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"The Day the Earth Stood Still": 1950's Sci-Fi, Religion and the Alien Messiah

Abstract

The Day the Earth Stood Still is a unique film for its time. From a secular point of view, it was one of the first to not portray aliens as the enemy. From a spiritual point of view, it has many similarities to the gospel accounts of the public life and teachings of Jesus. This essay will consider the religious significance of this film (both in its historical context and the present), comparing it to similar works and contrasting it with the beliefs of a number of New Age movements. The main character, Klaatu, will then be considered as a possible archetype of the 'Alien Messiah.'

The Day the Earth Stood Still is one of the classic science fiction films of the 1950s. For a film released in 1951, it far outshines the other films available at the time or in the following years of the science fiction film boom. Not only was it entertaining, but it had important religious dimensions, most if not all of which were ignored at the time. There will be four major sections to this exploration of the religious dimensions of this film. The first will compare the basic plot and ideas with the normal way in which 1950s science fiction films progressed, demonstrating the uniqueness of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Coupled with this will be an examination of how the world of the 1950s is portrayed, which will help show why the film exhibited certain characteristics, and how those characteristics relate to the religious concepts it portrays.

Secondly the parallels between the life of Jesus and Klaatu (the alien in the film) will be enumerated. This will demonstrate the valid relationship between the film and the life of a messianic figure, thereby showing that Klaatu is an early model for the alien messiah.

The third part will briefly compare the film with other works of science fiction, specifically *Apostle from Space*, which deals with alien life forms and their relation to religion (Christianity). This will be used to show how the concepts of alien life and religion have been dealt with, and relate with each other, in the area of science fiction.

The final section of this essay will deal with the relationship between the film and UFO-based religions. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* constitutes the archetype for the concept of a "space brother (or sister)," the nature of the evolved, scientific alien society, and how aliens are going to save us from ourselves, usually from atomic weapons. Comparisons between the film and various movements of George Adamski, the Aetherius Society and the Brotherhood of the Sun. The greatest correlation between the *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and religion can be seen between many of these groups and the model advanced in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.

The Day the Earth Stood Still involves the landing of an alien space craft in Washington, with its crew, an alien diplomat, Klaatu, and a fearsome robot, Gort. In the ensuing confrontation the alien is shot while offering people a gift (believed by the soldiers to be a weapon). This causes the robot to begin attacking the soldiers, displaying its power. Klaatu stops this rampage and is taken to a military hospital, where he explains that he must be allowed to talk to leaders from all countries of the world. This proves futile as the various governments will not communicate due to the political climate, and Klaatu is held prisoner. Klaatu then escapes, and lives in the city for a short time, attempting to learn the behavior of humanity.

Earth is alien for Klaatu, and people fear him, because he is different. As a demonstration of his power, he cuts off all electricity to the world for one hour,

with the exception of essential services (hospitals and flying aeroplanes). Klaatu is then found, and killed. It is at this point that the religious overtones become obvious. He is brought back to life by the use of a machine on his space ship, and the power of the "All Mighty Spirit." He then delivers his message to assembled intellectuals from all over the world, who have gathered at his space ship, stating that the other planets of the galaxy will not allow the earth to interfere with their safety (due to our ownership and use of nuclear weapons and the Earth's warlike nature). To this end, humanity must submit to live peacefully, being watched over by the robots (like Gort) or be destroyed. After humbling the gathered people, he flies off into space and the film ends.

The Day the Earth Stood Still differs from many other 1950's science fiction films in one principal way; the 'alien menace' is not arriving for destruction or invasion (Lucanio, 1987, p 25), and the heroes and heroines of the film are not trying to defeat the Klaatu, but help him (Lucanio, 1987, pp 25-26). If anyone is a monster in the film it is humanity, which wounds and kills a messenger who is trying to show it the error of its ways. This concept of extraterrestrial beings being portrayed in a positive light is very important, as it sets the stage for religious movements based on the concept of alien life forms coming to contact humanity in a positive way, not for invasion.

The portrayal of 1950s society is also useful for examining religion, especially UFO (unidentified flying object) based religions. The paranoia surrounding UFOs began in the United States in 1947, with the first widely reported UFO sighting at Mount Rainier (Brosnan, 1978, p 73). This paranoia, coupled with that of the Cold War (which was closely related) can be seen in the film, with the lack of trust and the hostile treatment of Klaatu. This is significant, because of the similar paranoia relating to new religious movements, such as UFO based groups (especially in the wake of the Heavens Gate tragedy).

Similarly the power over life and death is portrayed as given by the "All Mighty Spirit", not technology. This connects with the strong notion of religion being the highest source of power. A prime example of this is the link between religion and politics in the history of the United States (Utter & Storey, 1995, p 1). It fits that, in the fairly conservative 1950's, religion, even in this science fiction film, was given the power over death. This is where the links to Christianity begin to emerge.

The narrative of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is very similar to many of the occurrences in the New Testament (Lucanio, 1987, p 26). One particular area in which this is evident is the concept of salvation. The aliens offer humanity a chance to be saved, despite humanity's obvious threat to them, and maltreatment of each other and Klaatu (Lucanio, 1987, p 26). This ties into the message of salvation

that is presented in the Bible, humanity being saved despite its guilt (Hebrews 10:8-22). This is one firm link between Christianity and the film.

Yet this is not the only similarity between *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and Christianity. The life of Jesus and the character of Klaatu have substantial similarities. The distrust of Jesus by those in control and power in Jewish society, in particular the Pharisees, is seen throughout the four Gospels. It is very similar to the distrust shown to Klaatu in the film, especially when the hunt for him begins. In both cases it culminates in the killing of the figure by the establishment, the crucifixion of Jesus (Matthew 27:26) and the shooting of Klaatu.

After being killed Klaatu is returned to life by the intervention of the "All Mighty Spirit". This is obviously similar to the resurrection of Jesus (Matthew 28:1-10). This is further enforced by both Klaatu and Jesus delivering important teachings after their resurrections (John 20:17 - 21:23). The final, blatant similarity in their lives was their way of leaving the Earth by rising up into the 'heavens.' Klaatu entered his ship and rose into the heavens. Jesus was "... carried up into heaven" (Luke 24:51).

Also demonstrations both of the power of God in the New Testament, and of the alien races in the film involve darkness descending. When Jesus was dying on the cross "... from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land ..." (Matthew

27:45). This bears a clear resemblance to the scene in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* where Klaatu cuts off all power over the world for an hour, plunging half the world into darkness.

The links or similarities between Klaatu and Jesus show that it was likely that Klaatu was modeled upon Jesus. This would indicate that Klaatu has many messianic qualities, which can lead to seeing him as an archetypal alien messiah. This demonstrates the ability of a powerful alien being portrayed as a messianic figure, and is similar to supposed 'real life' aliens that are in contact with various UFO based religions.

Christianity and alien life forms and their links have also been explored more openly in the works of science fiction authors. *Apostle from Space* by Gordon Harris (Parkin-Speer, 1985, p 93) contains a very similar character to Klaatu, although his background is Christian, with a similar mission. Yet it develops further. The alien states that our technology is flawed due to the fact that it is non-renewable (Parkin-Speer, 1985, p 101). Our science, based on secular concepts, is flawed compared with the technology of the aliens, with their strong faith in God (Parkin-Speer, 1985, pp 100-101). This indicates that through changing our belief and way of thinking, to a more harmonious one, humanity could excel. This is similar to *The Day the Earth Stood Still* idea that our warlike ways, nature and technology are holding us back from galactic acceptance.

This highlights an interesting idea, that technology (especially atomic weapons) is destructive and stops humanity's progress. Klaatu warns that it will cause the destruction of the Earth due to alien retaliation, as many people in the world actually believe. This technological apocalyptic idea ties in with the fourth major area, that of the UFO based religions.

The galactic society described by Klaatu in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* has evolved beyond the need for weapons and war, by creating their own robotic police force. This is a very social Darwinian approach to the moment and changes in society (Sharp, 1975, p 34). Herbert Spencer in his views of social Darwinism indicates that all of society's areas, including religion, evolve into higher forms (Sharp, 1975, p34). The reference by Klaatu to "All Mighty Spirit" invokes a sense of an evolved religion, and in the case of bringing back the dead, one that interacts with technology. From this, it seems that the religious component directly mentioned in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* seem to be a highly evolved form of spirituality, one which can interact with society through technology.

These links between spirituality and technology, combined with a technological apocalypse are evident in many of the 1950s contactee movements. World peace, harmony and an escape from the coming apocalypse were important to the early contactee movements (Hanegraaff, 1996, p 95).

George Adamski became the first real contactee, when he meets Orthon from Venus on the 20th of November 1952 (Ellwood, 1993, p 84). The conversations that Adamski had revolved around culture and religion of the Venusion people (Ellwood, 1993, p 86). The religion of the people of Venus is about "... the power of the mind over the body and relations with the cosmos ...” (Ellwood, 1993, p 86). There are two major points of interest here. Firstly the relationship between religion and the mind/body sits well with the resurrection of Klaatu by the "All Mighty Spirit.” Here the spirit has re-animated the mind and body of Klaatu. This demonstrates the significance of UFO-based religion having direct mental and physical effects on believers, which is also what is shown in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Secondly, and possibly more important, is the year of the first contact by Adamski, one year after the release of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. This, coupled with the belief by many that the teachings that the aliens gave Adamski sound very similar to previous teachings that Adamski had made in the 1930s and novels he had written in the 1940s (Ellwood, 1993, p 85), could indicate that *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, could have directly contributed to the formation of the background of Adamski's religious beliefs.

The second 1950s UFO-based group to be looked at will be the Aetherius Society, founded by George King in 1954, after being contacted by a voice from another planet (Ellwood, 1993, p 92). King did not meet with the aliens physically,

they contacted him telepathically and he also channeled their spirits (Evans, 1973, pp 152-153). Yet the aliens did travel in UFOs and more importantly, they warned of the danger of nuclear technology (Evans, 1973, pp 155-164). This ties in well with the example of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The use of UFOs is a minor point, the major one being that nuclear technology is a danger. This creates the apocalyptic expectation/warning that the alien beings give. This salvation from apocalypse is an important aspect, allowing for a higher purpose and guidance, both physically and spiritually (the need to change our ways).

Another relevant group is the Brotherhood of the Sun. This group was headquartered in California. Some of their basic beliefs involve the creation of the human race by alien life forms experimenting on Earth, they tie this in with Darwinian theories of evolution (Trompf, 1990b, p 42). This fits in with theorists such as Von Daniken and his view that humanity was created/visited by aliens in the past (Von Daniken, 1970). The important point for comparison here is that through technology from the aliens the Brotherhood of the Sun believes that paradise will exist on Earth after an apocalyptic event (Trompf, 1990b, p 44). This technology can be referred to as 'cargo' (Grunschloss, 1998, p 2). Trompf refers to this 'cargo' as a form of miraculous device which provides a form of security (Trompf, 1990a, p 11).

Such 'cargo' can be seen in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* with the device that was to be given as a gift to the president (and caused Klaatu to be shot) and the robot Gort. The robot in particular provides security, and can be seen to be a miraculous device, fitting well into the definition of cargo (Trompf, 1990a, p 11).

Similarly the use of technology in the apocalypse is an important part of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and is in many religions. Among some African-American Muslims in the United States there is a belief that the apocalypse will come in the form of a purifying attack by UFOs, allowing the Muslim population to inherit the Earth (Walker, 1990, pp 345-6). With this is the idea of an "Intergalactic Federation of Star Brothers" (Walker, 1990, p 381). This is very similar to the Ground Crew Project who believed that UFOs would destroy the Earth's weapons and would induct us into the "Galactic Federation" (GrunschloB, 1998, p 3), with the technology (cargo) linking religion and science (GrunschloB, 1998, p 8). This is an almost exact copy of what Klaatu describes as existing.

As can be seen above *The Day the Earth Stood Still* has many connections to various religious ideas. The film itself stands out for its uniqueness at its time of production, and for its portrayal of 1950s society. The religious elements really emerge when the life of Klaatu on Earth is compared with that of Jesus, and the many parallels can be seen. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* draws many parallels to the New Testament, and provides a prime example of an alien messiah, in the mold

of Jesus. This is extremely useful for comparison with existing UFO-based movements and their messianic leaders.

By comparing the film with other works of literature connections could be made in the treatment of aliens by other writers of religiously linked aliens, whether they are non-believers in a believer's world, or members of a universal Christian faith. *Apostle from Space* shows how an alien that is a believer in a universal faith would be accepted. This provides other models to compare Klaatu too, and can be used to add attributes to help formulate ideas on alien based religious members.

Finally by comparing *The Day the Earth Stood Still* to established, UFO-based religious movements it can be seen how archetypal Klaatu and the devices and ideas from *The Day the Earth Stood Still* are. This comparison painted the picture that the portrayal of the alien 'messiah' (Klaatu) in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* seems to be very close, both in word, deed and equipment, too many established UFO-based religions.

Overall *The Day the Earth Stood Still* gives a good example of how an alien messianic figure might act, and serves as an archetype for the aliens that are believed by some people to be in contact with various religious groups. The basic message is very similar, and the relation of technology between us and them fits in well with the ideas of the UFO-based religions.

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