# Spectacles of Disaster

***"This nightmare — the one reflected in various registers in the science fiction films —is too close to our reality."***

SCIENCE FICTION FILMS were never the same after atomic bombs were revealed at the end of World War II. The Bomb enlarged the popular imagination of disaster and seemed to remove any limits on destruction. Ray guns and other fabulous weaponry, and aliens with a master plan to subjugate Earth, were stand-ins for the new historical realities of a possible nuclear holocaust (many Americans expected it) and the sinister expansion of communism (sure to one day dominate the world if not contained). The films became allegories for anxiety over those realities. Protecting democracy and Earth were one and the same thing.

It was a continual threat — war that could annihilate us, an enemy that could subjugate us, and radiation that transfigured anything it came in contact with.




## It Could Come at Any Time

We lived under continual threat in the 1950s. That was clear to me as my childhood began to have its own reality. In part, it was a reality created from watching *Science Fiction Theater* in our TV room, and any other films of alien invasion, wholesale destruction, and radiation that were featured in our small town movie house. I saw visual narratives of the larger social narratives of atomic energy and America as a superpower locked in a struggle over the fate of the world with another, exceptionally evil, superpower.

Most of the grown ups around me shared those narratives. But science fiction movies were intended for me, the "younger audience." Film historian Andrew Dowdy recalls, "Every Saturday night we witnessed the latest hostile surprise created by an environment more capriciously malignant than anything [Senator Joseph] McCarthy promised in his most lunatic moment."

***"The trauma suffered was that from now on to the end of human history, every person would spend his individual life under the threat of not only of individual death, which is certain, but of something almost insupportable psychologically — collective incineration and extinction that could come at any time."***

Susan Sontag included that observation in her landmark essay on science fiction films of the 1950s, "The Imagination of Disaster." She saw the films as an "intersection between a naive and largely debased commercial art product and the most profound dilemmas of the contemporary situation." They are not about science, she argues, they are about disaster and "the aesthetics of destructions." With the end of human history possible, they "reflect powerful anxieties" and "a hopeful fantasy of moral simplification."

## Avoiding Terrible Ends

Postwar science fiction films cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the Bomb (nor can postwar America). It represented the new supreme power, but not a god, and not like anything before. This was a machine in which we all had to find our place.

By the 1950s, Robert Oppenheimer's prediction that atomic bombs would become "terribly more terrible" had come true. As a technology for destruction and killing, hydrogen bombs dwarfed the atomic bombs used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki (as far as I could make out, that was pretty terrible).

In the films, disaster is the first order of bad endings. (It was assumed to be certain in a real world nuclear war.) Disaster typically falls on cities, but sometimes it strikes small towns first, before heading toward the cities. (But in the real world, no one was going to waste nukes on the countryside.)

Subjugation to communism is another terrible end. The Soviet Union was armed with nuclear weapons and clearly expansionist. No American foreign policy objective was more important than containing their expansion. On film, there seemed to be no end to alien invaders from space.

Finally, there might be the loss of our humanity itself. Purged of emotions and left without volition, the individual psyche is under threat. It reflects the perceived communist threat, but perhaps also the mass conformity in postwar America. (Film noir and "teenage rebellion" movies, with atomic warfare lurking beneath the surface, also left cinematic marks in the 1950s.)

Hiroshima, August 1945

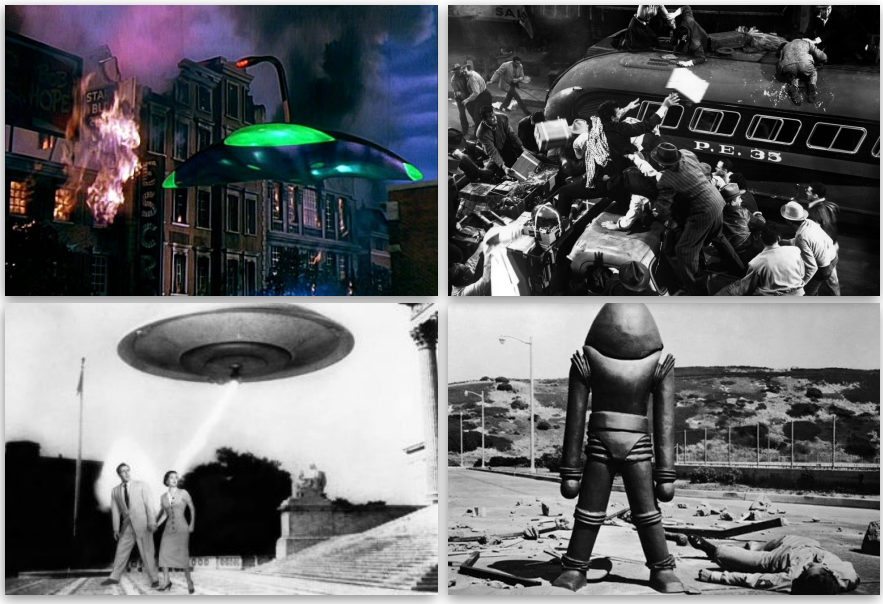

Movie poster for *When Worlds Collide*

Science fiction films provided a preview of all three possibilities: collective extinction, subjugation, dehumanization. Terrible ends, to be sure, but presented in morally simple frameworks with usually happy endings.

The first two of the terrible ends are nearly always avoided because there is "a morally simple framework" with brilliant scientists working closely with the somewhat befuddled military, loyal teamwork all around, and heroic ordinary citizens who struggle and resist being taken over, even in the face of uncertain futures.

**Machines and things were the sources of power; humans were panicked victims and the military helpless — unless science could find a solution.**

(*War of the Worlds* and *Earth Vs The Flying Saucers)*



## What You Will See

Based on childhood memories (with a debt to Sontag), I will try to offer glimpses into those visual narratives of the Atomic Age.

Expect hostile surprises, and a scientist-hero assisting a military response; picturesque holocausts and technological spectacle.

Expect to see cities collapsing, wide-spread panic, and mass evacuations.

Expect to see beasts —really big ones — awakened from underground and undersea, and going on destructive rampages.

Expect tales of dehumanization and the taking over of bodies and minds.

Expect cliches about power, knowledge, freedom, and social responsibility.

At some point, expect someone to say, "I hope it works!"

### *Invasion and Warfare*

In the 1950s, Americans still saw World War II as the "good war," a morally unambiguous fight between good and evil. They still liked old-fashioned warfare: foot soldiers, tanks and jeeps, big artillery guns, aerial dogfights, battleships. If there was to be another war, and most Americans believed there would be, then people wanted it to be a good war, fought in the old forms.

The Cold War provided a fitting context of good versus evil. The problem was that the next war would likely a nuclear war, fought by a relative handful of men and a few dozen planes. It would be a war to end all wars because it would end all of civilization. There was anxiety over that part of it.

Science fiction films were entertaining allegories for those anxieties. There are mysterious or sinister enemies, whether Earth-based or extraterrestrial, that can invade

without compunction or mercy. There is an abundance of destruction, or if not destruction, then a plan for some kind of takeover. The takeover usually starts with a few individuals, maybe one's parents, then the whole town, and then, if it is not stopped, whole cities. All of humanity might be subjugated to *communism* — excuse me, I meant to say *alien invaders*.

There are spectacles of combat that faithfully transfer old forms of war into a context of new technologies with unlimited destructive powers. The battleships are in space, and pilots are in aerial dogfights out there. Artillery-sized ray guns take down buildings while cities collapse under formations of alien spaceships. On the ground, troops are mobilized and there are casualties.

Technology — things and machines — is the source of power. Panicked humans run through the streets, doomed unless scientists come up with a technology by which to fight back, or find a weakness in the invaders.

### *The Scientist*

Harry Truman told Americans they won "a battle of the laboratories" in World War II because "scientists harnessed the power of the sun" to make a bomb. Scientists were now essential to the national defense. As in the Cold War, so it was in science fiction films.

A standard theme is the proper use of science versus the errant scientist gone awry, possibly mad. That was not a new theme. Before we knew about atomic energy we knew about the

The errant scientist approaches the alien in the name of science —*The Thing from Another World*

likes of Dr. Frankenstein and his monster, and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. But admiration and fear of the scientist is located in a new context in these allegories. His or her sphere of influence, and the reach of any monsters, is no longer personal, the village, or the far away city. It is planetary, cosmic.

A characteristically American mistrust of the intellect is visited upon the scientist. He is liable to crack up and go off the deep end. He may become a martyr to his own discovery through a terrible accident, or he may push things too far. Sometimes, the errant scientist (usually not particularly attractive) is fatally seduced by the superior science of the invaders and goes over to the other side. Even if his motives seem to be purely about science, and not about power, it never ends well for the scientist, and is a setback in the campaign against the aliens.

Generally, scientific enterprise is deemed to be good if it is a response to danger, and done in loyal teams coordinating with the military. That gives it the certificate of utility.

**Beasts are roused!**

**Alien things come for body and mind!**

**Warn the world!**

(*Gojira*, *Them!*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Thing from Another World*)


Disinterested intellectual or scientific curiosity is not supported.

Another marker is that good scientists are always physically attractive. If they come in pairs — man and woman — they are a glamorous couple with at least a seed, if not a full bloom, of romance between them.

Good scientists always attend to domestic relationships (wife and family, or girlfriend). Their loved ones may be menaced, but in the end, when the invaders have been repulsed, no lasting harm comes to them. There are exceptions to this, but only a very few.

Lastly, keep an eye out for the erstwhile newsman, who is often the friend and fellow-traveler of scientist. He also sees the danger and stays put, issuing a warning to the world. In the final scene from *The Thing from Another World*, it is the newsman, Scotty, who speaks into the radio transmitter from the frozen regions of the arctic to warn the world.

***"I bring you a warning: Everyone of you listening to my voice, tell the world, tell this to everybody wherever they are. Watch the skies. Everywhere. Keep looking. Keep watching the skies."***

### *Strange Creatures*

In the days and weeks after atomic bombs were used in Japan, American headlines referred to atomic weaponry as a potential Frankenstein's monster. Such fearsome weaponry might be turned on its makers.

In the films, prehistoric beasts lie hidden deep in the earth or under the sea and can be roused by nuclear testing, or perhaps by the the power of radiation which horribly transfigures anything it silently, invisibly touches — nuclear survivors, atomic spies, alien invaders, ordinary men in the wrong place at the wrong time, even lowly insects.

Ishiro Honda's 1954 *Gojira* (*Godzilla* to American audiences) is the world's most

famous awakened *kaiju*—Japanese for "strange creature." It was science fiction from the ones who got bombed. For many it was the cultural embodiment of American nuclear hubris, a cautionary tale about atomic power gone awry. Gojira brutally made his point.

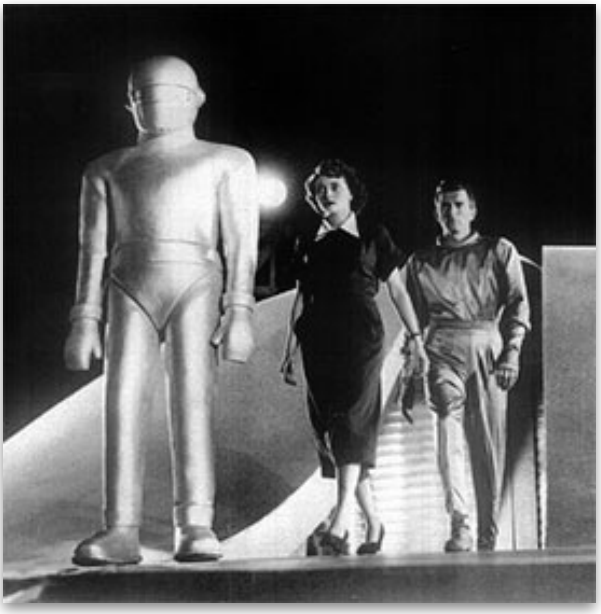
***The Takeover***

As the Cold War settled in, science fiction fused anxiety about the communist threat with fear of atomic war. A new theme emerged: the loss of individuality and social disintegration. Heroes and heroines struggled against the threat of dehumanization.

> ***"No more love, no more pain, no emotion."***

The possibility of world domination by the Soviet Union was the most obvious historical anxiety at work, but it was not the only source of anxiety. Take the age-old fear of losing our mind, or being possessed by way of a dark art, and add new ingredients. Add the increasing expectations of conformity, loyal teamwork, and depersonalization in postwar urban America. Then add the belief that a successful communist attack was made more likely by society's lethargy. A new brew has been boiled. It was a sauce for mixed attitudes toward the individual and expressions of personality, especially evident in body take-over films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *Invaders from Mars*.

> ***They're here! And you're next!"***



Klaatu and Gort, and the good mother, Helen — *The Day the Earth Stood Still*

***The Good Alien***

Sometimes (though not often) aliens turn out to be good people. A personal favorite is the paternal classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Klaatu —tall, handsome, fatherly — comes to Earth to warn everyone about continuing a reckless arms race.

He is, of course, treated with suspicion by the government and hostility by the military, who mobilize in tanks and jeeps and manage to shoot him twice (he can supranaturally heal himself). He is befriended, of course, by a mother and her young son, and by an international assembly of good scientists.

In the end, good prevails in a sort of UN fantasy and he delivers his message.

> ***"You are irresponsible children whose powers exceed your wisdom. Grow up, or stop playing with fire."***

## The Plot

In her essay, Sontag suggests "The typical science fiction film has a form as predictable as a Western." She outlines a primary scenario, for which there are variations.

**Arrival — spaceships, suspicious persons or organisms, beasts. etc. usually witnessed by just one person, often a young scientist, sometimes a young boy. No one believes him.**

**Confirmation of Arrival — witnessed by others as extraordinary destruction or sinister activity, confirming that they are here and we are in danger.**

**Conferences — usually between scientists and the military. The president is informed and an emergency declared. Authorities from other countries might rush to America (aliens nearly always strike America first) while the military rushes toward the threat in tanks and jeeps (a nod to old methods of warfare).**

**More Destruction — cities are destroyed and evacuated, there are atrocities. This is a setback for the military. The scientist-hero's wife and family or girlfriend might be in grave danger.**

**More Conferences — there must some vulnerability or new technology that will turn the tide of battle. Sure enough, the scientist(s) comes up with it and informs the military, which bounces back and takes new and efficacious action.**

**Victory — in the end, democracy, along with all of humanity, is saved. But there is often a question left unanswered at the end of the movie.**

***Will they come back again?***

No one believes he saw a spaceship land — *Invaders from Mars*

Witnesses to "the blanks" arm themselves— *Invasion of the Body Snatchers (In Mary Shelley's novel, Frankenstein, villagers armed themselves with pitchforks when the monster approached.)*

Alien with superhuman power is destroyed — *The Thing from Another World*