority in the cosmos, is the object of verbal commands, rather than being giver of them.

The power relationship constructed between him and Klaatu is therefore as deliberately complex and mysterious as Gort himself, and this application of mystery is far from haphazard or lazy. It is a key part of the film's symbolic coding, an interweaving of narrative and imagery which shapes, and is shaped by, the emanation of the political apprehensions of the era. The conflict between the scientific, rational view Klaatu espouses, and his actual role in the narrative as a religious, mythopoeic figure, is therefore no simple accident of incoherency, but part of a deliberate narrative and thematic suspension of, and an attempt to syncretise, these two knowledge systems. His dual nature is emblematic of the film itself. Thus, while one can dispute his emphasis, as Shapiro suggests *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is, in fact, something of a multi-valent hybrid: it is a biblical testament which nevertheless has "a structure that falls in line not only with ancient apocalypse narratives but also with what became in the fifties commonplace in bomb films." It is, in part, a messianic narrative where "the fulfilment of Biblical messianic prophecy starts in the liberal republic of science and then spreads to the larger society." It suggests the Jewish messiah as envisioned in the Psalms of Old Testament, but its concept of salvation is based upon the societal leadership of an intellectual elite who are instructed to promote moral action, and not on the internal spirituality which was the focus of ancient Judaism.[44]

This last aspect of Shapiro's reading was, in part, anticipated by French filmmaker Pierre Kast, who wrote in praise of the film and its director in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1952, observing that the narrative "ends on a poignant, questioning note, stressing the fatal limitations of man; yet strangely enough, these limitations apply not to the weak nature of man as an individual but to man as a social animal, accepting a certain way of life."[45] There is a fascinating contrast here with Patrick Lucanio's view, where the film's ending is not ambiguous, but a triumphant validation of the archetypal purpose of the genre itself:

> Klaatu's words, backed up by the prowess of his giant robot, Gort, signal the closing
> of a way of life and the emergence of a new life for humanity. They also reveal the
> power of the alien invasion film; the humbling of humanity is not to be taken as a
> defeat but rather as a victory. Humanity is now free to discover its true self with

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[44] Jerome F. Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2002) p. 81-82.
[45] Pierre Kast, 'Don't Play with Fire', in *Focus on the Science Fiction Film*, ed. William Johnson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 70.

respect to the powers and forces that run through the cosmos. This awareness, this discovery of a more profound level of consciousness, is precisely the meaning and value inherent in the alien invasion genre, which is filled with wonder and hope for humanity.[46]

For Lucanio, Klaatu's speech as an encapsulation of his mission and his deeds while on Earth, is a moment of transcendence for humanity, where the exposure of the flaws of society, and our species as a whole, removes the limitations we have placed upon ourselves. This very much chimes with Ruppersberg's view of the purpose and appeal of the 'Alien Messiah' subgenre.[47] For Kast, however, the film highlights the *enduring* nature of societal limitations and power structures – putting them into question but not offering any satisfying resolution, a deliberate insistence on the lack of the same sense of epochal completion that Lucanio claims is central to the archetype.

When set against each other, Kast and Lucanio's takes on the film clearly present divergent modalities of openness and closure, offering a more complex picture than that offered by Jancovich, or even Biskind. Kast's reading presents the film as challenging and critical, a disguised demand for an open questioning of the real-world enclosed and guarded system of American societal values and ideology. For Lucanio, and also Ruppersberg, it becomes spiritual and revelatory, an interpretation that takes place in a symbolic world which centres on closure in a narrative and emotional sense – a closure which is, paradoxically, necessary to the opening up of a future of new possibilities. It is, in fact, only by engaging with both possibilities that the film's full relationship with its construction of a political message for the historical moment, and its use of archetypal narrative forms and iconography as told for this construction, come into sharper focus. It is a film that reveals a longing for a deliverer – if not of humanity itself, then at least of a new vision for humanity. And it does indeed present an intervention aimed at averting future disaster, redeeming past mistakes, and in so doing offers hope for the future. Yet at the same time it possesses a profoundly melancholic understanding that the work of deliverance is not completed by such a brief visitation, and hope is mingled with the melancholic suspicion that it may already be much too late to avert disaster.

The War of the Worlds (1953)

A Formidable Menace: Diabolus Ex Machina

In significant contrast to the measured drama of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and its relatively sparing use of special effects, the appeal and visual identity of *War of the Worlds* rests fundamentally upon its use of spectacle. Like George Pal's previous science-fiction productions, *Destination Moon* and *When Worlds Collide*, it collected the Academy Award for Special Effects in its

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[46] Patrick Lucanio, *Them or Us* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 45.
[47] Ruppersberg, 'Alien Messiah', p.34.

year, and the rendering of the Martian onslaught was praised even by contemporary sceptics of the genre in film who saw most sci-fi movies as a shadow of science fiction literature. In his pointedly titled 1959 article 'A Brief, Tragical History of the Science Fiction Film', Hodgens complained vociferously of the lack of imagination and ambition in '50s sci-fi movies, but he praised Pal's attempts to expand the genre, arguing that "if the scripts contained moments rather similar to more traditional spectacles, they still contained images that had never been seen before," including *The War of the Worlds'* imagining of "deadly Martian machines, like copper mantas and hooded cobras, gliding down empty streets."[48] The following year, Kingsley Amis similarly lamented that "it appears that the boom in science-fiction films has passed … and without having explored more than a fraction of the possibilities". Like Hodgens, Amis despaired in particular of the frequent resort to catastrophe and in particular the monster menace in order to appeal to audiences, both foreshadowing Sontag's critical examination of the genre in 'The Imagination of Disaster' in 1966. Yet Amis also took care to note that *"The War of the Worlds*, with excellent Martians and some attempt to set up a logical alien technology, was probably the best of the menace series, if only because it provided a really formidable menace, one that couldn't be polished off with a few rounds of rifle fire."[49] In Hodgens's and Amis's praise for Pal's productions and *The War of the Worlds* in particular, we see laid out some important features of the movie which provide reason for choosing to focus on it in relation to *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the broader notion of alien visitations, and the then-burgeoning genre as a whole. The emphasis on a traditional approach to plot and storytelling but a unique and distinctive spectacle, and especially the rendering of fantastic technology to provide a genuinely intimidating foe for humanity, suggests a vibrant nexus of archetypal narrative forms and the innovative (for the era) which makes the film a particularly fascinating site for the interaction between worlds old and new.

The War of the Worlds lays out something of a curiously bifurcated nature in its thematic and narrative core from the very start, beginning with not one but two prologues of markedly disparate tones and styles. The first, using stock footage and narrated by a male voice with a mid-century American accent reminiscent of newsreels, places the film's narrative specifically within the historical context of the global conflicts which plagued the first half of the Twentieth Century, suggesting that a war *between* worlds is consistent with the escalation of modern warfare. This short sequence, only around half a minute long, is followed by the title card, where the transition of the title font from red to green clearly foreshadows the sickly Martian colour palette, and the credits,

[48] Richard Hodgens, 'A Brief, Tragical History of the Science Fiction Film', *Focus on the Science Fiction Film*, ed. William Johnson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972) p. 81.
[49] Kingsley Amis, *New Maps of Hell* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 40.

whose sudden flashes and changes in colour are abstractly yet clearly reminiscent of artillery bombardment. The second prologue, a longer sequence of around three-and-a-half minutes, begins with an image of Mars in the centre of a star field, while a different narrator, older, British, and with an austere distance that contrasts with the urgency of the previous speaker. His words are specifically an adaptation from the opening of H. G. Wells's original novel, emphasising the ignorance of humankind towards the extra-terrestrial threat, the intelligence and coldly calculating rationality of the Martians, and the cosmic scope of the conflict. Typical of science fiction narratives connected with Mars, the red planet is here explicitly associated with death, decay, and the final triumph of entropy.[50] As the narrator tells us, "for centuries, it has been in the last stages of exhaustion" – Arnheim's anxiety rendered analogically through an alien civilization that has literally exhausted its raw material of reality.[51] goes on to list the rest of the nine planets (except, oddly, Venus), with demonstrations of their inhospitable conditions, until coming finally to Earth, "green with vegetation, bright with water, and possessed a cloudy atmosphere eloquent of fertility". This characterisation of our planet serves a simple plot purpose, of course, explaining the Martian invasion. Yet it also sets out a symbolic opposition between Mars and Earth, which will lead inevitably to the Martian defeat.

Outside of its distinctive double-prologue, however, *The War of the Worlds* has a highly conventional structure for a mid-century Hollywood picture, with an action- and spectacle-focused 'A-story' and a more intimate, relationship-focused 'B-story' whose conclusions dovetail together in a moment of cathartic release. The 'primary' action, the invasion of Earth by the Martians, is paralleled with the burgeoning relationship between its protagonist, Clayton Forrester (Gene Barry), and love interest Sylvia Van Buren (Ann Robinson). Forrester, an esteemed scientist, is connected with the development of the atomic bomb, just like Barnhardt, and this is deemed no more problematic than it was in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. But Forrester is no dishevelled Einstein-figure; played by the square-jawed, classically handsome Gene Barry, he is as comfortable at a country square-dance or behind the controls of an aeroplane as he is in the laboratory. During the film, Forrester is primarily identified by his last name, and Sylvia by her first, both suggesting a deep connection to the natural world: the surname Forrester conspicuously resembles 'forest', while Sylvia is descended from the Latin word 'silva', also meaning forest or wood. Their blossoming relationship, and their underlying association with the natural world, places them not only

[50] Robert Markley, *Dying Planet* (London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 22.
[51] Rudolf Arnheim, 'Melancholy Unshaped', The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. 21, No. 3, (Spring 1963), p .297

narratively but symbolically opposite the enervated Martians, dependent upon their machinery to survive; the living Earth situated against the dying Mars.

Figure 4 – *The War of the Worlds:* Life on Mars.

Indeed, as the fight against the Martians becomes increasingly hopeless, as the spectacle becomes more destructively apocalyptic, the stakes of the story simplify, until the only remaining goal of Forrester as protagonist is to find Sylvia before they both perish in a final genocide. However, their fate bound not only by Wells's original narrative construction, but also the conventional rules of Hollywood narrative, the Martians finally succumb to the bacteria in Earth's atmosphere, "the smallest of God's creatures". Through divine foresight, a kind of biological defence mechanism for the planet, humanity is saved at the moment of its darkest hour. This, of course, resembles the classical *deus ex machina*, or as philologist and mythologist J.R.R. Tolkien preferred to call it, *eucatastrophe*: the sudden fortunate or joyful turn in events towards a good outcome, the proverbial happy ending.[52] Naturally, this cosmic salvation occurs at almost the exact moment when Forrester and Sylvia are finally reunited and experience their own, personal, eucatastrophe. It may be the microbes who get the credit but, in structural terms at least, there is a more complex

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[52] J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), p. 153.

operation going on here. Figuratively speaking, Forrester and Sylvia could even be said to defeat the Martians with love, or rather, participate in a ritualised invocation of the spiritual force of life itself, of which the story's cherished bacteria are simply among the most elemental representatives.

Microbes and Martians I: Engineers of the Apocalypse
The Martians may be the main attraction at this cinematic spectacle, yet because, rather than in spite, of the scale of the existential threat which they pose, we are given very little sense of the nature or character of Martian civilisation. There are no particular details given about what their culture was like on Mars, or with regard to what their plans might be for their existence on Earth once their genocidal assault on humanity is complete, their method of conquest being the extermination of humanity rather than its enslavement. As Robert Markley suggests, "Martians … are both the Other, the embodiment of an absolute intelligence that we can neither understand nor defeat, and those others who rival and mirror our desires and weaknesses and feed off of our own fears."[53] The most significant details we are given about the Martians themselves are to do with their biology: "I don't remember ever seeing blood crystals as anaemic as these," states one of Forrester's colleagues at Pacific Tech: "They may be mental giants, but by our standards, physically they must be very primitive." This, of course, sets up the eventual revelation that the Martians cannot survive the microbiological fecundity of the living Earth, no more than their triple-lensed cyclopean eyes can tolerate light brighter than that of the Martian day. More than this, however, it encapsulates their archetypal role, their enervation, their connection to the cosmic threat of entropy. The pairing of their incomprehensibly formidable intellect with their anaemic bodies, deficient of vitality, matches strikingly with Markley's characterisation of the Martians throughout their various representations and variations in popular culture, not only in the post-war climate but throughout the history of the genre, suggesting that what we are dealing with in *The War of the Worlds* is, in fact, primarily a modern formulation of an archetypal embodiment of incomprehensible villainy.

However, this does not mean the representation of the Martians is devoid of connections to specific contemporary concerns. As we have seen in its first prologue, the film draws specific attention to the post-war context, placing particular attention to the escalation of conflict and the evolution of the technology of warfare, as the narrator announces: "And now, fought with the terrible weapons of super-science, menacing all mankind and every creature on Earth, comes *The War of the Worlds*". There is, of course, an inherent ambivalence of tone here, one typical of the genre, in that what is about to be depicted is presented as being horrific, yet it is also a source of

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[53] Markley, *Dying Planet*, p. 206.

excitement and, naturally, spectacle. The film's most remarkable set-pieces focus on the destructive power of the Martian war machines, whether they are issuing a withering repudiation of the military's attempt at defence, or carving a burning path through the streets of Los Angeles. This tension was, of course, at the centre of Sontag's original critique of the genre; that "by means of images and sounds … one can participate in the fantasy of living through one's own death and more, the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself." While Sontag's point was that such a fantasy is, in part, recurring and enduring, the specific rendering of these themes was invariably coloured by the recent experience of worldwide technologized warfare.

Figure 5 – *The War of the Worlds*: The effect of the Martian weaponry.

The technology of war which the Martians deploy in their assault on humanity is symptomatic of their malignancy. We see human beings and military hardware evaporated into nothingness where they stand, dissolving in a sickly glow of red and green. This weapon, named the 'skeleton ray' in the film, is given a scientific-sounding explanation by Forrester, but one which simultaneously underlines Martian science as a black art: "It neutralizes mesons somehow. They're the atomic glue holding matter together. Cut across their lines of magnetic force, and any object will simply cease to exist." Forrester's dialogue establishes two key aspects of Martian technological and scientific 'know-how': firstly, that they possess a mastery of atomic science far beyond human

understanding; secondly, that they have the specific capability of undoing the most basic organizing structures of the universe, the patterns that give form and meaning to matter itself. The Martians are not merely the representatives of entropy; they have also weaponized it. In narrative terms, this subtly foreshadows the eventual failure of the US military to penetrate their defences with the atom bomb. The Martians cannot be defeated at their own game. Symbolically, it emphasises their nature as the enemy of life in both a spiritual and a material sense.

The mechanics of the Martian assault itself are, however, significant in characterising how the archetype is being rendered here, indeed because their methods are so mechanized and rationalised. The technologized approach of the Martians to warfare extends beyond merely a matter of their chosen tools. Their tactics are also representative of the role they play; for the Martian war machines, we are told, do not function as individual titanic warriors in automated armour, but as part of a larger network. This is made explicit in a scene where General Mann (Les Tramayne) briefs his audience of international dignitaries and military figures on the alien invaders' strategy:

> Now, this much is certain. It's vital to prevent the Martian machines from linking up. Once they do, they adopt an extraordinary military tactic. They form a crescent. They anchor it at one end and sweep on, until they've cleared a quadrant. Then they anchor the opposite end and reverse direction. They slash across country like scythes, wiping out everything that's trying to get away from them.

The Martian war network, and the problems it presents to the human military, bears resemblance to the developments of the field of cybernetics as it emerged in the late '40s and early '50s, such as the work of Norbert Wiener and John von Neumann. In the perfectly synchronised combat strategy of the Martians there is also a resemblance to Wiener's concern that "The danger of cybernetics … is that it can potentially annihilate the liberal subject as the locus of control."[54] Wiener, arguably the leading figure in the formation of cybernetics and the one who coined the term, had a particularly personal interest in the use and misuse of technology, as Hayles records: "Wiener's war work, combined with his antimilitary stance after the war, illustrates with startling clarity how cybernetics functioned as a source of both intense pride and intense anxiety for him." [55] The ambivalence Hayles describes is of a different nature and tenor than that which inhabits science fiction film, but there is a significant correspondence in the duelling excitement and dread directed towards scientific and technological process, and the interface between the body and the machine. Wiener's cautioning against the misuse of technology does, in fact, take on an openly prophetic and apocalyptic tone:

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[54] Katherine N. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 110.
[55] *Ibid*.

"Like so many Gaderene swine, we have taken unto us the devils of the age, and the compulsion of scientific warfare is driving us pell-mell, head over heels into the ocean of our own destruction."[56] Anxiety over technology is, certainly, a very particular concern of the post-war period, as Wiener's project, and that of his fellow cyberneticists, demonstrates. Yet there is also a deeper, more elemental, anxiety in play here, which the specific act of projecting these anxieties on a nebulous, almost featureless, foe brings out.

The Martians are destroyers of the bonds which construct meaning, whether these are the bonds between atoms or the social and spiritual bonds of matrimony and the church. As Sontag states, "These alien invaders practice a crime which is worse than murder. They do not simply kill the person. They obliterate him."[57] Martian technology corrupts and is corrupted, an extension of their nature as a twisted reflection of modern civilisation, invoking the use of nuclear weapons as well as the technologized and rationalised genocidal programmes that comprised the Holocaust, but here applied even more indiscriminately and rapaciously. This, for Markley, is characteristic of the role of Martians in science fiction invasion narratives:

> As the archetype of all remorseless invaders, "Martians" signify the dark, nightmarish underside of a modernist ideology that places its faith in science, technology, and progress. At the same time, they have served as stand-in for paranoid fears of malignant intelligence: Nazis, communists, body snatchers, fifth columnists, and all aliens who sap human strength and subvert identity from within.[58]

The second point here is significant in the all-embracing nature of this form of xenophobia. Martians then, as an archetype, do not denote a particularly enemy, but are instead a particular idea of 'the Enemy', which can be detached and re-applied as suits the climate of the times. The Martians of *The War of the Worlds* are themselves noticeably without a direct link or analogical connection to a specific fear or anxiety belonging to their contemporary context.

The War of the Worlds may be a product of the same Cold War environment as *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, but beyond the scale of the threat they pose, and the underlying notion of two worlds in conflict with each other, there is nothing necessarily to mark Martian behaviour as a representation of the Soviet Union, despite the 'Red Planet' imagery. Indeed, with their blitzkrieg-like attack on civilization, they could just as easily be interpreted as spectres of the Nazi war machine, or

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[56] Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings* (London: Free Association, 1989), p. 129.
[57] Susan Sontag, 'The Imagination of Disaster' in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 221.
[58] Markley, *Dying Planet*, p. 206.

equally Imperial Japan's sudden attack on Pearl Harbour. Markley's characterisation of the Martians as representing not only an alien 'Other' but specifically "those others who rival and mirror our desires and weaknesses and feed off of our own fears" echoes Norbert Wiener's cautions that "our present militaristic frame of mind … has forced on us the problem of possible countermeasures to a new employment of these agencies on the part of an enemy. This enemy may be Russia at the present moment, but it is even more the reflection of ourselves in a mirage."[59] Here there is a connection to Wells's original narrative, which specifically connects the Martian invasion to European colonialism, pointedly asking his audience "Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?" The evil that Martians do adapts and shifts with the times, evolving to match the fears which populate the imaginations of the specific era in which they manifest.

The Martians, encased in their terrible engines of destruction, capable of razing worlds, but ultimately proving weak and unable to sustain themselves within Earth's natural biosphere, speak to the same anxieties that lead Wiener "to reconstruct himself as a liberal subject through a disguised erotic fantasy that allows him to control information rather than be controlled by it" where "Alone together in the woods, the two men construct a world of objects through the interplay of their gazes."[60] In *The War of the Worlds*, this anxiety finds a different outlet, the matrimonial bond, the construction of meaning through a reproductive futurism rendered through Christian spirituality and myth. Yet the appeal to a primal, vital form of leaving remains, as does the problem being addressed. As Markley puts it, "Martians mark a return of the repressed: a force of revolutionary terror acting as retribution for humankind's gutting of the Earth's resources or a doomed race that reflects humankind's blindness to the consequences of mindless exploitation."[61] Martians are the embodiment of the same fears that lends Wiener's work its fatalistic tone. As Wiener states in *The Human Use of Human Beings*, "Progress imposes not only new possibilities for the future but new restrictions. It seems almost as if progress itself and our fight against the increase of entropy intrinsically must end in the downhill path from which we are trying to escape."[62] Indeed, Wiener's pessimistic diagnosis of humanity's progress recalls Benjamin's famous reflection on Klee's *Angelus Novus*: "But a storm is blowing in from paradise; it has caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future while his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."[63]

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[59] Markley, *Dying Planet*, p. 206; Wiener, *Human Use of Human Beings*, p. 128.
[60] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, pp. 109-110.
[61] Markley, *Dying Planet*, p. 206.
[62] Wiener, *Human Use of Human Beings*, pp. 46-47.
[63] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 257.

Towards the end of the path Wiener describes, left behind in the wake of Benjamin's apocalyptic storm, there is the dying planet Mars, with its technologically advanced, overwhelmingly destructive arsenal belied by the innate weakness of its people. *The War of the Worlds* may invoke this haunted understanding of human social and technological progress, of the cost of our advancement but it doesn't truly engage with the implications thereof, as its own interests ultimately lie elsewhere.

Microbes and Martians II: Atomic Devils
As a crowd-pleaser intended for the American mass-market of cinema viewers, *The War of the Worlds* is specifically constructed to frame its apocalypse in as broad and familiar terms as possible, and it does this by specifically and emphatically placing the technological onslaught of the Martian war machine in religious, and therefore Christian, context. This intersection allows us to address directly the key question of whether there are, in fact, two (or more) modes of apocalypse in 1950s science fiction films, which Biskind suggests, or variations on a single central theme, as Shapiro argues. Here, in fact, we have a narrative drawn from a source distinctly sceptical of religion and Christianity in particular, but which, in response to the circumstances of its adaptation, developed a distinct religious dimension along with its wholesome romance. As Lucanio notes, "*War of the Worlds*, despite its emphasis on spectacle, retains the linear narrative of Wells's novel but with added allusions to mankind's relationship with God – something that undoubtedly would have caused Wells to writhe in intellectual agony."[64] Pal himself apologetically explained, "Audiences wanted it", and that explanation could go for the Christian interpolation as well as the relationship between its lead characters.[65] More problematically, this transition in the framing of this particular narrative occurs in apparent contradiction to the proposed cognitive shift in the cultural understanding of the causation of the apocalypse itself from divinely ordained to potentially man-made. In other words, the film seems to be running against the stream of cultural change. Rather than emphasising man's ability to destroy the world, and itself, at the push of a button, instead it focuses on reasserting humanity's limitations evens with atomic power newly at our command, and the fundamental ineffability of our fate as individuals and as a species.

Therefore, while the 'Hollywoodization' of Wells's original novel may produce a superficially conventional narrative, it also creates distinctive points of friction within the aesthetic and cultural textures of the film. Besides Pal's comment regarding the romantic plot, the film does demonstrate within its text further self-awareness with regard to its own cinematic heritage. An establishing shot in the town of Linda Rosa (which, along with the Martian landing site, is one of the main focal locations of the first act of the film) shows Cecil B. DeMille's Biblical epic *Samson and Delilah* (1949)

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[64] Lucanio, *Them or Us*, p. 26.
[65] Quoted in Hodgens, 'A Brief, Tragical History of the Science Fiction Film', p. 81.

playing at the local cinema, suggesting a direct cinematic lineage between DeMille's historical/mythological epics and the 1950s science-fiction spectacle. Furthermore, *Samson and Delilah* itself was, in fact, specifically cited by Sontag for its portrayal of Old Testament disaster as being of a kin to that of the emerging genre: "Certain of the primitive gratifications of science fiction films – for instance, the depiction of urban disaster on a colossally magnified scale – are shared with other types of films", sequences which do not "differ in aesthetic intention from the destruction scenes in the big sword, sandal and orgy color spectaculars set in Biblical or Roman times".[66] Shapiro in particular is very direct with regard to emphasising his view that the whole corpus of bomb films expresses "the Jewish apocalyptic tradition, which exhorts the restoration of a fractured world more than they express the dominant Messianic Christian tradition's focus on the hereafter."[67] The tendency shared by Sontag and Shapiro towards a consistent interpretation of disaster in science fiction specifically as a modern manifestation of an ancient and enduring archetype is mediated by a Jewish perspective, and is, perhaps, also reflective of an acute awareness of the failure to prevent the occurrence of the Holocaust.

The failure of efforts by human governments in the film, and the American armed forces in particular, to repel the Martians play out in different ways through the film, and this has much to do with the particular nature of the story it is telling. It represents much less a critique of modern technological civilisation than *The Day the Earth Stood Still*'s more politically targeted concerns, and this has surprising implications for attempts to categorise it in a straightforward manner. Even though Biskind terms it "a conservative film" where "Science has to throw in the towel" (and of course he is not, strictly speaking, inaccurate in his description here), *The War of the Worlds* nevertheless depicts a surprisingly close relationship with, even a collegial collaboration between, the scientific intelligentsia and the military. This presents a certain degree of political consensus and centrism despite its religious tone, harking back to an idealised view of Allied efforts in World War II through its portrayal of intranational and international co-operation.[68] This is not born out of a haphazard lack of clear political messaging, but part of a clear pattern emanating from the idiosyncratic logic of the narrative.

As has already been noted with regard Forrester and Sylvia, the film is happy to show its cards with a certain degree of nominative determinism. The example of General Mann is, for

[66] Sontag, *The Imagination of Disaster*, p. 214.
[67] Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema*, p. 5-6.
[68] Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, p. 147.

Shapiro, a noteworthy case of this tendency, one which is illustrative of the film's general outlook towards humanity's position in the cosmos:

> Just as the technological and social systems that Sizard and Pal fled failed to prevent the Holocaust (and, in fact, sent people to the gas chambers in an efficient, orderly fashion), so too does the technology and social systems of the 1950s fail Earth. It would seem, therefore, that the more cosmological the battle the more 'Mann's" or "Man's" secular institutions and technologies become increasingly powerless.[69]

As the commander of the US military's response to the Martian invasion, General Mann is both literally and metaphorically the embodiment of the establishment's efforts to maintain control over the situation. However, though his efforts are in vain, it is important to take note of the film's depiction of his character, in the sense of both narrative function and morality. He is introduced as a colleague and friend of Forrester's, and graciously refuses to pull rank over Colonel Heffner, the commander of the defences at Linda Rosa, insisting he is only present to observe. He appears shaken at the press conference in Los Angeles, and his uniform still muddied from the rout at Linda Rosa, but this increases the audience's sympathy for him as a leader who has been on the ground, tragically aware of how outclassed the military are against their alien foe. Here and in the war room sequence later in the film he temporarily takes up the role of audience focal point while the film deals with the bigger picture of the invasion, away from Forrester and Silvia. He then disappears from the film after the failed nuclear attack against the Martian war machines, not dissimilarly from how Mr. Harley disappears from *The Day the Earth Stood Still* after negotiations between Klaatu and the world governments break down. However, unlike Harley, his role is not to condemn the failings of the military or the political establishment, but to illustrate that even under such distinguished leadership, the defenders of Earth cannot be victorious through force of arms or any device of human design.

Yet even the final resort to religion is itself of an apparently contradictory nature. There is, in particular, a nuanced but important difference in how Sobchack and Shapiro characterise the film's attitude towards religion. They both insist that film addresses specific insecurities and anxieties in American culture in the post-war period. Shapiro, noting the sheer lack of interest *The War of the Words* has in its alien antagonists as a culture, as a civilisation in its own right, suggests that "the film seems to present the Martians as a backdrop to human characters who, in a post-Hiroshima environment, have lost touch with nature and must recognize that their powers may be rendered useless by greater powers."[70] Sobchack shares the view that the film suggests a sense of lack, but for her it explicitly and specifically links to a religious instinct: "When an SF film's postulated society is

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[69] Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema*, p. 88.
[70] *Ibid*, p. 85.

forced to face its own inadequacies, its own inability to deal with and control the unknown and insupportable, then (as in "real" life) that society will simultaneously hide and celebrate its lack of effect by congregating and by making of its failure something holy."[71] This is not the case for Shapiro, who makes the somewhat contrasting proposition that the film offers "a liberal bourgeois, secular vision of religion. Clayton [Forrester] does not seek God in the churches, but rather to spend his last moments with Sylvia." [72] While Shapiro is right to point out the motivation for Forrester at this point of the film, just like in Biskind's description of "the defeated scientist hero is reduced to wandering from church to church looking for his girlfriend" doesn't quite reckon with the way the film's wholesome love story plays out as a form of matrimony, a sacrament in its own right, another kind of communion.[73]

Figure 6 – *The War of the Worlds:* The survivors celebrate and rejoice.

For Sobchack, the fact that "No one and no effected empirical solution is able to stop the Martian onslaught in *War of the Worlds*" makes it "fitting, therefore, that the film ends with the

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[71] Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space* New Brunswick, (NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 62.
[72] Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema*, pp. 88-89.
[73] Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, p. 117.

survivors congregating in churches, praying and singing in an acceptance of their inadequacies and impending doom."[74] Yet, Shapiro is correct to note that "God no longer intervenes for the righteous, but waits passively, revealed to an individual as the individual is revealed unto himself."[75] Here he is clearly referring to the death of Pastor Collins who, as he approaches the Martians in a last gambit to avoid the outbreak of war, fatefully recites the most famous extracts from Psalm 23: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil … Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over … And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Yet despite his heroic attempt at approaching the Martians as spiritual brothers, Collins is killed in any case, a failed attempt at peace that marks the beginning of open conflict.

The appeal to a hoped-for shared spirituality by Pastor Collins, like the military efforts spearheaded by General Mann, and the scientific expertise of Pacific Tech, is ultimately futile in the face of the Martian onslaught. However, it is important that the film does not condemn any of humanity's attempted proactive responses to the invasion, despite their futility. There is a sense of duty to their deeds, not dissimilar in tenor to that in which Krishna tutors Prince Arjuna over the course of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and which was so famously invoked by Oppenheimer in an interview with *Time* in 1948 when he suggested that the verse "I am become Death, shatterer of worlds" occurred to him at the successful detonation of the Trinity nuclear test. According to James Hijiya this passage, and Oppenheimer's recitation of it, are frequently misinterpreted by Western commentators. It is not bombastic self-aggrandizement, or self-pity, but rather a mythic rendering of a specific conception of duty based upon an individual's role in society, grounded on the Hindu concept of dharma. In Oppenheimer's case, his role in the Second World War was determined not a matter of caste but of profession and expertise, and his dharma must be fulfilled no matter his personal doubts about the potential use of the bomb: "It was the duty of the scientist to build the bomb, but it was the duty of the statesman to decide whether or how to use it. Oppenheimer clearly and repeatedly acknowledged these very different dharmas."[76] Similarly, the more developed members of *The War of the Worlds*'s supporting cast – Pastor Collins, Colonel Heffner, General Mann, the Pacific Tech scientists – all pursue their duty until they are unable to continue, whether because they are killed or because events otherwise overtake them (the failure of the nuclear attack for Mann and the rioting in Los Angeles for the Pacific Tech team, which prevents them from evacuating with their equipment). Those who abandon their roles and their duties, like the rioters in LA or the local policeman who abandons Forrester and the Sheriff at the crash site (and who is

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[74] Sobchack, *Screening Space*, p. 62.
[75] Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema*, pp. 88-89.
[76] James A. Hijiya, 'The Gita of J. Robert Oppenheimer', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 144, No. 2 (June 2000), pp. 137.

promptly incinerated for his moral failure), receive comparatively short shrift and even shorter screen time. The noble are as buffeted by fate as the ignoble, but, as far as *The War of the Worlds* is concerned, it's how you conduct yourself that matters.

Here we start to see the film being reframed in terms of certain key syncretic constructs, such as those that occur between science and its narrative rendering as a kind of magic, as well a resurgence in an almost Greco-Roman conception of 'fate', existing alongside increasing interest Eastern spiritual belief and practice coming from, amongst other sources, intellectually curious figures such as Oppenheimer – all of which is awkwardly and not fully contained by a traditional Christian approach. Critique of science fiction film has time and again addressed the first of these, making the connection between the scientist and the archetypal figure of the magician, and the tendency towards a binary moralisation of good science and bad as a modern iteration of white and black magic, since Sontag's 'Imagination of Disaster'. Daniel Wojcik also noted the Faustian connection, diagnosing a recurring characterisation of atomic scientists in particular as "obsessed with harnessing the sacred powers of the universe, who would ultimately destroy the world in the pursuit of divine, forbidden knowledge".[77] For Glen Scott Allen, this is reminiscent not just of the individual archetype, but of "the entire morality play of intellectual arrogance and the obsessive self-destruction it inevitably engenders – an argument (or perhaps "assumption" is a better word) which runs throughout the Western master narratives from Oedipus to Faust."[78] Both of these films taken as case studies for examining alien incursions have scientists as key characters, but despite the noted ambiguities surrounding the ambiguous figure of Gort, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* ultimately showcases 'super-science' as a force for good. In contrast, *The War of the Worlds* places the emphasis firmly on the reverse of this polarity, but it does so in a curiously removed way. The Martian science is a black art, and human science, whether in the form of the atomic bomb or the proposed biological weapon that could defeat the Martians, is shown to be ineffective. The Faustian theme is, therefore, not quite fully developed here. Unlike, for example, Dr. Carrington in *The Thing from Another World* (1951), there are no human scientists in *The War of the Worlds* who are seduced into siding with the alien invaders over humanity in the name of gaining greater knowledge. Nor is there a specific trespass which leads to the Martians attacking Earth because of some overzealous investigation into the cosmos, like Morbius's hubris leading to the unleashing of the Monster of the Id in *Forbidden Planet* (a rich vein of signifiers which will be addressed in the next

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[77] Daniel Wojcik, *The End of the World as We Know It* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), p. 202
[78] Allen, *Master Mechanics & Wicked Wizards*, p. 4.

chapter). It is the Martians themselves who are the Faustian figures here; whose voraciousness has consumed their own planet and now threatens ours.

They are the embodiment of the principle of Mephistophelian science without the depiction of a transfer or trade between the human and the demonic. We do not see any glimpse how the civilisation relishes the fruits of their forbidden knowledge before their doom overtakes them. No temptation or fall actually takes place; the Martians are simply damned by their very nature. They do serve as a warning in the Faustian mould, but it is a distant one at best. Hence, as the film has no characters who are confronted with a Faustian dilemma, it does not reckon with how the invariable generic conflation of science and magic interacts with its religious themes. This distinction is particularly important for Sobchack:

> Similarities notwithstanding, the cultural function of religion, is the opposite to the cultural function of magic. Based on negative and pessimistic assumptions of man's ability to control or affect his destiny, religion's function is to socially affirm and make supportable man's inadequacies. This function results in group activity which gathers man into a congregation to control his fear and terror of the inevitable, the uncontrollable, and the unknown.[79]

In this reading, because there is no viable human solution, no 'white magic' counter-spell to cast which could fend off the devilry of the Martians, the characters of *The War of the Worlds* must resort to the heightened emotional and religious dichotomy of hope and despair. Thematically, therefore, we might be able to rest the crux of *The War of the Worlds*' approach to the anxieties of the modern world in a resort to divine grace and an acceptance of one's fate in the cosmic schema. However, exactly because of the previously noted frictions created by the introduction of 'standard' Hollywood plot elements into Wells's story, something else is produced by the film's narrative structure and the rhythmical arrangement of plot and character beats, particularly in the crucial moment of *eucatastrophe*. We have, in fact, not two but three alternate human responses to the Martian threat: human science, which is not strong enough to oppose the Martians on their own terms; organised religion, which is ideologically sounds but does not endow its practitioners with agency to resolve their own problems; and finally, there is the curious all-distorting structural power of 'love'. In *War of the Worlds*, matrimonial love, if it does not conquer all, at least can weather the storm, and provide a reason to take hope after the devastation. If not solely responsible for the microbes' victory over the Martians, it could be seen as operating in concert with it, a supporting voice in the divine incantation which does, in the end, dispel the devilish invaders.

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[79] Sobchack, *Screening Space*, p. 62.

The War of the Worlds is in its own way a distinctly reactionary picture, but the nature of this reaction is not with regard to a specific political stance, or in relation to some broader formulation of consensus and the relationship between the military and science. Rather, it positions itself against evolving notions of apocalypse itself. If, according to Wojcik, "Apocalypse was now no longer a cosmic event executed by supernatural deities; it was now reduced to a mundane, technological absurdity," then here we are confronted with a retrograde narrative, and attempt to reassert the cosmic nature of apocalypse and return it to its properly ineffable place.[80] There is a reassertion of the "previous millenarian visions" which "emphasized the imminent arrival of a redemptive new era" in contrast to the "increasingly pessimistic" beliefs "stressing cataclysmic disaster" which, Wojcik argues, became increasingly prevalent in the post-war period. The ending of The War of the Worlds briefly but clearly invokes the millenarian promise of an Arcadian paradise to follow the devastation, both through the reuniting of Sylvia and Forrester, and the final shots of the refugees in the hills above Los Angeles singing with faith and hope: "This world and the next. Amen". The scale of the Martian attack, of the destruction caused, is no contradiction of this optimism; rather, it is part of the point. As Tolkien suggests, in appropriate Christian fashion, the happy ending of a fairy-tale, a fantastic story, "does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance".[81] The suffering which humanity endures in The War of the Worlds is spiritually purifying, but this would not have been the case if humanity had meekly offered up itself to the Martians. Hence the seeming paradox of the necessity of an ultimately futile resistance, but it also these same traits and behaviours which allows the species to carry through into the next world, the new Earth, with its dignity largely intact.

Alien Incursions: Conclusion

It is clear that while The Day the Earth Stood Still and The War of the Worlds both make use of a certain formulation of the archetypal and the historical, mediated by genre, their starting points and ultimate conclusions are clearly very different. Not only are their respective alien visitors of a self-evidently opposing nature, but where The Day the Earth Stood Still is open-ended, questioning, with humanity's fate uncertain despite the relatively small scale of the violence inflicted by Gort, The War of the Worlds insists on returning humanity to a purer, more certain state as a result of the conflict it barely survived. In a certain irony, it is the film which places the emphasis more on its contemporary political, social, and technological reality which also makes more overt use of Christian models and iconography for its storytelling. Ultimately, however, such facets are put towards a very different purpose than in their traditional usage. There is not spiritual purification, no divine validation at the

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[80] Wojcik, The End of the World as We Know It, p. 103.
[81] Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', p. 153.

conclusion of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Even judgement is withheld. Its apparent Messiah figure does not, in fact, use his prodigious powers to save the world in any literal or metaphorical sense, and he is not a redeemer; instead he uses his access to godlike super-science to demonstrate the peril that humanity is in, which they must work themselves, not spiritually but politically and scientifically, towards averting. And, indeed, the message is primarily delivered not to holy men or politicians, but to scientists, whose wisdom, it is implied, exceeds that of traditional social leaders. This is, of course, in marked contrast to the literal miracle offered at the end of *The War of the Worlds*, which saw its scientist characters reduced to huddling in a church, their prayers for salvation answered in a last-second reprieve the reaffirms humanity's faith in God, despite the devastation inflicted by the Martians.

However, their divergences in approach offer a greater range and variance to the analysis of the narrative and thematic construction of these films, and their value as instances of their time and culture, than categorising them into simple binaries of good alien versus bad, progressive versus conservative, or mythic and historic. Through the mythological strands of thought and the broader psychosocial debris which coalesce around both the bomb and the associated anxieties of post-war technological civilisation in cultural artefacts such as these films, they can be regarded as, not whole bodies caught in amber, but rather impressions in the clay of history. They provide opportunities to identify traces of the more indirect, emotional fallout of such devastating events, all the more so because they are mediated by conventions specific to the time and the operation of the genre within the industry. In this context, it is significant that *The Day the Earth Stood Still* strives, as we have seen, to perform a direct critique of the overall political situation of the post-war years, specifically the beginnings of Cold War international politics and the proliferation of atomic weapons. It attempts to wrestle with the consequences of the political conflict and technological advancement of the 20th century by envisioning a cosmic intervention that gives at least the chance of diverting the species, and the world, down a different course. That the narrative hesitates, holds back from embracing the certainty of the solution offered by Klaatu gives the film a fascinatingly frayed edge, and a distinctly melancholic final note.

Conversely, such a cultural and intellectual melange can be turned to a reassertion of older values and beliefs, and there is even an element of mutual reinforcement here, perhaps even mythic self-address, in the way *The War of the Worlds* asserts the ancient, incomprehensible, and seemingly random nature of apocalyptic disaster through the depiction of just such a disaster. There is melancholy to be found here, not only in the scale of the destruction and lost off life, but in the sacrifice of Pastor Collins and the valorous futility of the military struggle against the aliens. Yet ultimately the melancholic, while present, is deliberately held at arm's length, and ultimately pushed

aside by the re-establishment of faith and sacrament, by the promise of marriage and of a better and purified world. The mythic and archetypal elements of *The War of Worlds* are therefore not mere dressing, but deeply founded in its themes and in the structure and resolution of its plot, even as they provide the excuse for its displays of spectacle. In *The Day The Earth Stood Still*, the interaction of the historic with the mythic functions, ironically, as a secular parable, measuring choice and compromise in the deployment of phenomenal technological power. Fraught with particular significance for American culture and society following its deployment of atomic weapons in order to defend itself and project its power further abroad and into the future, it expresses profound discontent with the recent past by projecting concerns onto the future. Both films have their symbolic and thematic elements enriched by the weaving of archetypal constructs together with their active political and technological concerns, through the vocabulary which science fiction film was beginning to develop in this, still formative, period. Yet their respective visions of the future, their very relationships with the idea of the future, diverge based upon their respective uses of the mythic and historic to alternately attempt to excavate and address the melancholy foundations of the scenarios they confront, or to veil and ultimately retreat from that confrontation.

In *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, where Klaatu's unseen interplanetary alliance uses technology to facilitate a peaceful utopia, even if it is, paradoxically, via the displacement of violent impulses and behaviours onto a force of robotic 'peacekeeping' surrogates. These are not as contradictory depictions of technology, and its relationship with civilisation and society, as they first appear. In *Forbidden Planet*, as will be shown in the next chapter, technology clearly has a profound effect on societal cohesion of both the original inhabitants of Altair IV and later visitors to the planet, whether reinforcing it or literally obliterating it entirely. In this light, the Monster from the Id can be conceived of as an inverted double of Gort, the latter a clearly-defined physical being embodying power and control in his smooth lines and deliberate movements, while the former typically appears as an invisible, chaotic force, only briefly glimpsed as an archetypal demonic creature deliberately out of keeping with its science fictional surroundings; it is a regressive and primal figure out of medieval, rather than modern, folklore. This contrast makes perfect sense: Gort is a cosmic policeman, and the Monster not just a murderer, but murderous intent itself. Both positions necessarily entail violence. What Gort provides, however, is a medium for violence – and violent, even libidinous, emotionality – to be expressed in concrete form, and thereby pinned down. Not safe, perhaps, but sanitized. The Monster is nothing less than a message without a medium, 'information' distilled to pure affect – little wonder the Krell technology of Altair IV sooner or later destroys all of its users, just as destructive in its way as the Martian's death rays.

This Island Earth, meanwhile, asks its audience to consider the contemporary moment of what was then the peak of American (and thus, in Hollywood's imagination, human) scientific advancement as if it were, indeed, yesterday's news – something it has in common with both *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The War of the Worlds*. By putting their spectacular images of alien technologies and cultures directly in contrast with contemporary scientific advances, these films depict the natural consequence that the increasing ubiquity of technology and the familiarity of technologized life would inevitable have – that if, as Arthur C. Clarke famously stated, "sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic", then sufficiently *familiar* technologies become indistinguishable from mundane tools.[82] There is important contemporaneous connection here between the domestic technology of the household and the 'marvellous' technology of, for example, the atomic bomb through the idea of the 'pushbutton' age.

This connection manifests in the hope, evident for example in the depiction of the experimental work of its scientist hero, that atomic power would in fact lead to a technological utopia of essentially self-powered cities, vehicles, and domestic utilities.[83] As Don Ihde notes, there is more than one way in which technology can move into the background: firstly through deliberate intention, in which convenience via (semi)automation is the point; and secondly through obsolescence, by simply becoming junk.[84] These films don't quite transform the plane or automobile into so much discarded waste, as they still retain purpose in the context of human society (and the plane is in this way 'redeemed' at the end of *This Island Earth*); but they do re-contextualise them from symbols of a high technological society to the subtly but significantly distinct role symbols of the everyday in the attempt to place the West, and America in particular, in the position of the colonised rather than the colonisers. As we have seen, *The War of the Worlds* does this most explicitly, and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* by implication, and it returns as the ultimate threat in the final act of *This Island Earth*, part of what allows it to function as an unfolding of the genre in this period.

Therefore, if the '50s are viewed as a period of transition rather than stability (a transition which films like *The War of the Worlds* are specifically acting against), then it would be expected for people of the time, both audiences and filmmakers, to requisition mythic forms to naturalise new sociological forms such as the nuclear family. Indeed, psychoanalysis became popular in the States in the '40s and '50s specifically in the wake of a new era of consumerist economic expansion in the

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[82] Arthur C. Clark, *Profiles of the Future* (New York: Popular Library, 1973), p. 36.

[83] Joyce A. Evans, *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), pp. 39-40.

[84] Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 108.

American post-war environment, merged with a revised form of functionalism that "was used to dictate how the sexes should function, according to precise ideals." [85] In choosing to actively confront, and providing an archetypal resolution to, the opposed problems of mourning and courting, *Forbidden Planet* occupies a point at the centre of the melancholic spectrum – concerned with addressing the trauma of the individual, but not how it is situated with social, cultural, and political structures.[86] This position it shares somewhat with *This Island Earth*, which implies, though does not actually show, a return to normality for Ruth and Cal after the destruction of Metaluna, with the promise of potential for domestic bliss to follow.

However, *The War of the Worlds*, through the same lens, performs a kind of double operation, a melancholic pessimism that exists almost in spite of its own attempts to reassure and assuage anxieties. It is intended as a sacred pessimism, one which posits God's grace as the only possible source of salvation, religion the only solace – but even this is imperilled by the film's depiction of the Martians themselves as morally and spiritually irredeemable, in effect beyond the scope of God's grace. The theological implications of the possible existence of sentient alien life was a present concern, at least in the religious imaginary of the period, as evidenced in James Blish's novel *A Case of Conscience*, who present the opposite problem – a utopia constructed with no previous knowledge or awareness of the Gospel.[87] Whereas the destruction of Altair IV in *Forbidden Planet* will suggest an acknowledgement of the cost of the events which have occurred there, the literal final notes of *The Wars of the Worlds*, in attempting to reassure the film's audience with an appeal to the divinely ineffable, ultimately ring false after the scale of the destruction we have witnessed.

There are, however, some caveats that need to be drawn here. First is the simple formal and structural point that *endings* don't necessarily *explain* films. Building on this, and considering the films in their full range, and embedded within a larger cultural and intellectual constellation, we can entertain a second notion, that the films – and not just those with *actively* political ambitions – are engaging with the inevitable inadequacy of any cultural response to the bomb, consciously or not. Indeed, considered in concert, they propose the thesis that there is no entirely adequate, practical human response possible to the ghosts which haunt the middle of the twentieth century. Even

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[85] Douglas T. Miller & Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), p. 149.

[86] For Barry Keith Grant, it was also released in a year which "more than any other year of the decade, marks a period of cultural transition". 1956 "was marked by tensions arising from contemporary technological, political, and cultural changes, that were inevitably articulated in Hollywood movies of the time." In 'Movies and the Crack of Doom', *American Cinema of the 1950s*, ed. Murray Pomerance (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 155.

[87] James Blish, *A Case of Conscience* (London: Gollancz, 2014).

Klaatu's farewell in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* becomes endowed with a note of doubt and dread. The degree to which this engagement is deliberate may therefore vary, but it can be seen in this open-ended questioning of both new and established orders of civilisation *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *Them!*, as well as in the traditional religiosity of *The War of the Worlds* and more complex existentialism of *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. It is apparent in fears of technology expressed through the Martians of *The War of the Worlds* and the Metalunans of *This Island Earth*. It is disavowed, but nevertheless insistently present, in manifestations and even sublimated identifications with the Other, in the form of giant ants from the desert and domestic spiders in the suburban basement. Such manifestations, and other motifs, appropriate existing cultural archetypes and are embedded in traditional and formulaic narrative structures, but the exact modulation of these structures and their framing within both the cinematic medium and the science fiction genre is relational to the key concepts here set forth. The films themselves do not necessarily exist at fixed points with regard to these concepts, but at the intersection of the various spectrums or vectors whose trajectories and waveforms are modulated through the specific historical concerns of the era. Hence, the profound melancholy that suffuses these films, all the more acute for the dissonance which emerges in the uncanny imbrication of distracting special-effects spectacle and direct address to some of the most pressing and unresolved technological, sociological, and psychological anxieties of the era.

Chapter 2: Cosmic Excursions

This second case study is centred on close readings of two films which both attempt to imagine and depict visitations by humans to distant planets beyond our solar system. *Forbidden Planet* (dir. Fred M. Wilcox, 1956) is an iconic film which serves as both a touchstone for what science fiction film meant in this era and as a significant influence for the genre's future evolution. The film's narrative is comprised of a loose adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, with the eponymous planet of Altair IV standing recognisably in place of Prospero's island, and its inhabitants clearly analogous to the specific figures of Prospero, Miranda, Ariel, and Caliban.[1] *This Island Earth* (dir. Joseph M. Newman, 1954), meanwhile, is an adaptation of a science-fiction novel of the same name by Raymond F. Jones,[2] itself an expansion of an earlier serialised narrative published in sci-fi pulp magazine *Thrilling Wonder Stories* over two years, from 1949 and 1950 – one of only two films in this corpus to be adapted from material belonging to the same period of history, along with *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. This contrasting relationship is itself pertinent to the comparison: *Forbidden Planet* is a Renaissance comedy translated into the language of 1950s science fiction film, while *This Island Earth* is a live-action rendering of contemporary sci-fi prose. Unsurprising, perhaps, in this light is the revelation that *This Island Earth* comprises a more active exploration and investigation of its own science-fictional world and, by extension, its genre. The plot essentially takes the form of a transition from the mundane 'real world' to a marvellous, science fictional one. *Forbidden Planet*, meanwhile, is more immediately direct in its implementation of science fiction iconography and motifs, drawing upon contemporary developments in scientific thought in order to aid in the construction and fleshing out of its diegesis and particularly the ancient-yet-futuristic alien world that provides the title and setting of the picture.

This study begins with a consideration of *Forbidden Planet* due, in part, to its status as not only an iconic and influential film, but also one of the most thoroughly studied in the corpus of 1950s American science fiction cinema as a whole. As Barry Keith Grant notes, it was "in CinemaScope and color, the first big-budget ($1 million) science fiction movie made by a major Hollywood studio, and many regard it as one of the greatest examples of the genre."[3] Its themes and the unique details of its production set the stage for the introduction of explicitly cybernetic concepts into the imaginary

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[1] Williams Shakespeare*, The Tempest*, in *The Complete Works, Second Edition*, eds. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1221-1244.

[2] Raymond F. Jones, *This Island Earth* (Huntsville, AL: Thunderchild Publishing, 1980 [1952]).

[3] Barry Keith Grant, 'Movies and the Crack of Doom', *American Cinema of the 1950s*, ed. Murray Pomerance (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 175.

of popular science fiction cinema. The film's incorporation of Freudian terminology into a Shakespearean narrative has, naturally, been difficult for scholars to resist. The main threat which emerges through the narrative, the Monster from the Id, is a deliberately obvious reference to one of Freud's most fundamental and well-known psychological concepts, which in turn lent its name to Margaret Tarratt' influential article on science fiction film, 'Monsters from the Id'.[4] The process of producing the film's electronic score, by Louis and Bebe Barron, has also frequently been highlighted by critics, such as in Rebecca Leydon's chapter '*Forbidden Planet*: Effects and Affects in the Electro Avant Garde' in Philip Hayward's collection on SF film scores *Off the Planet*, as well as James Wierzbicki's musicological breakdown of the score, and more recently by K. J. Donnelly in his *Occult Aesthetics*, for details such as the unconventionality of the relationship the score has to the film's visuals, and also for its compositional process, consciously and deliberately influenced by Norbert Wiener's work on cybernetics.[5] These considerations are here grounded in a reading of the narrative based not around the film's protagonist, Commander Adams (Leslie Nielson), but instead on its actual dramatic centre, the brilliant but arrogant Morbius (Walter Pidgeon), and his relationships in particular with his daughter Altaira (Anne Francis) and the figure of Robby the Robot, both of whom mirror their 'father' in different ways. Adams and his crew provide the entrance into this world, but it is a world that existed long before their arrival, and the drama extends out of their disruption of the small family unit on Altair IV. It is with these details that the score is discussed, focusing on the laying out the foundation of the composition as an attempt at 'performing' cybernetics, and contextualising this in relation to the film's overall narrative, character dynamics, and themes.

The particular structure of *This Island Earth*'s narrative, meanwhile, lends itself to a discussion of the function of genre. Situating this development against a genealogy of genre studies, extending backwards from the work done in J. P. Telotte's *Science Fiction Film* in classifying the genre, through the influence of Tzevetan Todorov's *The Fantastic*, and its response to Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism,* this half of the case study aims to articulate the specific genre operations being undertaken in *This Island Earth*.[6] More than this, however, the investigation here will attempt to illustrate the complex relationship between the production of new science fiction

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[4] Margaret Tarratt, 'Monsters of the Id', *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2003), pp. 346-365.
[5] Rebecca Leydon, ''*Forbidden Planet*: Effects and Affects in the Electro Avant Garde', *Off the Planet*, ed. Philip Hayward (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 61-76; James Wierzbicki, *Louis and Bebe Barron's Forbidden Planet: A Film Score Guide* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005); K. J. Donnelly, *Occult Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 130.
[6] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957; Tzevatan Todorov. *The Fantastic*, trans. Richard Horward (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975); J. P. Telotte, *Science Fiction Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

and the evolving understanding of what science fiction, and even genre itself, is. This reading of the film's archetypal figures and themes against the background of Frye's work is rendered in particular by reversing the perspective of the film from that of the protagonist, Cal Meacham (Rex Reason) and instead examining in more detail the character of Exeter (Jeff Morrow). Here we have a sympathetic antagonist figure who, like Morbius, anchors not just the character conflicts, but the moral drama of the narrative. From this perspective, the reading here draws out the underlying melancholic themes of *This Island Earth*, its connection to the development of the idea of genre itself in this period and beyond, and also its clear resonances with *Forbidden Planet* in lamenting dead or dying alien races while also suggesting that they were, inevitably, doomed. The comparison allows for a re-situating of both films in relation to different aspects of the intellectual constellation of the era, thereby mapping a portion of the cultural disposition of America in the 1950s.

Forbidden Planet (1956)

The Philologist and the Robot: A Double Bind
A modernised Shakespearean romance rendered through the visual language of science fiction pulp, *Forbidden Planet* takes place on and in the space around the planet Altaira IV, a 'missing' human colony which the crew of the C-57D, led by Commander Adams, is tasked with investigating. Before they arrive, they are confronted by the seemingly respectful but nevertheless inhospitable figure of Morbius. One of the first things we learn about Morbius is that he is a philologist; he is an academic, an intellectual, and his discipline is language, speech, writing, communication. It is significant that the foundation of Morbius' understanding of Krell technology is not based in a technical analysis of its physical operations, however fanciful those may be, but precisely through his command of *language*. From this perspective, Morbius can be seen as a particular rendering of the kind of intellectual described by Glen Scott Allen as the 'wicked wizard' archetype, whose "sinister aura is created by that character's display of intellectual prowess, a prowess that is usually communicated in rhetoric that strikes us more closely aligned with magic than science."[7] Feats of oral and verbal power are not the unique preserve of such men, as other kinds of figures, from witches and their familiars to St Francis of Assisi, from the mythic figure of Orpheus to the adventures of Hugh Lofting's Doctor Doolittle,[8] have been endowed with preternatural powers of communication with the natural world. Later on, Morbius's daughter, Altaira, resembles these figures as well in her familiarity and comradery with the deer and the tiger. However, in her case this ability is implicitly tied to a virginal notion of innocence and purity, like in the unicorn myth, for after she responds

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[7] Glen Scott Allen, *Master Mechanics & Wicked Wizards* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), p. 8.
[8] Hugh Lofting, *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011 [1920].

positively to Commander Adams's amorous advances and lets him kiss her, her tiger 'friend' becomes aggressive and violent towards both her and the Commander. There is, clearly, a traditionally gendered quality to the nature of Morbius and Altaira's respective feats of communication: Altaira's abilities are situated with regard to the emotional, physical, and social in relation to sexual maturity; Morbius's operate in relation to the intellect and states of consciousness.

Yet, through the evocation of the Freudian idea of a "language of dream-thoughts", Morbius's situation in relation to his own linguistic powers is, in fact, more fraught than that of his daughter.[9] His control is challenged and, ultimately, overwhelmed by the underlying irrationality and primal behaviours of the subconscious mind, all of which come to a head in the final act of the film. Freud's explication of the reasoning behind his 'dream-work' to an American audience in 1909 does, in effect, sum up the underlying themes of Morbius's predicament:

> The manifest dream-content is the disguised surrogate for the unconscious dream thoughts, and this disguising is the work of the defensive forces of the ego, of the resistances. These prevent the repressed wishes from entering consciousness during the waking life, and even in the relaxation of sleep they are still strong enough to force them to hide themselves by a sort of masquerading.[10]

Morbius's situation, the danger that wiped out the original colony and threatens the crew of the C-57D, and the apocalyptic fate of the original inhabitants of Altair IV, the Krell, are what occurs when the repressed wishes of the conscious mind are permitted expression in the physical world, and dreams and reality are no longer distinguishable. When, during the Monster from the Id's third and most brazen attack on the ship, the Monster comes under concentrated fire, we see Morbius disturbed in his sleep, and it is only when he awakes that he hears the attack end. In the same moment he hears Altaira's cry, for she has also experienced the attack in her dream, although as an observer rather than participant. Margaret Tarratt uses this as an example of how science fiction was as interested in interior life as in its historical moment – yet, of course, the framing of such an interest is specifically through an understanding of psychology which continued to resonate in American culture through this historical moment.[11]

Morbius's predilection for power through and over language also runs throughout the film in less obvious ways as well. It is Morbius who initiates contact with the C-57D over radio, rather than they who contact him. However, it is significant that he does this primarily to discourage its captain

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[9] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010), p. 296.
[10] Sigmund Freud, 'Third Lecture', *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Harry W. Chase, https://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/65347/sts-003-spring-2008/contents/readings/freud.pdf
[11] Tarratt, 'Monsters from the Id', pp. 346-365.

and crew from landing. Curiously, he seems reluctant to forbid them from landing directly, but rather issues a statement, Pontius Pilate-like, of abdicating responsibility. The planet is, indeed, forbidden territory, but its one spokesperson is reluctant to state by whom or what it is forbidden. This disassociation, it becomes clear, is key to not only the initial disappearance of the colony, but also Morbius's character and behaviour throughout the film. In terms of the immediate mechanics of the plot, though, this is primarily a false attempt at discouraging the action of the film itself, in structural terms a classic example of a Proppian interdiction, in which the hero is given specific instruction not to perform a particular act or venture to a particular place.[12] Here this interdiction is, as in Propp's morphology, inevitably followed by its violation. As Morbius continues to urge Commander Adams to stay away from Altair IV, the captain of the starship irately shuts off communication with the surface, before piloting the ship to the ground himself, directly and personally. The academic's speech, his words of command, are opposed and countered by the military officer's direct actions; the man of words and the man of action are opposed practically dialectically right from the very start of the film's narrative. Such a dialectic, with its connection to the notions of positive and negative feedback as functions of communication and control, and the way it is functionally superseded by the larger system of the film's narrative structure as a romance, is central not only to the plot but the thematic concerns of the film, providing an aperture for the emergence of cybernetic concepts in the science fictional imaginary of popular cinema. Nowhere is this more rarefied than – very literally – in the body of the film's most visually distinctive and memorable character.
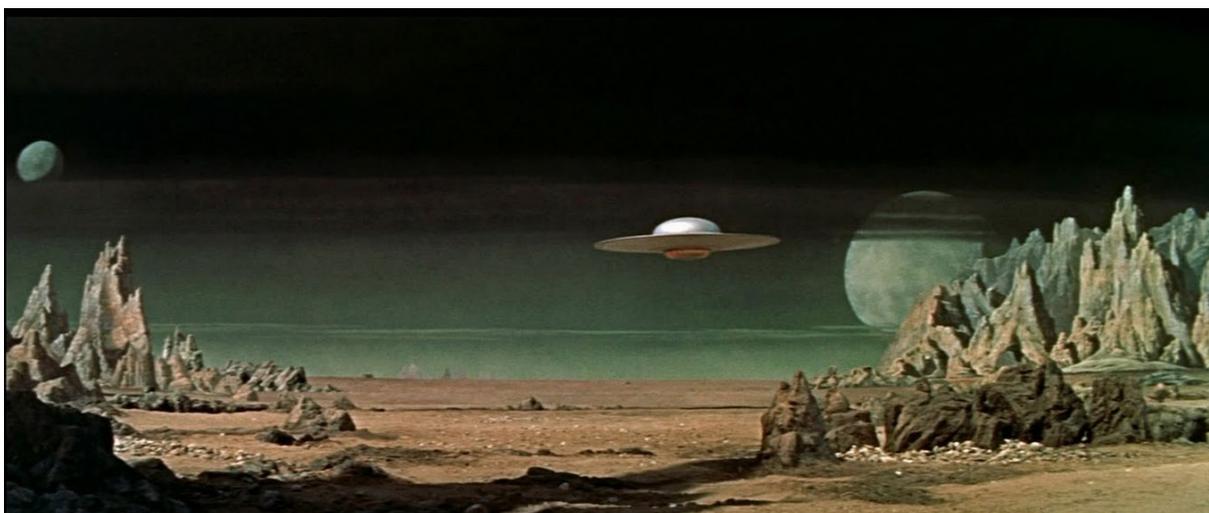

Figure 7 – *Forbidden Planet:* The C-57D arrives on Altair IV.

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[12] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009), pp. 26-27.

Not long after the ship lands, we are introduced to the figure of Robby the Robot. The first glimpse of him is as a distant dust cloud racing towards the planet's new arrivals, appearing almost like a desert djinn, though his initial speed is undercut by his cumbersome, bulbous form which emerges from the sled-like speeder. Robby is, of course, one of the defining representations of robotics in popular culture, and one of the iconic figures of twentieth century science fiction, reappearing in subsequent films and television shows, from MGM's *The Invisible Boy* (1957) the following year, also produced by *Forbidden Planet*'s Nicholas Nayfack, to episodes of science-fiction family odyssey *Lost in Space*, to a guest appearance in the detective show *Columbo* and beyond.[13] Where *The Day the Earth Stood Still*'s own iconic robot, Gort, is clearly human in shape but almost featureless outside of his chrome skin and cyclopean aperture, Robby is, while bipedal, less distinctly human in form. Yet the exposed workings of his internal mechanisms, in concert with his formal speech and precise tone, give him a distinct sense of personality which is quite different from the enigmatic and voiceless Gort – one can observe that where Gort has no mouth and only his deadly vision, Robby instead has his proves of thought and speech revealed through a transparent carapace. Even his overly literal responses to offhand questions and remarks are part of his 'charm', which is clearly encapsulated by his overtly amiable, alliterative name.

Like his master, Robby is a kind of linguistic expert. He is equipped, in addition to English, with "187 other languages along with their various dialects and sub-tongues". Morbius has constructed Robby in his own image, like father like son, or the image of the creator reiterated in the created. Nevertheless, there is a distinction to be made here. The emphasis on Morbius's life-long research into the translation and understanding of the Krell frames him primarily as an expert in comparative linguistics, while Robby's comprehensive, modular approach emphasises more fundamental language processes and, even more than his creator's approach and attitude, identifies linguistic construction as a form of applied logic. This is instantly contrasted with the practically-minded Commander Adams who, nonplussed by Robby's linguistic repertoire, gives the mildly dismissive response that "Colloquial English will be fine." The robot's speech is not only visualised through the blue lights of a voice box resembling a digital decibel meter, but apparently so too is his very process of composing or configuring statements and responses. Inside the transparent dome that forms his 'head', we can see a series of mechanical instruments, somewhere between pistons and typewriter keys, which move to the sound of electronic tapes being inserted. This intricate audio-visual display of practical special effects and sound design indicates when Robby is thinking about – or more specifically, the impression is, *selecting* – what he will say next.

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[13] Wierzbicki, *Louis and Bebe Barron's Forbidden Planet*, p. 13.

In other words, Robby's communicative mechanism and functioning appears to be imagined and designed, consciously or not, along the lines of cybernetic principles specifically in the form outlined by Claude Shannon, who was interested in "defining information as a strategic choice that enabled him to bracket semantics." As criticised by Douglas MacKay at the seventh Macy Conference on cybernetics in March 1950, this approach fundamentally only covered 'selected information' which, as N. Katherine Hayles describes it in her history of posthumanism and cybernetics, is "information calculated by considering the selection of message elements from a set".[14] For McKay, this failed to consider 'structural information', the metacommunicative date which facilitates how we understand any given piece of information.[15] It is such a limited form of communication that Robby, despite his encyclopaedic knowledge, appears to be engaged in. He very clearly formulates his whole response at once in response to the specific inquiries made of him and the data provided to him, without regard for the context of those inputs, and then 'reads off' his answers from his own internal systems as a discrete unit of information. His responses to the basic questions and statements posed to him in his first scene, regarding the oxygen in the atmosphere causing rust, or the irrelevance of his gender and physiognomy, are instructive in more ways than one. To the audience, as to the crew of the C-57D, they are perhaps humorous responses, but they are humorous in a particular way: pragmatically conveying specific technical information where such specificity is not required by, or is otherwise out of sorts with, social convention.

In so doing, Robby's performance rarefies the process of communication itself, making a display – a spectacle, even – out of the elisions in casual conversation and small talk, his concrete objectivity standing out cumbersomely against the subjectivity of normal human conversation. His rejoinders initially seem like largely irrelevant nonsense, ignoring or poorly addressing the intent of his interlocutors, but in fact exactly because they are unexpected and unpredictable, they provide insight into the distinction between "selectional-information-content", as McKay frames it, and the "structural-information-content" which is necessary for the selected information to be contextualised and understood.[16] Most significantly, his answers frequently draw attention to and emphasise his robotic nature, in contrast to the human characters around him. When Commander Adams comments upon the "High oxygen content" of the "Nice climate you've got here", rather than acknowledging the implied remarkability of an atmosphere breathable by humans, Robby states with a deadpan tone that "I rarely use it myself, sir. It promotes rust." Similarly, when the cook wonders aloud whether Robby is a "boy robot or a girl robot", the machine intelligence politely

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[14] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 54-5.
[15] *Ibid*.
[16] Steve J. Heims, *The Cybernetics Group* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p. 112.

dismisses the query entirely, pointing out that "In my case, sir, the question is totally without meaning." The pointedly direct and practical nature of these responses illustrates the meta-structure of ordinary human interactions, with their anticipated redundancies and social placeholders, cutting through to the assumptions lying beneath such social exchanges.

https://img.moviepostershop.com/forbidden-planet-movie-poster-1956-1020516260.jpg
[last accessed 03/06/2019]

Figure 8 – *Forbidden Planet* theatrical poster.

Like Gort, the film's marketing may have shown Robby posed like a Universal Studios movie monster, carrying a vulnerable Altaira like a trophy or conquest, but unlike his predecessor Robby never adopts this role in the plot and nor does the camera ever treat him as a leering predator. In contrast to Gort and *Forbidden Planet*'s own technologically-manifested spectre of male aggression, the Monster from the Id, Robby denies possessing an actual gender and instead insists that the question of whether he is a male or a female is without meaning. Though his name and voice clearly default to a recognisably traditional male identity, this statement identifies him with the androgynous figure of Ariel in *The Tempest*, with whom he shares a similar role in their respective narratives. Just as Ariel acts as servant to Prospero in Shakespeare's play, so too does Robby serve Morbius here. Unlike the capricious, mercurial sprite, however, the stolid Robby remains genially disposed towards the rest of the cast of characters, albeit in a dispassionate way. Like a good

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Asimovian robot, he is incapable of harming human beings, apparently running on a more basic, unarticulated version of Asimov's 'Three Laws of Robotics'.[17] Lacking Asimov's qualifications regarding conflicts between commands issued to him, however, Robby nearly overloads when Morbius, to prove the point, instructs the robot to shoot Commander Adams. This contradiction sends the robot into a kind of double bind, unable to reconcile Morbius's command with his fundamental encoding against taking a human life. The same behavioural block eventually helps clinch the realisation for Morbius that he himself is the progenitor of the Monster from the Id as Robby, aware of this truth on some level, is prevented by the double bind from acting against the Monster.

The double bind itself was named and outlined by Gregory Bateson and his colleagues Don D. Jackson, Jay Haley, and John H. Weakland in a paper entitled 'Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia', published in *Behavioral Science* in 1956, approximately seven months after the nation-wide release of *Forbidden Planet*.[18] There is, obviously, no causal link to be drawn from the double bind laid out by Bateson et al. towards the depiction of Robby in the film, but there remain significant shared concerns. The double bind, as outlined in the paper, requires an authority figure that inflicts the dilemma on the victim (the mother is pin-pointed in terms of the family dynamics Bateson & co. are discussing), a "*repeated experience*", a "*primary negative injunction*" and a "*secondary injunction in conflict with the first*", as well as "*tertiary negative injunction prohibiting the victim from escaping the field*".[19] In the case of *Forbidden Planet*, there is certainly a dysfunctional family of a sort present, but Robby's condition it is not so much a result of an active injunction as deliberate neglect, since Morbius simply has not constructed the robot with the same facility to escape such quandaries that Asimov's robots, for example, are designed – or rather, imagined – to possess. This is, however, a minor discrepancy next to that fact that Robby is, of course, not a schizophrenic. He shares with the analysis of the condition, as laid out in the paper, a form of confusion between metaphors with reality, but rather than being unable to parse between "*unlabeled*" metaphorical imagery and sensorial reality in his perception, he simply doesn't recognise or understand metaphors, as well as other colloquialisms, as figures of speech – an early instance of the commonplace science fictional trope of 'excessively' logical machine-thinkers who find it difficult to comprehend human idioms.[20]

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[17] Originally set out in the short story 'Runaround', first published in *Astounding Science-Fiction*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (March 1942).

[18] Gregory Bateson, 'Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia', *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 201; 206.

[19] *Ibid*., pp. 206-207.

[20] *Ibid*., p. 205.

Such misunderstandings do not generally seem to affect Robby's normal operations, as he is not capable of feeling anxiety – it is only the double bind itself which causes him to cease normal functioning. This can be paralleled with Bateson et al.'s description of the fundamental nature of the schizophrenic's psychosis. The resemblance of Robby's breakdown to the schizophrenic condition is fairly straightforward and two dimensional. Yet his inability to reconcile the command to injure with his core programming is, in fact, not the end point of the film's concerns with such psychological complexes but, rather, an index towards the underlying condition which is the true fuel for the film's drama, for the romantic conflict. For, as we have seen, Robby was made in the image of his creator, and possesses an echo of his flaws as well as his capabilities – and, significantly, it is Robby's inability to attack the Monster from the Id which reveals its true nature as an emanation of Morbius himself. Morbius, with his inability to recognise the Monster for what it really is, unaware of his own taboo – indeed, *forbidden* – obsession with his daughter, can be mapped just as directly, and with greater depth, on to the same set of concerns which Bateson's work was intended to address.

This confusion of symbol and the object it represents is reflected also in the other side of Altaira's story, as she moves from being primarily identified as 'girl/daughter' to being identified as 'woman/wife'. The tiger which threatens her and the Commander after she loses her 'innocence' through his romancing of her is the key symbol here. With the animal's annihilation, the film not only renders societal and cultural anxieties surrounding the transition from adolescence to womanhood. It also, in its simplistic way, anticipates the development of Bateson's thought on the important difference between the *presumed* fear of the *real* lion and the *actual* fear of the *idea of* the lion.[21] *Forbidden Planet* is, of course, a film rich with the deliberate invocation of metaphor as way of projecting psychology onto reality, and a key aspect of Bateson's 'Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia' is precisely a concern with metaphor, and its relationship to psychology and reality both:

> The entire field of fictional communication, defined as the narration or depiction of a series of events with more or less a label of actuality, is most relevant to the investigation of schizophrenia. We are not so much concerned with the content interpretation of fiction – although analysis of oral and destructive themes is illuminating to the student of schizophrenia – as with the formal problems involved in the simultaneous existence of multiple levels of message in the fictional presentation of "reality". The drama is especially interesting in this respect, with both performers and spectators responding to messages about both the actual and the theatrical reality.[22]

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[21] Gregory Bateson, 'Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia', p. 271.
[22] *Ibid*. pp. 222-223.

While Bateson is primarily referring to stage drama, courtesy of the planet's Krell technology, Altair IV is a place where the imaginary can become and be confused and co-signified with the real in ways that resonate with his analysis of schizophrenia as a problem of messaging and meaning. Special effects are, after all, another kind of theatrical reality. Commander Adams's spectacular obliteration of the tiger with his futuristic pistol is not just the elimination of a physical threat, or even just an encounter with the representative of a patriarchal figure hostile to his relationship with Altaira. Through the ancient Krell's interstellar voyages bringing them to Earth and then taking back with them specimens of terrestrial life, the tiger is explicitly connected to a prehistoric past before the existence of any human technological civilisation. The confrontation between the 'modern' ship's captain and the ancient predator is, in fact, another symbol of the fundamental conflict of the film, rarefied and given shape and form by the heightened environment of Altair IV. It is the same conflict that rages within Morbius himself, between his rational conscious mind and his untamed Id - and the other characters, to a certain extent, play their roles as figures within his psychodrama.

Morbius and the Monster: Cybernetic Warfare
The confrontation with the tiger is, of course, but a single instance of a larger conflict, one that develops over several encounters in something like an approximation of an actual military campaign on a scale simultaneously local and cosmic. The Monster from the Id besets the crew of the C-57D in a series of escalating attacks, beginning with sabotage, then the targeted assassination of key personnel, and finally an all-out assault on their now-fortified position. Commander Adams and his crew respond to the first incident by constructing a force field, establishing a more defined perimeter around the ship and stationing sentries by the entryway. When this 'passive' mode of defence fails, resulting in the violent death of the ship's engineer, they put down futuristic gun emplacements whose form and function is directly reminiscent of artillery and anti-aircraft guns. The crewmen manning the blaster turrets are, to use a more modern parlance, 'plugged in' to these futuristic weapons through viewfinders. Targeting is conducted through the ship's radar, which identifies the Monster's position, even though it is invisible to the human eye. This information is then relayed to the ship's defenders, led by the Commander. The details of the process by which this happens is unclear, though Adams order to switch to 'automatic control' suggests some manner of direct informational link between the ship's radar and the crew's weapons, guiding their fire and allowing them to engage, albeit unsuccessfully, the unseen enemy.

The problems which Adams and his crew are dealing with here, and the uses of technology depicted in their attempt to overcome them, are clearly of a similar nature to those which Wiener was attempting to address with the development of automatic anti-aircraft fire control during the Second World War. Yet, of course, the significance of Wiener's investigations, as far as he was

concerned, went considerably beyond the immediate mechanical challenge of predicting the movement of aircraft. According to Peter Galison, "As the AA predictor came to fruition, Wiener came to see it as the articulated prototype for a new understanding of the human-machine relation, one that made soldier, calculator, and firepower into a single integrated system."[23] Similarly, Paul N. Edwards notes in *The Closed World* that "World War II-era weapons systems in which humans served as fully integrated technological components were a major source of the ideas and equipment from which cognitivism and AI arose."[24] And *Forbidden Planet* itself is not averse to a degree of open-minded speculation with regard to the relationship between the human mind, technology, and the integration between the two, which is clear when we take into account the true nature of the enemy the crew of the C-57D face: an infinitely more advanced cybernetic force, twisted by the unacknowledged return of the repressed.

Figure 9 – *Forbidden Planet*: The crew of the C-57D attempt to repel the Monster from the Id.

For when Morbius and the Monster from the Id are revealed as one and the same in the denouement of the film, the latter a manifestation of the former's subconscious will through advanced technology and vast amounts of thermonuclear energy, it becomes clear that the Monster is, in its own way, simply another form of technologically advanced weapon. There is also another significant collapse of multiple meanings here: the monster represents a technological unconscious and the technological unconscious literally represents the monstrousness within humankind, savagery unleashed by technological advancement. The relationship is not simply one-directional, for as Morbius takes time to specifically note to his visitors, his native intelligence has been

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[23] Peter Galison, 'The Ontology of the Enemy', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Autumn, 1994), p. 244.
[24] Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1996), p. 20.

augmented through interfacing with Krell educational apparatus, which seems to technologically circumvent the labour of learning itself. In her introduction to *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles articulates one aspect of the posthuman view which she argues has developed out of cybernetics: "the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born".[25] *Forbidden Planet* merely offers a similar line of thought, except that the prosthesis offered by the Krell technology is not merely a material continuation of the process Hayles describes, but offers an even more profound shift: prosthesis based in a form of 'controllable' energy which can directly affect reality itself, with no need for 'instrumentality'. Through technology, the mind can directly impose its will on the world. Contrary to the form of posthumanism Hayles articulates, however, the film's prototypical version does, perhaps, suggest an exaggerated form of genetic determinism dependent on an unlocking of an individual's intellectual potential. The formidably intellectual Morbius survives the process, but the colony ship's captain is reported to have been killed instantly, while the C-57D's Doc survives just long enough to reveal key information to the Commander. Morbius, meanwhile, has become not just a posthuman but a postmaterial cyborg; it is little wonder he is so dismissive of Robby the Robot, whom the crew find so marvellous. Robby is a sophisticated technological instrument, but Morbius has explicitly moved past instruments and instrumentality. However, though Morbius is clearly an archetypal imagining of what can go wrong through the misapplication of human-machine relationships, he is not quite of the ilk which Wiener dreaded, despite his sublimated malignancy. In contrast to Wiener's fear of the destruction of the autonomous liberal subject through automation and technological usurpation of the individual will, instead the Monster from the Id is a primal form of that will intensified and inflamed by the Krell's marvellous technology.

Nevertheless, even though the film's preoccupations take it in different directions to Wiener's key anxieties, there is a sympathetic thematising of the conflict between chaos and order as manifested through the human use of technology (and the technological use of humans). The Krell, in all their 'wisdom', could not account for the elementary contingent factor that was their own flawed psychology, the effect of their own subconscious minds on their wondrous engines of creation, corrupted instead into phenomenally powerful weapons of destruction which annihilated their civilisation, and which later Morbius subconsciously uses to strike at threats towards him and his relationship with his daughter, wiping out the colony and imperilling the C-57D. It is appropriate that a character whose function is to illustrate the power of the subconscious mind possesses a

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[25] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, p. 3.

name that resembles a corruption of 'Morpheus', the Greco-Roman god of dreams, perhaps deliberately or otherwise conflated with that of astronomer and mathematician August Ferdinand Möbius, invoking a relationship and a clash between the 'primitive' subconscious and the rational mind. *Forbidden Planet*'s primary analogue to Gort is thus not Robby at all, despite their shared robotic nature and similarity in appearance and behaviour in publicity materials; it is the barely glimpsed (and never fully de-mystified) Monster from the Id.

Here, then, we have some sense of the reason for Margaret Tarratt's classic analysis of the genre, 'Monsters from the Id', being named for the creature from *Forbidden Planet*. As in Shapiro and especially Lucanio's later characterisations of the genre, we can see the resonance between structuralist, mythological approaches, and critiques grounded in the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and his successors. Tarratt's article, however, is one of the clearest examples of this approach in action, being deliberately constructed around the traditional Freudian model of psychoanalysis (which even Lucanio rejected as too deterministic).[26] Yet it is a version of this model that clearly underpins the narrative here, as Tarratt reveals when discussing films, like *Forbidden Planet* and *Conquest of Space* (1955), that deal specifically with the concept of forbidden knowledge:

> Traditionally, the idea of forbidden knowledge has had a sexual as well as an intellectual connotation stemming from the myth of Adam and Eve. Science fiction films take up this dual interpretation. With them we return to the problems and anxieties of the Middle Ages, when people feared to inquire too closely into the elements, thought to be inhabited by evil demons.[27]

Despite the differences between their approaches, there is also a resemblance between Tarratt's likening of the concept of forbidden knowledge to medieval notions of demonology and Sontag's description of how science actually functions in the genre as alternately white and black magic, which Kawin to some extent synthesised in his analysis of the relationship between science fiction and horror in 'Children of Light'.[28]

In terms of the fundamental concerns and operations of science fiction film in general, however, Tarratt expressly differs from Sontag in her observation that "Although the majority of science fiction films appear to express some kind of concern with the moral state of contemporary society, many are more directly involved with an examination of our inner nature."[29] Equally, where

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[26] Lucanio*, Them or Us* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 20.
[27] Margaret Tarratt, 'Monsters from the Id', in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2003), p. 350.
[28] Sontag, 'Imagination of Disaster', in *Against Interpretation* (London, Penguin, 2009), p. 223; Bruce Kawin, 'Children of Light', in *Film Genre Reader III* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2003), p. 330.
[29] Tarratt, 'Monsters from the Id', pp.345-347.

Shapiro divides the superficial 'language' and the actual 'meaning' of the films into genre tropes and their mythological underpinnings, Tarratt retains her focus on the idea that the spectacle of a society (or world) being threatened remains essentially a canvas for rarefied investigations into more personal struggles; in this context, the mythic is simply one of the strongest available palettes. The issue of scale which Sontag identified as the core of the genre is therefore, according to Tarratt, ultimately secondary to their true concern:

> … these films are deeply involved with the concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis and seem in many cases to derive their structure from it. They may deal with society as a whole, but they arrive at social comment through a dramatization of the individual's anxiety about his or her own repressed sexual desires, which are incompatible with the morals of civilized life.[30]

While the question of scale will return as the core of the final case study, from this perspective, it is simple enough to perform a structural framing of the Morbius/Monster relationship as a corrupted version of the Klaatu/Gort dyad, whereby a cybernetic relationship between a human individual and a powerful technological force is hijacked to serve not the cause of interplanetary peace, but the individual's most violent inclinations and transgressive desires. That it shares significant superficial commonalities and iconographic identifiers with the demonic emphasises the point; the mythic and fantastical Monster 'corrupting' the scientific and technological mind of Morbius and the Krell. However, the Monster remains in its essence a psychological devil, a demon of the mind projected outwards. It is unleashed not as a cosmic Manichean force, or even as a threatening relic of not-quite-obsolescent religious beliefs, like the Martians, but rather as a consequence of Morbius's own, ultimately self-destructive, desire for isolation, rationality, and the attempted erasure of his 'primitive' itself. The dire history of the Krell is, in large part, simply set-up for this character-based drama.

Here we can also see a glimpse of the connection between the Monster from the Id and its original Shakespearean counterpart, Caliban – a character read as a stand-in for indigenous peoples subject to colonisation by writers such as Aimé Césaire in his translation of the play *Une tempête* (1969) just over a decade later, though to very different ends.[31] In the film, the psychology of Morbius as a character takes a clear precedence, and he is only able to dispel the Monster when he reaches the same reconciliation with his own subconscious self that Prospero does with Caliban: "This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine."[32] It by accepting what he has repressed, the flaws in himself that were also the flaws of the indigenous-yet-absent civilisation which he idolizes (an

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[30] Tarratt, 'Monsters from the Id', p. 347.
[31] Aimé Césaire, *Une tempête*, Collection Théâtre, 22 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969).
[32] Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act V, Scene i, in *The Complete Works*, p. 1242.

absence that forms a lacunae into which falls any attempt to actively deal with colonial relationships and power structures) that Morbius can end the danger to his daughter and her suitor, albeit at the cost of his own life. That the conflict can only be resolved through death, through Morbius's own absence from his daughter's life, brings a bolder melancholic hue to the resolution of the narrative than Shakespeare's own, more traditionally Romantic ending. Reconciliation is only partial, and death depicted as necessary for the continuation of life.

The Barrons and Wiener: Cybernetic Soundscape
It is not only in its visual and narrative symbolism that *Forbidden Planet* grapples with cybernetic concepts, however. The film provides a significant instance where the intellectual sphere extrudes into popular filmmaking not just in an ambient, co-developmental manner, but through direct influence and inspiration on a key aspect of cinematic composition itself, namely the film's score. While it was hardly the first Hollywood feature film to use electronic music, *Forbidden Planet* was revolutionary in that, during production, the decision was made to discard the traditional orchestral score entirely, and rely solely on a soundtrack derived from technological and mechanical sources.[33] These 'electronic tonalities', as they are described in the film's credits, were produced by avant-garde sound artists Louis and Bebe Barron, contemporaries and colleagues of John Cage and Edgard Varèse, who they had previously worked alongside in their shared Greenwich Village studio in New York City.[34] As Schmidt states, of all the electronic, avant-garde influenced soundtracks for science fiction films in this era, it is "the Barrons' score for *Forbidden Planet* that truly stands out as *experiment*, constructed of a host of idiosyncratic circuits that died even as they fulfilled their purpose".[35] Indeed, Bebe Barron recalled an incident where their work subsequently stoked the interest of researchers from the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California: "They were studying the secret of life, or the origins of life, and they read something that Louis had written. They were so intrigued by this, they spent a whole day talking to us about the life cycles of our circuits".[36] Yet the interaction between the scientific and the artistic in the Barrons' work did not begin here; it can be traced much further back, to the intellectual stimulus behind the work itself.

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[33] Stephen Prock, 'Strange Voices', *Journal of the Society for American Music*, Volume 8, No. 3, (2014), p. 372
[34] Jane Brockman, 'The First Electronic Filmscore – Forbidden Planet', via https://www.effectrode.com/knowledge-base/the-first-electronic-filmscore-forbidden-planet-a-conversation-with-bebe-barron/ [accessed 28/10/2016].
[35] Lisa M. Schmidt, 'Popular Avant-Garde', in *Sounds of the Future*, ed. Mathew J. Bartkowiak (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company, 2000), p. 32.
[36] Ted Greenwald, 'The Self-Destructing Modules Behind Revolutionary 1956 Soundtrack of Forbidden Planet', via https://www.effectrode.com/knowledge-base/the-self-destructing-modules-behind-revolutionary-1956-soundtrack-of-forbidden-planet/ [accessed 31/10/2016].

In fact, the Barrons drew directly and explicitly from Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics*. Bebe Barron herself later insisted that "Cybernetics was so appropriate to what we were doing — it is what we were doing."[37] In the Barrons' process, Louis would design and construct circuits which produced the 'raw noise' that was then captured on tape and edited by Bebe. But they did not regard these circuits as simple, predictable mechanisms. Prock notes that "As the principal creator the circuits producing the sonic raw materials that Bebe shaped into compositions, Louis sought to apply Wiener's principles, conceiving his circuits as living bodies".[38] The Barrons' work in general during this period, and the soundtrack of *Forbidden Planet* was no exception, was in fact intended to be Wiener's analogical principle – his process of comparison between animal and machine – brought literally screaming to life. For Louis Barron, this was not merely some appropriate theoretical underpinning invoked to justify their process, but rather their process was the practical and artistic enactment of the theory as they understood it. As he later explained, "To me ... these circuits are as if a living thing were crying out, expressing itself. There's an organic type of behavior going on."[39] This 'organic' behaviour they thematised through two primary angles evident in Wiener's work: the concepts of entropy and probability respectively.

In these later interviews regarding their work on the soundtrack, the Barrons themselves articulated the major threads which they pulled out of Wiener's early work on cybernetics. In particular, they were drawn to the analogy between machine and organism that underlined so much of Wiener's work and to the notions of probability and entropy as understood through a cybernetic perspective on the world. However, though they might have shared these fascinations with Wiener, they also reinterpreted and adapted – and sometimes warped – Wiener's ideas through their own artistic practice. Wiener's use of analogy is explicative and detail-orientated, focusing on specific aspects of the design, construction, and operation of modern machinery that makes the analogy appropriate:

> the many automata of the present age are coupled to the outside world both for the reception of impressions and for the performance of actions. They contain sense organs, effectors, and the equivalent of a nervous system to integrate the transfer of information from one to the other. They lend themselves very well to description in physiological terms.[40]

For Wiener, analogy is not merely a communicative tool, but a form of understanding and framing concepts and objects in relation to one another.[41] As sound artists, the Barrons interpreted this

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[37] Brockman, 'The First Electronic Filmscore – *Forbidden Planet*'.
[38] Prock, 'Strange Voices', p. 379.
[39] Greenwald, 'The Self-Destructing Modules Behind Revolutionary 1956 Soundtrack of Forbidden Planet'.
[40] Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1961), p. 43.
[41] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, p. 91.

system of language and meaning became less a process of constructing precisely and discretely codified comparisons, though their interest in the technical and scientific side of cybernetics is very much present, but instead the conceptual basis for an act of almost Promethean creation.

https://www.effectrode.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/louis_and_bebe_barron_again.png
[last accessed 03/06/2019]

Figure 10 – Louis and Bebe Barron in their studio, January 1st 1956 by Walter Daran

The language used to describe it, whether by the Barrons themselves, their interviewers, and other commenters, consistently reinforces this framing of the functioning of their circuits not just as comparable to 'organic behaviour', but as a representation of life itself constructed through machinery. Moreover, the sonic emanations emerging from this process are themselves frequently described in terms of the most primal of communicative activities, whether animal or human: "wailing, screeching, or singing" as Ted Greenwald relays it, "until some internal component becomes overloaded and fails. At this point the creature dies, emitting its final howls and whispers in a swan song of power failure." Or as Louis himself put it, "these circuits are as if a living thing were

crying out, expressing itself." [42] Bebe's story of the Salk Institute scientists who came to visit them, repeated both to Greenwald and to Jane Brockman, fits clearly into the self-conception the Barrons had about their work. [43] Certainly, Wiener himself had the occasional flare for the dramatic in his writing, but he was scrupulous about limiting the analogy to the functioning of the operations he was describing, whether they were biological or mechanical. For the Barrons, the analogy became not a tool or even a mode of intellectual thought, but something more profoundly transformative.

The Barrons believed that, through their circuits, they could produce truly idiosyncratic and autonomous art. Louis Barron, in fact, rejected the notion that his work was in any way 'synthetic', because that implies a controlled and markedly superficial imitation of life: "Synthetic, to me, is the opposite of organic. Synthetic music lacks this life-like quality." In essence, for Louis Barron, an understanding of probability influenced by cybernetics suggested to him it was possible to produce "circuitry that doesn't have a complete description of what it's going to do." [44] This autonomy, achieved through a surrender of authorial control to a form of randomness, reinforces the Barrons' conceptualisation of their circuits as enactments of the machine-organism analogy which was one of the key engines of cybernetic thought. Yet there is a further discrepancy between the Barrons' and Wiener's early work here, despite his palpable influence on them. As Wiener noted in *The Human Use of Human Beings* – first published the same year the *Forbidden Planet* was released – probability offers "all the worlds which are possible answers to a limited set of questions concerning our environment." [45] For Wiener, probability was a useful tool that could help thwart entropic decay, support homeostatic systems, and reassert order over chaos.

Yet, for the Barrons, the random, probabilistic, 'life-like' behaviour of their circuits' behaviour was only possible because of entropy. In Wiener's conception, entropy is the opposite of information, leading to the breaking down of both meaning and life itself, and must be combated with systematic approaches that cybernetics was designed to provide a framework for within the various disciplines of its practitioners. For the Barrons, entropy opens up the possibility of the use of randomness in music. As Bebe Barron recalled, "Probability not only made random sounds O.K. in our minds, it also increased entropy – which was what we were trying for. Then, in Cybernetics there was also information theory: the more probable something is, the less information it transmits." [46]

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[42] Greenwald 'The Self-Destructing Modules Behind Revolutionary 1956 Soundtrack of Forbidden Planet'.
[43] Brockman 'The First Electronic Filmscore – Forbidden Planet'; the Salk Institute for Biological Studies was not founded until 1960, four years after the release of *Forbidden Planet*.
[44] *Ibid*.
[45] Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1961), p. 12.
[46] Brockman, 'The First Electronic Filmscore – Forbidden Planet'.

This was, in fact, more in line with Claude Shannon's view of entropy as being identifiable with information, rather than the entropic anxiety which so often seemed to underpin Wiener's own work.[47] Here they were, if not already ahead of the game, at least demonstrating an awareness of different approaches to cybernetics and its core concepts, seeing chaos as the necessary fertilising mixture for increased complexity and allowing for new and varied forms of life, as well as its dissolution.

However, the Barrons' work should be not seen as some entirely separate entity imposed on the film with no regard or sympathy for its own narrative and themes. Early cybernetics and Freudian psychology are here synthesised into a form that accesses the popular appeal in both, even as it fails (or rather, does not try) to fully understand them as academic theory. As Prock notes, the "allusion to sexual violence and death in organic circuitry was perfectly suited to the representation of sexual violence and death in the film."[48] Despite the unpredictable nature of their circuits, there remained plenty of deliberate artistic choice on the Barrons' part, from Bebe's control over the final arrangement and composition of the 'electronic tonalities' to specific connections between particular circuits and particular characters and moments in the film:

> when Morbius dies in the laboratory — that really was the Id/monster circuit dying at that point. And that worked especially well because Morbius was the monster: it was coming from his subconscious. That was the end of that circuit. It was the best circuit we ever had. We could never duplicate it. [49]

For Wierzbicki, this would only reinforce the connection he posits between *Forbidden Planet*'s employment of electronic music and its 'traditional' role in 1940s cinema, for instance the use of the theremin in Hitchcock's *Spellbound*, where "such ideas were associated not with futuristic technology but with current trends in psychology."[50] Schmidt and Rebecca Leydon also both remark on the almost surprising conventionality of the recognisable leitmotif-style form of the film's score, such as the aforementioned Monster from the Id/Morbius circuit, or what Leydon referred to as Altaira's "love music".[51] This, too, was a conscious decision by the Barrons, a deliberate part of their attempt to integrate their avant-garde approach with the classical Hollywood style.

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[47] Hayles, *Howe We Became Posthuman*, pp. 102-103.
[48] Prock, 'Strange Voices', p. 32.
[49] Greenwald, 'The Self-Destructing Modules Behind Revolutionary 1956 Soundtrack of Forbidden Planet'.
[50] James Wierzbicki, *Louis and Bebe Barron's Forbidden Planet*, pp. 27-28.
[51] Schmidt, 'Popular Avant-Garde', p. 19; Rebecca Leydon, 'Forbidden Planet: Effects and Affects in the Electro Avante Garde', p. 74.

Yet, as Prock notes, there is a substantial difference between the way the score of *Forbidden Planet* interacts with the film's characters in contrast to the classical form, for here "there is a curious disconnect between nondiegetic music and subjective interiority." The film may make use of recurring leitmotifs, but it is the only example of such a technique being used by the film to voice "the inner, emotional lives of its characters".[52] Deleon, too, notices the unusual quality of the sound's interaction with what is depicted onscreen, arguing that "The only cohesive element is the movement through various amplitudes and frequencies. This creates movement through sound – a soundscape, which is quite different than the familiar progression of structured music."[53] As he goes on to elaborate,

> the nondiegetic "electronic tonalities" in this film … tend not to function as indices of subjective states but instead become preoccupied with stylized representations of the physical world in general … More specifically, these stylizations become increasingly bound up with representations of the body.[54]

Here we can glimpse the 'strange concoction of atavism and the avant-garde', as Prock describes the film's peculiar chemistry, working not against itself, but with these two elements vibrating in sympathy with one another.[55] Schmidt draws out a similar paradoxical dynamic in the interaction between science fiction and the avant-garde in the film, arguing that, even in its most populist representations, "sci-fi always wants to confront the mainstream with some kind of alien while the avant-garde is, in a sense, obsessed with being another kind of alien to the mainstream."[56] *Forbidden Planet*, the Barrons' compositions aside, is ultimately an example of the former, but one whose relationship to the avant-garde illustrates an important quality of popular science fiction itself, and its relationship to the cultural as well as practical circumstance of its production.

A further divergence from the classical Hollywood style is evidenced in the soundtrack's relationship to the diegesis itself, a point of frequent discussion and explication of the Barrons' work on the film. As Deleon lays out in straightforward terms, it is "almost unclear as to where the score ends and the sound design begins: the same tones found in the score are present within the sound effects of the diegetic world". Or, as Prock more evocatively describes it, the soundtrack operates "both diegetically … nondiegetically … and, more fantastically, simultaneously as music and sounds,

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[52] Prock, 'Strange Voices', p. 377.
[53] Cara Marisa Deleon, 'A Familiar Sound in a New Place: The Use of the Musical Score Within the Science Fiction Film', in *Sounds of the Future*, ed. Mathew J. Bartkowiak (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company, 20000, pp. 15-16.
[54] Prock, 'Strange Voices', pp. 377-378.
[55] *Ibid*, p. 371.
[56] Schmidt, 'Popular Avant-Garde', p. 38.

in and out of the diegesis, as if in a sonic quantum state."[57] This is, in part, due to the fact that the Barrons had an unprecedented influence over the whole sound design of the picture. According to Bebe herself, "… 95% of the sound in that picture was ours—everything except a couple of things like the computer blips. We were doing sound effects and scoring and source music."[58] Elsewhere, the Barrons noted that the 'Krell music', labelled and 'performed' as a musical piece within the narrative of the film itself, would normally have been produced independently, but they ended up taking over responsibility for its production also.[59] The result is a kind of off-putting sublimation, the 'sonic quantum state' which Prock describes, a state of doubt, where sound either quietly slips through or violently breaks through the conventional barriers between the diegetic and non-diegetic. The traditional arrangement of the cinematic audience's senses is under assault, no less than the C-57D and its crew; and the ghosts of the Barrons' organic, living-and-therefore-doomed circuits haunt the film, just as the Monster from the Id haunts the desert of Altair IV.

It is thus via the particular and unusual instance which the Barrons' work on the films provides that Schmidt constructs a concise but fascinating excavation of the nexus of cultural relationships exposed by *Forbidden Planet*. Indeed, her argument provides an opportunity to pull the lens back and see how such an instance – the film considered as an individual crest of a wave in the vast ocean of history, to use Braudel's imagery – might offer insight into longer and deeper trends, at least on the level of social history.[60] According to Schmidt's interpretation of these trends, "it cannot be an accident that both film and avant-garde music find their origins" in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, "when western culture was flushed with faith in its own progress"; nor was it a coincidence that "Science fiction was born as a self-conscious literary genre somewhere in this time period."[61] As a result, she elaborates, "All three of these discursive clusters – sci-fi, avant-gardism, and cinema – owe much to the discourses of modernism that were in play at this historic moment."[62] One might easily add the emergence of both Freudian psychology and the study of radiation to the list. In such view, then, *Forbidden Planet* provides a point of return for these 'clusters', like an ice core drilled through the glacier of social history and cultural development.

What this return uncovers is not simply the distinctions in the character and evolution of these clusters as they have operated over the decades, or even the potential commonalities which

[57] Prock, 'Strange Voices', p. 375.
[58] Brockman, 'The First Electronic Filmscore – Forbidden Planet'.
[59] Greenwald, 'The Self-Destructing Modules Behind Revolutionary 1956 Soundtrack of Forbidden Planet'.
[60] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, trans. Siân Reynolds (London: Collins, 1972), p. 21
[61] Schmidt, 'Popular Avant-Garde', p. 27.
[62] *Ibid*.

extend from their shared point of origin, through the social and intellectual pressures which shaped them, to a clear point of reconnection. What is also present is a glimpse of the flaws and distortions of these discourses, the halting nature of their evolution, and the inevitable unfulfillment of their promises. *Forbidden Planet* attempts to assuage these disappointments through a sense of adventure, cosmic wonder, and the final promise of domestic harmony, but the relentless presence of entropy seeps into the film in not just in death of Morbius, in the destruction of Altair IV, and in the annihilation of what remains of the Krell civilisation, but also in the very audio-visual composition of the film itself. The discursive clusters Schmidt identifies still exist, have grown, have become more clearly defined and identifiable in the intervening decades, and yet all this reveals a deeper wound, somehow born in recent memory, perhaps in the ashes of the Second World War, and yet in hindsight, it seems, promised by modernism and its discourses from the start.

This Island Earth (1955)

Genealogies of Genre: Telotte, Todorov, Frye
While *This Island Earth* spends most of its runtime with its feet planted on Earth, in terms of its overall structure it follows the recognisable narrative pattern of a journey far more than *Forbidden Planet*. This is suggested by the manner in which their titles are, inadvertently, mirrors of each other. Both are suggestive of secluded locations surrounded by the incomprehensively vast ocean of space, but with a key difference: *Forbidden Planet* is suggestive of an arrival at such a secluded plane, while *This Island Earth* is, rather, suggestive of a departure. Indeed, where *Forbidden Planet* begins with the arrival of the C-57D at Altair IV, *This Island Earth* has its protagonist departing Washington, D.C. on a self-piloted cross-country jet flight to Los Angeles. Once the C-57D arrives on Altair IV, the action of the film takes places in a relatively stable set of locations: the ship and its landing ground, the mansion of Morbius, the subterranean Krell machine city. The departure from the planet maps directly on to the ending of the film, emphasising Altair IV itself as the central location around which the narrative is focused. The narrative of *This Island Earth*, by contrast, is marked by a progressive shift in locale, from Washington, D.C. to Los Angeles, from Los Angeles to Georgia, from Georgia to a distant planet in outer space and back again. Moreover, as the environment shifts, so too does the perspective of the protagonist – and the audience – on and within the narrative, as each new location is accompanied by a new understanding of the story, and a new comprehension of the kind of narrative universe in which the story takes place. The prologue in Washington, D.C. introduces not only the protagonist, but briefly the notion of the transformative power of nuclear science; the Los Angeles sequence then combines this with the introduction of truly alien technology. The Georgia sequence that follows then reveals the alien visitors behind the introduction of this technology to Earth, suggesting an infiltration and manipulation of the worldwide scientific community and hinting

toward their underlying intentions. Then, the final space travel sequence revolves around travelling to and returning from a distant planet and the revelation of an apocalyptic conflict between Earth's visitors and yet another alien race. The film's narrative structure could, then, be modelled as a progression through different aspects of the genre itself, a microcosm of some of its key developments and variations in this period.

Once the prologue in Washington D.C. is dispensed with, the first major scenario in the film takes the form of an unravelling mystery, as renowned scientist Cal Meacham (Rex Reason), a clear archetypal compatriot of *The War of the World*'s Clayton Forrester, is confronted by mysterious events that occur after he arrives back at his Los Angeles lab. It is this quality of the narrative, the active questioning of the rules of the diegesis, which, even more so than other films of the corpus, invites an analysis of the film's narrative structures along the lines which Todorov laid out in *The Fantastic*. The relationship between the uncanny, the marvellous, and the fantastic, as he defines them, are not just as a set of rules demarcating genres, but as a series of structural processes which function as an unveiling of the narrative world itself – and specifically whether the events taking place belong to a world of mundane explicability, unfettered imagination, or something poised between the two other states, respectively.[63] As protagonists of science fiction narratives often do, Cal occupies the role of a genre detective, unravelling the thread of fantastic happenings until the oscillation between the two ends of the uncanny-fantastic-marvellous spectrum resolves itself. It is his curiosity which is the driving force of the plot at this point, though it is soon revealed that the whole scenario has been contrived by Exeter (Jeff Morrow), a representative of the alien Metalunans, to solicit Cal's expertise on the connection between nuclear power and 'everyday' electronics. The film, exactly because of its generic formulaic aspects – or rather, its assemblage of various generic formulas into a single narrative – therefore provides an ideal opportunity to examine in more detail what structural approaches can reveal of a film and its functions. Yet caution is required here, as this first section of the film also remains concerned with the profound effect technology could have on society, and though this *fascination* with such technology never resolves itself into anything resembling a thesis, it clearly invokes a different and more science fictional-specific definition of the fantastic, than that outlined by J. P. Telotte in his *Science Fiction Film*.[64]

The problems of genre definition, and the application of Todorov's own specific technical use of generic terminology, present themselves in the discussion of the film's second main scenario as well. When Cal arrives at the Club, a remote scientific retreat in Georgia, the tenor of the

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[63] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 41.
[64] Telotte, *Science Fiction Film*, p. 14.

narrative shifts accordingly with the new location, creating a tone that might be described – though not by Todorov – as uncanny. There are, of course, hints of such a tone in the first act, primarily through foreshadowing delivered by Cal's lab assistant Joe, who begs Cal not to set off on Exeter's pilotless plane because, as he evocatively exclaims, "This whole thing smells to high heaven." Just as in *Forbidden Planet*, this interdiction is inevitably violated, and it soon becomes clear that Joe had performed his narrative role admirably; there is much amiss in this seemingly idyllic collaboration between human scientists and the mysterious visitors from beyond. After an alternately flirtatious and fractious reunion with one of the other scientists invited to the Georgian retreat, Dr. Ruth Adams (Faith Domergue), Cal is officially introduced to the visitors who will later identified as Metalunans, but very quickly it is apparent that their hospitality is intended as a cover for more sinister activities. From the moment Ruth's conversation with a fellow scientist ends abruptly when another guest of Exeter's walks past, the foreshadowing in the first act starts to gain narrative corporeality in the form of an atmosphere of paranoia and mistrust, which becomes fully articulated through the classic Cold War fear of brainwashing.
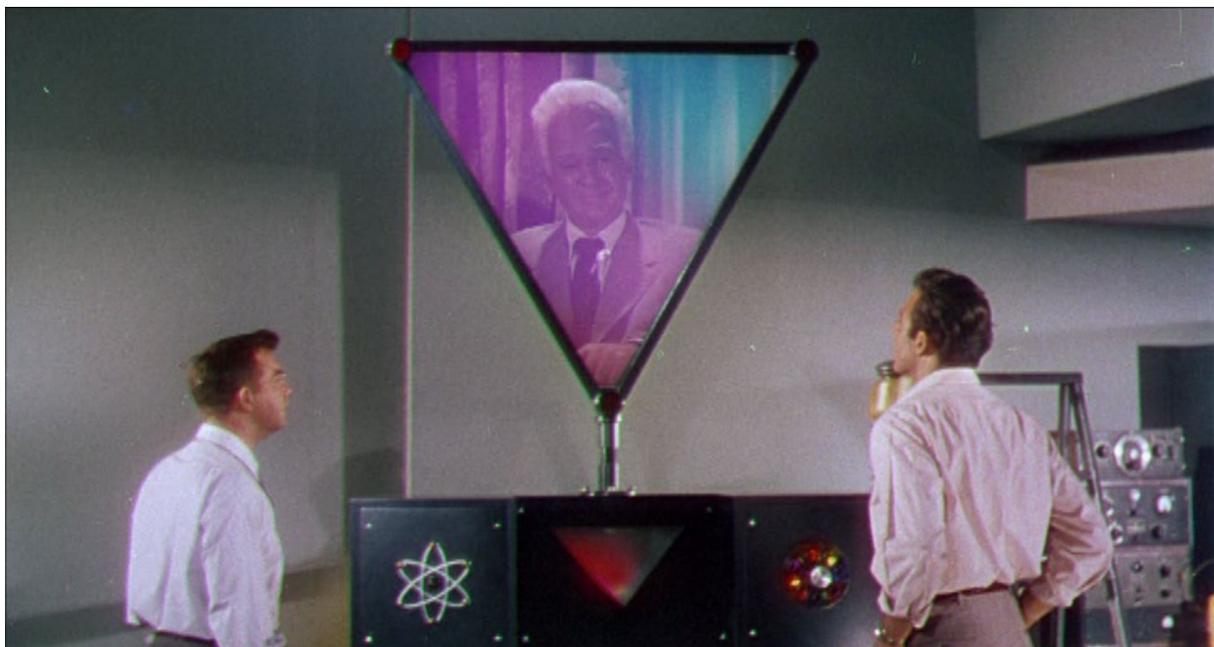
Figure 11 – *This Island Earth:* Exeter communicates with Cal and Joe via the interocitor.

With the mental conditioning of the scientists to serve the aliens interlopers, the second act of *This Island Earth* is strikingly reminiscent of films such as *The Thing from Another World* (dir. Christian Nyby, 1951), *Invaders from Mars* (dir. William Cameron Menzies, 1953), and *It Came From Outer Space* (dir. Jack Arnold, 1953), and with them it presages arguably the definitive Fifties film of this particular science fiction subgenre, *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (dir. Don Siegel, 1956). They all represent the same fear, that "The human subject, overtly or covertly, becomes robotised

into an acquiescent member of an alien, often expanding group aiming at total takeover."[65] Yet this middle section of *This Island Earth* is only one stop on Cal's journey. Indeed, it is remarkable the extent to which the film anticipates a comprehension of brainwashing and its effects without showing these in any detail. "Just talk to them," Ruth instructs Cal when he presses her for evidence of this claim, but none of the characters ever do talk to any of the apparently brainwashed. Rather, the situation in Georgia is merely a gateway to stranger things, and the threat of brainwashing is primarily introduced at this earlier stage so that it can be held over Cal and Ruth as a threat once they reach their more distant destination. The aircraft Cal and Ruth try to escape the remote facility in is intercepted by a flying saucer, and they embark on a yet more marvellous stage of their journey to the apocalyptic world of Metaluna itself, under siege from the Zagons. Here the film does, more properly, resemble other Hollywood narratives structured around journeys to alien planets, from *Rocketship XL-5* (dir. Kurt Neumann, 1950) to *Forbidden Planet*, a narrative of an outright marvellous nature in Todorov's schemata.

Even in Telotte's terms though, the narrative and thematic structure of *This Island Earth* clearly shifts between different modes: here, an encounter with *fantastic* technology yields to an *uncanny* scenario marked by paranoia and suspicion, which, eventually, yields to the *marvellous* interplanetary voyage that end the film. These divisions are not absolute, nor are the film's three acts entirely heterogeneous with regard to their mode of engagement with science fiction motifs. The uncanny bleeds into the third act just as it lies in wait in the shadows of the first. Nevertheless, the proposition that the narrative of *This Island Earth* illustrates, in part, a taxonomy of the genre in this period does present us with a problem. By invoking the notion of processing through different permutations of generic narratives, we are invariably confronted not just with Telotte's sub-categorisations of science fiction film, but also to the principles underpinning Todorov's original conception of the fantastic in literature. We must deal with these two superficially similar, but separately oriented definitions, not just of the subgenres we are dealing with, but of the function of genre itself. For Telotte's purposes, these genres (or subgenres, as they operate within science fiction) are defined by their 'fascinations', each a somewhat amorphous nexus of iconography, signifiers, archetypes, and narrative tropes, but for Todorov, they function as a very specific arrangement of an underlying 'mechanism'.[66] For Telotte, the definition lies in what, in broad terms, the film is 'about', in its meaning however defined; for Todorov, primarily in terms of how it functions, structurally and systematically.

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[65] David Seed, *American Science Fiction and the Cold War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 133.
[66] Telotte, *Science Fiction Film*, p. 14; Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 19.

While Todorov was concerned with the genre of an individual work functioning as a mechanism that is constituted of an interrelated series of systems (albeit grounded in observable behaviours rather than pure theory), Telotte's interest is clearly more thoroughly based in notions of meaning. Indeed, despite the debt owed by Telotte's conception of the genre to structuralist approaches, he is careful not to identify his own approach with it. He specifically refers to Todorov's terminology as "a useful element of structural thinking", both an explicit acknowledgement of the influence of Todorov's thought and an implicit declaration of independence from it.[67] As we have seen, in Telotte's terms, *This Island Earth* would be characterised by its procession through the three main scenarios which it inherited from Jones's prose versions of the narrative: the discovery and assembly of *fantastic*, world-changing technology; immersion into an *uncanny* work-place environment; and a *marvellous* voyage to a world at the precipice of apocalypse. Employing Todorov's original schemata, however, we would necessarily see the three scenarios of the film not as distinct stages of the narrative, each with their own fascination, but as components of a more holistic process which resolves itself only when observing and processing the narrative in its totality.

These definitions, despite the correspondence of the language used to describe and label the individual modes being outlined, are essentially drawn from two different traditions or strategies of genre studies. Todorov's mechanistic scheme is in the *syntactic* tradition, while Telotte's is in a sense a (post)modern adaptation and update of the *semantic* with syntactic elements, suggestive of Rick Altman's proposed approach which does not see these two traditions as mutually exclusive in their actual deployment.[68] Altman cites Jameson (as well as Todorov) for illustrating this division, who efficiently outlined the two traditions in his article on 'Magical Narratives', published shortly after *The Fantastic* was translated into English.[69] The semantic, according to Jameson, was an approached based on

> "the substitution, for the individual work in question, of some more generalized existential experience of which a description is then given which can range from the impressionistic to the phenomenologically rigorous. In this approach, the essence of genre is apprehended in terms of what we will call a *mode*." [70]

What both Todorov and Telotte's definitions of the fantastic have in common is this: each involves an encounter between the real and the unreal. However, the manifestation of these states and their relationship to each other extends in different directions from that encounter. For Todorov, as we

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[67] Telotte, *Science Fiction Film*, p. 11.
[68] Rick Altman, 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre' in *Film Genre Reader III*, Barry Keith Grant, ed., (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2003), p. 34.
[69] *Ibid.*, p. 31.
[70] Fredric Jameson, 'Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre', *New Literary History*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Autumn, 1975), p. 136.

have seen, the fantastic exists as a state of suspense; it is a state of agnosticism, of knowledge withheld. For Telotte, it offers the possibility of transformation for individual life and for society within the confines of the narrative diegesis itself, in the form of a utopian promise, or a dystopian threat.

While Telotte did specifically base the terminology of his classification of science fiction on that of Todorov's approach, there is a significant disjunction between how these two notions of genre actually operate, for Telotte's 'fascinations', despite their influence from Todorov's school of structuralist genre studies, nevertheless resemble such a modal understanding of genre in their emphasis not on the rules of their respective narrative types but instead as categories based around shared themes. In contrast, then, Jameson describes the syntactic in terms as

> a determinate … mechanism with precise laws and requirements of its own, whose realization in the various media of theater or narrative, in film or in daily life, may be the object of analysis and synthetic reconstruction, resulting, not in the expression of a meaning, but rather the building of a *model*.[71]

This, in fact mirrors the terms of the argument Todorov uses to critique Northrop Frye's approach to genre, a critique which constituted the jumping-off point for *The Fantastic*. The history and development of genre studies itself is implicated here, for as Jameson noted much later, "Any reflection on genre today owes a debt –sometimes an unwilling one – to Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*".[72] While Frye's approach, like Todorov's, and Vladimir Propp's before him, may be based in an understanding of literature as a form of language in itself, according to Todorov he is like "those dialect-lexicographers of the nineteenth century who combed remote villages for rare or unknown words " in that his schemata doesn't fully reckon with how language actually functions: "The work of the dialect-collectors has not been useless, yet it is misleading: language is not a stockpile of words but a mechanism".[73] Or, as Robert Scholes sums up Todorov's critique, "Frye calls for science but hardly tries to give it to us."[74] This, in fact, places Frye in a valuable position in the evolution of intellectual thought in this period, one potentially rich with significance for an analysis of the interaction between mythic and scientific thought.

Iconographies of Science Fiction: Planes, Brains, and Flying Saucers
That *This Island Earth* begins with Cal climbing into the cockpit of a US Air Force jet plane place the image and concept of the plane itself is an icon of importance throughout the film, though an imperilled one. The inciting event of the plot is Cal's jet being completely suborned by an unknown

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[71] Fredric Jameson, 'Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre', p. 136.
[72] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 257.
[73] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 19.
[74] Robert Scholes, 'Foreword', in Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. *xi*.

force, eventually revealed to be the intervention of far more scientifically advanced and technologically knowledgeable civilization. Curiously, each plane Cal travels in is, in fact, something of a mechanical if not a technological regression: from top-of-the-line jet plane to two-engine passenger prop plane, to the two-seater single-engine propeller that is abducted by the flying saucer. Each is, in its own way, compromised by Metalunan technology: the first plane by having its controls disabled and landing managed; the second through modification and remote control; the third most dramatically through being abducted into the flying saucer. The abduction is a natural escalation of the film's repeated motif of human mechanisms being overwhelmed by alien technology, even destabilising and usurping the recurring role of the aeroplane in the film as a vehicle between narrative acts as well as location. Cal and Ruth's escape in the plane at the end of the film thus serves as the classic re-establishment of normalcy at the end of the narrative – though, intriguingly, *This Island Earth* ends not precisely on the note of the two human scientists flying into the sunset, but rather with the crashing of the flying saucer and the death of the alien Exeter.

The nature of the second aircraft encountered, which transports Cal from the familiarity of his lab in California to the much stranger environment of the Club in Georgia, is a case in point, demonstrating both the use of the plane as a narrative as well as mechanical transport, and the nature of the plane itself facilitating in that role. Cal and Joe hear the second plane before they see it. It is, in fact, in the very moment that Joe makes the eminently sensible assessment that the thick fog would prevent any aircraft from landing, the hum of its engines becomes recognisable and then increasingly proximate. While this does serve to humorously undercut Joe, it functions primarily not as mockery, but as evidence that such grounded, practical, sensible thinking is not suited for dealings with the mysterious Exeter. The visual detail of the plane itself further raises the spectre of the uncanny. It arrives in view as two bright lights descending onto the airfield, its full form initially still hidden by the weather, a choice which serendipitously augments the uncanny atmosphere of the scene and makes the plane's arrival relatively simple to film in practical terms. This atmospheric quality is redoubled once Cal and Joe walk up to the plane, which opens its doors and lowers the steps to the cabin seemingly of its own accord. Cal venturing inside the plane confirms for him and for the audience that the aircraft is fully automated, its windows covered and its pilot seats empty; the instruments, too, seemingly move of their own accord. The whole interior of the cabin, meanwhile, has a clinical sparseness to its design, with white bulkheads and floor, and a single passenger seat resting in the centre.

The plane's automation is indicative of the advanced technology of its operators, and further hints at the true origin of Exeter and his scientific and engineering knowledge, but it also fulfils a more traditional, archetypal function: the inanimate artefact which behaves as if it was alive. This

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represents an act of breaking down the comfortable divide between living beings and lifeless objects which has always been, if not actually a defining feature of the uncanny, than at the centre of speculations around its nature as a genre and as psychological experience, as debated by Freud in his meta-analysis of Ernst Jentsch's reading of Hoffman: "Jentsch has taken a very good instance 'doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not in fact be animate'; and he refers in this connection to the impression made by wax-work figures, artificial dolls and automatons."[75] The plane's autonomous, animated operation in this sequence is, in the film's own terms, a direct echo of Cal's forced landing in his jet plane at the start of the film, accompanied by the same "high-frequency howl" that Joe Wilson described in the earlier scene, and the same electronic beat, reminiscent of a heartbeat. The same arrangement naturally appears for the third time when the plane Joe and Ruth are using to escape Exeter's Club in Georgia is directly abducted by the Metalunans' flying saucer. The combination of the howl and the beat emphasises the seeming collapse of the separation between inanimate objects and living beings with their own agency, as in each case the plane in question defies its original status and purpose as a tool, and is instead usurped by a greater technological power.

Following his plaintive attempts to persuade his friend and colleague to leave the aircraft, the camera lingers on Joe for almost exactly half a minute before he turns and walks away into the fog, just as the scene fades to black. This serves various narrative and practical purposes. It constitutes an attempt at offering a satisfying departure for the character of Joe, who has been the story's main supporting player thus far, but whose usefulness in the narrative came to a close with Cal's departure on the plane and is, therefore, not seen again after this conclusion to the film's first act. Then, similarly to the use of the plane's lights as it lands, having the plane's departure represented by pointing a wind machine at an actor mitigates the problems of shooting an aircraft actually departing in the fog. Most importantly, of course, it serves as a wordless re-emphasis of Joe's concerns and, therefore, his overall purpose in the narrative. While he is defined within the diegesis of the film simply as Cal's friend who cares for his safety, his role is conspicuously that of the nay-sayer who is nevertheless proved to be correct, as he tries to convince Cal not to investigate the mystery. He inevitably fails, for he is essentially trying to convince the protagonist not to progress the narrative. Considered in non-diegetic, narratological terms, however, it is exactly because of this behaviour that he is also a key component in establishing the stakes of the story, the sense of danger and threat.

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[75] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', trans. Alix Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVII (1917-1919), *An Infantile Neuroses and Other Works*, edited by James Strachey (London: Vintage Classics, 2001), p. 236

The uncanny tone of the second act, of the scenario that takes place at the scientists' retreat, 'The Club', is therefore established specifically through the juxtaposition of the fog-ridden airstrip from which the pilotless plane departs, and the seemingly idyllic locale at which it arrives. This film brings this juxtaposition into focus when Cal meets Ruth, who turns out to be a prior acquaintance from an academic conference. Her arrival on-screen initially disarms the low, sinister wind instruments and high, tense strings that accompanied Cal's departure from the plane; the key Hollywood narrative moment of the protagonist meeting his love interest practically forces the soundtrack to shift into a sweeping, romantic mode. This is not, however, a permanent change, but the beginning of a tonal back-and-forth within the soundtrack, one that actively plays with the synchronization effect of the film score, offering these romantic cues and then exchanging them for more sinister signals so the meaning of what we are seeing is changed, a variation on the kind of dynamic play 'of plenitude and rupture' which Donnelly describes.[76] When Cal enthusiastically introduces himself, evidently expecting a warm response in return, but instead encountering hesitation and prevarication from Ruth, this apparent misrecognition is accompanied by the score shifting from the sweeping strings of the romantic mode back to the lower, more sinister tone that accompanied his arrival. The back-and-forth continues with his attempt to reconnect with her by describing their trysts "after classes … going swimming in a little river near the school". But it is not his recollection but rather Ruth's bashfully averted gaze which is accompanied by another outbreak of romantic melodising, followed by a reversion to the sinister mode when Ruth changes the subject, mentioning Exeter by name. Significantly, it is initially Ruth's actions and responses that the music synchronises with until the end of the scene, the score switching referents as Cal actively chooses to sit next to her in the front seat of the car rather than as a passive passenger. Here the romantic strings start up again, and this disruption in the subliminally anticipated pattern reflects the fact that Cal, hitherto primarily reacting to situations as Exeter has laid them out for him, now has taken a measure of control over the narrative, at least in so far as his relationship with Ruth is concerned.

Music is, in its own way, significant within *This Island Earth*. This is reflected by each of the films' discrete 'performances' of specific pieces of music diegetically with their narratives. The Barrons produced the Krell music which Morbius demonstrates for Commander Adams and this piece is, clearly, of a kind with the rest of their work of the film. Here, as throughout the film, they attempted to produce *alien* music by relinquishing a certain amount of control to random, 'automatic' methods of producing sound through what they viewed as a cybernetic approach to composition. By contrast, in this section of *This Island Earth*, we witness the *alienating* of Mozart,

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[76] Donnelly, *Occult Aesthetics*, pp. 8-9.

not just classical but arguably archetypal music, from the perspective not of Cal, but of Exeter. Fundamentally, then, the Barrons' score for *Forbidden Planet* attempts to *perform* Wiener's cybernetics in order to construct an alien space, but one which would become a stage for the theme of the unconscious mind and the repression of anxieties surrounding sexuality and death found therein. Meanwhile, the use of a classical Hollywood score and Mozart in *This Island Earth* is, like the film's narrative, employing familiar archetypes to help produce its own sense of unease and dislocation. This is part of the playing out of an ideological, philosophical, and specifically epistemological conflict between the close-minded, encyclopaedic knowledge of the Metalunans and the open-minded, experimental learning of the humans.

Figure 12 – *This Island Earth:* **The Metalunan spaceship takes off.**

Despite these symbolic contrasts, however, Cal's role in the film's narrative remains primarily reactive rather than proactive, and this is no accident. The major decisions he makes are generally choosing whether to go along with the course others have marked out, whether they be Exeter's complex recruitment method, or Ruth and Steve's already existing plan to escape the Club with evidence of the strange events taking place there. The escape itself is, in fact, rendered entirely moot when they are abducted by the flying saucer and brought to Metaluna, which is what Exeter and the Monitor had planned all along anyway. As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that it is, in fact, not Cal whose agency is central to the plot; it is not Cal whose decisions shoulder increasing moral weight as the narrative progressives. Rather, it is Exeter who increasingly becomes the dramatic focus of the film. As Cal becomes more enmeshed in Exeter's world, as he willingly or unwillingly is swept along with the Metalunans' plans, we see a parallel perspective develop and

take hold over the narrative, just as surely as their alien technology takes hold over human aircraft: we see Exeter arguing with the Monitor for more respectful and humane treatment of the scientists, weighed down with the certainty that if his mission fails then his planet, and people, are lost. The story of Cal and Ruth may be a Romance, in both the traditional and modern sense of the genre, but Exeter's story is clearly a Tragedy. As Frye might have it, he is a descendent of the Dionysiac myth of the dying god.[77]

Mapping out this specific character type as it recurs throughout the films in this study, Exeter is situated somewhere between Klaatu and Morbius, sharing elements of Klaatu's alien nobility and Christ-like selflessness, but also Morbius's Faustian obsessions and compromises. Such figures are hardly opposed in Frye's view. On the contrary, he cites Christ's time on the cross as a classic example, as all such figures are instead fundamentally united, almost paradoxically, by their isolation:

> The root of pathos is the exclusion of an individual on our own level from a social group to which he is trying to belong. Hence the central tradition of sophisticated pathos is the study of the isolated mind, the story of how someone recognizably like ourselves is broken by a conflict between the inner and outer world, between imaginative reality and the sort of reality which is established by a social consensus.[78]

Because of his conscience, and his empathy for humanity, Exeter is indeed isolated from his people, yet because of his loyalty to, and then his irresolvable (and thus melancholic) mourning for his people, he cannot join Cal and Ruth and live amongst humanity either. While the film begins with Cal, as a figure of identification for the audience, encountering an alien and hostile world, the true end of the film is not his return with Ruth to their world, but as we have seen, it is the crashed ship and Exeter's death. There are, of course, tonal reasons for this: Cal and Ruth receiving their 'happy ever after' immediately following the death of a sympathetic character would place them in an unappealing light. Yet, we have a direct counter-example in the ending of *Forbidden Planet*, where Morbius's death not only precedes, but is necessary for Commander Adams and Altaira to be brought together unimpeded as a new family unit. In contrast, Exeter's death is not a predicate for anything, but a final word: a closing, rather than an opening, of possibility. Both the narrative placement and the apocalyptic finality of his passing significantly alter the film's balance, in Frye's terms, between the romantic and the ironic, between the traditionally comedic and the tragic.

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[77] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 35-36.
[78] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Technologies of Science Fiction: Transmissions and Interceptions

Reframing *This Island Earth* as not just the story Cal and Ruth, but also as the story of Exeter and his 'world' as experienced from the perspective of Cal and his companion(s), therefore allows for a realignment of understanding of the film's key themes and its narrative structure with the pathos of the tragic, excluded figure at its conceptual centre. Such an interpretation emphasises the key relationship to and between 'inner' and 'outer' worlds throughout the film. Exeter, whose name is connotative of exile, is both a connection and a block between worlds and, as we have seen, is in turn connected to and blocked from them himself. In his role as a kind of alien psychopomp guiding Cal into, if not quite the netherworld, at least certainly an under-world, Exeter alternates between gestures of exposure and concealment, delivering information in contained doses, always holding back more. Even at the end of the film's narrative, he lies to Cal and Ruth about venturing forth to explore the universe after returning them to Earth, except that Cal now knows him well enough to not only see the lie for what it is, but see the specific truth beneath it. It is a strangely futile attempt at consolation, a lie almost intended to fail, revealing in its paradoxically obvious deceptiveness the strange mix of compassion and calculation on which rests his character. However, it is not solely Exeter who performs such gestures of misdirection and deception in the film; there is also Ruth's deliberate performance of misrecognition between her and Cal, and her conversations with him add other variations of the inside/outside, exposure/concealment dichotomies that the characters are engaged in.

The theme of translation and incomprehension, which first appears with Cal's decoding of the 'Electronics Service No. 16 Catalogue', is revisited and made explicit with the language barrier Ruth describes between herself and the German scientist Dr Engelborg, which is immediately contrasted against the Metalunan's preternatural facility with language (a facility which, as Exeter's lack of recognition of Mozart reveals, does not extend to a socio-cultural comprehension – in this capacity, they resemble more Robby the Robot than Morbius the philologist). Cal also attempts to gets in on the game, using the lead plate in his lab at the Club in order to try to conceal his conversation with Ruth and Steve from prying interocitor-aided eyes, a vain gesture which nevertheless reveals to him the truth that the other scientists are brainwashed, a state which Exeter himself argues to his fellow Metalunans is one that inhibits understanding and comprehension. Here we can also see another key manifestation of the posited underlying paradigm, of transmissions sent and intercepted (in this case, not by Cal's lead plate, but by the laboratory cat, Neutron). Extending this idea metaphorically to Cal's plane journeys and spaceflights can be interpreted in this fashion as well since they, too, frequently involve gestures of interception thwarted or achieved, from the initial loss of control of the jet at the start of the film, to the later

abduction of the plane during Cal and Ruth's attempted escape, to the Zagon's assault on the Metalunan spaceship itself.

There is a recurring emphasis here on technology itself providing new means of communication, a facilitator of interaction as well as the subject of both characters' and audience's interest. The depiction of communication technology in these films does in fact suggest, as Marshall McLuhan would go on to argue in the following decade, that it is both process and content, subject and object – medium and message.[79] . The interocitor built by Dr. Meacham is a demonstration of advanced Metalunan scientific and technical knowledge, an irresistible lure to a scientist like Cal – but it is also an apparently untraceable method of long-distance audio-visual communication that can erase evidence of its own existence through a targeted beam and a deliberate triggered overload. Moreover, once Cal arrives at the Georgia facility, Exeter and Brack use their own interocitor to spy on the suspicious humans, and Brack subsequently uses its power as itself a form of deadly weaponry to fire upon the fleeing car transporting Cal, Ruth, and Steve – ironically, perhaps, being used to silence 'noise' rather than to enable conversation and the spread (or surreptitious gathering) of information. This only makes sense as the distribution of power and control is a problem of communication, of direction and response, regulation and feedback; it is a cybernetics problem.

The car itself, or at least the increasing affordability and resultant ubiquity of it, was at this point a transformative technology in America, one which had profound implications (alongside a range of post-war developments, including the almost interocitor-like television) for film which was, heretofore, the most recognisably technological of media. As John Belton wryly notes, "the things that Americans bought tended to take them away from the movies, both literally and figuratively. Through their most important purchases – cars and houses – Americans bought their way into suburbs, where new interests began to fill their leisure time", in which television was a contributing, but not the primary determinant, factor to the extent that has historically been claimed.[80] In McLuhan's *Mechanical Bride*, he observes that the car has, in fact, become a techno-organic product, parallel to the ability refine the human body via technological means: "The body as a living machine is now correlative with cars as vibrant and attractive organisms".[81] In *This Island Earth*, such 'domestic' advances (and even the flight of jet aircraft, or those more experimental technologies Cal works with in his lab) are overshadowed by the Metalunans' own technological and scientific mastery, not just via the interocitor but also in the form of their spacecraft and the accompanying

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[79] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press, 1997), p. 20
[80] Belton, *Widescreen Cinema*, pp. 69-70.
[81] Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride* (2011), p. 84.

ability to adapt humanoid bodies to the pressures of space travel – here, too, the body can be tuned and adapted, if not improved, in machine-like fashion, but on a far more impressive scale than girdles and corsetry.

In line with McLuhan's later theorisations of media there is also a question here, lurking at the periphery of the film's depiction of its marvellous science-fiction gadgetry, of whether the Metalunans' technologies – their impressive but ultimately controlling telecommunications devices, their brainwashing technique, their bio-engineered workforce of mutants – are inhumane because the Metalunans as a species are inhuman by nature (Exeter excepted), or whether the imagined technologies themselves, considered as media functioning as extensions of the Metulanan self with resulting social consequences, could be interpreted as partially determining the aliens' clinical, self-interested, compassionless behaviour. As Don Ihde argues in his deconstruction of existing arguments around the notion of 'controlling' relationships between technology and culture, "To enter any human-technology relation is already both to 'control' and 'to 'be controlled.'"[82] In the case of the Metalunans, more coldly utilitarian technologies and methods could be born out of, or perhaps adapted to, the their desperate need as they endure the apocalyptic assault of the Zagons as, in fact, happened in the United States during the war, laying the groundwork for the intellectual climate of the 1950s. This occurred not just among physicists like Eisenstein and Oppenheimer, or mathematicians like Wiener and Von Neumann, but even among anthropologists like Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson – indeed, as Nathaniel Brennan notes, it was precisely his use of 'applied anthropology' as part of military intelligence operations in Southeast Asia that led to his shift in approach: "His faith in anthropology shaken, Bateson gradually abandoned ethnography and moved on to the emerging fields of communication theory and cybernetics".[83] Among these films then we can observe the traces of question strand that encompasses if not all of the corpus, then certainly those 'marvellous' and 'fantastic' pictures that explicitly deal with contact between humans and more advanced alien civilisations and technologies; what is *lost* through the advancement of technology, versus what is *expressed* through that advancement. If the Metalunans' technologized society seems cold and affectless, then for the alien Krell of *Forbidden Planet*, by contrast, technology 'without instrumentality' is merely a means by which the already-existing unconscious id can escape and be made manifest. Or, to put it another way, Krell civilisation surpassed physical media, and was destroyed by the unfiltered and unconstrained emotionality that resulted. On Altair

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[82] Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 140.
[83] Nathaniel Brennan, 'The Cinema Intelligence Apparatus', *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex*, eds. Haidee Wasson and Lee Grieveson (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), pp. 152-153.

IV, technology reveals and expresses something of our primal nature (whether human or Krell); in *This Island Earth*, it is, instead, both border and barrier, transmitter and interceptor.

The Club and Metaluna, as locations associated with Exeter and his people, reflect this underlying dynamic in varying ways. The Club's pastoral Georgian locale presents a superficially idyllic and utopian exterior that conceals the true purpose and character of the operation within. Metaluna, meanwhile, is a world turned in on itself, where everything has become interior, concealed, and repressed. This reaches its peak with Cal, Ruth, and Exeter's arrival at the Monitor's chamber with its distinctive blue filter that is suggestive of not only the Metalunan's technological advancement but also their emotional and moral repression. They are coded as a cold people and it is partially Exeter's amiability, his *warmth*, which makes him stand out from his fellow extra-terrestrials. Nevertheless, he cannot deny his nature or allegiance, as in his argument with Cal on board the spacecraft where the trauma of the Second World War, which so suffuses the backstory and actions of the Metalunans, comes closest to being spoken aloud. "We're not all masters of our fates, Meacham", Exeter retorts when Cal, quite justifiably, accuses the Metalunans of mass murder, and when Cal dismisses this defence, the alien pointedly remarks that it was a phrase he had learned on Earth. This is curious, because it places Cal as the representative not just of the American perspective but humanity as a whole, potentially implicating not only those who stood on trial at Nuremberg, but also the crew of the Enola Gay.


Figure 13 – *This Island Earth:* **Metaluna under assault from the Zagon bombardment.**

Thus, even though Metaluna itself is clearly an echo of the devastated Old World, a 'Europe after the Rain', its people are not simply an analogue to Nazi Germany, nor Stalinist Russia. They are

any morally compromised people driven into committing atrocities by their existential desperation, and they are also simply themselves – or rather, they are the arrogant and austere Monitor, the quietly vicious Brack, and the intellectual, mournful Exeter. Yet any shared complicity between human and Metalunan doesn't erase Exeter's guilt, and if he can be described as an emanation of Frye's archetypal dying god, he's one of a markedly different character to the 'angelic' purity of Klaatu. Both suffer significant injuries and go to meet their deaths inside their spacecraft-corteges, but where Klaatu achieves some kind of peaceful transcendence, in the end Exeter's fate rushes violently towards him. Cal and Ruth, meanwhile, have returned to Earth – 'home', as Ruth states – but their plane never lands, and they remain forever suspended in the air, forever caught between inside and outside the 'natural' human world. Ultimately, though he begins in position of power, Exeter cannot escape the deterministic nature of his archetypal role. By contrast, while Cal might remain caught between earth and heaven with Ruth in their final scene, nevertheless he continues to exist in a space of possibility. No doubt we can formulate a further framing of the reason why the film ended on the moment it did: because it is Exeter's story that *provides* an ending.

https://www.thewadsworth.org/wp-content/gallery/euroart/max-ernst_1942.281_top25_web.jpg
[last accessed 03/06/2019]

Figure 14 – *Europe After the Rain II* by Max Ernst (1940-42), Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT.

The fate of the Metalunans is thus depicted as essentially inevitable. The matte paintings of the desolate caverns of Metaluna, strewn with the ruins of its technologically marvellous society, are halfway between the real, documented images of war-torn city ruins that emerged out of World War II and Max Ernst's imagining of a post-war Europe that is somehow both decayed and fecund, a vision of death and life intermingled and inseparable. The scale of the destruction on Metaluna lends particular weight to the pronouncement by the Monitor that they are not capable of developing their own method of synthesising uranium due to the death of so many of their scientists and destruction of their scientific institutions. It is, perhaps, an artefact of the frequently fanciful science of the genre, but the exact nature of the Metalunans' desire – and the research which Cal and Ruth are working on that may provide it is – possesses something of the quality of a nuclear-age alchemy.

For Frye, the narrative form of romance is itself an alchemical formula, no less than the transition of lead into uranium which the Metalunans so desperately seek.[84] According to Jameson:

> Romance is for [Frye] a wish fulfillment or utopian fantasy, which aims at the transfiguration of the world of everyday reality, whether in an effort to restore it **to** the condition of some lost Eden or to inaugurate and usher in some new and ultimate realm from which the old mortality and imperfections have been effaced.[85]

This is, of course, a constituent part of the whole of Frye's project which was, as Jameson put it subsequently, one of "Blakean myths of eternal bodies projected against the sky".[86] Science fiction in general is somewhat of a rarefication of this approach to narrative, and the relationship between romance and myth; Frye himself notes it as "a mode of romance with a strong inherent tendency to myth."[87] Certainly, Exeter's role as both psychopomp and dying god hints at the mythic bones beneath the science-fictional surface of *This Island Earth*.

Yet, this is also where we encounter a profound note of melancholy, for though Metaluna is a site of the 'technologically miraculous', as Frye would put it (which could perhaps be considered an earlier model for Telotte's definition of the 'marvellous') it is evidently far from a utopia. Rather, as we see even more explicitly in the sights pointed out by Exeter in the tram ride, it is a fallen utopia, now a world as exhausted as the Mars of *The War of The Worlds* – and, per Arnheim, we indeed witness their very last twitches and spasm of their civilisation, down the knowing self-immolation of the final member of their race, who knows he cannot successfully mourn the loss of his people.[88] The Metalunans no longer even have the personnel or the tools to pursue their own scientific projects. To put it one way, the Metalunans could indeed be described as calling for science but are hardly capable of producing it. This goes hand-in-hand with the recurring, yet strangely abstracted, emphasis on the idea of brainwashing in the back half of the film. Metaluna is not just materially exhausted by the endless war, but its people are morally and, most of all, imaginatively exhausted as well. Like the Martians, they have regressed to a point where they must rely on the developments of another culture, one still possessed of vitality and imagination and, perhaps, hope, to provide them with deliverance from their plight. Yet the need this situation evinces is unaccompanied by any sense of humility in the Metalunans, as their final contingency plan to flee to and colonise Earth reveals.

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[84] The connection between romance as a genre, romantic love, and various forms of magic (including alchemy), has a long and complex history – see Ioan P. Couliano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, trans. Margaret Cook (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[85] Jameson, 'Magical Narratives', p. 138.

[86] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, p. 6.

[87] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p.49.

[88] Rudolf Arnheim, 'Melancholy Unshaped', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 21, No. 3, (Spring 1963), p. 297

The intellectual dynamic of Frye's original position and the subsequent contrast and critique provided by Todorov offers a useful theoretical toolset in analysing a film with such distinctive generic qualities as this *This Island Earth*. More than this, however, that same dynamic is enacted and played out within the narrative of the film itself, not in the detail of the film's own understanding of intellectual concerns, but instead through the interplay of archetypes and structures, of semantic codes and syntactic mechanisms. The genre studies approach which Todorov articulates, a procedural determination of the nature of the narrative world itself, can be considered analogous to the approach which Cal adopts within the diegesis. Meanwhile, Frye adopts the position of, if not an all-knowing, then at least a superlatively well-informed expert managing a pool of informational resources in order to fulfil a predetermined schema. The fundamental flaw at the root of Frye's critical approach is, for Todorov, that it is an attempt to reason out the fundamental elements of narrative itself through *a priori* logic, rather than the observation and analysis of material texts and genres:

> Frye's system … is composed of *theoretical* genres and not historical ones. There are a certain number of genres not because more have not been observed, but because the principle of the system imposes that number. It is therefore necessary to deduce all the possible combinations from the categories chosen.[89]

According to Todorov, Frye's theory of literature is, essentially, one which is based on, and requires, a specialised form of hermetic knowledge dressed in the guise of scientific rationalism, as he pointedly makes clear in the conclusion of his analysis of the limitations, and extrinsic demands, of Frye's approach:

> In order to understand this mechanism [language], it suffices to start from the most ordinary words, the simplest sentences. Even in criticism: we can approach the essential problems of literary theory without necessarily possessing the scintillating erudition of a Northrop Frye.[90]

Exeter's foibles aren't based in an overdeveloped erudition, exactly, and we witness his profound ignorance of human culture in the Mozart scene, where he seems initially unaware of the connection between what is to him, alien music in the background, and the 'gentleman' Cal mentions. Yet there remains a resemblance here in Exeter's role in the film as an orchestrator, a scientific and technological maestro, and the kind of role Todorov argues Frye is demanding the critic occupy. Indeed, one of Cal's reasons for venturing forth to join Exeter is because the scientific knowledge the mysterious man on the screen possesses "should be in our text books". Moreover, Exeter is, from the start, perfectly aware from the start of the specific nature of the narrative world**,**

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[89] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 14.
[90] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

the events unfolding within it, and the rules which govern it. Yet, as we have seen. he is profoundly limited by the role he occupies within that world to following a certain limited pattern of behaviours.

The exchange of knowledge, power, and agency between these two characters is, therefore, the central dramatic pivot around which the film's narrative is orientated, far more so than the romance between Cal and Ruth. Yet it is more than this still, because it also sits at the conceptual and thematic heart of the film, and its connection to the political climate of the era, suggestive of America's relationship with the Old World in the post-war years of the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine, as well as the emerging intellectual concerns regarding the possession and dispersal of information and how this shapes meaning itself. It is entirely appropriate that neither Frye's archetypal nor Todorov's mechanistic schemas fully capture the narrative operation of the film, but that just such an exchange between them offers something more, revealing itself precisely in the contrast of the procedural but ultimately open-ended revelations of Cal's journey of discovery against the mythic tragedy of Exeter's doomed attempt to save his world.

Cosmic Excursions: Conclusion

The investigation into *Forbidden Planet* establishes that there was an active and intentional cyberneticist presence in the imaginary of Hollywood science fiction cinema of the 1950s. This is distinguishable not only in recurring thematic and narrative facets of the genre but also, in this particular case, concentrated and rarefied through the technical construction of the Barrons' unique score for the film. The study of *This Island Earth*, meanwhile, allows us a glimpse at the function of genre itself, what we can learn about the films by examining some of the developments in genre studies during this period, and, in turn, what we can learn about genre studies from examining the films of the period. The comparison therefore taps into a nexus of intellectual thought and cinematic production that demonstrates the relationship between how science fiction film was framed in the 1950s, and how science fiction film was actually operating the '50s. This is not to say that these are entirely separate and distinct processes, as there remains a mutual co-production of the science fiction imaginary underway: models of attempting to structure genre and categorise science fiction in the abstract or historically, and the idiosyncratic developments in the creative practices of constructing new science fiction.

The examination of *This Island Earth* is therefore useful as both a specific case with its own unique relationship between audio and visual, and as a more traditional comparison to *Forbidden Planet*'s flirtation with the avant-garde. Together, they model different kinds of marriage between form and function in the forms of communication used by science fiction films in this era, in ways that supplement their thematic concerns and narrative strategies. An accounting of these variations

is valuable because it allows us to simultaneously distinguish with greater contrast the narrative and formal operations and different approaches to the genre, and, thus, identify with more clarity the nature of the fundamental commonalities detectable in this pairing of films. This suggests that there are not only superficial similarities based in the iconography of pulp sci-fi and common genre tropes, but that these are merely surface detail of more significant resonances. Underlying these two films are contemporary political, social, and moralistic concerns which are not erased or side-lined by, but are instead inside the fossilized amber of, the archetypal and generic convention of the films which give them their shape. Here a glimpse of a melancholy synthesis of myth and history is unveiled, arranged into a constellation of themes and iconographic renderings specific to the 1950s milieu.

The intention here is not only to examine the differences in how these two films operate and the individual connections each may have to different points in the intellectual constellation of the era, but to now bring these two readings together in order to map out their place in the overall milieu of both the genre of science fiction film and the period of the '50s in America. With this approach in mind, it is clear that *Forbidden Planet* is also a form of mystery, a murder mystery with the true cause of the previous death of the colonists, and the attacks on the crew of the C-57D, withheld as a key point of suspense throughout the film. Yet there remains a fundamental difference between it and *This Island Earth* when it comes to the function of the mystery in terms of their respective thematic and narrative operations. *Forbidden Planet*, after all, begins with a flying saucer approaching a planet – and it is a human-operated flying saucer. In this possibly utopian future of space colonisation, humans have, to some degree, agency not only in but through the marvellous. As such, there is no slow unmasking of the underlying nature of the events of the plot or the kind of world in which they take place; there is no Todorovian hesitation or prevarication between the marvellous and the uncanny. The 'reality' of space travel and the existence of an (extinct) alien race are, themselves, not withheld from the audience, instead serving as establishing devices that are required for setting the film's plot in motion. The mysteries present in the respective films are therefore of two different orders. *This Island Earth* is, as we have seen, a mystery that changes its characters' understanding of the world they inhabit by shifting through different modes of the genre itself. *Forbidden Planet*, then, is a mystery that changes its characters' understanding of their inner selves and their relationships, specifically in the context of romance, the collapse of the old family unit, and construction of the new. Its concerns are, in a sense, more domestic than the space opera which *This Island Earth* becomes, but it is a domesticity endangered by misunderstood technology and misapplied cybernetic principles: the nuclear family and the nuclear age brought into direct confrontation, blown up to a planetary scale.

With *Forbidden Planet*, then, we can begin to unveil more distinctly the melancholic spectrum presented by the consideration of this corpus of films together and in situ. The point is not that all the case studies, or their fellow science fiction pictures of the era, have the *same* relationship to recent historical trauma. Rather, they reveal a set of responses demonstrating both common limitations but also distinctly and individually modulated expressions within this melancholic mode. Indeed, of the corpus, *Forbidden Planet* is the only picture that displays a conventional, 'Romantic' Hollywood happy ending in the unambiguous union of Commander Adams and Altaira aboard his ship – and it is therefore curious and telling that it remains the most explicitly psychoanalytical. *Forbidden Planet* proposes that mourning can be addressed, and ultimately resolved, through a mythic disassembly and reconstruction of the family unit. In Shakespearean terms, the cure for Tragedy is nothing else than Comedy. In this specific sense it is the most conformist of these films to the extent that it is engaging in a representation, and a reinforcing, of the emerging social convention of the suburban nuclear family – as distinct from the traditional extended family typical of traditional agricultural and urban close-knit living. The archetypal narrative structure of the formation of a new household, extending back through Shakespeare's *Tempest* and beyond, is here being repurposed and deployed as ideological support for the new suburban society of '50s America; a nuclear remix and reimagining of the mythic family dynamic.

This is not to say that *This Island Earth* has no interest in the inner lives of its characters, or the *Forbidden Planet* has no sense of wonder or discovery. On the contrary, Exeter's personal journey from a reluctant but loyal servant of the state to a man of individual conscience is central to the dramatic arc of *This Island Earth*, while the scenes of Morbius giving Commander Adams and his companions a tour of the Krell machine city are amongst the most effective evocations of an alien, cosmic scale conjured through special effects from this period of science fiction. Rather, the distinction is in the way narrative information is presented to the audience, and the emphasis placed on it, which is the key difference. By placing the two films alongside one another, we see more clearly not only the archetype but also the social context framing their two chief 'antagonists', Morbius and Exeter, who are not abject villains but rather sympathetic figures of tragic intellectual hubris. While the more practical protagonists, whether soldier or fellow scientist, serves as a balanced audience surrogate, the Faustian figures of the flawed intellectuals serve as the real dramatic cores of their respective films' narratives. They are, in fact, mirrors of each other: Morbius, the human who desires, if not to be alien, then at least to be the point where *human and alien* meet and can understand one another; and Exeter, who desires, if not to be human, then at least to be the point where *alien and human* meet and can understand one another. Morbius is betrayed by his arrogance, unable to see how his basic psychology is connected to all the deaths on Altaira IV, or

that he is making the same apocalyptic mistakes as the ancient Krell. Exeter, meanwhile, is betrayed by the arrogance of his people, who insist on treating humans as disposable drudges. That Morbius has repeated the error of the alien Krell further aligns his position with that of Exeter. This position is fraught with the still-unprocessed collective trauma of the Second World War and its aftermath.

There is, underlying both Morbius and Exeter's respective journeys, not just a personal or collective hubris, but also a shared consideration of complicity in and guilt for the consequences of their inability to avert disaster. In other words, they both put in place an emphasis on connecting personal responsibility to the fate of the world, or even worlds. Altair IV is a world whose people have been eradicated, but whose systems are still running, hidden underground. Metaluna is a world in the process of being destroyed, but whose people have so far survived, hidden underground. In a way that was more immediately and viscerally conceivable after 1945, both are visions of planetary-scale destruction, ghosts of Hiroshima. Here both Altair IV and Metaluna can be identified as functionally distinct from Mars of *The War of the Worlds*, which the first case study identified as the archetypal exhausted, desiccated planet. Mars was a starting point, an origin and explanation for the film's out-of-this-world menace. Altair IV is itself the scene of the action of *Forbidden Planet*, and Metaluna the final destination in *This Island Earth* before the return. In *Forbidden Planet*, a world can be destroyed in an instant, its ruins to be discovered millennia later. In *This Island Earth*, a world is annihilated slowly but steadily over some unknown length of time.

Neither exactly matches the conditions of an atomic detonation, no more than they match the other, but they display the same underlying operation. They both demonstrate an attempt to perform a re-contextualisation and an imaginative historicization of technologized conflicts that can obliterate worlds. Metaluna, in a melancholic attempt to inject a note of cosmic redemption into the act of planetary destruction, is transformed into a 'life-giving' sun by the ferocity of the Zagon's attack. For, as Kristeva notes in her reading of Gérard de Nerval, "*Melancholia* belongs in the celestial realm. It changes darkness into redness or into a sun that remains black, to be sure, but is nevertheless a sun, source of dazzling light."[91] Altair IV, meanwhile, is annihilated at his own instruction, part of his attempt at a more personal form of redemption, and perhaps complete his mourning of the Krell by destroying their dead and de-natured world. Both films thereby articulate their own melancholic, apocalyptic mythology, with the bomb and its associated horrors the key symbolic reference point.

Forbidden Planet thus invites us to re-examine the concepts of nature which are referenced throughout the genre, and the relations they might bear with civilisation, forming its own theory -or,

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[91] Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 151.

rather, myth – of nature. The fate of the Krell (and Morbius) is presented primarily as an archetypal struggle in this vein, with the primal, unconscious 'Id' in conflict with our civilized, rationalized, conscious selves. The Krell are themselves indubitably deceased during the action of the film. They are absent in body but retain a presence through their technology; it is Morbius's task to mourn the Krell (a task at which he fails), and to witness the fact that they were themselves the bomb, and at the height of their civilisation brought about the end of their own history. The Metalunans, similarly, are a civilisation on the precipice of final collapse, with both their cities and, it would seem, any sense of ethics and morality destroyed by the pressure of constant bombardment. The Martians are, by contrast, depicted as simultaneously ultra-rational and desperate, eventually authoring their own destruction, twice over, by not considering the importance of nature, both in its limitations and its potency.

These formulations occur not only at a narrative and thematic levels but, as the analysis of *Forbidden Planet* demonstrates, but can also emerge from the formal composition of the film as an audio-visual work. The unique character of the diegesis of *Forbidden Planet* is, in part, created through re-situating the film's soundtrack in relation to the audience's sonic perception and what is occurring on-screen relative to the classical Hollywood style. The traditional soundtrack of *This Island Earth*, as in the first on-screen encounter between Cal and Ruth, tells the audience directly what to feel; the non-diegetic score provides an authorial commentary which feeds into the exact same generic operations which underpin the film's plot. With the break-down of the usual separation between diegetic and non-diegetic, the soundtrack the Barrons composed for *Forbidden Planet* is performing quite a different operation, which abandons authorial commentary in favour of a construction of a sonic space which produces a multiplicity of possible meanings. *This Island Earth*'s presentation of its science fiction universe takes the form of a sequential unfolding before the audience, simple and directly supported by traditional visual and audio cues, while *Forbidden Planet*'s deployment of both its audio and visual special effects compromise a holistic envelopment of the audience. They move in opposite directions, respectively bringing the alien to the audience, and bringing the audience to the alien.

Across the full corpus of these films, and the alien civilisations encountered throughout, the audience is frequently presented with not only with cinematic foes to root against, but also cautionary tales warning against excess, or hubris, or both. In *War of the Worlds* and *Them!*, the natural, biological world is treated explicitly as a kind of recourse and redress to the over-technologized (in this case study, *This Island Earth* muddies the waters somewhat by having the Metalunans' doom come at the hand of another alien race). As we shall see, due to the transformative power of radiation, the ants of *Them!* are at the cusp of moving from the realm of

nature to that of civilisation, but in doing so would displace and destroy humanity, an eventuality which must obviously be prevented (this has a curious resonance with that film's Western roots, as the planet is, indeed, not big enough for both humans and giant ants). In any case, of the various alien civilisations depicted, only Klaatu's interplanetary alliance seems to have found stability in its rigid cybernetic technocracy, where deadly robots like Gort preserve universal homeostasis by eliminating destabilizing elements – potentially including Earth. There is a logical, scientific harshness here that is shared with the Martians and the Metalunans, though in Klaatu there is, nevertheless, kindness and the promise of reconciliation. Viewed back through this lens *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, in its early cybernetic approach, offered the hope that the lessons of nature could be adopted and incorporated into the urbanised, technologized world. Meanwhile, at the far end of the cosmic scale, the period, and the structure of the corpus, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* will instead issue a rejection of the necessity of society, of civilisation, and instead proposes a form of submission to nature – an attempt, at least, at mournful acceptance of loss and change. In this way, these films' views on the relationship between civilisation and nature align in significant ways with their understanding and modelling of communication, which is necessarily fraught with questions of technology and its effect on society. The alignment of such concerns is, in fact, at the core of the third case study's exploration of displacements and distortions in scale.

Chapter 3: Uncanny Transformations

The films *Them!* (dir. Gordon Douglas) and *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (dir. Jack Arnold, 1957) are part of a broader subset of American science fiction films of 1950s based around the simple idea of distortions in size and scale, where either human beings or animals become unnaturally smaller or, more commonly, enlarged. This was a significant thread in the genre tapestry of the period, and other relatively prominent examples include *Tarantula!* (1955), an earlier film by *Shrinking Man* director Jack Arnold; *The Deadly Mantis* (1957) and *The Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (1958) by Austrian director Nathan Juran; and most frequently in the B movie pictures of independent writer-producer-director Bert I. Gordon such as *The Amazing Colossal Man* (1957), *Beginning of the End* (1957), and *Earth vs. the Spider* (1958).[92] This premise in film is, of course, not limited solely to this period. *King Kong* (dir. Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoesdsack, 1933) is a famous early example, and possibly the most influential giant monster picture of them all, *Gojira* (dir. Ishirô Honda, 1954), alone has spawned a litany of sequels and imitations in both Japan and America in subsequent decades. Meanwhile, the idea of a special effects-laden picture based around shrinking has been resuscitated intermittently in later films such as *Fantastic Voyage* (dir. Richard Fleischer, 1966), *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* (dir. Joel Schumacher, 1981), with distant descendants up to the present day from *Honey I Shrunk the Kids* (dir. Joe Johnston, 1989) to Marvel/Disney picture *Ant-Man* (dir. Peyton Reed, 2016) and its sequel. Yet the strongest ongoing association with these films, and the height of their output, was the 1950s. There are, evidently, numerous variations on the formula, and no single film or pairing of films is going to summarise the subgenre. The goal here, as in previous chapters, is not to summarise, but to select two films which take the core concept of the particular subgenre, identified with reference to Telotte as Uncanny Transformations (a very different understanding of the concept of the Uncanny than Todorov's, as noted in the methodology),[93] in distinctly differing directions and triangulating the points of difference and overlap between the two case studies. The first point of distinction is obvious: *Them!* deals with giant ants that have been mutated by radiation, and *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, as its title suggests, concerns a man who is confronted by his own ongoing miniaturisation, caused by a combined exposure to radiation and insecticide.

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[92] This specific aspect of the 1950s science fiction film phenomenon was noted by Paul Wells for its engagement with gender roles and masculine self-image in 'The Invisible Man: Shrinking Masculinity in the 1950s', *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men*, eds. Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993), pp. 181-184; also 188-191 for *The Incredible Shrinking Man* and 196-197 for *Them!*

[93] J. P. Telotte, *Science Fiction Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 12; Tzevetan Todorov, *The Fantastic* p. 41; trans. Richard Horward (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).

The conflicts in each film are thereby immediately set out in, essentially, opposite directions. *Them!* presents an outward struggle, a battle for supremacy between humanity (or the United States, which for the film's purposes are the same thing) and a hostile alien species.[94] *The Incredible Shrinking Man* focuses on its protagonist's inner struggle, his attempt to redefine what it means to be a human being (or a man, which for this film's purposes are the same thing) as his condition increasingly limits his ability to interact with, and survive, everyday environments and situations. This fundamental difference necessarily affects the relative scope and stakes of each film, and therefore the perspective of the underlying problems out which the characters' struggles have developed. After the first act is resolved and the nature of the enemy is revealed, the narrative of *Them!* quickly establishes the consequences of the spread of the ants will be global catastrophe and the annihilation of humanity. *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, on the other hand, never suggests that there might be any kind of epidemic of its protagonist's condition. Indeed, the cause and circumstances of his situation are clearly and repeatedly stated to be highly unusual and improbable; not an inevitable Faustian consequence of meddling with nature, like the ants of *Them!*, but a random, capricious act of fate which affects him alone. Yet he also, because of the unremarkable nature of his life beforehand and the films genericised synthesis of existentialist thought and vaguely Christian spiritualism (in addition to the film's own blind spots when it comes to diversity of representation), takes on the role of an everyman figure.

Both *The Incredible Shrinking Man* and *Them!* attempt to construct narratives out of the anxieties which exist in the contemporary milieu towards the splitting of the atom and the literal and metaphorical fallout from that act. The concept of radiation is called upon to serve as a kind of negative philosopher's stone, an alchemical force or concept which reveals some kind of deeper truth through the transformations it effects. Just like the Martian's death rays in *The War of the Worlds*, however, radiation in these films threatens the meaning and integrity of society itself. Per Kristeva's reading of Nerval, "alchemical metamorphosis may be read as a metaphor more in keeping with the borderline experience of the psyche struggling against dark asymbolism than with a para-scientific description of physical or chemical reality."[95] Traceable in both of these 'uncanny' films is a concern for what atomic science means for societies that make use of it. *Them!*, with its carefully managed escalating plot structure, deals with this question in terms of hierarchy, from the

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[94] The nature of this Othered threat, and its relationship to the film's female characters and overall approach to gender, has fuelled debate about the film, not just in the work of Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1983) and Jerome F. Shapiro, Atom Bomb Cinema (New York: Routledge, 2002), as will be explored below, but also, more recently, in Susan A. George *Gendering Science Fiction Films* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), pp.49-51;109-112, who broadly aligns with Biskind's view on *Them!*

[95] Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 151-152.

top downwards. The response to the crisis it presents is grounded in the overall response by society itself in the form of police officers, federal agents, soldiers, and scientists all working together, yoked to the common cause of preserving human civilisation and its place of dominance over the world.

In this functionalist view, a single life can be sacrificed to the common good, or a sane man incarcerated in an insane asylum against his will, and it is deemed perhaps unfortunate, but necessary. In this sense it is the least melancholic of the films analysed here, as it adopts a pragmatic view of trauma and mourning. *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, as we have already begun to see illustrated, instead approaches the problem on a profoundly individual, and individualist, psychological level. It sees the problem of anxiety of the atomic bomb as a problem of anxiety, not of atomic power, which is merely a trigger, though one which does define the logic of the narrative's inner conflict. In a sense it is a film about coming to terms with lack, about the specific shift from pathological melancholy to healthy mourning. It is, of course, because these films construct such distinct narratives through similar concepts and imagery surrounding distortions in size and scale that they provide an opportunity to excavate how the culture regarded the relationship between atomic power, the natural world, and humanity – and how such dynamics, conversely, are deeply embedded in the narrative structure of the films.

Them! (1954)

Setting the Stakes: Escalation and Revelation

In its own way as striking as *This Island Earth*, the narrative structure of *Them!* hinges around key moments of revelation and escalation. Just as the audience is never called upon to believe that the mysterious items sent to Cal have a mundane explanation, it is also clear from the opening events of *Them!* that we are within the liminal realm of the fantastic. Discoveries are made, and questions provoked that must be resolved. The first discovery New Mexico state police sergeant Ben Petersen (James Whitmore) and state trooper Ed Blackburn (Chris Drake) make, the young girl wandering in the desert (Sandy Descher), is in fact a deliberate forestalling of revelation. Evidently traumatised, unable to speak, she cannot help but be inscrutable. The subsequent discoveries at the eviscerated caravan belonging to the girl's family and the general goods store, raided for its sugar, deepen the mystery. The characters discuss possible mundane explanations, such as the idea of an escaped inmate from a mental institute, even while knowing that such unlikely events can't explain the facts. With each new detail of the case, the film's centre of balance, per Todorov, moves away from the uncanny and towards the marvellous.

The first act of the film reaches its climax in the revelation of the first ant fully visible to the audience, literally rearing its head as it looms over an unaware Pat Medford (Joan Weldon). Then,

following the encounter, another kind of revelation, courtesy of Harold Medford (Edmund Gwenn), as he ominously intones that "We may be witnesses to a Biblical prophecy come true: 'And there shall be destruction and darkness come up in creation, and the beasts shall reign over the earth.'" For Shapiro, this prophetic language is reminiscent of, though not an exact quotation of, both the Book of Daniel and the Revelation of St. John, and he was not the first to note this resemblance.[96] Stephen O'Leary similarly commentated that "The monsters in these films stand in for the raging beasts of Daniel and Revelation, as symbols of demonic and/or chthonic powers that wreak destruction before finally being vanquished and as manifestations of the sins of overweening pride and idolatry."[97] Atomic weaponry and scientific hubris are merely the most up-to-date excuse for such manifestations in the 1950s.

Figure 15 – *Them!:* One of the giant ants looms over an unaware Pat Medford.

Of course, the beasts of the Christian apocalypse are chimeras, one "having ten horns, and seven heads" and being "like unto a leopard, and his feet were as the feet of a bear, and his mouth

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[96] Shapiro, *Atom Bomb Cinema*, p. 109.
[97] Stephen D. O'Leary, 'Apocalypticism in American Popular Culture', in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism,* Vol. 3, ed. Stephen J. Stein (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1998), p. 402.

as the mouth of a lion",[98] or another which had "two horns like unto lamb, and … spake as a dragon",[99] or the beast ridden by the Whore of Babylon, which was "scarlet-colored … full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns".[100] There is, then, a tension here between the allusions being made, between the mythic language of the Christian apocalypse, the pulp sci-fi aesthetic of radiation-engorged titanic insects, and the film's overall functionalist aesthetic. The film, through Harold Medford, uses a *semblance* of the revelatory language of the Bible to invoke the threat of what is, in fact, a different class of apocalypse: a post-human world where the beast reigns supreme – which, in a quiet way, presages the inverted human-animal relationships and the shock ending of *The Planet of the Apes* (dir. Franklin J. Schaffner, 1968) by fourteen years.

The encounter with the ant which threatens Pat also confirms the Medfords' theory, and from this point onwards the film shifts gears from mystery to action, from police procedural to theatre of war. The questions that require answering are no longer a matter of what and why, but of where and how. This second act may also begin with a search of the desert coordinated from the air, but rather than being presented with an enigma to be deciphered, instead the government task force – featuring representatives from the local police, the FBI, the Department of Agriculture, and the US Army (and with a commensurate upgrade from one police plane to two military helicopters) – knows precisely what they're looking for and what it means. Yet, given their origin in a pulp-science understanding of the effects of radiation, *Them!* conspicuously lacks some corresponding feat of deliberately engineered super-science that allows for the human defeat of the ants in just the nick of time. There is no moment such that Sontag describes where "The final strategy, upon which all hopes depend, is drawn up: the ultimate weapon – often a super-powerful, as yet untested, nuclear device – is mounted."[101] In *The War of the Worlds* the attempt is at least made, with the scientists of Pacific Tech formulating a plan to use biological warfare against the anaemic Martians (which in turns foreshadows their eventual defeat at the hands of the earth's microbiological biosphere itself). The Medfords, by contrast, do not provide, and never even offer, a proverbial silver bullet to defeat the ants, but simply the knowledge about *Formicidae* biology and social habits that allows the police and armed forces to come up with strategies that depend not on the last-minute deployment of some secret weapon, but rather on an understanding of the ants' behaviours which allows their

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[98] Rev. 13: 1-2 (ASV).
[99] Rev. 13: 11-12 (ASV).
[100] Rev. 17: 3 (ASV).
[101] Susan Sontag, 'The Imagination of Disaster', *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 210.

movements to be anticipated in a fashion that once again brings to mind the origin of Wiener's work of cybernetics in predictive modelling.

The relationship between science and the military here is truly collaborative. Despite his framing of the ants as 'symbols of demonic and/or chthonic powers', O'Leary is also careful to point out that "the ants are defeated not by divine intervention but by scientific knowledge commanding the full military resources of the state."[102] That it is the scientists in charge and military following, even willingly, their direction is, of course, key to Biskind's characterisation of the film as a right-of-centre film.[103] He notes that, "in films like *Them!*, the military was not able to use its big guns because it was fighting on its own turf."[104] Despite the solution to the problem of the ants ultimately being carried out militarily, with the US armed forces effecting curfew in Los Angeles and scouring the city's sewers in the film's final act, there are also significant limits on military power in place here, both in terms of its direction and the scale of what weaponry they can use. This is in significant contrast to, most obviously, *The War of the Worlds*, which has far more military power on display, with the bomb itself being deployed against the Martians, but with much less success. This, of course, is partially due to the different order of threat posed by wild animals, for all their mutated size and strength, against an organized and technologically overwhelming alien invading force.

It is worth noting here that it is precisely in their approach to the interpretation of *Them!*, and the signification of the specific wild animals in question, that Biskind and Shapiro's radically opposite approaches come to a most obvious head. Indeed, Shapiro singles out Biskind's reading in particular with a pointed reference to the 'centrist' label:

> *Them!* is hardly the centrist or reactionary film that some critics want it to be. Rather, it is an apocalyptic narrative that plays on the fears of the audience on a number of levels. Fear of insects, fear of the bomb, fear of the apocalypse. The film's first concern is fear – not politics – because fear is fun.[105]

But despite Shapiro's critique of Biskind's reading, there are points of connection between their two approaches. Here, in fact, he somewhat oversimplifies Biskind's argument, hiding the common point they share, which is the fundamentally tautological statement that, whatever their origin, giant insects are menacing because giant insects are menacing. In both arguments, the fear therefore comes from technologized humanity's relationship to nature, not humanity's own relationship to

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[102] O'Leary, 'Apocalypticism in American Popular Culture', p. 402.
[103] Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, pp. 124-5.
[104] *Ibid.*, p. 126.
[105] Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema*, p. 111.

technology. The only difference is Shapiro frames this in the context of an eternal struggle, mired in the weight of ancient histories.

Biskind, meanwhile, simply conveys it as a kind of ahistorical phenomenon that intersects with a moment in history. To illustrate his point, Biskind conceives of a fictitious centrist sci-fi film called *The Attack of the Giant Aphids*, in which a pair of generically named protagonists are menaced by insects affected by a nuclear test (a clear reference to *Them!*). With this thought experiment in place, he goes on to argue:

> centrist films … are not primarily worried about the Bomb; they love the bomb, or at least the technology that makes it possible … to understand what these films did worry about, all we have to do is look at what's before our very eyes: it's aphids after all, nature run amok.[106]

He may as well have said 'it's ants after all', and it's a comment that reflects a certain degree of the almost essentialist interpretative approach Shapiro engages in when he talks about how fear, not politics, is the primary intent of these films. In a sense, they are drawing from the same underlying concept: the fundamental way the alien figure of the insect is a *tabula rasa* whose import is endlessly re-applicable to the concerns of the specific individual viewer.

The only difference is that, for Biskind, this means the ant is inherently anthropomorphic, because it is a social creature and we can only understand social behaviour in human terms, while Shapiro, in his usual style, attempts to step out of the game by making the easy misreading of such figures a central part of his point:

> Organized insects posing a threat to humanity is an ancient narrative device. Giant ants work because they are scary to us, the audience … Yet, because they have little other than their antlike characteristics, it is easy for the spectator, critic, and scholar to project their own fears onto the giant ants.[107]

Yet, with his fictitious example of the aphids, ultimately Biskind distances the point he is making from his actual reading of *Them!* Here, if not in contradiction to his earlier point then at least sitting awkwardly beside it, he conflates the ants not only with the fear of communism and the bomb, but also a fear of female power, which seems to run against his 'aphids after all' aphorism. "*Them!* has as much to do with the sex war as it does the cold war," he states, which given Pat Medford's character as a female scientist arguing for the respect due to her from her military colleagues, seems

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[106] Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, p. 107.
[107] Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema*, p. 107.

a fair enough reading thus far. But then he goes on to state, somewhat more boldly, "The film's attack on extremism becomes an attack on women in a man's world."[108] In Biskind's characterisation, then, Pat becomes co-identified, co-signified with the very monstrous creatures she is helping to study, track down, and destroy.

Biskind's justification for such a reading is founded in the assumption that "the anthropomorphic gravity of American films is so strong that they have difficulty dramatizing a genuine otherness."[109] It is this facet of his argument in particular Shapiro finds particularly disagreeable:

> Peter Biskind, for instance, claims while a few men are sacrificed to the women's movement, the rest of the film works to constrain women in traditional roles. Biskind also calls the ant society matriarchal or communist, which is fallacious anthropomorphizing and not consistent with the narrative."[110]

Certainly, Shapiro acknowledges that the film deals with gender politics, but he insists on distinguishing the humans from the ants, dealing with them as separate (though not entirely isolated) sets of symbols, rather than requiring the films to produce a fully integrated dialogue and thesis for its main themes. Instead, he finds resonances which, despite his macro-scale and vertically collapsible structuralist approach to the genre as a whole, are less schematic and totalizing when taken individually: "In *Them!* we find ants nearing maturity, a near-pubescent girl, and a heroine and hero who argue over gender roles. The argument is resolved in the heroine's favour when she asserts her identity as being both female and a scientist."[111] The most appealing aspect of Shapiro's approach is, perhaps, that he defines the behaviour of the characters and then looks at the ants as symbolic subsidiaries to them, rather than striving to balance the characters and the ants equally in the name of presenting a dialogue that somehow embodies the core tensions of the era. This allows the ants, and any similarly alien, Othered figures in these films, to retain their potential for symbolic richness while avoiding the trap of being overly anthropomorphic, allowing for a range of comparison and contrasts rather than resting on the determination of which direct one-to-one allegory might apply.

The Individual in Society: Communication and Organisation
The opening of the film, with its police search conducted by road vehicle and plane, technologically coordinated and facilitated by radio, and the consequent discovery of a young girl who cannot talk,

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[108] Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, p. 133.
[109] *Ibid.*, p. 132.
[110] Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema*, p. 105.
[111] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

frames the narrative from the very start in terms of communication. The girl, who is never given a first name, has her condition diagnosed as aphonia – or 'the loss of voice', as the nurse explains for the benefit of Agent Graham and, of course, the audience. This inaugurates the film's focus on communication as both a practical mechanism and predominant theme. The title *Them!*, echoing the girl's exclamation once her speech is finally triggered by Harold Medford's intervention, suggests something of an infantile inarticulateness that underpins the whole narrative. Here too is an early indication of the film's concern with the welfare of children, a concern which is positioned distinctively from the point of view of adults, rather than the children themselves. The young girl is a mystery to be solved and a charge to be protected, but her traumatic experience itself is, at most, an issue of tertiary importance.

Figure 16 – *Them!:* Harold Medford uses formic acid to trigger the Ellinson girl's trauma.

There is, crucially, no subjective flashback sequence founded in her experience of the attack or her recollection of it, no resort to subjective or impressionistic modes of representation to convey her mental and emotional state. Such techniques were hardly unheard of in cinema by this point, or Hollywood specifically. Luckhurst, tracing their use and reception back to the early days film, notes that "As early as 1915 Hugo Münsterberg declared 'the cut back' (as he termed it) 'an objectivation of our memory function'". More recently than this, in tune with the concerns of America in the mid-

century, "Hitchcock's popular Freudianism … deployed the flashback to recover the repressed origin of neurosis in *Spellbound* (1945)".[112] *Them!* thereby offers us a depiction of trauma that is simultaneously utterly explicit and recognisable, and almost entirely detached from the traumatic experience itself. The depiction of psychological injury in *Them!* is yet further emphasised, but also problematised, by the characters' later visits to a mental asylum, where they meet a pilot misdiagnosed as insane after he saw one of the giant ant queens, and a hospital, where they similarly encounter an unbalanced alcoholic who also claims to have seen giant ants. The film's investigator protagonists have an altogether pragmatic approach, hardly treating the pilot and the alcoholic as different from each other. Each is primarily of interest as sources of information, not for their own individual wellbeing. The asylum doctors are even told to keep the pilot in custody, preventing him from speaking about what he saw in public until the crisis is over; a clear gesture of closing off communication (and individual liberty) for the benefit and stability of society at large. A contrast emerges with Klaatu in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, whose perspective we share as he looks through the window of his hospital room, recovering from his own (physical) wound, planning a way to get his message out into the world. In *Them!*, meanwhile, the physically and emotionally traumatised are viewed from the perspective of visitors to the ward, from the outside looking in.

The pragmatic approach of the film's characters and its pseudo-realist style is also found in its narrative construction. There remains an overall literal-mindedness to the way the Ellinson girl's traumatic response is triggered, not through any kind of analogical "graphic (or auditory match)", as Luckhurst identifies in more recent cinematic depictions of trauma, but through the exact reiteration of an early sensory experience – the smell of the formic acid which the ants produce and use as a weapon.[113] Her reaction has value to the film in terms of setting the up the stakes in the first act of the plot, and establishing the communication theme, but we are not given any real insight into her emotionality outside of these functions. She is more a cause than a character – both in the sense of being an origin point, and also as an emblem of what the protagonists are fighting for. This is in marked contrast, once again, to *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and the character of Bobby Benson. While both vanish from their respective films the moment that they have served their narrative purpose, Bobby is permitted agency and choice, as well as clear interests and the ability to form a meaningful relationship of his own with Klaatu. The Ellinson girl, despite police officer Ben Petersen's paternal behaviour towards her, is allowed to demonstrate no such independence of thought and action. The two children trapped in the sewers of Los Angeles at the end of the film,

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[112] Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008), p. 181.
[113] *Ibid*., p. 180.

who Petersen sacrifices himself to protect in the narrative's denouement, are similarly immaterial in terms of character and agency.

In this way the film takes pains to acknowledge the importance of family, yet at the same time holds any actual depiction of family at a distance, outside the primarily professional relationship between the Medfords. We do not even see the reunion of the lost boys with their mother, despite the focus on her presence during the search. Even the obligatory heteronormative romance, between scientist Pat Medford and FBI Agent Robert Graham (James Arness), is curiously underplayed by the standards of contemporary genre fare. The focus of the film is instead on professional relationships and, more specifically, professional coordination; on the police officers, federal agents, scientists, and uniformed soldiers jointly tasked with responding to the developing crisis. As the scale of the threat posed by the giant ants increases, so too does the organised response, accruing expertise and manpower to match each stage. Furthermore, there are no particular displays or incidents of individual incompetence, of institutional resistance to necessary action, or of mechanical failure at some key juncture. As Biskind noted, there is a distinct lack of conflict between civilians and servicemen, between local and central authority, between scientists and the military.[114] Despite the apocalyptic portents of Dr Harold Medford, the film is fundamentally optimistic regarding humanity's – or, at least, America's – capabilities and competencies in confronting the threats of the new world of the atomic age.

The film's faith in the capacity of American police, scientists, and armed forces to manage even the most extraordinary crisis rests to a significant degree in the technological structures and practices of communication which emerged in the late nineteenth century and developed throughout the first half of the twentieth. Most prominently, the film depicts, from that very first opening scene of the search in the New Mexico desert, extensive use of radio and, to a lesser extent, the telegraph in delivering vital information and coordinating police and military action. It is not, exactly, an idealised portrait of the kind which emerged after the resurgence of radio in the 1920s, which Susan J. Douglas describes as having "envisioned the social impact of radio through a utopian lens, seeing a future in which 'the masses' were 'uplifted' through radio, made better educated, more appreciative of classical music and intellectual engagement, more rational and deliberative."[115] Radio is not depicted as miraculous or astonishing, and it obviously does not constitute any kind of marvellous technology by 1954. Moreover, individuals are not necessarily any 'better' morally or intellectually in *Them!* for their access to such broadcasting technologies and informational

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[114] Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, pp. 124-125.
[115] Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 169.

networks. It is, indeed, a film not terribly interested in moral failings, despite the implication of the Trinity test being a kind of Fall, the Original Sin of the Atomic Age. The Ellinson family, 'Gramps' Johnson, State Trooper Ed Blackburn, even Sgt. Petersen; none of these deaths are framed as punishment for some kind of moral infraction. Rather, they are simply the consequence of isolation, of disconnection from the organisational units of American society and governance, of civilisation. Petersen's death is particularly notable in this regard, in that it is precisely when he ventures into the ant's lair by himself in order to rescue the trapped children, that he, unable to both aid their escape into the pipe and fight off the ants singlehandedly, is caught and killed.

For Maurice Yacowar, *Them!* is distinct among the genre – as he categorises it – exactly because of Petersen's role in the narrative.[116] The underlying logic of these films requires that "All systems fail in the disaster" and that "The police are either absent or sceptical about anything beyond the familiar." Thus, simply because of his character's occupation and his role in the story, "James Whitmore in *Them!* is virtually unique as a policeman hero of a disaster film."[117] Moreover, he is no lone Western sheriff or Film Noir investigator like Sean Connery's character in *Outland* (dir. Peter Hyams, 1981) or Harrison Ford's *Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982). He uncovers no fundamental flaw or complex conspiracy that undermines the institution for which he works – a feature of the plot arc for law-enforcement protagonists in, for example, dystopian science fiction films of the early 2000s such as *Equilibrium* (dir. Kurt Wimmer, 2002) and *Minority Report* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2002).[118] Petersen, unlike many of his later successors as science-fiction lawmen, performs the function of his profession in alignment with the needs and values of the institutions for which he works, and the broader system that supports the society of which they are each a part. In *Them!*, the system works, even if it is not perfect – hence, perhaps, the uncomfortable scene in which our heroes keep a sane man locked up in a mental institute in order to avoid a general panic ("We'll let you know when he's better," Agent Graham informs the patient's doctor matter-of-factly). It is, after all, for the great good. Even Petersen's death is, in fact, the culmination of his purpose within the system, not an aberration. His sacrifice is, after all, not in vain: the two children are rescued, and the ant nest is found and destroyed. His disconnection from the organised group left him vulnerable, but it was a *necessary* disconnection, in accordance with the values and priorities of society.

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[116] Maurice Yacowar, 'The Bug in the Rug', in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003), p. 277.
[117] *Ibid*., p. 289.
[118] In terms of works within the period, Fireman Guy Montag in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and its adaptation for film by François Truffaut (1966), would be an influential earlier example of this archetype in the genre.

Evolving Utopias: The Radio and the Atom

While there is no specific role played by technological communication in creating some speculative, idyllic utopian society (or the appearance of one), radio and telegraphic communications in *Them!* are nevertheless indicative and demonstrative of a practical form of societal unity, aiding in the development of a more robust, adaptable nation. In this sense, despite its relatively grounded action, it shows perhaps the mostly distinctly utopian inclination, or rather, offers the sense of a utopia which is already present – and can defend itself. Command and control are successfully deployed against the animal, through the machine, in protection of the social and natural order. As Shapiro notes, "*Them!* is a structural-functionalist's … ideal world", and it is radio which facilitates the necessary structures and functions.[119] In this regard the film resembles the earlier utopian commentators, described by Johnson and identified and quoted by Boddy, reacting to the burgeoning of radio in the early 1920s. Former editor of *Popular Science*, Waldemar Kaempffert, for example, argued that "Communication means organization, and radio, particularly in its broadcasting aspect, will prove the most potent unifying influence that has appeared since the railway and the telegraph were invented."[120] According to Douglas, this idea developed not just in the ideas of contemporary commentators but in the practices of radio broadcasters as the medium continued to evolve over the next decade:

> "What we hear, as part of the radio industry's conscious and unconscious efforts
> to construct a sense of nationhood and national unity in the 1930s, is the
> evocation by commentators and newsmen of the national "we", the "we" that
> was united despite our differences, the "we" that was allegedly monolithic in its
> outlook and will."[121]

The radio left on, with the wind howling in the background and minimal scoring (there is a musical sting to accompany Petersen and Blackburn's discovery of Gramps' body) conjures a deliberately eerie, tension-building effect. Gramps, of course, had his radio tuned to the news, and the small store in south-west America is, even in a casual, off-handed way, linked to the political situation in France and a meeting of members of the World Health Organisation in Switzerland.

The film is primarily interested in national concerns (America and humanity are, outside of this minor detail, largely identified with each other), but we have in audio form a resemblance of the idea John Trowbridge articulated at the turn of the century, that "wireless telegraph is the nearest approach to telepathy that we have vouchsafed to our intelligence…. The nerves of the whole world

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[119] Shapiro, *Atomic Bom Cinema*, p. 104.
[120] Waldemar Kaempffert, 'The Social Destiny of Radio', *Forum* (June 1924), 769-70; quoted in William Boddy, *New Media and Popular Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 17-18.
[121] Douglas, *Listening In*, p. 164.

are, so to speak, being bound together, to that a touch in one country is transmitted instantly to a far-distant one."[122] For Trowbridge, radio's virtue was not in its capacity as a form of broadcast media, but instead as a means of instant communication that would, in his view, potentially enable greater unmediated understanding. Here, the utopian dream of radio is rendered as mundane, ordinary set-dressing, and as a mournful hint of the fate of Gramps, the owner of the store. Nevertheless, it is striking that that the sound of the radio broadcast is cut off by Officer Blackburn just before his death, to be immediately replaced by the sound of one of the ant's own 'communication broadcasts'; the background human burble is replaced by an invasive alien noise that slowly builds up to the point of and reaches its peak directly after the State Trooper's fatal encounter. There is an early suggestion here of human communication and ant communication coming into a thematic conflict even as individual members of their species come into direct physical conflict. Underlying this is the notion of a radically out-of-control nature versus the existing technological order, of radiation versus radio. By symbolically cutting himself off from society in switching off the radio, Blackburn made himself vulnerable to attack from the ants, whose greater organization here is represented by their own ability to broadcast.

Radio, then, is both a tool and a form of media, but it is also an organisational system in and of itself, and *Them!* demonstrates these various forms along with aspects of their underlying principles. The scene in which Sgt. Petersen attempts to explain the protocols of voice communication over radio during the scouting expedition by helicopter to Harold Medford is a case in point. Another commentator of the early 1920s, J. M. MicKibbin Jr., puts the case in even stronger terms that Kaempffert: "Perhaps no man could mold the 120 million people into a harmonious whole, bound together by a strong national consciousness: but in the place of a superhuman individual, the genius of the last decade has provide a force – *and that force is radio*."[123] Such a characterisation of the potency of the medium is, however, subsequently haunted by the ascent of the Nazi Party in Germany for, as Josef Goebbels himself argued ten years after McKibbin Jr.'s proclamation, "It would not have been possible for us to take power or to use it in the ways we have without the radio …"[124] The potential power of radio can, therefore, hardly be considered to be a utopian promise by the time of the post-war years, and the organisational system it offers is as

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[122] John Trowbridge, 'Wireless Telegraphy', *Popular Science* (Nov. 1899), 59-73; quoted in Boddy, *New Media and Popular Imagination*, p. 13.

[123] J. M. McKibbin Jr., 'New Way to Make Americans', *Radio Broadcast* (Jan. 1923), 238, quoted in Boddy, *New Media and Popular Imagination*, p. 19.

[124] Joseph Goebbels, 'The Radio as the Eighth Great Power' via http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb56.htm [accessed 31/08/2017].

capable of being corrupted as the scientific rationalism, embodied by Martians and Metalunans, that was used to justify the atrocities at Dachau, Buchenwald, or Auschwitz.

Figure 17 – *Them!:* **Sgt. Peterson explains radio protocol to Dr. Harold Medford.**

Nevertheless, the influence of radio did not cease with the build-up to the Second World War. It took on additional resonance and power during and after conflict for, as Douglas reminds us, despite the cultural memory provided by the film footage shot at the time providing an unprecedented level of access to moving images of warfare, "… the way we have come to remember the war – through this visual record – misrepresents how people followed and imagined the war on a daily basis. This was a war that people *listened* to…. World War II was a radio war."[125] The description Douglas gives of the character of the radio newsmen covering the war, which she suggests became fundamentally connected with the courageous figures of the American infantrymen themselves, could serve also as a precis of the kind of modest, cooperative heroism embodied by the characters of *Them!*, and Sgt. Petersen in particular:

This was the romantic image of the GI that would be so celebrated in popular culture
for decades after the war: the strong, brave, everyday guy who was a team player

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[125] Douglas, *Listening In*, p. 162.

and not a prima donna, understated instead of a braggart, altruistic and selfless to a fault except where American achievement was at stake. Soldiers interviewed on the air, like Sgt. Herbert Brown of New York, also modestly yet stoically cast warfare as work: "We have a job to do over here, and the quicker we do it, the quicker we get home."[126]

The system of organisation known as radio, in both telegraphic and audial forms, is the structure which underlies the stalwart America of *Them!*, and it is this structure through which the nation's responses to the crisis of the Atomic Age is directed. It is the embodiment of the spirit not of Einstein but of Edison, "an absolutely vital component of the American cultural mythology about Yankee ingenuity, perseverance, individuality, resourcefulness, enterprise, innovation", here re-appropriated and synthesized with William H. Whyte's Organization Man where there is "no conflict between the individual's aspirations and the community's wishes, because it is the natural order of things for the two to be synonymous."[127] Sergeant Petersen and his compatriots are heroes of the radio age, but perceived from the era of the atom. In this light, through the formulation of altruism Douglas describes, the state policeman's death takes on specific relevance in post-war American culture, as the necessary sacrifice of the individual for a common good.

Here we have a further point to add to the nexus of technological and cultural developments which we saw Schmidt identify in the previous chapter as all emerging and coming of age in the same period from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries: film, science fiction, and the avant-garde.[128] To this list we may add radio, and the connection is not merely one of coincidental timing. Indeed, as Boddy lays out, the pre- and early history of science fiction not only had the development of radio as one of its recurring fascinations, but there was also explicit overlap in terms of their appeal for technologically-minded individual, not least for the man who had, perhaps, the most significant role in defining the genre itself:

> Early popular literature concerning wireless had roots not only in American scientific literature and experimentation going back to the founding of *Popular Science* in 1872, but also in an equally long-lived tradition of science-themed utopian fiction beginning with the novels of Jules Verne in the 1860s and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards*. The two discursive strands, along with the entrepreneurial enthusiasm of a pioneer

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[126] I Douglas, *Listening In*, p. 194; Brown quote from National Archives, *The World Today*, May 25, 1942, 200 MR 2197.

[127] Glenn Scott Allen, *Master Mechanics and Wicked Wizards* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), p. 50; William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (Harmondsworth, MDX: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 12.

[128] Lisa M. Schmidt, 'Popular Avant-Garde', in *Sounds of the Future*, ed. Mathew J. Bartkowiak (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company, 2000), p. 27.

radio retailer, coalesced in the career of tireless electronics dealer, publisher, and
author Hugo Gernsback.[129]

In situating the technology of the radio age against the fallout of the weaponry of the new
atomic era, *Them!* is also tracing something of its own generic and cultural history up until the
point of its conception and production.

What once seemed transformative and miraculous is now the bastion of the status
quo. In this venerable role, the radio cannot resemble anything like, for instance, Darko Suvin's
idea of a 'novum', even in the loosest application of the concept.[130] It is the exploration of the
consequences – or rather, the fallout – of radiation that comes closest to fulfilling this
function, specifically the radiation from atomic bomb detonations. It is, after all, the
consideration of the effects of the other nuclear explosions since the Trinity test which leads
the film to close out on its final note of ominous possibility, a warning in prophetic, overtly
millenarian tones courtesy once again of Harold Medford: "When man entered the Atomic
Age, he opened a door into a new world. What we eventually find in that new world, nobody
can predict." *Them!* is not, of course, attempting to construct a thesis on what the transition
from a 'radio age' into the 'Atomic Age' *means* for the future of human civilisation, or what
that future really looks like – but it is a film that considers itself to be at the point of, and even
part of, that moment of transition. The substance of that transition is a substitution of the
mechanical, controllable, and safely insubstantial and, above all, domesticized world of radio,
with the dangerous, unpredictable, transmogrifying, and almost incomprehensibly cosmic
world of radiation.

Family Meetings: Entomology and Anthropology
Curiously, Yacowar classifies *Them!*, along with many of the films which we are under discussion
here, not as science fiction but instead as 'disaster films' which, he claims, are "quite distinct from
the science fiction genre Susan Sontag discusses in 'The Imagination of Disaster,' though like sci-fi,
the disaster film exploits the spectacular potential of the screen and nourishes the audience's
fascination with the vision of massive doom."[131] Without fully embracing his insistence of a complete
separation of genres somewhat in the style of Darko Suvin's use of 'science fantasy', the distinction
Yacowar draws is still of value here. Indeed, his summary of "The most common disaster type" which
"pits a human community against a destructive force of nature" is, as we have begun to map out, an
effective precis for the plot and themes that underpin the narrative of *Them!*[132] The form that this

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[129] Boddy, *New Media and Popular Imagination*, p. 25.
[130] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 63.
[131] Yacowar, 'The Bug in the Rug', p. 277.
[132] *Ibid*.

destructive force takes is, however, unusual in being both titanic, mutated creatures out of quasi-Biblical myth and also an organised community in its own right opposing humanity in a way that does inevitably invite comparisons. We have already noted Biskind's tendency to read the ants as, even if inadvertent, commentaries on American attitudes towards communism and feminism, with respect to the ants' inherent collectivist and matriarchal social structures.[133] Yet, as Biskind himself quite rightly points out, "First on a level so obvious that it is usually ignored, the ants represent an attack by nature on culture. Nature, for all mankind's technological expertise, is still a threat, red in tooth and claw."[134] The giant ants of *Them!* certainly embody a profound disruption and distortion of the natural world and humanity's relationship to it, but these disturbances have roots that go back to the most basic of conflicts, simply framed in the terms of modern technological concerns.

Whatever anthropomorphic parallels there may be between humans and ants will invariably have limitations in terms of how the ants are themselves regarded from the perspective of the film's characters and their approach to the threat. There is, for instance, no suggestion in the film that communication with the ants is remotely possible. Diplomacy and negotiation are never viable options. As opposed to the presence of the character of the pastor in *The War of the Worlds*, no human character attempts to make contact or reason with them; they remain, as Harold Medford describes them, beasts. Yet, while they demonstrate nothing more than bestial intelligence, behaving in ways that are incomprehensibly alien, the ants still offer a mirror of human behaviours; or, perhaps, the humans mirror them. For Biskind, therefore, "Aliens, no matter how seemingly strange and exotic, end up resembling humans in one way or another."[135] Shapiro, despite his disagreement with Biskind's overall position, also notes that there are, at least, some deliberate contrasts and comparisons being drawn here between human and insectoid figures: "The ants hatch directly from the eggs into adulthood, bypassing the larval and pupal stages. Both the girls and the ants are traumatized by an early end to their childhoods; it is little wonder that the girl is catatonic and the ants turn against human beings."[136] Just as there is a distinct focus on the moral necessity of protecting human children throughout the film, on the obverse side there is a clear emphasis on the danger posed by the ants' reproduction, by the ability of their queens to disperse and reproduce rapidly.

These themes are not as pronounced as they are in, for example, *Forbidden Planet*, or *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. For Margaret Tarratt, the issue of gender may be a detectable presence in

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[133] Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, pp. 132-133.
[134] *Ibid*.
[135] *Ibid*., p. 138.
[136] Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema*, p. 109.

the film, but such tendencies remain largely sublimated: "There is also a large group of films in which such [Freudian] tensions are latent but not fully explored. The films do not appear to create their own symbolism. *Them!* … is a good example of this."[137] This, however, makes the film more, not less, interesting as barometer of its era in terms of gender representation. Indeed, the question of the film's treatment of its female lead is one lens through which critics and theorists have examined the overall question of the political and social progressiveness in *Them!*[138] It is certainly the case that, in archetypal terms, the character of Patricia Medford does not cover any particularly innovative ground symbolically or structurally. She essentially combines the common enough stock roles of 'the female scientist' and 'the scientist's daughter', and shares with both of these the status of romantic interest for a male lead, like Ruth in *This Island Earth* or Altaira in *Forbidden Planet*. Yet these two archetypes synthesise in unusual ways with regard to her character's abilities, agency, and status within the film's hierarchy of its characters. In contrast to how Morbius's sheltering of, and desire for control over, Altaira literally powers the plot of *Forbidden Planet*, Harold Medford notably treats Patricia not as a child in need of protection, but as a respected colleague, conscientiously referring to her as 'Doctor Medford', and supporting her insistence on venturing into the ant nest with Sergeant Petersen and Agent Graham, against their protestations.

In aligning the ants themselves together with the traumatised Ellison girl and the character of Patricia Medford, Shapiro suggests there is, in fact, a distinct shape and definition to the film's approach to gender than Tarratt depicts, and posits that: "In *Them!* we find ants nearing maturity, a near-pubescent girl, and a heroine and hero who argue over gender roles. The argument is resolved in the heroine's favour when she asserts her identity as being both female and a scientist."[139] This, of course, is in deliberate contrast to the arguments put forward by Biskind to support his thesis of *Them!* as a centrist film, and which therefore requires the film's treatment of gender in some way. Biskind not only notes the potential relationship drawn between Patricia Medford and the ant matriarchs, but explicitly sets them up as contrasts, arguing that "To men the moral is: Better give an inch than lose a mile, better let Pat Medford assert herself, or face a far more serious challenge to male power in the future. To women: Don't be too assertive or you'll be punished for it."[140] Here, then, is where Shapiro's critique comes into full force.

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[137] Margaret Tarratt, 'Monsters from the Id', *Genre Reader III* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2003), p. 363
[138] As typical for the genre, Patricia is the sole prominent female character – aside from the Ellison girl who, of course, doesn't speak aside from one word: "Them!"
[139] Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema*, p. 45.
[140] Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, p. 133.

Figure 18 – *Them!:* The US Army and the Medfords face down the last of the giant ants

It is not that Shapiro objects to reading Patricia as a an example of an empowered woman by the standards of the era and therefore a commentary on the status of women in the `950s: "Clearly, Patricia Medford stands out as an expression of some women's dissatisfaction with the 'traditionally' exclusive roles of wife, lover, and mother. As I interpret this film, *Them!* acknowledges and supports the broadening spectrum of gender roles that emerged after World War II."[141] Shapiro specifically objects to the reading of the ants as anything other than what they are: natural organisms turned into preternatural threat. His one concession to reading the ants themselves in specifically human terms focuses not on Patricia, but rather the other half of the film's token romance: "if the ants in *Them!* are anything other than mutated ants, then they surely are a projection of Robert's [Agent Graham's] internal crisis."[142] The ants, then, would not themselves be representative of women too assertive for their own good, but rather suggest a return of the repressed in the male psyche, aligning them more explicitly with *Forbidden Planet*'s Monster from the Id, thematically as well as

[141] Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema*, p. 105.
[142] *Ibid.*, p. 108.

functionally. In this light, *Them!* also becomes a myth of the formation of the family unit, but with the role of the husband under interrogation, rather than the bride's father.

The evident richness of its metaphorical potential is integral to the appeal of *Them!* as it is to 1950s science fiction films as a whole, yet also clear is the inadequacy of these metaphors, or their inability to wrestle with the cause of the discomfort caused by the atomic bomb and the geo-political situation its invention helped precipitate. At a certain point, any chosen metaphor fails, or falls apart, or simply dissipates. Just as the Metalunans are not quite Nazis, and Exeter is not quite a Good German, so too are the ants not-quite-satisfactory as a symbol of communism or, indeed, feminism. Instead, they rather come to stand in for something broader, more generic, and, perhaps, much older. Shapiro, as we have seen, argues stridently against Biskind's position, even contending in absolute terms that

> The ants are not a metaphor for the dangers of matriarchal or communist societies. Organized insects posing a threat to humanity is an ancient narrative device. Giant ants work because they are scary to us, the audience. They are intelligent but hostile and dispassionate. In giant form they are as otherworldly as the Martians that are revealed to us, finally, in *The War of the Worlds*. In aspect, they are cold and mechanical, a fearful techno-alien threat.[143]

There is, of course, a metanarrative reality behind the film's characterization here as well: the ants are, very clearly, mechanical constructs and not actual beasts. Their pulsing heads, while unnerving, cannot overcome the motorized rigidity of their movements. In a sense, this is the reverse of Shapiro's point, as in this sense their mechanical, technologized nature could be seen a result of the immediate historical realities of science fiction film production in the 1950s, rather than through the influence of archetypal myth.

The disruption of the relationship between the natural and the technological which the ants represent is, therefore, inextricable from the contingent details of the film's production. If the ants are at all effective it is because, in a sense, their intrinsically mechanical, rationalised nature is part of what makes them better adapted to the distorted world, post-Trinity, than humans are. Harold Medford notes that if the ants are not wiped out immediately, if they are allowed to breed, they will overtake humans as the dominant species on Earth within a year. The threat they represent is not simply annihilation, but usurpation; they do not merely imperil humanity's physical existence, but to humanity's status in relation to the natural world. This echoes throughout their presentation in the film, and the contrasts that are presented with the human characters. This is the case not just in terms of reproduction, where the ants perhaps offer less a commentary on traditional marriage than

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[143] *Ibid.*, p. 107.

they do an alternative society and family structure that do not require complex interpersonal relationships to propagate new life. Certainly, Medford's introduction matches aspects of Laura Mulvey's characterisation of scopophilia in film, between the fetishistic focus on her legs and the fact that her arrival is a self-evident interruption, her skirt caught on a ladder as she descends from a military transport. [144] Like the Gort leering over Helen in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the filmmaking style of Hollywood in '50s simply can't restrain itself in such moments. Despite these typical compositional elements, however, Pat Medford's key role in the narrative is not down to her gender, but her profession – her romance with Agent Graham is left largely to the margins of the narrative, while her expertise is centred. The humans have to, if not abandon, engage in a measure of suppression of traditional gendering in order to maximise their efficiency to defeat the ants.

A similar function occurs with regard to language, in a way that comes to symbolise the film's overall approach. Due in part to the film's procedural tone and largely matter-of-fact approach to its marvellous events, the language used by its characters comes across as mainly instrumental rather than stylised or poetic. It is, as we have seen, primarily used for conveying information, for organisation and coordination, rather than expressing feeling, ideals of beauty, or complex thought. The radio at the general store is, after all, tuned to the news, to the dissemination of information, rather than the arts. The main exceptions to this are the repetitive ramblings of an alcoholic and, of course, the pseudo-Biblical narration offered by Harold Medford and the functionality of much of the dialogue is precisely why these brief eruptions of prophetic diction stand out so distinctively. To be victorious over the ants, humans must, to some limited but considerable extent, mirror the rational, technologized behaviour of the creatures themselves. In *Them!*, the solution to the problems affecting, and threats facing, modern civilisation must occur on systematic levels of national interest. Individuals are effective to the extent to which they can perform their role and contribute to the overall effort, as for instance both Pat Medford and Sgt. Petersen do as scientist and police officer. For this reason, the film does not genuinely attempt to engage with the anxiety of the individual. Isolation such as that experienced by the Ellison girl, locked in her trauma, or even the entirely sane pilot sectioned for the sake of national security, is experienced from the outside looking in. The psychological experiences, the processes of mourning and melancholy, that emerge out of living in the period of terrifying transition that the film positions itself as part of, are to some degree represented, but go by unexamined all the same.

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[144] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Abingdon, Oxon: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 837-838.

The Incredible Shrinking Man (1957)

Narrative Perspectives: Lost and Found

In contrast to *Them!*, the narrative of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957) is structured not around the response of a social group, an organisation, or an institutional structure to the disruptions of scale suggested by the bomb. Its focus is, appropriate to its themes, both more specific and more broad than that. It is a film primarily interested in the question of the nature of humanity in the age of the atom; or, to put it in more specific terms, what it means to be *a man* in 1950s America. From this question comes its specificity and also the breadth of its thematic scope. Like the novel it was adapted from, Richard Matheson's *The Shrinking Man* (1956), it follows the travails of Robert Scott Carey (played in the film by Grant Williams), an ordinary man who is exposed to radiation and afterwards begins to shrink, imperilling his work, his relationship with his wife Louise (Randy Stuart) and, soon enough, his life. Finally ending up trapped in the cellar of his own house, he is unable to reach out to any other human beings for help. The story is not attempting to capture the structure of American society as whole. Rather, it is attempting to tackle the anxieties elsewhere expressed in the form of alien invaders and mutant creatures, with the ongoing existence of the human race as a whole hanging in the balance, by instead addressing them in a personal, domestic context, with the existence of just a single man being at stake. It therefore also contrasts specifically with *Them!* in conceiving of and depicting 'man' not in terms of *organised society*, but as *individual*. Inevitably, given the period, it is a film that, in its attempt to consider the human condition after the Trinity test (Hiroshima and Nagasaki lurk more distantly in the background here than in other films in the period), see humanity as *man*, and civilisation as a quality of *man*kind.

It is, of course, equally unsurprising that the film's 'everyman' figure should be a white, middle-class male, with other forms of lived experience left largely unaddressed. This is, of course, true of the vast majority of films in the genre in this period, with only the very rare exceptions such as *Five* (1951) and *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* (1959) – both, curiously, post-apocalypse films, as if the collapse of civilization itself was required before the issue of race could be addressed. Nevertheless, the sheer absence of this consideration in a narrative about a character finding himself marginalised by forces beyond his control invites an irony-tinged comparison with Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, complete with uncanny parallels such as the narrator-protagonist finding himself in a cellar that somehow represents his condition, and (more explicitly in the novel of *The Shrinking Man* than the film adaptation) recounting how he found himself there.[145] Certainly, it might be possible to perform a reading of the story as interpreting Scott Carey's diminishment as an

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[145] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001); Richard Matheson, *The Shrinking Man* (London: Gollancz, 2014), p. 6

inhabitation of the life of a disadvantaged minority, whether in terms of race or otherwise. Scott does, in fact, briefly find comfort in being able to identify with the experiences of a little person, Clarice (April Kent), who has lived with restricted growth all her life. This interaction could even invite the consideration of the relationship between the respective experiences of being born disabled and the experience of developing a disability later in life. However, despite this potentially rich thematic vein, the film's interests ultimately lie elsewhere, and Scott's friendship with Clarice is presented primarily as a respite and, subsequently, one more thing for him to experience the loss of as his condition deteriorates.

The film's version of the story is structured around a series of losses experienced by Scott that test his status and being as 'man', both in the sense of his maleness and in the sense of his position as a civilized being (which the film does have trouble distinguishing between). He is a character who starts from a position of reasonable, albeit conditional, comfort – we first see him and his wife enjoying a boating holiday together, though it is his brother's boat, the same brother Scott works for – and swiftly finds himself unmoored from his relationships and his previous life as the result of acquiring the strange condition of the film's title. The credit sequence itself sets the tone, with the slowly shrinking silhouette of a man being overshadowed by a cloud coming ever nearer. This, for Yacowar, is the core image of the film, one which he explicitly ties to the period and its accompanying anxieties surrounding the bomb: "In the 1950s, obsession with atomic disaster showed human beings diminished by their own technology, as in the credits of *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, where the human outline dwindles as the mushroom cloud swells."[146] There is, then, the first ominous piece of narration, whose tone recalls the dead and dying narrators of earlier film noirs such as *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *D.O.A.* (1950): "The strange, almost unbelievable story of Robert Scott Carey began on a very ordinary summer day. I know this story better than anyone, because I am Robert Scott Carey." The film's reliance on narration is partly a convenience, of course, given the protagonist's emotional, social, and, soon enough, physical isolation from other people, most notably his increasing separation from his wife and brother. Yet it also serves another purpose, which connects to the core of the film's themes and its attempts to tackle the existential anxieties of the era. Even the repetition of his name in the opening lines a seemingly somewhat awkward re-emphasis of his status as the protagonist, also highlights the recurring theme of the character's insistence on the fundamental fact of his identity.

That the film begins with the collapse of a marital union, rather than ending with the formation of one, is somewhat unusual for the genre; for if *Them!* sketches out a conflict between

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[146] Yacowar, 'The Bug in the Rug', p. 278.

the domesticized technology and organising system of radio and the primal natural forces unleashed through the bomb in the form of radiation, then *The Incredible Shrinking Man* depicts the invasion of the effects of radiation, and the resulting destabilisation of the relationship between human civilisation and nature, into the home – into the domestic scene. Even the wireless itself is turned against Scott, as its reporting of his situation further contributes to the invasiveness of the news media and his inability to escape his condition. Here, as Yacowar argues, "the advances of civilization are found to be fragile and dangerous. In *The Incredible Shrinking Man* the world of commonplace objects overwhelms the hero, until he resolves in mystic humility to enjoy his disappearance, his fade into the rich nothingness of God."[147] Yet the particularities of his situation, and the disintegration of his marriage over the course of the film's first act (their relationship is, of course, clearly doomed from the moment Scott's wedding ring falls from his shrunken finger early on in the story), also raises the spectre of Freud, and to a much more noticeable degree than in *Them!* Here, for Tarratt, "Fear of castration by the female is the overriding theme … and we are aware of the popular myth of the dominant American woman, served by an emasculated spouse."[148] Certainly, the film places a distinct emphasis on the unmanning of Scott as his life unravels, culminating in the scene where he is revealed to now be living, specifically, in a dollhouse.
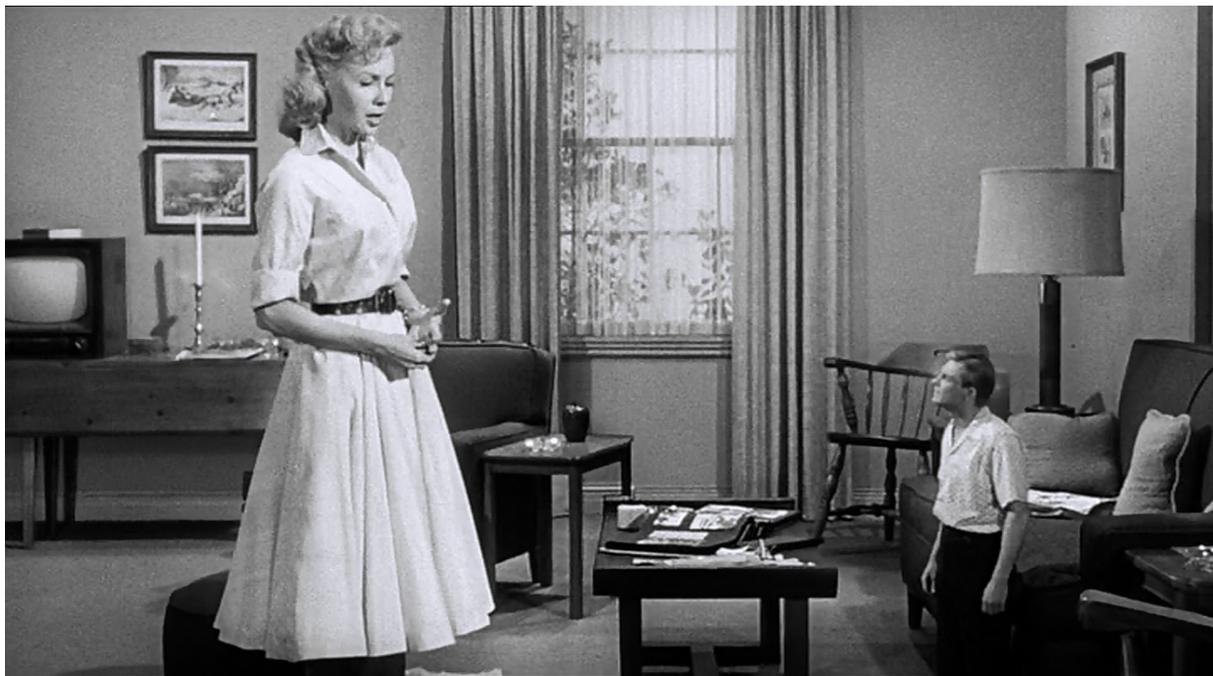
Figure 19 – *The Incredible Shrinking Man:* **Scott takes out his anger on his wife Louise.**

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[147] Yacowar, 'The Bug in the Rug', pp. 279-280.
[148] Tarratt, 'Monsters from the Id', p. 361.

His marriage has by this point, become utterly dysfunctional, with Scott clearly coming to resent his dependence on his wife as he berates her for leaving him for any length of time. It is, of course, in her harried, distracted state, trying to appease Scott but not knowing how to truly calm his anger, that she leaves the door open and unattended for a moment and their cat is able to re-enter the house and attack Scott. For Tarratt, this sequence is key: "In the dollhouse he is reduced to the status of a toy. The giant clawing cat is a replacement for Louise."[149] Tarratt's Freudian reading of the film emphasises the archetypal qualities of the narrative; it suggests that the film is rendering fundamental psychological functions and anxieties through a metaphorical lens that simply uses the language of pulp science as a prop for justifying its symbolic action. Yet there remains, of course, the prevalence of Freudian themes not only in this film, almost as distinct here as in *Forbidden Planet*, but throughout the genre in this period which, as Tarratt herself insists, is present in the full range of films in the period, from *The Day the Earth Stood Still* to *The Thing*.[150] Here, then, is something of a paradox: a body of films which are "more directly involved with an examination of our inner nature" than expressing "some kind of concern with the moral state of contemporary society", but in such a way that is very distinctively *of* the particular period.[151]

By the end of the film, Scott has lost his job, his family, all the trappings of his comfortable suburban life, but until the very end he keeps the 'I' of the ego alive throughout his closing narration, insisting on the perpetuation of his own self-identity even has he appears to lose any remaining corporeality:

> So close, the infinitesimal and the infinite. But suddenly I knew they were really the two ends of the same concept. The unbelievably small and the unbelievably vast eventually meet, like the closing of a gigantic circle. I looked up, as if somehow I would grasp the heavens, the universe, worlds beyond number, God's silver tapestry spread across the night – and in that moment I knew the answer to the riddle of the infinite. I had thought in terms of man's own limited dimension. I had presumed upon nature. That existence begins and ends is man's conception, not nature's. And I felt my body dwindling, melting, becoming nothing. My fears melted away, and in their place came acceptance. All this vast majesty of creation, it had to mean something – and then I meant something too. Yes, smaller than the smallest, I meant something too. To God, there is no zero. I still exist.

Through Scott's journey of material loss and spiritual self-discovery, the film attempts to posit a new myth of the absolute nature of the ego in the face of the overwhelming anxieties of the nuclear age. It suggests that, somehow, the ego – the 'I' – can be preserved even without a social context,

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[149] *Ibid.*.

[150] *Ibid.*, p. 356.

[151] *Ibid.*, pp. 345-347.

through an existential assertion of the self by *denying* distinctions in scale. It is through this process, in the film's final minutes, that Scott's losses have already become liberating. No longer needing to eat, he is freed from the hunger which drives the predatory instincts of beasts such as the cat and the spider. It is no coincidence that it is following not just the defeat of the spider as Other but this specific liberation of the self that he discovers he has shrunk so much that he can now pass through the grate between the cellar and the garden unhindered. Yet there is a final irony in Scott's pronouncement at the end of the film, in his insistence that 'I still exist', as if he rages in defiance of the closing of the narrative itself, which necessarily ends the existence of his character more definitively than a fatal wound from the spider would have done.

Scott's attempt to survive the closing of his narrative thus chimes with the film's existential and spiritual dimension as it interacts with the cosmic understanding of the universe being presented. His will to exist after the body, after the social, after the company of living things, beyond even the story he inhabits, of course, resembles a religious belief in the afterlife, reinterpreted for, and almost in defiance of, the age of modern science. 'To God, there is no zero' is a statement in defiance of physical mortality or of existential meaninglessness in a time when a single atom can determine the fate of thousands if not millions. The 'I' of the self will always still exist in the eye of God, or as part of the infinite, which is indistinguishable from God in the mortal mind (this is a significant change from the novel, where Matheson had his protagonist realise "to *nature* is no zero").[152] It is also, in a sense, a rejection of the very basis of modern mathematics and science in favour of a Classical world-view that dismisses the idea of zero. Yet the film's relationship to myth is not simply a resuscitation of ancient knowledge; the reasoning here can only exist in response to atomic physics. Furthermore, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* resonates alongside Joseph Campbell's tendency towards reading founding narratives of civilisation as myths of self-actualization, as a ritualised discovery of the identity and the ego of the culture hero which, yes, leads to communal benefit but also, drawing on Buddhist philosophy, towards personal enlightenment.[153] The film presents, just as profoundly as Campbell, an Americanisation of myth as a mythology of and for America, the land of the self-made man, of the American Dream. Here we witness the historicization of myth itself.

Natural Limitations: Beast and Man
The latter part of the film continually associates Scott's anxiety about shrinking, about vanishing from existence, specifically with the far more banal and base concern for nourishment. In this disproportioned world, a simple matchbox becomes a makeshift home, a redoubt from the spider-

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[152] Matheson, *The Shrinking Man*, p. 200; emphasis added.
[153] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), p. 30.

predator, while a broken water-heater unleashes a biblical flood. All becomes about mere survival. As Scott narrates before embarking on his first expedition to claim the cake which lies by the spider-web: "I was driven by hunger, and also by the horrible thought that without nourishment, the shrinking process was quickening." He is, throughout these travails, confronted with basic issues of survival: shelter, food, protection against the elements, and protection against predators. "In my hunt for food, I had become the hunted. This time, I survived. But I was no longer alone in my universe. I had an enemy, the most terrifying beheld by human eyes." In so doing, he is in a sense re-enacting the rise of humanity from instinct-driven beast to tool-wielding, civilized being. This is a framing which can be traced through science fiction from the mutated survivors of a post-apocalyptic Mars in *Rocketship X-M* (dir. Kurt Neumann, 1950) to the evolutionarily bifurcated society of H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* and its subsequent adaptation (dir. George Pal, 1961), and is here, perhaps, connected to and synthesised with the structure of the castaway narrative, historically inspired in Western culture by the story of Alexander Selkirk, then fictionalised and mythologised by Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.[154]

In Marx's reading of *Crusoe*, the castaway's condition is marked by the upmost necessity of his various forms of labour, and finding the balance between them, in his struggle for simple survival. Moreover, his resulting independence is distinguished from the interdependent structure of pre-industrial societies such as, for example, medieval Europe.[155] Scott Carey is reduced not to an *actual* primitive civilizational condition, as that would still necessitate social dependence. Instead Scott, by the time he is stranded in the cellar, can neither be dependant or depended upon. As Marx's commentary illustrates, the myth we are dealing with here is more fundamental, and stranger. Scott Carey, like Robinson Crusoe before him, has become something else, something both less and more than a civilised, socialised human being. His condition could, certainly, be compared to that of *homo sacer*, the sacred man of obscure ancient Roman law who, as Giorgio Agamben interpreted it, existed outside of politics and society, outside of community, whose life could be taken by anyone and is therefore reduced to simple biological existence, *bare life*.[156] In Thomas Lemke's summary, "'Bare life,' which is considered to be marginal and seems to be furthest from the political, proves to be the solid basis of a political body, which makes the life and death of a human being the object of a sovereign decision."[157] And, surely, Scott's life becomes as marginal in societal

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[154] H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine*, in *Classic Collection* (London: Gollancz, 2010); Daniel Dafoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (London: Penguin Books, 2001)
[155] Karl Marx, *Capital,* Vol. l, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990) pp. 170-172
[156] Giorgio Agamben, *Home Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998)
[157] Thomas Lemke, *Bio-Politics: An Advanced Introduction*, trans. Erick Frederick Trump (New York: New York University Press, 2011), p. 55.

terms as is humanly conceivable, his life as easily taken away by a misplaced footstep (as nearly happens during the flood in the basement) as from a cat's claws, with the possibility that no-on would be the wiser.

The formulation of the castaway myth is, thus, one which long predates the atomic era, but whose invocation here, in the shadow of the Second World War, takes on a particular significance. As Lemke observes,

> the camp for [Agamben] does not so much represent a concrete historical place or a defined spatial unity, but symbolizes and fixes the border between "bare life" and political existence. The camps in this sense are not only Nazi concentration camps but rather any space in which "bare life" is systematically produced.[158]

Scott's condition, it is true, is not part of a systematic line of production – on the contrary, it is singular, and random. However, Lemke's criticism of Agamben, that he "tends to erase the historical difference between antiquity and the present, as well as the differences between the Middle Ages and modernity", strengthens the link here, as these films, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* among them, are engaged in a similar operation.[159] This is not the condition of the Holocaust understood and presented as it was, but rather the reprocessing of such a reduction to *bare life* in the context of a profoundly individualistic, liberal culture by latching on to a clear, familiar, and venerable archetype. The misrecognitions and misconceptions that result are in their own way as revealing as true understanding would be. The figure of the castaway, reconstructed through the imaginary of American '50s science fiction film, thereby takes on specific meaning shadow of the Holocaust and the Bomb.

Hence, the attempt at reassurance that emerge through Scott's travails in the cellar, which rest precisely on the rediscovery of his sense of agency through the mastery of his environment. Now, fully separated from political and social life, he gains rather than loses a sense of meaning and purpose. He commits to becoming sovereign of his own small universe: "as man had dominated the world of the sun, so I would dominate my world". It is exactly his resolve to master this world that allows him to master his own fears and anxieties, and the tools which allow him influence and control over things-in-the-world are also psychological props in more ways than one. Scott's narration makes the symbolism almost awkwardly on-the-nose to modern ears, emphasising the film's themes of male identity and human relationship with tools through his pronouncement that "I still had my weapons. With these bits of metal I was a man again." Yet there is more going on here

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[158] Lemke, *Bio-Politics*, p. 56.
[159] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

than simple phallic imagery. Weapons may be repurposed as symbols, but they are also fundamentally tools. Indeed, somewhat ironically in the context of gender, Scott makes use of needles and thread, the key implements and material of sewing. Here, then, we have Scott rebuilding a relationship with more simple tools after complex technology has almost destroyed his humanity. For Yacowar, as we have already seen, the question of the control of technology, and its control over us and our fate, is one which the film courts from the opening credits.[160]

Figure 20 – *The Incredible Shrinking Man:* Scott's final confrontation with the spider.

The technology which re-masculinises an unmanned Scott is direct, tactile, and *instrumental*. It is in direct contrast to the unfathomable, weightless, immaterial technological power of the Krell in *Forbidden Planet* or the Metalunans in *This Island Earth*, technology that is, despite its size and scope, as inconceivable and invisible as an atomic nucleus. Morbius praised the Krell's surpassing of instrumentality, but the raw expression of the psyche it allowed destroyed him. For Scott, technology is not salvation, but his weapons become artefacts, talismans that aid him in his journey to self-actualisation, and their physicality, their instrumentality, reinforces rather than diminishes this role. Such an interpretation might, in fact, suggest that the technologies which empower Scott are, in Heideggerian terms, "no mere means" but "a way of revealing." His tools show him the truth of himself, and the way to bring forth that truth.[161] Understood in this way, we can see that Scott's narration emphasises the mythic and archetypal forms of his tools and their role not simply as

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[160] Yacowar, 'The Bug in the Rug', p. 278.
[161] Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitty (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 12.

representations of Freudian gender anxiety, but as part of the reconstruction of his humanity in the age of 'the infinite and the infinitesimal'.

Similarly but, in a sense, contrariwise to the praise of Scott's meagre arsenal, the film diligently supplies us with a ready-made reading of the monstrous spider, with his narration informing us that it represents "every unknown terror in the world". It is the alien, the incomprehensibly foreign; it shares its voracious, pitiless otherness with the ants of *Them!*, the Mutants of *This Island Earth*, and the Martians of *The War of the Worlds*, but unlike them it is not from another world, or itself transformed by technology: it simply is itself. Yet it is this same exact quality that makes it so richly symbolic. The spider, both recognisably itself and beyond recognition, is fear of the other reduced to its most primal form. For Tarratt, consequently, the spider is to be identified with "*phallic* mother, of whom we are afraid; so that the fear of spiders expresses dread of mother-incest and horror of the female genitals."[162] If the cat is domesticity poisoned into violent hostility, and the spider is fear itself, then the last of the key animal motifs, the bird, suggests a freedom from such hostility and fear, and from the isolation which accompanies them both. Seen on the far side of the grating which prevents Scott from escaping the cellar and into the world beyond, it is a blithe spirit, neither threatening Scott nor really noticing him at all. It ignores even his offer of food, a rejection which drives Scott into a frenzy of cathartic laughter and sobbing. The bird prefigures Scott's eventual moment of acceptance of his fate, which occurs as he shrinks to a small enough size to pass through the same grate which previously separated him from the outside world. With these totemic figures, the film sketches out a scheme of metaphors for human relationships, in which psychological anxieties are projected on to animal behaviours.

In other words, there is a distinct and active anthropomorphising process in play here that is not, for example, present in *Them!* Indeed, this plays into the film's particular renderings of the inversions and imbalances of the relationship between humankind and nature. In this context, it is significant that the cat and the spider see Scott not as 'human' at all, but as prey. There is a shift in perspective in operation here, a shift that is reminiscent of de Castro's discussion of perspectivism in *Cannibal Metaphysics*:

> For if all existents are not necessarily de facto persons, the fundamental point is that there is de Jure nothing to prevent any species or mode of being from having that status. The problem, in sum, is not one of taxonomy, classification or so-called ethnoscience. All animals and cosmic constituents are intensively and virtually persons, because all of them, no matter which, can reveal themselves to be

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[162] Sigmund Freud, 'Revision of Dream Theory', 22:24, referenced in Tarratt, 'Monsters from the Id', p. 361.

(transform into) a person. This is not a simple logical possibility but an ontological potentiality.[163]

The cat and the spider are not 'simply' fetish totems for human gender issues, nor are they just animals. Through the shift in Scott's relationship with them, they threaten his personhood as much by their insistence on their own personhood as they do via direct predatory action. De Castro is, of course, writing in relation to the cosmology of the indigenous tribes of Amazonian South America, but as he specifically qualifies, while "The Amazonian metaphysics of predation is a pragmatic and theoretical context highly favorable to perspectivism", it is also the case that "there is scarcely an existent that could not be defined in terms of its relative position on a scale of predatory power."[164] *The Incredible Shrinking Man* is, naturally, deeply concerned with questions of relative positions and scales of power, especially in relation to the human world, the natural world, and the deeper cosmology that binds these worlds together. Scott comes to identify with the spider as much as he loathes it, and though his loathing is not diminished, it becomes tinged with an acceptance of their relative perspectives.

Special Effects: Size and Scale
The question of perspective also marks *The Incredible Shrinking Man*'s distinctive relationship with its regime of special effects, one which is intimately connected with its narrative and themes. Certainly, as any 'typical' example of science fiction cinema, "a genre so founded on the realisation of things that do not exist or are unknown or impossible at the time", the special effects of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* are striving to make visible and recognisable an impossible thing.[165] However, the particular impossible thing being represented here does not take the form of an invasion of the familiar world by the impossible (as in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The War of the Worlds*), nor is it an attempt to construct an entirely new world (as in *Forbidden Planet* and, to a lesser extent, *This Island Earth*). Rather, it is, in a sense, the transformation of familiar reality itself into something fantastical. No clearer is this than in the moment, just over fifteen minutes into the film, where we first see Scott at a fraction of his normal size, his body overshadowed in almost cartoonish fashion by the armchair in which he sits. Yet the film is insistent on playing this moment as a dramatic reveal – initially, we can only tell something is wrong because no human form is visible in the chair from behind. When the camera reverses position, so that we are now viewing the chair from the front rather than the back, and Scott's diminished form is fully visible, the soundtrack

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[163] Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. Peter Skafish (Chicago: Univocal, 2014), p. 56.
[164] *Ibid*.
[165] Geoff King and Tanya Kryzwinska, *Science Fiction Cinema: From Outerspace to Cyberspace* (London: Wallflower, 2000), p. 65.

emphasises the moment with a musical sting, while the arm and shoulder of Scott's brother remain visible in the foreground to confirm the relative scales of what we are seeing. It is, of course, a reveal in terms of his emasculation and his infantilization, and much of the drama of the next few scenes emanates from his emotional state in this moment and this situation. Yet this moment is also a reveal to the audience in terms of unveiling the film's regime of special effects. Previously, Scott's condition had been presented primarily through simple costuming, having Grant Williams wear oversized shirts and suits to give the appearance of his having shrunk, or through body language, having him hunched down on a consulting room sofa next to his wife, as one of the doctors explains their theory of the cause of his condition. Scott's appearance in the chair represents a shift in the film's approach, an image that demands to be recognised a performative illusion rather than simple theatrical gestures.

Figure 21 – *The Incredible Shrinking Man:* **Scott reflects on his condition.**

The blatant impossibility of Scott-in-the-chair, together with the dedicated attempt at a credible representation and the simultaneous, paradoxical demand for a reaction from the audience to this particular sequence of shots is all, of course, demonstrative of the issues regarding one of the central critical discourses surrounding science fiction film: the fundamental relationship the genre has to special effects. This relationship has, variously, been referred to as 'tension' or, influentially by Brooks Landon, as 'ambivalence' between the creation of a fantastic, and therefore unbelievable, spectacle and of a convincing reality to be displayed on the screen.[166] Noting a specific underlying

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[166] King and Kryzwinska, *Science Fiction Cinema*, p. 64; Brooks Landon, *The Aesthetics of Ambivalence* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992).

dynamic in science fiction film between the narrative and visual languages of realism and fantasy, Landon argued that there was a "larger generic ambivalence as SF film is pulled between the antithetical poles of documentary realism and pure fantasy."[167] La Valley arrives at a similar point, but where Landon is discussing the whole genre from the perspective of its development in the late 1980s to the early 1990s, La Valley finds a specific resonance for this dynamic in the 1950s. According to him, "the genre seems to be straining at both ends, toward fantasy and realism simultaneously with its center missing, that center usually being the atomic bomb."[168] For La Valley, the film that resolves this tension most successfully is *Forbidden Planet*, which he claims "restores the note of wonder and awe, largely free from paranoia and fear, that was absent from most of the 1950s films".[169] The difference between *The Incredible Shrinking Man* and *Forbidden Planet*'s attitudes, which La Valley does hint at, is reflected in their specific approaches to matters of scale as performed through their special effects.

The clue is, perhaps, in the title. The adaptational shift from *The Shrinking Man* to *The Incredible Shrinking Man* is certainly indicative of a distinction in tone between literary science fiction and cinematic science fiction in the era in terms of marketing and presentation. Yet it also suggests something fundamental about what science fictional film can *do*. "Especially in its cinematic form," Telotte argues, "science fiction often seems to appeal precisely because it lends itself to the greatest imaginative capacities of the film medium: its ability, through what we very broadly term "special effects," to give shape and being to the imagination."[170] For Landon, this is not merely an ability or predilection of the genre, but a core facet of its structure and form, where the "interruptive spectacle of special effects … present[s] a kind of counter-narrative purely in terms of special effects", so that the film's actual visual component "exists in ambivalent relationship to the film's plot – or story-based narrative".[171] Landon was, of course, discussing primarily the state of science fiction in the early '90s during the rise of digital effects, but the understanding of the purpose and role of special effects as put forth here can certainly apply to such sequences as the exploration of the Krell machine in *Forbidden Planet*. It can also potentially be recognised in the sequences showcasing the firepower of the Martian war machines in *War of the Worlds*, as well as for the space travel and apocalyptic destruction scenes of *This Island Earth*, Klaatu and Gort's display of power in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and the appearance of the giant ants of *Them!* What is,

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[167] Landon, *The Aesthetics of Ambivalence*, p. 62.
[168] Albert J. La Valley, 'Traditions of Trickery', in *Shadows of the Magic Lamp*, eds. George Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), p. 152.
[169] *Ibid.*, p. 153.
[170] Telotte, *Science Fiction Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 3.
[171] Landon, *Aesthetics of Ambivalence*, p. 69.

therefore, unusual about *The Incredible Shrinking Man* is the extent to which the 'counter-narrative' becomes the *dominant* narrative, not just in terms of the film's attractions, as Gunning's work on early film and its relation the medium as a whole might frame it, but in its relationship with the shape and form of the plot itself.[172] It is not necessarily a synthesis of the plot-narrative and the counter-narrative, but it becomes something like an inversion. *The Incredible Shrinking Man*'s plot, therefore, increasingly takes place inside the regime of special effects in a way that few other Hollywood science fiction films of the 1950s attempt to do for more than brief moments.

The predisposition towards *large-scale* spectacle was, for Sontag, symptomatic of "the trauma suffered by everyone", in part due to the shared realisation of the apocalyptic consequences of atomic warfare, the knowledge that "collective incineration and extinction … could come at any time, virtually without warning".[173] Yet she also makes the clear that the devastating power of the atomic bomb is not the only scene of the imagination of destruction, "For science fiction films may also be described as a popular mythology for the contemporary negative imagination about the impersonal."[174] Here, the individual is dissolved by a hostile other, causing a metamorphosis which obliterates identity and self but often leaves an uncanny shell behind, either as a disguise or a thoughtless drone. It is a quintessentially existential horror, whose mythopoeic dimensions were famously captured by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where "in a universe divested of illusions and lights, man feels alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land."[175] In Camus' absurdism we see the link – or the cut – between threats to the world and the individual. By extension we can see how science fiction film uniquely reflects this caesura, this 'divorce' between humanity and its modern environment through the attempt to place ourselves in it, in time as well as space. In the very act of envisioning the future, we subject ourselves to the effects of time and therefore are forced to acknowledge our own doom.[176]

Yet, as we have seen, Scott's diminution, as facilitated by special effects, is continually and emphatically countered by his narration. Unlike other science fiction films of the period such as *War of the Worlds*, *This Island Earth*, and *Them!*, the conflict is not so much between semantic regimes of reality and fantasy within the visual realm of shooting and editing, but rather between the visual

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[172] Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), p. 382.
[173] Susan Sontag, 'The Imagination of Disaster', *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 223-4.
[174] *Ibid.*, pp. 220-21.
[175] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 13.
[176] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

realm and the auditory. It is, after all, Scott's voice that expresses his final denial of non-existence, after his body has already faded to nothingness. His narration, of course, is a classic instance of *acousmêtre* as defined by Michel Chion, indeed more so because the exact placement and timing of his narration is never made entirely clear it "haunt[s] the borderlands that are neither the interior of the filmic stage nor the proscenium – a place that has no name, but which the cinema forever brings into play." [177] We see him writing in his book, giving his account of his experience, something he returns to with renewed vigour after forging his bond with Clarice; yet it is equally clear that it is representative of his efforts to remain connected to the larger world, and is apparently abandoned once he resumes shrinking.

Moreover, instances of narration become more frequent once Scott descends into the cellar, not less. As he no longer has other human characters with which he could have a dialogue, within the logic of classical Hollywood filmmaking this necessitates further direct address to the audience. This is simply a matter of practicality which, by contrast, Matheson's novel need not address due to its omniscient third-person narrator – but as a result of the confluence of adaptation and cinematic vocabulary, in the film, all that remains of the 'I' of the Ego in the final sequence is the voice. This is, in Derridean terms, completely appropriate, due to the status of the voice as full marker of presence in the form of "logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism: absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning."[178] Scott's narration remains a recording, of course; a trace of the voice rather than the voice itself. It is its own form of *auditory* special effect, which adds further layers of irony and disruption to Scott's literal and metaphoric presence-absence as the film closes. In this way the film's spoken narration struggles against its visual schemata in its quest to produce American reconstruction of myth as primarily an actualisation of the self rather than centred as function of the social and communal. Self-actualisation is thus, necessarily, formed in relation not to other people, but in contrast to nature: a neo-Darwinian conception of what it means to be human.

Perilous Geographies: Inside and Outside
The question of the place of the self, physically and existentially, in the wider universe is what makes the question of scale key thematically as well as visually in *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, and it is intriguing that it is in a similar demonstration of scale that La Valley finds his 'note of wonder and awe' in *Forbidden Planet*. Here he cites what he terms as "The centrepiece of the film, a tour through special effects of the Krell world of wonders" – a sequence in which, notably, the characters

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[177] Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 24.
[178] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatru Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 11-12.

of Commander Adams, Morbius, and the ship's doctor appear miniscule in comparison to the vast machines of the Krell which they stand inside. For La Valley, such a prodigious feat of special effects in conjuring this massive spectacle "reinforces and awakens the theme of technology's powers, at the same time that the disappearance of the Krell reminds us of the misuses of technology, its power to outdistance man and his primitive morality." By comparison, he treats *The Incredible Shrinking Man* as fairly unremarkable, grouping it along with films like *The Amazing Colossal Man* (dir. Bert I. Gordon, 1957) and *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (dir. Nathan Juran, 1958), as well as more explicit 'monster films' such as *The Thing From Another World* (dir. Christian Nyby, 1951) and *The Fly* (dir. Kurt Neumann, 1958).[179] Yet if *Forbidden Planet* acknowledges the atomic anxiety of the age but ultimately replaces it with wonder, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* attempts to reach the same destination but by a very different route. More fully and clearly than many of its fellows, it attempts to tack into the wind of the underlying psychology behind *living with* that anxiety, depicting something of the relationship between mourning and melancholy that, for the most part, remains sub-textual in these films.

Indeed, of the selected corpus, only *The Incredible Shrinking Man* showcases a scenario resembling, the new normal of suburban life. Belton summarises the changes that took place during the period:

> Housing shortages during the war, which forced many young couples to share cramped houses or apartment space with their parents, gave way to a postwar surge in home building and buying … GI loans, low-interest rates provided through VA/FHA mortgages, standardized housing introduced by construction entrepreneurs such as William J. Levitt led to the sale of 1.4 million homes in 1950 … By the end of the decade, there were over 10 million more homeowners than there had been at its start, and of the 13 million new homes built between 1948 and 1958, 11 million were located in the suburbs.[180]

While Mathieson wrote the novel from the perspective of a Californian who had gone East, the trajectory of both his own career and that of the literary Scott Carey,[181] the setting of most of the film's action is vague enough to be without specific context or broader clarity of place – an Everytown, America to follow *Things to Come*'s British Everytown of 20 years earlier. Nevertheless, whatever coast they might be on, the fact that the cinematic Careys, a not-particularly-wealthy white couple, married but young and without children, owned a multi-story home is indicative of this period of change in homeownership and population distribution. It is a period that, for Lewis Mumford, marked by the beginnings of a new form of social alienation:

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[179] La Valley, 'Traditions of Trickery', p. 152.
[180] John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 72-3.
[181] Lisa Tuttle, 'Introduction' in Richard Mathieson, *The Shrinking Man*, pp. v-vi.

> Under the present suburban regime, every urban function follows the example of the motor road: it devours space and consumes time with increasing friction and frustration, while, under the plausible pretext of increasing the range of speed and communication, it actually obstructs it and denies the possibility of easy meeting and encounters by scattering the fragments of a city at random over a whole region.[182]

Mumford's description of mass suburbia is strikingly resonant with Scott Carey's fate, as he is swallowed up by his own suburban home and finds it increasingly impossible to connect with other human beings. While not as prominent as the desert setting, other films of the genre in this period picked up on the dramatic and uncanny potential of the suburban setting; most notably, the original version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (dir. Don Siegel, 1956) takes place in a California satellite town that partly satirises the uncanny quality of the environment.

Given that it tackles the new suburban dynamic directly, the extraordinary moment of self-realisation at the end of *Incredible Shrinking Man*, in which Scott Carey attains a level of oneness with nature, at an atomic level no less, is all the more striking in concordance with the recurring motif of an Edenic nature 'that throws us out', which runs through much of the genre both in this period and beyond. In many cases, it is assumed that technology necessarily isolates us from nature, and a return to 'the Garden' is preferable – we see this in the final shot of the hills outside Los Angeles in *The War of the Worlds*, after technology fails and nature wins out, and it is suggested, too, by the plots and themes of *Them!* and *This Island Earth*. By contrast, through his exposure to radiation, Scott is increasingly isolated from society, from civilisation, and instead returns to a more technologically minimalist way of life, still tool-using, but as a hunter-gatherer. This regression to primal impulses and a simpler way of life is itself a romanticizing of a certain kind of technology, a tendency Ihde notes, but then the narrative turns, and this regression becomes a simple stepping stone in the route to a more existential rediscovery of the self.[183] It is, however, through technological mediation itself that this epiphany is achieved – not just in the sense of the technologically-produced radiation that alters Scott's body, but more profoundly, in that he is only equipped to comprehend an atom and a galaxy as existing on a comparable scale because of a technological culture of advanced optics which brings "what is to be seen into a normal bodily space and distance. Both the macroscopic and the microscopic appear within the same near-distance. The 'image size' of galaxy or amoeba is the *same*."[184] The complication here is that this embodied experience is explicitly surpassed in the final moments of the film, investing Scott's fate with a moment of sublime ego-transcendence that leaves behind both nature and civilisation.

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[182] Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: MJF Books, 1989), p. 507.
[183] Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 75.
[184] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

Thus, if the Krell machinery scene comprises a centrepiece, or perhaps a keystone, which holds in place the ambition and significance of *Forbidden Planet*'s own regime of special effects through its sense of awe at the massive scope of what is being displayed, then the whole cellar sequence in *The Incredible Shrinking Man* stands as an inversion of this structure. It is, by contrast, not a keystone at all, but rather forms a significant proportion of the plot itself as presented onscreen. The sequence runs for approximately 40 minutes, from Scott being flung down beside the steps while trying to escape the cat to finally passing through the cellar grate after the defeat and death of the spider, approximating just over half the film's overall runtime. It is an interior on a massive scale, like the Krell machine, which Scott is trapped inside: "My prison. Almost as far as I could see, a grey friendless area of space and time". Yet it is also a wilderness, outside the outside, like the wasteland that dominates the surface of Altair IV, or the desert of New Mexico, a wilderness which, as we have seen, he resolves to tame.

Figure 22 – *The Incredible Shrinking Man:* **Scott reclaiming his sense of self within the cellar.**

The voiceover narration, whenever it frames the cellar from Scott's miniscule perspective, does so in terms that conflate the indoors and the outdoors. The stairs which lead between the cellar and the rest of the house "stretched above me, as far as the eye could see. Cliff, rising upon cliff. I knew I could never scale them." Even more strikingly, once Scott gains his bearings and surveys the scene around him, he describes the terrain – and he does make it sound like *terrain* – as "stretched before me like some vast, primeval plain. Empty of life, littered with relics of a vanished race. No desert island castaway faced so bleak a prospect." Here, early on in the sequence, an explicit iteration of the motif of the castaway, but emphasising that Scott's transformation creates

and even deeper divide: distinctions of scale outweigh distinctions of geography. Similarly, a simple gap in a crate, which Scott must traverse on his route towards spider-guarded cake, becomes "a deep abyss. It was only a box and the space between, yet to me it was the Grand Canyon, and the Mammoth Caves combined: dark, mysterious, and dangerous." There is, then, also a conflation of the natural world and the human, the artificial, emerging here. Inside and outside had already become destabilized for Scott in his use of the dollhouse as a living space; here the situation is completely inverted, as the most insular part of the home, the cellar, become a vast wilderness. There is, indeed, a contrast here with the more direct relationship in *Forbidden Planet* between inside and outside spaces. If Altair IV is clearly demarcated between desert, domestic sanctuaries (Morbius's home and the C-57D), and cavernous underworld (the Krell city), in *The Incredible Shrinking Man* all three become co-identified. Reality is not just under assault from the Unconscious, as it is in *Forbidden Planet*, but is here overwhelmed by it. Scott's melancholy has consumed his entire world.

This, of course, remains primarily represented through a series of disruptions between humanity and nature which both trigger and embody Scott's condition. There is significance to the fact that it is, specifically, a combination of radiation and insecticide that together destabilise his material self and his existential self. There is a kind of alchemical logic at play here: radiation *combined with* a substance used for attacking the smallest of the visible animal life is what causes Scott himself to become small. The use of insecticide links the two thematic strands of the film which reckon with humanity's relationship with nature – a proposed dichotomy of man and beast, and the twin disruptions of inside/outside and natural/artificial – and synthesises it with the general anxiety of the era towards atomic science. The film was, of course, released four years before Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, originally published in 1962 which brought to public awareness the dangers of artificial pesticides such as dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), and it would be a gross exaggeration to claim the Matheson's novel or the film anticipated the specifics of her work and the response to it. Nevertheless, there is a shared genealogy here for, as Carson herself notes, "This industry is a child of the Second World War. In the course of developing agents of chemical warfare, some of the chemicals created in the laboratory were found to be lethal to insects."[185] Synthetic insecticides were, therefore, if not a sibling of the bomb, certainly a close cousin in terms of their origins. Moreover, as Carson goes on to detail, "the production of synthetic pesticides in the United States soared from 124,259,000 pounds in 1947 to 637,666,000 pounds in 1960 – more than a fivefold increase."[186] Even without being grounded in direct knowledge of the specific effects of DDT

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[185] Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), p. 15
[186] *Ibid.*, p. 16

and other similar chemical sprays, depictions such as in *The Incredible Shrinking Man* express a general awareness, and Faustian anxiety, regarding new ways of using science to control nature.

Here, then, is an intersection of the film's two primary thematic dynamics: the transformation and revelation of the domestic sphere from suburban comfort and middle class idyll to new-Darwinian battle of the individual against nature in a world of predators and competitors for resources; and the threat posed by modern science to human life and meaning not necessarily by threatening it directly, but instead through the collapse of the understanding of the significance of scale though the simultaneous universality and insubstantiality of the atom (a threat which also becomes the foundation for Scott's final epiphany). It is these realities which Scott's condition reveals to be *already in place* beneath the surface of everyday life in the world of the suburban middle class, continually undermining any and every attempt at constructing a sense of material and social comfort, of something called normal, as materiality and sociability both turn out to be façades covering the threat of meaningless nothingness. The anxiety, then, doesn't stem directly from the radiation cloud, but is merely revealed by its effects. It is in order to address this threat directly that the film dramatizes Scott's losses so emphatically and, in parallel to those losses, has him simultaneously undergo a series of transformations carried out through the forced confrontations with physical nature and cosmic possibility. This reckoning with the confusion and conflation of the natural and the human metamorphoses Scott from contemporary everyman to solitary castaway, then to hunter-gatherer and warrior, and finally to attain a measure of existential peace as mystic Ego, "the man of the future". Scott is therefore the sole survivor of his own personal apocalypse, and the film is thereby demonstrably attempting to engage with the challenge of what a 'man' must become to survive and, more importantly, live with such catastrophe.

Uncanny Transformations: Conclusion

The Incredible Shrinking Man and *Them!* approach the construction of science-fictional drama and 'thrills' out of the melancholic anxieties of their era from, essentially, opposite directions. This is, of course, the case foremost in the obvious sense, that they present the same conceit from mirrored perspectives: an infestation of oversized insects on the one hand and the physical diminishment of a single man on the other. Yet this simple distinction develops into quite different overall approaches to dramatizing the fears of the atomic age, and the proposed methods of quelling those fears. The strategies of *Them!* are, as we have seen, just that: co-ordinated operations which require the deployment of appropriate information and manpower in order to repel the threat of discrete opposing force. The threat they represent is more profound than merely their brutal method of killing, as they contest with humanity not just for domination but for neo-Darwinian adaptive suitability to the world in the era of radiation. Ultimately, however, it is the judicious application of

military power, as directed by scientific knowledge, which defeats them. The anxiety can, in other words, be addressed through taking practical steps to limit the effects of particular problems. Yet, as the film's open-ended, questioning coda makes clear, an address is not the same as a resolution. If the characters have, in part, reckoned with the literal and metaphorical fallout of the Trinity test, the 'original sin' of the atomic age (as opposed to the 'first murder' that was Hiroshima), they have yet to confront the fact of its continued existence and use, both historical and potential. There remains the simple unresolved fact of the bomb itself, and nothing in the film's regimen of practical solutions can resolve this. *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, by contrast, is entirely concerned with *living with* the anxiety created by the bomb, and an overall sense of cosmic vertigo incepted by atomic science. This is, in a sense, an inversion of *Them!*'s position as Scott's primary confrontation is, in fact, with his own existential angst. The physical challenges he undergoes are simply ways for him to come to a more philosophical understanding of his place in the universe.

It is particularly significant, in this light, that Scott's condition is both distinctly random and completely irreversible. Both the actual method of his 'infection' and his own exposure to it are clearly marked as arbitrary. External attempts by scientists and doctors to understand and abrogate the shrinking effect are dismissed within the first half hour of the film, and Scott's exertions never truly accomplish anything other than forestalling the eventual dissolution of his physical self. There is, then, no solution offered in terms of the practical implementation of scientific knowledge or, just as importantly, from support networks whether they are socially- or institutionally-based, as the breakdown of Scott's marriage and the failure of his friendship with Clarice illustrate. This is, of course, all part of the film's ploy of reducing the character of Scott, and by extension the idea of 'a man', down to their basic constituents. From here it aims to reconstruct the idea of 'manhood' into something that can withstand a potentially nihilistic confrontation with the redrawing of cosmic scales that is brought on by the splitting of the atom. Indeed, the kaleidoscope of psychological symbolism which Scott tumbles through emphasises the extent to which Scott's conflict is interior rather than exterior, further illustrated by the fact that the bulk of the film's action takes place within his home. There is a certain irony revealed by this detail; that a hostile world, whose overwhelming largeness is a key part of the danger which fuels the film's drama, is also in a sense a mould of Scott's own mindscape, entirely shaped and orientated around his own anxieties and, in turn, providing him with a route to cosmic enlightenment – but it is, of course, a journey he has to undertake alone.

Simply by virtue of being about an isolated figure attempting to redefine the meaning of his existence without the context and support of society, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* foregrounds failures of communication. From the misunderstandings and frustrations that occur between Scott

and Louise to his later, literal inability to be heard after falling into the cellar, Scott's emotional journey through the first act of the film is, to a large part, rendered through his failure to articulate his feelings of shame and hopelessness over his condition, and his resulting resentfulness and despair. This places his voiceover narration in the interesting position of a form of communication that emphasises, by virtue of its assumed interiority, his isolation. It once again emphasises the world of the film as being, in part, the world within Scott's own mind. It is a subjective world, a conditional world, whose meaning is determined by the 'I' of the Ego in a genericized, existentially-inflected spirituality. This, as we have seen, is in strong contrast to the importance of communication and social organisation in *Them!*, and the latter film's world-view follows suit. *Them!* is not 'about' communication in an overt way, and it does not attempt to develop any complex theories on the subject. Yet displays of communicative behaviours and systems, such as the use of radio and the ants' own distinctive sound, as well as disruptions, in the case of the traumatised Ellison girl and the alcoholic in rehab, permeate the narrative on a deeper level than the mere presence of dialogue or body language. The issue of communication is not so much the heart of the film as it is its sinew and muscle, allowing for the mechanics of the plot to unfold and providing the means for its two groups in conflict, humans and ants, to arrange themselves against each other in physical conflict. Communication, even human communication, is here not primarily a means of self-expression, but a system of arrangement and organisation of free actors into a society with a shared purpose. The world of *Them!* is one in which, certainly, marvellous events occur, but they exist in relation to an overall schema of meaning constructed relationally in the context of social structures, not as the expression of one individual character's psyche.

Therefore, while the respective motifs of miniscule man against spider and humans against giant ants obviously bear a strong superficial resemblance, the actual functioning of these images in the context of their respective discourses is quite distinct. Hence the rich symbolism of the spider that makes it the ideal candidate for Freudian readings and similar interpretative approaches, while the ants seem to perpetually frustrate, offering only unsatisfying and seemingly contradictory metaphors. Biskind identifies and contrasts them with Patricia Medford; Shapiro with Agent Graham. They are an Othered communist horde, and they are also beasts of the apocalypse, a Faustian consequence to humanity's breach of natural law. This last symbolic regime is, as Shapiro and O'Leary are correct in highlighting, the only reading that is made textually explicit, but even here the connection is made through a diluted version of Biblical prophecy. This proliferation of meanings is itself perhaps an indication of mythic thought in operation, but a version of mythic thought as processed through the pseudo-science of pulp science fiction, and the simultaneous relative groundedness of the film's cinematic style. *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, with its synthesising of a

Campbellian myth of self-actualisation into the domestic scene, perhaps does a more complete job of adapting and historicizing mythic thought for 1950s America by making the challenges of suburban life themselves epic in scale. It finds the mythic in modern everyday life, while *Them!*, like *The War of the Worlds* from the year before, suggests more of an onslaught *on* the modern *by* the mythic, in the form of a threatened apocalypse by a more advanced or better adapted species. *The Incredible Shrinking Man* is not interested in conflicts between or for the control over worlds. The small stakes of the story, the fate of one life, are entirely the point.

In other words, if *Them!* posits, though does not quite show us, a vision of a 'post-human world', then *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, rather more directly, shows us the fall and rise of a 'post-world human'. The end of humanity, and its domination over the earth, that is threatened in *Them!* can only be put off by a disciplined deployment of mid-century know-how arranged through institutional organisations. *Them!* is unusual entirely to the extent which it demonstrates faith in the resilience of all such systems, as embodied by the down-to-earth nobility of its law enforcement officers and military personnel, and the unquestioned competence of its scientists – by contrast to a film like *The Thing from Another World*, where the military withstand the threat the scientific mindset crumbles in response. *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, meanwhile, is interested specifically in what happens when such systems fail, or are no longer of use; not on a national or societal scale as in *The War of the Worlds*, but on the level of the individual. Each, however, is a clear response to an anxiety that the unfathomable consequences of splitting the atom might undercut the foundations of modern society and civilisation as a whole: one simply offers the reassurance of constructing a crisis which institutional knowledge and practices can withstand, while the other argues that such structures and systems are not, in fact, necessary for the human spirit to persist. Of course, just as a spider may, analogically, represent more than just a spider and giant ants are not always just giant ants, split atoms are not always just split atoms and radiation is not always mere radiation. By incorporating such threats, real and imagined, into narratives about procedural responses to violence or the dissolution of a household, filmmakers of the era make anxieties of the atomic era *about* governmental authority and marriage, as much as they make governmental authority and marriage *about* the bomb and its conceptual accoutrements. In the context this arrangement myth may, in a sense, serve as a resin for holding such frictions in place by binding them together in a narrative substance that is both familiar and fantastic; simultaneously grounded in specific cultural reference points and also reiterative throughout this period and beyond.

As we have seen in the prior case studies, for instance, the archetypal elements of *Forbidden Planet*, *This Island Earth*, and *The War of the Worlds* in particular are clearly all of a kind: a heterosexual romance taking place against the background of specifically technological planetary

catastrophe. Dr. Forrester and Sylvia even attempt an escape from destruction together in a plane, as Cal and Ruth do twice in *This Island Earth*. *Them!* shows traces of this meta-structure as well in the burgeoning relationship between Patricia Medford and Agent Graham. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The Incredible Shrinking Man* therefore present the most distinctive approaches, the former depicting a single-parent family with no man ultimately taking the deceased husband's place, and the latter showing the dissolution of a suburban marriage, perhaps the death of a nuclear family in its larval stage. It is no surprise that Hollywood has a strong tendency to fix such archetypal emotional hooks to these science fiction narratives; what is important is that, by doing so, the union of the couple is repeatedly and insistently associated symbolically with the return of normalcy, with life continuing on after crisis, with the restoration of peace after strife. Such narratives assume they have settled the traumas uncovered and provoked by the action of the film; mourning has been assuaged by love. It is a fantasy not just of romance, but of resolution. They evince a belief in 'the final clinch'; that the past can, in fact, be buried.[187] However, while *The War of the Worlds* is clearly working in this same structure as *Forbidden Planet* and *This Island Earth*, it ultimately presents us with a conflict which cannot be resolved by individual human (or Metalunan) action. The trauma of unresolved mourning overpowers the narrative energies of Forrester and Sylvia's relationship, and they are swept up in its wake.

In the psychosocial fabric which *The War of the Worlds* shares with *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, we can therefore identify an undercurrent of irrevocability, a depiction of a way of life lost, regardless of whether it is due to alien malice or human accident. In the latter case, furthermore, there is no attempt to reconstruct the family unit or find the presence of the divine in any kind of physical or material salvation. Instead, it attempts to posit the possibility that the individual can survive the permanent loss of the family, of physical reality, of the known universe itself. *The Incredible Shrinking Man* depicts not a struggle between two civilized but incompatible worlds (and world-views), but a more profound conflict, between civilization itself and nature, a conflict brought about by technology. It is a struggle that, as we have seen, lurks in the background of *The War of the Worlds*, between the desiccation of Mars and Gaia's vengeance on the invaders through bacteria – but it is obviously the military conflict that takes centre stage in the film's action. *Them!* appears as something of an interstitial point here: the giant ants have a hierarchy, a distinct social structure borrowed from the smaller, real-world brethren that may or may not serve as a metaphor for some threatening socio-political phenomenon, whether communism or feminism, and naturally they have

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[187] This is certainly not unique to the genre; this is a tendency which Parker Tyler identified in the attempts of Hollywood filmmaking of the 1940s to reflect contemporaneous understandings of psychology. See his *Magic and Myth of the Movies* (London: Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd, 1971), p. 120.

communication; but they notably lack any tool-using characteristics, and there is little within their depiction that could be identified as intellect rather than instinct, in contrast to the explicitly cerebral and strategic intelligence of the somehow inhuman but still 'civilized' Martians.

In *Forbidden Planet* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still,* conflicts between civilization and nature simply set the stage for the drama that emerges out of the 'natural', primal impulses of the individual running up against wider social structures. Nevertheless, each takes care to ground themselves in relation to a geography in part defined by the relationships between a technologized, urban environment of civilization and the natural world. So too does the curious structure of *This Island Earth*, in the way it folds and incorporates different environments into representations of its own generic structure. Indeed, the geography of these films in general is fascinatingly varied, while remaining distinctly American in their representations and imaginings – though never quite the 'real' America of the actual '50s moment. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* presents us with the urban capital of the United States of America, the place which Klaatu apparently deems most appropriate to make his presence, and that of his interplanetary government, known to all humankind. *The War of the World* comes to a climax in a siege of Los Angeles by alien machines of war, a city which also plays host to the subterranean denouement of *Them!*. *This Island Earth* strikingly links these two specific urban settings in Dr. Meacham's transcontinental flight across the United States from DC to LA, providing us with a montage of America – and thus, Earth's – natural beauty, no doubt in part to emphasise its characters' later separation from these spectacular, but familiar, landscapes. There is a connection too between the massive caverns of Metaluna to which Exeter's people have retreated from the Zagon bombardment, the Californian 'undercity' of echoing sewer pathways, and the humble basement of the Carey's suburban home, which becomes another kind of wilderness.

Cities may fall under assault from alien forces, both technological and biological, in order to elevate the stakes of the narrative in visceral and spectacular fashion, but the natural world provides a more complex array of meanings and significations. It is here that the Martians' assault on humankind begins, not in the streets of LA, but in the forested wilderness of Northern California. Such scenes of desolation proliferate throughout the corpus. And it is, of course, in the desert that the ants of *Them!* will mutate and emerge as challengers to humanity's dominance over the planet, and it is the desert that has consumed Altair IV after the Krell destroyed themselves. It is a frequent motif of the genre – Universal's *It Came From Outer Space* and 20th Century Fox's *Invaders from Mars* are both 1953 films which feature the desert as the site of alien contact, featuring benevolent and malevolent visitors respectively. Metaluna, for all the fallen grandeur of its subterranean civilization, also has something of the desert about it; the city reduced to wasteland. These deserts are liminal places, of death and rebirth.

As Susan Courtney observes, despite the actual public deployment of the bomb being orientated around both the destruction of urban centres Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or the oceanic islands of the Pacific Proving Grounds, popular imaginings of atomic power nevertheless coalesced around the desert as the site of its creation and emergence:

> Far more than just the physical site of the bomb's first detonation (three weeks before the military use for which it was designed), the desert quickly became the mythic scene of its arrival. For despite the enormous military-industrial-scientific collaboration that spanned several years and multiple locations to bring atomic weapons into being, the desert would be envisioned, repeatedly, as their quasi-magical, quasi-mystical primal scene.[188]

In *Forbidden Planet*, the desert is the site of destruction on the scale of nuclear war, but with the lingering psychic wound of the destruction of what went before hanging over the empty landscape. The ants of *Them!* will provide us with the most literal and direct, and *The Incredible Shrinking Man* the most symbolically and metaphorically, examples of this phenomenon. These films associate with the creation of the bomb an unleashing of primal natural forces that disturbs the balance of the natural world, resulting in amongst the smallest and most mundane of insects becoming an existential threat. Here the desert is a place of birth and life, but it is a twisted, mutated, cancerous form of life that unbalances the natural order, and threatens humankind's domination over the world.

Throughout, the films clearly reflect the fundamental limitations and the erratic evolution of Hollywood science fiction filmmaking in the era, whether in terms of special effects or more profound issues such as the representation of women and minorities. That they construct and render meaning in the context of their time, while also being plagued by problems that continue to mar mainstream American film production to this day, emphasises the historical complexities of analysing and interpreting these films and the corpus more broadly. *Them!* and *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, as films that are both interested in literal disruptions to a contemporary sense of normalcy, whether on a national scale or that of a single home, are valuable in their attempt to construct narratives upon what they perceived as the great anxieties of the age, not for their accuracy in doing so, but for the assumptions they display. At the same time, the dramatization of those anxieties and the assumptions, and the specific processes of mourning and melancholy that underpin many of them, are also better understood in the specific context of 1950s America. This is not because such concerns are unique to that period for, as Shapiro emphasises, assaults on race and nation, or destabilisation of the family, have been perennial themes of mythic storytelling.

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[188] Susan Courtney, 'Framing the Bomb in the West', in *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex*, eds. Haidee Wasson and Lee Grievson (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), p. 216.

Rather, it is that they represent a specific rendering of these archetypal themes, mediated through a specific moment of development in the genre of science fiction film, which allows them to enrich our understanding of their period, and the films' own underlying concerns and fascinations.

Conclusion

Mythologies

The science fiction cinema of the 1950s neither 'transcends' its moment of conception nor fully 'embodies' every aspect of American society, politics, and culture from the period. It is a particular type of lens, a partial set of perspectives available from one location, looking out upon the surrounding landscape and trying, impossibly, to see past the horizon. Indeed, the limited perspectives of these films are as revealing as any other quality. One of the broad characteristics that marks the science fiction film of this era out from that of other decades, not just later in the 20th century but also in comparison to the 1920s and '30s, was specifically the *lack* of emphasis on the construction of an imagined future, whether utopian or dystopian.[1] Rather, as we have seen, the focus remains on the intervention from beyond into the familiar and recognisable, whether that interference is benevolent or monstrous.

Even *Forbidden Planet*, the most significant exception to this basic formula, contains within it a telling reversal in the intervention by the primordial, *unheimlich* figure of the Monster from the Id into an organised and rationalised 'marvellous' world, the technologically advanced future revealed to be built on the unstable clay of emotionality, subject to the dictates of unconscious and sublimated fear and desire. The establishment of a sense of normalcy that is then disrupted by an inciting incident that creates disruption and drama is one of the most fundamental narrative patterns of Hollywood. But within the scope of the science fiction film it takes on additional significance. It is not merely the life of an individual, family group, or town that is disrupted within these films, it is life itself, and while this is evident through alien incursions and interplanetary excursions, and in the nascent post-apocalypse subgenre, it is clearest of all in the metamorphosis films. The familiar structure of Hollywood narratives, built upon the range of older traditions it adapts and remediates for its own purpose, becomes something more complex and contradictory. It is the paradox at the heart of the genre, of the attempt to describe or elaborate on an unprecedented historical moment with language and imagery that invokes a sense of mythic continuity precisely in the moment of collapse, of catastrophe.

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[1] As noted in the introduction, this was not necessarily true of the science fiction *literature* of the same period – nor of other elements of contemporary design and visual culture. Perhaps the most prominent example of a genuine utopian impulse in the period was Disney's Tomorrowland theme park, intended to be a "vista into a world of wondrous ideas, signifying man's achievements ... a step into the future, with predictions of constructive things to come. Tomorrow offers new frontiers in science, adventure and ideals: the Atomic Age ... the challenges of outer space ... and the hope for a peaceful and unified world." – quotation from Walt Disney as reported by Rachel Withers, 'Yesterland', *Slate*, 4 September, 2017, http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2017/09/disneyland_s_tomorrowland_was_once_an_ode_to_a_utopian_future.html [accessed 10/10/18].

Therefore, by taking these films not as isolated works with straightforward formulaic resemblances of genre and style, but as an intertextual corpus whose components exist in relation to each other along a spectrum within the larger cultural and intellectual constellations, they can be read as making a proposition that there are deep psycho-social wounds that exist in the collective unconscious. Either we must address these wounds, or we fall into warfare and catastrophe. As we have seen, the question of authority – of command and control – is central to such an address, and to considering the corpus as a whole and identifying the key distinctions and underlying connections between the films. This is something fundamentally recognised by Biskind in his analysis of the power balance between scientists and the military across these films. Simply put, it is a question of implementation, and who has the right to manage it. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *Them!* both attempt to offer practically applicable solutions to the problems presented by traumas and anxiety of the post-war eras, in different ways attempting to assert the existence of institutions that can address either systemic problems or an individual moment of crisis without political in-fighting. In *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, this is a somewhat utopian vision of diplomacy without national interests, one of the rare instances of the genre in this period engaging, albeit indirectly, in that class of storytelling. By contrast, in *Them!*, the proffered solution is more material and strategic in nature, emphasising the importance of the considered deployment of professional and scientific knowledge within existing structures (the established order here succeeding where it fails in *The War of the Worlds*). Despite this distinction, the concluding moment of uncertainty and doubt these films share is revealing, as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* wonders whether humanity can redeem itself in time to be incorporated into this utopia, and *Them!* considers what future threats might lie in the atomic age, and by implication raises the question of how the existing institutions of the police, the army, and the scientific academy might fare against them.

Indeed, the plot and action of *Them!* showcases structures of power and authority functioning smoothly even in the face of inconceivable crisis, in which the expertise of people in a variety of fields of expertise are drawn together under the aegis of the United States government in order to implement a solution to the problem of the giant ants. That this problem is, in an institutional sense, self-created hangs unspoken over the film, as do utilitarian questions of moral calculus regarding whether the bomb should have been developed and deployed in the context of the Second World War. Such questions are, albeit in something of a contradictory fashion, at the centre of the drama in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, whose attitude to authority and power is not based on hierarchical levels and branches, but in a distinction between the emotionalised chaos of human decision-making against the rational absolutism of machines such as Gort. Klaatu is an

intermediary, both in his actual mission and metaphorically. He is an envoy of a greater power, but he is not in his own kingdom; in his dyadic union with Gort, he retains power, he remains *an* authority, but he is not *the* authority. The anxiety expressed in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is not even specifically in the use and destructibility of weapons on a nuclear scale, as Gort represents a far greater level of destruction. Rather, it's the anxiety that human hierarchies, chains of command, systems of power and control are not consistent and reliable, and are not capable of becoming so. Hence the frightened soldier who shoots Klaatu, the focus on the intransigency of government bureaucracy and international diplomacy – and the behaviour of Helen's would-be suitor Tom Stevens, who jeopardises interplanetary relations and Earth's existence out of ambition and jealousy.

The great machinery of the order which Klaatu represents, and of which Gort is the embodiment, in fact offer another inversion, as they are the opposite of the great machines of the Krell. For, on the one hand, we have a technology, intended to be a creative force, unleashing the primal and profoundly destructive emotionality of the unconscious; on the other, we have a technology that is explicitly and demonstrably intended to be primarily destructive, intended to suppress and side-line human (or human-like) destructive behaviour born out of emotional excess. In *Forbidden Planet*, the bomb becomes co-signified with the misguided and misapplied intelligence of a scientific race; the unleashed madness of the Krell, and by extension of Morbius, who mutually demonstrate another way of experiencing the failure to mourn through the collapse of melancholia into psychopathy – becoming murderous, and in so doing symbolising the war that *does* destroy the world. Technology, as an extension of those who make and use it, is infected by their irrational behaviour, by their psychological flaws and failings. In *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, technology is presented as a means by which to eliminate, or at least side-line those same flaws by taking the most high-stakes decisions imaginable out of human hands entirely. In this sense it could be read as an example of either pro- or anti- (or at least indifferent to) disarmament, for or against Mutually Assured Destruction, because ultimately it is not a film whose action is primarily concerned with what we do with the bomb, but rather what we do with ourselves. The technocratic rationalism of the film is presented not as an end in itself, but as a means to an end; the end being the possibility of real United Nations solution that bypasses provincialism and 'petty' bargaining.

If *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *Forbidden Planet* present very different views on the value of technology and its relationship to human failings, like *Them!* they nevertheless insist on the *possibility* of practical human solutions and redress to the various perceived and unconsciously insistent problems of the post-war era. As we have seen, these range from the psycho-social dynamics of the emerging suburban nuclear family, to the political and cultural conflicts of national

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and international politics, and a specific existential anxiety born of the atomic age. These problems, reimagined and dramatized as generic expressions grounded in the era, are invariably from a particular, limited perspective. There remain telling gaps; structural absences in the kinds of issues and conflicts these films attempt to address. Gender is addressed purely as a problem of binary, heterosexual relations between courting couples, or fathers and daughters. For all of the variations and modulations of the relationship to the Other within the corpus, outside of rare exceptions such as Ranald MacDougall's *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* (1959), real-world race relations are conspicuously unexamined by the genre in popular cinema, at least until the emergence of the *Planet of the Apes* series in the late 1960s.

Both the phenomenon of the popularity of Freud, viewed as a mythic retelling of Oedipus that re-contextualises and affirms the nuclear family even as it problematizes it; and the development of cybernetics, seen as a structural project intended to address the entropic challenges of existence in general and the modern world in particular, reflect different aspects of the transitional period of America that was the '50s. While acknowledging that these are hardly the only cultural phenomena swirling in the slow-boiling cultural mixture of their era, there remains in effect a metaphorical Janus face here, with one gaze set towards the future and the development of American hegemony (a hope inflected by doubt), while its mirror opposite is looking at the loss of old decencies and ways of life (an anxiety inflected by nostalgia). Both tendencies emerge out of the same moment, the same range of cultural experiences – different emanations from a single wound. In this mixture, in its common source in the still-recent past, we can identify some reason for the aforementioned 'present-ness' of the genre at this point in its development. *Forbidden Planet* is, notably, a highly unusual example of an attempt to depict a distant future at this point, in direct contrast to not only the dystopian futures that will appear in the following decades, but also the scattered instances of prominent science fiction filmmaking of the interwar such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and the Alexander Korda production *Things to Come* (1936) which both, nominally at least, depict cities of the future. Indeed, when Korda's chosen director, William Cameron Menzies, turned his hand back to the genre in the 1950s, it was with the contemporary-set alien incursion story *Invaders from Mars* (1953) that possesses an inescapably nightmarish quality quite distinct from the Wellsian progressivist message and technological rationalism – not to mention a timeline which stretches from the present day to a century in the future – of *Things to Come*.

More connections proliferate within the visual iconography of the genre. The city-desert of Metaluna doesn't just recall the 'mythic site of the bomb's arrival', but merges it with the sites of its devastation in Japan, as well as the war-torn ruins of Coventry and Dresden. With reference to the atomic bomb test sites in the Pacific, the films also employ the ocean and the shore as another set of

liminal spaces. It is the coastline which greets Ruth and Cal as they return to Earth and also Exeter as he crashes to his doom. Here, too, in the comfortable small boat belonging to his brother, is where Scott Carey encounters the radioactive mist that will transform his body, his life, and his understanding of existence. Beyond the specific films of this case study, many entries in the science-fiction genre in the period treat the encounter with the ocean, or bodies of water in general, as an encounter between the present and an almost literal deep time, such as: the eponymous beast in Warner Bros. picture *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), a title loaded with apocalyptic and revelatory allusion as well as referencing godfather of literary science fiction Jules Verne; [2] or the evolutionary 'missing link' from Universal's *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954); or, most famously, *Gojira/Godzilla, King of Monsters!* (1954/1956), in both its Japanese original and re-edited American versions. There is a significant appeal in connecting the cutting-edge innovation of the bomb, and its unprecedented destructive power, with the unleashing of ancient, primal forces out of the ocean – the most unpredictable and primal sphere of the natural world, which inevitably clashes with the industrially and technologically developed human world at the point where land and sea meet.

The representational value of the bomb (and associated scientific phenomena such as radiation) is therefore an endlessly variable focal point for the thematic interests of its era; it is a core symbol for an entire species of technological anxieties at the cusp of radical political and societal change. The science fiction films of the 1950s could, therefore, be schematized not as a mythology *of* the bomb, but as a mythology *around* the bomb – and around Hiroshima. As Kristeva notes, quoting from Margurite Duras's 1960 synopsis of Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour*, which Duras scripted:

> Because of what took place in history, there can be no artifice involving Hiroshima. Neither tragical nor pacifist artifice facing the atomic explosion, nor rhetorical artifice facing the mutilation of feelings. "All one can do is to speak of the impossibility of speaking of Hiroshima. The knowledge of Hiroshima is something that must be set down, a priori, as being an exemplary delusion of the mind." Hiroshima itself, and not its repercussions, is the sacrilege, the death-bearing event.[3]

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[2] Rival studio Disney released a period-set adaptation of Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (dir. Richard Fleischer, 1954) the following year, which features its own titanic creature in the form of the giant squid that attacks the *Nautilus*.

[3] Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 231; quotation from Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour, synopsis* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 10.

However, without the melancholic energy, the "despondency and the exhilaration" provided by the unveiling of this terrifying new wonder of technology,[4] Hollywood science fiction film appears to stall out for a brief period following its height in the late '50s.[5] While the genre did continue to evolve past this point, it did so slowly and haltingly. George Pal's 1960 version of *The Time Machine*, while standing on the edge of the new decade, feels rather like a relic in its attempt to articulate modern themes by resurrecting 19th century fictions and fears (as well as its production design) – just as *The War of the Worlds* did seven years earlier.

In this, *The Time Machine* was one of just a handful of 1960s science fiction films continuing directly on from 1950s trends (1964's *Fantastic Voyage* by Richard Fleischer, despite the distinctly '60s Cold War subplot, being another clear example). Notable in this context are Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) and François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), both explicitly dystopian works that also function as commentaries by French auteurs on American culture in general and Hollywood filmmaking specifically. The original 1968 *Planet of the Apes* therefore presents a significant tipping point for the genre in cinema following the relative lack of high-profile science fiction films during the early '60s, saving the reveal of its setting as a post-apocalyptic, post-nuclear future Earth for its final moments in order to re-contextualise the adventure that has gone before as having occurred in a future dystopia. In attitude it stands in contrast to Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick's oblique-yet-optimistic vision in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, of the same year, which sees humans surpassing the Earth (and ourselves), rather than losing the planet to our ape brethren.[6] By 1968, the bomb has either already gone off long ago, or is finally rendered irrelevant against the cosmic scope of human destiny.

Histories

This thesis began with the joint projects of re-examining the meaning and value of science fiction films of the 1950s both in their own era and in the present day, and by means of this re-examination, articulating a distinct and well-supported position in the debate regarding the limits of the interpretation of media via close reading, particularly in its relationship to cultural context. Bordwell was, of course, correct to identify overly-definitive reflectionist arguments as being two-dimensional, monochromatic, and frequently circular.[7] However, a too-stringently sceptical

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[4] Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 9.

[5] While the genre did tail of towards the end of the decade, it was brought to the end with not only Duras and Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour*, but also Stanley Kramer's *On the Beach*, adapted from Nevil Shute's novel.

[6] This is, perhaps, a case of film catching up with its rival medium the television, which in the same period previously manifested various dystopian tales in *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964; created by future *Planet of the Apes* screenwriter Rod Serling) and *The Outer Limits* (1963-1965), which themselves serve as contrasts to the nascent utopianism of Gene Rodenberry's original *Star Trek* (1966-69).

[7] Bordwell, *The Poetics of Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 30.

approach, in which formalism serves not as a foundation for analysis but as a restriction, risks a similar kind of ahistoricism as the purely archetypal, structuralist reading. Acknowledgement of internal conventions and concerns within the industry, within filmmaking practice itself, are surely necessary to approaching a film with any understanding, but these too exist in the particular context of the evolution of the industry, which is not always defined by, but nevertheless has a relationship with, broader social and political dynamics. Certainly, to insist that a feature film can be distilled to one simple, clean statement of what it says about its contemporary moment is also, in its way, limiting. A valuable distinction to be drawn here is between attempting to isolate in a linear fashion what a film is *saying*, and engaging in a broader analysis of what it is *doing*. It is significant in this light that even individual films of the corpus, as we have established, demonstrate ambivalence and internal contradiction, that they revel in the pulp adventure and special effects so indelibly associated with the genre, but also demonstrate significant anxiety and, indeed, melancholy regarding the impact of technology on society. This is apparent not just in the deliberate political critique of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and the social commentary of *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, but in the pulp adventure of *Them!*'s bug hunt and *This Island Earth*'s alien conspiracy, or the attempts to translate older texts into the visual language of fifties sci-fi, as in the cases of *The War of the Worlds* and *Forbidden Planet*.

One of the key critiques Bordwell makes of reflectionist criticism is the lack of attention given to the lag between production and release of a film, and reading an individual picture as a response to the immediate circumstances of its release will almost invariably prove misleading.[8] However, there is a degree to which culture and history are always already engaged with the process of responding to and digesting the events of recent years – if there can be said to be a Zeitgeist, it will always be a haunting of one kind or another. That films *necessarily* churn up, reproduce, filter through recent history does not have to be considered a weakness in their utility as cultural and historical artefacts, as well as texts in their own right, but a potential strength in the unveiling of history-as-process. This extends not just towards consideration of the temporalities of film production in a linear sense, but also laterally, embracing the enclaves, the cul-de-sacs, the dead-ends and recessive genes of culture and history, as well as those details and experiences which were consciously or subconsciously repressed or held at a distance. The broad sweep of films from a single period will never comprehensively share a single nature, because even in an era of conformity and avowed centrism such as the '50s, as we have seen, the character of a culture or nation at a particular point will never itself be singular, total, or monodirectional. In a sense, this is a similar

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[8] Bordwell, *The Poetics of Cinema*, p. 31.

wrestling with issues of scale such that had been creeping from scientific study into popular consciousness since the dawn of the 20th Century, which came to its incalculably momentous culmination at the end of the Second World War – the same wrestling with the significance of the minute detail against the systemic and universal that is most strikingly characterised through Scott's struggle in *The Incredible Shrinking Man*.

For Rudolf Arnheim, writing in response to Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film*, itself published in 1960 and necessarily a response to the development of the medium over the past decade as much as its earlier history, such issues were not abstract, but at the centre of the complicated, sometimes contradictory relationship between filmic representation and reality itself:

> To the best of our understanding we live in a world in which the constellations of basic forces run the gamut from the simplest order to unfathomable complexity. At the particular level of magnitude, located between the atomic and the astronomic realm, to which man's senses are geared, nature tends to be characterized by high complexity. But whether in trying to answer the question: What is reality? we look at what is close at hand or what is remote, apparent to the eye or hidden, superficial or essential, shaped or unshaped, is, of course, a matter of philosophical outlook or, aesthetically, of style.[9]

Thus, we look to detail that is specific to the genre and the medium, but it is this specificity that is itself so vital and revealing. There *is* something quite distinctive about the period we define as the 1950s, about the media produced within it, and the particular spectrum of representational and stylistic choices to be found therein – and this exactly because of the era's inevitable complexity, the strands of progressivism mixed in with the dominant centrism and conservativism. These points of friction are not, as Bordwell insists, damaging to a properly established historical reading, but rather they are among the most revealing of details, especially in the context of the precarious, but still influential, financial and production system of Hollywood. 'Fifties' science fiction film does not show us *the world* as it was in 1950s, but rather, a particular proliferation of representations, of *worlds*, and realities, that overlap and conflict both with each other and the historical moment.

Here we encounter one of the fundamental problems that remains at the centre of the conflict between historical and structural approaches. If, as we propose, the frivolous fun and earnest fervour of these films belies a more deeply seated melancholy that is distinctive and revealing of the period, then what of the relationship between culture and melancholy in other periods and eras? Is such melancholy not simply an essential feature of human society and culture that reveals itself through the reiteration of certain structures? This could also be seen as a variation

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[9] Rudolf Arnheim, 'Melancholy Unshaped', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 21, No. 3, (Spring 1963), p. 292.

of the same issue that affects, and attempts to disarm, eco- and nuclear- criticism. Shapiro was not incorrect to point out the recurring fascination with the apocalyptic imagination, that nearly every generation imagines itself as the last.[10] Yet, in the late 2010s, it has become only more apparent that the end of the world, or at least human civilisation, is not only scientifically possible, but plausible in a way distinct from previous eras, if not through the continuous haunting of nuclear warfare, then through ecological devastation wrought by our highly technologized global society. Indeed, as Caputi's argues, the melancholia of the 1950s hardly stayed within the '50s, and "had acquired a dense layering of mythological meanings and metaphoric overtones" in the timespan between that decade and her writing in the early 2000s.[11] There always-already melancholic quality of the 1950s, which these films have been show to clearly demonstrate, is precisely what makes them to mythically ripe, so that "There is virtually no slippage between what *actually* happened and what they *wish* happened" for the American neoconservatives of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.[12]

For Arnheim, writing in the early 1960s, the melancholic mood envelops perhaps the whole modern era, and can be traced back through works such as Eliot's *Prufrock* and the paintings of Monet and the impressionists, back to, perhaps, the beginning of the 'photographic' age, per Kracauer:

> Now melancholy as an inner disposition not only makes elegiac objects seem attractive but carries still another, more important implication: it favors self-estrangement, which on its part entails identification with all kinds of objects. The dejected individual is likely to lose himself in the incidental configurations of his environment, absorbing them with a disinterested intensity no longer determined by his previous preferences.[13]

One could certainly construct a reading of Scott Carey's psychology in *The Incredible Shrinking Man* based on such a notion of melancholy, with the way household objects increasingly threaten to overwhelm him, as the fabric and texture of physical materiality itself becomes both monolithic and insubstantial, while his self-loathing is turned outwards onto his family. In this context we may reconsider Arnheim's suggestion that Kracauer's observation, "valid for individuals, also applies to phases of civilization", from the perspective constructed through the films.[14]

For Arnheim, such phases are not a matter of decades or of generations, but are broader, over-arching structures for defining the development and character of civilisation, in which a

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[10] Jerome F. Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 4-6.
[11] Mary Caputi, *A Kinder, Gentler America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 1
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 6
[13] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, as quoted in Arnheim, 'Melancholy Unshaped', p. 295.
[14] Arnheim, 'Melancholy Unshaped', p. 295.

moment such as the '50s is, precisely, just a moment - a mere crest of a wave, to return once more to Braudel's characterisation of history.[15] Scott Carey himself, as a construction, as a representation, does not embody in himself completely the psyche of modernity, or even the briefer period of the 1950s. Indeed, he is conspicuously separated from society – and yet, this alienation is itself what connects him to the character of his time in history, while his ultimate refusal of elegiac obsession moves him past this reflexive dynamic in what is, ultimately, a moment of pure wish-fulfilment. Meanwhile, his predicament, the very off-handedness of the manner in which it occurs, the assumption of the audience's understanding in both the pseudo-magical power of nuclear phenomena to transform, and the specific social and cultural implications of his transformation, are all inflections born of such a moment as the '50s, sketching out the borders of broader concerns of modernity (and the early stages of the postmodern), while calling upon older, archetypal, mythic storytelling. Such connections are not all necessarily conscious, but they are born of *use*, of a process of assemblage of detail from whatever was to hand; a bricolage.

Films examined in this way therefore do not present us with a monad of the contemporary cultural universe that somehow contains the whole reality and nature of the historical moment in miniature. They convey a feeling, or rather, they locate a node in a complex and overlapping structure of feelings – of loneliness and hope, defiance and despondency. Such emotions are not, naturally, unique to the era, but the texture and flavour of their portrayal, of their representation is shaped and inflected through detail born of historical and cultural specifics. Almost in spite of themselves, the science fiction films of the 1950s can carry significant messages from their era forward to the present day, whether through the reiteration of romance and nascent family dynamics forming against the backdrop of technological warfare and dead or dying civilisations, or the distinct experience of alienation endured by an extra-terrestrial diplomat or a would-be breadwinning husband compromised by an improbable physical condition. Exactly by juxtaposing the mundane and the fantastic, the intimate and the infinite, these films use the glamour of the cosmic and the opportunity for grand adventure to tell both political parables that can challenge political orthodoxy and escapist fables that thoughtlessly, but tellingly, reassert cultural norms.

Even those fables are, then, often unselfconsciously revealing. In this sense popular film, including – and to a degree, especially – science fiction film, is uniquely placed to isolate and capture both the excitement and the anxiety of its era. Here we do, however, strike against the element of the reflectionist argument that Bordwell claims is circular, and it is with due regard for this concern that this thesis has aimed to demonstrate how films are shaped by their context in a host of

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[15] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, trans. Siân Reynolds (London: Collins, 1972), p. 21

deliberate and unconscious ways, exactly because of, rather than despite, the degree of contingency involved in film design and production as it interacts with specific industrial and broader cultural systems. With science fiction this can be particularly distinct, as in such examples as the hiring of the Barrons to produce the 'score' for *Forbidden Planet*, which creates an intersection between artistic remediations of cybernetic theory and the process of film production and design. This in turn helps render the broader array of connections that emerge in the final narrative and formal construction of the film. Such intersections are created not just through the use of symbolism which draws on popular ideas – and, indeed, popular myths – of science and politics, but also in the specific attempt to depict the distant future or, as is common in this period of science fiction, a radical change to the present status quo.

In this sense Sontag was right to identify catastrophe as the central motif of the genre in this period. For such premises foreground the contemporary view of what is essential and what is ephemeral in civilisation and, significantly, reveal not only what is consciously thought of but also what is assumed, the unquestioned biases for the filmmakers as well as their deliberate speculations. The question is of whether the shaping of films by their environment can be determined or discussed is thus illuminated by how science fiction film is, specifically, informed by and reveals the era of its inception. Certainly, many of the films which have been discussed often attempt to dispel the conscious anxieties of their audiences, but to do so they must repeatedly invoke the very same spectres which they seek to exorcise, while leaving others unspoken and unaddressed – forcing the weight of the repressed onto the symbols available to the genre and the medium at this time. Here is a reflexive, contradictory action that, across the sum of the corpus and the genre, generates the surprisingly complex emotionality that underlies the ostensibly simplistic plots and characters of fifties science-fiction film.

Science Fictions

Science fiction cinema cannot help but be grounded in the perspective of its era, the specific iconographies and technologies of contemporary design, and the political and the historical contingencies surrounding them. To remove entirely the consideration of such texts from their context is to obscure the political concerns of the films and close off potentially fruitful avenues of investigation into their thematic and narrative construction. Sobchack was correct to notice that the genre's initial ascendency in cinema, what she acknowledges as its first 'Golden Age', was located at a crucial point in the history of the pre-eminent post-war superpower: "the first wave of the genre's popularity (in fact, its first mass articulation as a film genre) begins in the 1950s and emerges, we might now argue, as the first socially cinematic representation of late American capitalism's new

expansion toward its "purest" state."[16] This is, of course, what makes science fiction film so vital for Telotte, that:

> its ability to lay bare those attractions, to hold up that reason-science-technology triad for our inspection, to trace 'the unsaid and the unseen of culture,' particularly of a technological culture like modern America, presents a potent and, given the power of all technological culture, even a needed payoff.[17]

As has been observed throughout the analysis of this corpus of films, the genre in this period was not simply a straightforward celebration of American technology and ingenuity, of capability and know-how. Certainly, some threats are perceived as coming from without, as with the Martians of *War of the Worlds* and Metalunans of *This Island Earth*, from the unfathomably other as in *Them!*, or the intellectually compromised, as in the case of Morbius in *Forbidden Planet*. Yet from the very beginning of the period, films like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* reveal a profound disquiet with the new political technological regime, and although this film is often marked as an anomaly due to the seriousness with which it approaches the subject, this same disquiet can be detected in the origin of the ants of *Them!*, in the anxiety and melancholy within the modern technologized home in *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, and in the well-intentioned but misguided scientists of *This Island Earth* and *Forbidden Planet*. Even *The War of the Worlds* is sceptical towards, if not the effect of American technological infrastructure, then its ability to deal with a truly apocalyptic crisis.

A complex and contradictory awareness is mapped out by these films – that the most unsettling developments emerged with the dawning of an age of technological advancement that came not from abroad or beyond, but from home-grown American innovation that was so dearly prized: "the emphasis of such mapping … was predominantly on the fearsome and wondrous *novelty* and *strangeness* of this new technology – and on the new forms of cultural *alien-ation* generated by this technology and its entailment with 'a whole new economic world system.'"[18] They do not tend towards telling straightforward parables of technological triumph of a newly supreme nation over its enemies foreign and domestic, but rather show distinct caution and hesitancy towards the world being forged in the aftermath of the Second World War. This is not merely alarm over the global ideological rivalry that emerged in the aftermath of the conflicts of the first half of the century, but the very advancements that seemed to be allowing America to compete in such a sphere. The awesome power and awful threat of the technologized new world were, evidently, hard to separate.

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[16] Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 252.

[17] J. P. Telotte, *Science Fiction Film* (2001), p. 32, referencing Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy* (London: Methuen, 1981).

[18] Sobchack, *Screening Space*, p. 252 – formatting and emphasis in the original text.

As Sobchack herself concluded on this period of the genre: "The first "Golden Age" of the SF film, then, emerges coincidentally with the emergent cultural logic of late capitalism, and the genre's valuation of wariness and wonder articulate that logic as a new groundbreaking aesthetics."[19] Such ambivalence was evident in prior stages of technologized society, including in the interwar period, as dramatized most prominently in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. Indeed, in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', originally published in 1935, Walter Benjamin identified the core of such ambivalence in the mutual inadequacy of not just technology, but of human society and technology in their relationship to each other: "The destructiveness of war furnishes proof that society has not been mature enough to incorporate technology as its organ, that technology has not sufficiently developed to cope with the elemental forces of society."[20] That this ambivalence carries forward into the post-war period is not surprising, and far from suggesting an ahistorical mode of static concerns and anxieties, rather, it is suggestive of the same historical accumulation of horrors that continued during and after the time of Benjamin's writing – the Angel of History being swept ever-forward into the future.[21]

Of course, Hollywood science fiction is hardly engaged in the kind of politicization of art which Benjamin recommends in response to the rise of technofascism. Rather, it is exactly in their frequent desire to escape politics, to put off and shed worldliness, that the spectrum of ideologies that underpin the narratives of these films comes through. This is as clear in the rational utopianism of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* as it is in the millenarian apocalypticism of *The War of the Worlds*. This contradiction is a recurring feature of the genre. As La Valley observed, "The science fiction film seeks to bridge the present – often simply archetypal of surrogate characters with whom we can identify – with an alien or strange future and everything that belongs to the world of special effects." The value of the archetype for these films, then, is specifically as the material for La Valley's bridge between the present, known world and the promise – or threat – of the unknown. This is a period where the lines demarcating science fiction film from other genres, especially horror, had not yet fully formed. Many of the science fiction films of the era, both in this study's corpus and beyond, had their genealogy linked more strongly to the Universal Pictures monster of the thirties and forties than science fiction literature, *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) being only the most obvious example. While it is, of course, valid and vital to acknowledge the tendency of science fiction film to be diverted by, or caught up in, the latest Hollywood fashion or fad, to dismiss such examples – as

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[19] *Ibid*.
[20] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1999), trans. Harry Zorn, p. 235.
[21] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, p. 249.

Suvin did in his quest for identifying the heart of the genre in the idea of the *novum* – entirely for the sake of the formal and archetypal purity of the genre is to be unengaged in the actual process by which genre is articulated.[22] In tracing the evolution of the genre, it is important to embrace the points of overlap and convergence, to acknowledge the development of science fiction as, to a significant degree, a conversation. While there are clear divergence points in its history, the success of *Star Wars* (1977) being perhaps the most notable, such moments do not erase the existing conversation but, rather, build on top of it like geological strata.

This thesis therefore demonstrates that it is feasible to perform a historically-informed thematic analysis of a body of films within one period of a genre in film. After the era studied herein, there continues to be an oscillation between miscellaneous mythic forms and films that attempt to address their contemporary conditions, expressed through the language of science fiction. This will be schematized briefly, though further in-depth close reading would be required to determine the exact definition of these periods and their points of transition. If, as proposed above, Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1963) functions as the next of these moments of transition in science fiction cinema, then we might now consider the nature of that transition, and what comes next. There is potential in following the continued interaction of the melancholic and the mythic with the genre, and its relationship to historical context, as it develops through the second half of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries. One approach to identifying and examining the next period of study could therefore be to orientate it around the significant year of 1968, with its release of *Planet of the Apes* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which builds on an underlying millenarian, mythic vision of humanity's future. This could be taken as the centrepiece of a 'long 1960s' in science fiction film, exploring it as a mirror of one of the most turbulent years of the era, in the wider context of the ongoing escalation and eventual failure of American intervention in Vietnam.

The brief but significant influence of the French New Wave with Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) and Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) chimes with potential fortuitousness with the increasing geopolitical complexity of the period, as does the continued development of the 'arthouse SF film' with Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1971). Meanwhile, within an Anglo-American context, the melancholic strand develops into either the psychosis of Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange* (1971), or the genuine mourning and the explicit eco-criticism of Douglas Trumbull's *Silent Running* (1972). This approach may be continued forward into subsequent periods. *Star Wars* therefore could be considered to mark the beginning of both a postmodern and a post-Vietnam SF cinema that continues through the

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[22] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 63-69.

1980s, in which the mythic subtext of the genre becomes explicit text while the melancholic either fades into the background,[23] or merges with the gothic-noir of Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982). By the 1990s this might be regarded as evolving into hyperreal science fiction, accompanied by the increasing shift to CGI effects, with its return of the 1950s alien invasion film through psychotic parody and bombastic pastiche in Tim Burton's *Mars Attacks!* and Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996),[24] in which the potential psychosis of the melancholic and the self-aggrandizing traits of the mythic are taken to their logical extremes.[25]

This period culminates in Alex Proyas's *Dark City* (1998) and the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* (1999), before the shift that the occurs both in the culture and in the genre post-9/11, which leads to explicitly melancholic and mournful films such as Steven Spielberg's return to the genre with a new *War of the Worlds* (2005), as well as Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), and Danny Boyle's *Sunshine* (2007), whose reckoning with both the War on Terror and renewed ecological concerns has its own distinct tenor.[26] From the cusp of the 2010s there can be seen a consolidation of this partially bifurcated, but not fully separable, state of the genre where the mass-populist science-fiction action movie, particularly in the form of the SF-inflected superhero film,[27] exists simultaneously alongside a distinct form of 'prestige' science-fiction cinema.[28] Though the domination of branding and the franchise in current Hollywood filmmaking is evident in both strands (as demonstrated by Denis Villeneuve's 2017 *Blade Runner* sequel), there are also shared thematic

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[23] This has shifted in later iterations of the franchise, particularly recent sequels *The Force Awakens* (2015) and *The Last Jedi* (2017), precisely because they do remediate the past so explicitly.

[24] Though this return had its predecessors in the last two decades with films such as the respective remakes of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978) and *Invaders from Mars* (1986). However, Susan A. George notes something distinct about "the return of the bad alien and the touting of conservative ideology in 1990s invasion films." Susan A. George, *Gendering Science Fiction Films* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 164.

[25] As Liz Hedgecock observes, even Jack Nicholson's President Dale "cannot hope to match the impact of the Martians who, quite literally, steal the show. This alien mastery of the form implies televisions invasive extraterrestrial status." In '"The Martians Are Coming!": Civilisation v. Invasion in *The War of the Worlds* and *Mars Attacks!*", *Alien Identities: Exploring Differences in Film and Science Fiction*, eds. Deborah Campbell, I. Q. Hunter, Heidi Qaya, and Imelds Whelehan (London: Pluto Press, 1999), p. 114.

[26] This period also saw a parallel rise in prominence of mythic-invoking fantasy films, most prominently Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003) and the beginning of Warner Bros' *Harry Potter* series (2001-2011), as well as marking a new phase in the expansion of the superhero film with the first of 20th Century Fox's *X-Men* (2000-2006) and Sony Pictures' *Spider-Man* (2001-2007) trilogies, among others.

[27] Perhaps most explicitly manifested in Zach Snyder's 2013 Superman film *Man of Steel*, which clearly attempted to position itself as a first contact/alien invasion film in both its marketing and the tone of the narrative.

[28] Christopher Nolan's work is one significant influence on the recent evolution of both sides of the genre, with his *Dark Knight* trilogy (2005-2012) helping to codify the current model for the superhero film, while *Inception* (2011) and *Interstellar* (2014) have done the same for the contemporary prestige SF film, demonstrating how closely these two modes are, in fact, aligned.

resonances. These frequently centre, explicitly, the experience of personal trauma and grief alongside a broader concern for the fate of both the planet and its human inhabitants, from Marvel-Disney's *Avengers* mega-franchise to Alex Garland's metaphysical eco-thriller *Annihilation* (2018), bringing to the forefront the undertones of the mythic and the melancholic that dates back to the genre's first real emergence in cinema in the 1950s.

At the end of his cautionary missive to an imagined alien audience, I. F. Stone frames the prospective expansion of humanity into the heavens as, itself, just such a catastrophe: "They may soon be transferring to outer space the hates that in every generation have brought suffering to the earth. It might be wise to stop them now, on the very threshold of the open and as yet unpolluted skies." Here there are have hints of both the future and the recent past of science fiction, from *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and the warnings of Klaatu, to later science-fiction films as varied as *Planet of the Apes* and *The Matrix*, which frame humanity itself as verminous, an invasive species.[29] Stone himself refers to humans as "a creature not to be trusted with the free run of the universe".[30] Again his language is evocative and instructive in its use of genre imagery as a cultural reference point, putting human beings in the role of the 'creature' that threatens an untainted paradisal world, the 'as yet unpolluted skies' rest of the universe. A deep melancholy imbues this construction of humanity's relationship with the universe, a sense of mourning not only for the past, but also, impossibly and inevitably, for the un-glimpsed future. Here in the confusion and conflation of the self with the monstrous, of technology and science with superstition and prejudice, of progress with collapse, is reflected the same buried, melancholic heart of a repressed, naïve, paranoiac, dissenting, compromised, imaginatively spectacular, formulaically structured, conservative, transgressive, self-excoriating and self-validating genre of cinematic storytelling – whose inadequacies are themselves revelations.

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[29] In both cases, this framing is offered by a species or intelligence that has risen up and supplanted humanity as dominant hegemon of Earth, with an obvious interest in keeping humans suppressed – allowing cinema audiences in both the late '60s and the late '90s to entertain the notion of humans-as-vermin, but also to dismiss it as, essentially, anti-human propaganda.
[30] I. F. Stone, 'A Note to the Universe', *The Haunted Fifties* (London: The Merlin Press, 1964), p. 3.

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Alphaville. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard. France: Athos, 1965.

The Amazing Colossal Man. Directed by Bert I. Gordon. USA: American Pictures, 1957.

Annihilation. Directed by Alex Garland. UK/USA: Paramount, 2018.

Ant-Man. Directed by Peyton Reed. USA: Walt Disney, 2016.

Attack of the 50 Foot Woman. Directed by Nathan Juran. USA: Allied Artists, 1958.

The *Avengers* Franchise. Directed by Joss Whedon and Anthony & Joe Russo. USA: Paramount/Walt Disney, 2012-2019.

Beginning of the End. Directed by Bert I. Gordon. USA: Republic, 1957.

Blade Runner. Directed by Ridley Scott. USA: Warner Bros., 1982.

Blade Runner 2049. Directed by Denis Villeneuve. USA: USA: Warner Bros., 2017.

Children of Men. Directed by Alfonso Cuarón. UK/USA: Universal, 2006.

A Clockwork Orange. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. UK/USA: Warner Bros., 1971.

Columbo. USA: Universal Television, 1972-2003.

Conquest of Space. Directed by Byron Haskin. USA: Paramount, 1955.

Creature from the Black Lagoon. Directed by Jack Arnold. USA: Universal, 1954.

The *Dark Knight* Trilogy. Directed by Christopher Nolan. UK/USA: Warner Bros., 2006-2012.

Dark City. Directed by Alex Proyas. Australia/USA: New Line Cinema, 1999.

The Day the Earth Stood Still. Directed by Robert Wise. USA: 20th Century Fox, 1951.

The Deadly Mantis. Directed by Nathan Juran. USA: Universal, 1958.

Destination Moon. Directed by Irving Pichel. USA: Eagle-Lion, 1950.

Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. USA: Columbia, 1964.

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Fantastic Voyage. Directed by Richard Fleischer. USA: 20th Century Fox, 1966.

Flash Gordon. Directed by Frederick Stephani. USA: Universal, 1936.

Five. Directed by Arch Oboler. USA, Columbia Pictures: 1951.

The Fly. Directed by Kurt Neumann. USA: 20th Century Fox, 1958.

Forbidden Planet. Directed by Fred McLeod Wilcox. USA: MGM, 1956.

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The *Harry Potter* Series. Directed by Christopher Columbus, Alfonso Cuarón, Mike Newell, and David Yates. UK/US: Warner Bros., 2001-2011.

High Treason. Directed by Maurice Elvey. UK: Gaumont British, 1929.

Hiroshima mon amour. Directed by Alain Resnais. France: Pathé, 1959.

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Inception. Directed by Christopher Nolan. UK/USA: Warner Bros., 2011.

Independence Day. Directed by Roland Emmerich. USA: 20th Century Fox, 1996.

The Incredible Shrinking Man. Directed by Jack Arnold. USA: Universal, 1957.

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Interstellar. Directed by Christopher Nolan. UK/USA: Paramount, 2014.

Invaders from Mars. Directed by William Cameron Menzies. USA: 20th Century Fox, 1953.

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Invasion of the Body Snatchers. Directed by Don Siegel. USA: Allied Artists, 1956.

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The Invisible Boy. Directed by Herman Hoffman. USA: MGM, 1957.

It Came from Outer Space. Directed by Jack Arnold. USA: Universal, 1953.

The *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy. Directed by Peter Jackson. New Zealand/USA: New Line Cinema, 2001-2003.

Lost in Space. USA: 20th Century Fox Television, 1965-1968.

Man of Steel. Directed by Zach Snyder. UK/USA: Warner Bros., 2013.

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Metropolis. Directed by Fritz Lang, 1927. Germany: Ufa, 1927.

Minority Report. Directed by Steven Spielberg. USA: 20th Century Fox, 2002.

The Outer Limits. USA: United Artists Television, 1963-1965.

Outland. Directed by Peter Hyams. UK: Warner Bros., 1981.

On the Beach. Directed by Stanley Kramer. USA: United Artists, 1959.

Planet of the Apes. Directed by Franklin B. Schaffner. USA: 20ᵗʰ Century Fox, 1968.

Rocketship X-M. Directed by Kurt Neumann. USA: Lippert, 1950.

Samson and Delilah. Directed by Cecil B. DeMille. USA: Paramount, 1949.

Silent Running. Directed by Douglas Trumbull. USA: Universal Pictures, 1972.

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Star Wars. Directed by George Lucas. USA: 20ᵗʰ Century Fox, 1977.

Star Wars: The Force Awakens. Directed by JJ Abrams. USA: Walt Disney, 2015.

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Sunshine. Directed by Danny Boyle. UK/USA: 20ᵗʰ Century Fox, 2007.

Tarantula! Directed by Jack Arnold. USA: Universal Pictures, 1955.

Them! Directed by Gordon Douglas. USA: Warner Bros. 1954.

The Thing from Another World. Directed by Christian Nyby. USA: RKO Radio, 1951.

Things to Come. Directed by William Cameron Menzies. UK: United Artists 1936.

This Island Earth. Directed by Joseph M. Newman. USA: Universal, 1955.

The Time Machine. Directed by George Pal. USA: MGM, 1960.

The Twilight Zone. USA: CBS Productions, 1959-1964.

The War of the Worlds. Directed by Byron Haskin. USA: Paramount, 1953.

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When Worlds Collide. Directed by Rudolph Maté. USA: Paramount, 1951.

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