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Intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic: Science, Religion, and The War of the Worlds - Part I

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Intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic: Science, Religion, and The War of the Worlds - Part I

Abstract

The War of the Worlds, which was scripted by Barré Lyndon and directed by Byron Haskin, reflects the Christian religiosity with which many of these films were charged—the overt references to a second Ark as humankind struggles to escape Earth in *When Worlds Collide* or the oft-repeated interpretation of Klaatu as a Christ-figure in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The significant question in this essay, though, is: In terms of its presentation of religion, why does the first cinematic version of *The War of the Worlds*, one of the seminal science fiction novels of the twentieth-century, differ so dramatically from Wells' original vision?

This article is continued in Volume 11, Issue 2.

Yet across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us. And early in the twentieth century came the great disillusionment.

(H.G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds*)

It was Paramount's most successful picture of 1953. In the American Film Institute's fifty greatest villains of the twentieth-century American cinema, the Martians arrive at number twenty-seven, and it was among the four hundred titles that vied for the AFI's top one hundred films of the century. Indeed, in commentary contained on the 2005 DVD release, male lead Gene Barry remarked that, of the scores of movie and television roles he has played over his long career, it is Dr. Clayton Forrester in *The War of the Worlds* for which fans remember him most. Lodged in the midst of a number of 1950s science fiction films that featured the end of the world in one way or another—the post-apocalyptic advent of a new humanity in *When Worlds Collide*, the pre-apocalyptic salvation offered by Klaatu in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, or the decidedly ambiguous success over nuclear science spun out of control in *Them!*—George Pal's *The War of the Worlds* reveals a number of cultural fears that plagued America in the years immediately following the Second World War: the fear of Soviet invasion, the dubious security of nuclear weaponry, and fragility of civilized behaviour in the face of apocalyptic threat.

The War of the Worlds, however, which was scripted by Barré Lyndon and directed by Byron Haskin, also reflects the Christian religiosity with which many of these films were charged—the overt references to a second Ark as humankind struggles to escape Earth in *When Worlds Collide*¹ or the oft-repeated interpretation of Klaatu as a Christ-figure in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.² The significant question in this essay, though, is: In terms of its presentation of religion, why does the first cinematic version of *The War of the Worlds*, one of the seminal science fiction novels of the twentieth-century, differ so dramatically from Wells' original vision? Certainly it wasn't necessary for the shock effect of an alien invasion, and Wells' antagonism for religious belief and practice is well known. A student for a time of the eminent scientist Thomas Huxley (who became known as "Darwin's bulldog" for his tenacious defence of the theory of evolution), Wells was also a passionate socialist and member for a time of the Fabian Society. As Brian Aldiss points out in his introduction to a recent edition of the novel, he had a respectable "radical pedigree. Like William Godwin, he regarded humanity as perfectible; like Percy Bysshe Shelley he believed in Free Love."³ Neither of these, of course, found much favour with the fin-de-siècle Church of England. Indeed, as I will discuss in more detail below, one of the pivotal characters in *The War of the Worlds* symbolizes nothing so much as Wells' contempt for religion.

In his discussion of two late nineteenth-century "Mars invades" novels—*The War of the Worlds* and Kurd Laßwitz's *Auf zwei Planeten* (*Two Planets*)—Ingo Cornils⁴ points out that a close reading of Wells' novel reveals clearly "the direction his thoughts would take" throughout the rest of his career. Most significant for our purposes were Wells' belief that "man would have to abandon his supreme confidence in the future, [and] accept that the evolutionary process would continue."⁵ In *The War of the Worlds*, Cornils concludes, "Wells evokes a keen sense of loss and a reluctance to let go of the world he knows".⁶ Though Wells and Laßwitz came to different understandings of what it meant, "both believed that man needed to grow up and be prepared for the fundamental changes that scientific progress would inevitably bring".⁷ For Wells, one of these is the long-overdue abandonment of organized religion. Quite unlike the novel, however, while the characters in Pal's *The War of the Worlds*⁸ will certainly keep their eyes on the skies once the Martian threat is over, the film ends with a ringing endorsement of humankind's place in the universe secured by God's blessing and protection.

While most commentators have noted the religious references with which Pal's film is replete, in general they seem a bit perplexed by their presence and are quick, therefore, to dismiss them. Citing *The War of the Worlds* specifically, for example, Dana Polan contends that "in many '50s monster films there is a character, often a priest, whose attitude toward the monsters is, 'Let us try to reason with them.'"

Several seconds later that character will be a smoldering pile of ashes in consequence of his belief that monsters share anything, such as rationality and humanism, with human beings.” For Polan, a fatal naïveté seems to mark these particular characters, and their only function in the film is to highlight the otherness of the invader and the futility of human religious belief in the face of invasion. While, in his major treatment of 1950s horror films, Marc Jancovich devotes two pages to *The War of the Worlds*, he too ultimately trivializes its religious aspects. He recognizes that “science remains a distinctly ambiguous force within the film,” but when military science fails in the form of the atomic bomb, the people who have gathered to witness the destruction of the aliens “either become a destructive mob, or else huddle helplessly in churches where they wait and pray for deliverance.”⁹ Like Polan, Jancovich's reading seems clear: Religion is the last refuge of the terrified, a sanctuary in which people hide from the horror that stalks their world. It is the definitive painkiller, Marx's famous “opiate of the masses” in the face of humankind's (seemingly) inevitable destruction. Though he ultimately describes the defeat of the Martians as unexpected and naturalistic, film critic Peter Biskind offers the most insightful reading of the period in which these films were released—a post-war America in which many believed “that their country had the endorsement of the Almighty, the Divine Seal of Approval.”¹⁰

Finally, in *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, Andrew Tudor is arguably the most dismissive of any religious content, treating the resolution of the film as little more than an unsophisticated *deus ex machina*. "As in *The War of the Worlds* a decade earlier," he writes,¹¹ referring specifically to the naturalistic demise of the extraterrestrial plants in *The Day of the Triffids*, "a religious gloss is given to the fact of humanity's final relief, though as with the earlier film that gloss seems so extraneous as to be laughably implausible to any audience."

Through a close reading of George Pal's 1953 *The War of the Worlds*, I would like to take a position opposed to these, and suggest that it can be seen both as a thoroughly religious film, and as one for whose audiences the religious components would have been anything but extraneous, implausible, or unsophisticated. This is not so much because of the obvious religious references that run throughout the film, but because of the interplay between the time in which it was released and the vast differences that exist between the film and the H.G. Wells novel on which it is ultimately based. Although the film adaptation owes, perhaps, more to Orson Welles' famous 1938 Mercury Theatre of the Air production,¹² it is important (a) to consider the differences between Wells' novel and Pals' film in terms of its representation of religion, and then, (b) to ask why those differences are so striking and what they say about the time in which and the audiences for which the film was produced. Put simply, not only did the filmmakers

add considerably more religious content than is found in Wells' novel, they completely reversed the thematic evaluation of that content, locating it at or close to the center of the film. Whereas in the novel religion is the last refuge of the desperate and the insane, in the film it is the one positive social value that underpins the narrative and links the principal characters together. Since there does not seem to be any inherent need for this rather drastic change—any number of alien invasion films have managed just fine without it—in terms of interpreting *The War of the Worlds* in its original context, this becomes a sociological as well as an hermeneutic problem.

Religion in H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898)

In Wells' novel, though the narrator, "a professed and recognized writer on philosophical themes,"¹³ occasionally prays, these are almost invariably presented as fox-hole prayers, supplications offered in moments of desperation and sheer panic. "I prayed copiously," he recounts,¹⁴ as a Martian tentacle creeps through the ruined house in which he and an Anglican curate have taken refuge. Indeed, later in the novel, the Martians drag the body of the curate outside, where it will soon be used as food and fertilizer for the invasion forces. As an alien tentacle searches the coal-cellar in which the narrator is still hiding, "I whispered passionate prayers for safety."¹⁵ Much later, reflecting on his need to kill the curate to prevent them both

from being captured by the Martians, and wondering about the fate of his wife, he recalls:

I found myself praying that the Heat-Ray might have suddenly and painlessly struck her out of being. I had uttered prayers, fetish prayers, had prayed as heathens muttered charms when I was in extremity; but now I prayed indeed, pleading steadfastly and sanely, face to face with the darkness of God.¹⁶

He prays for his wife, in the sense of hoping that she met a quick and painless death, as opposed to being harvested by the Martians, her flesh and blood sprayed across the landscape for their food. These seem qualitatively different than the prayers for deliverance he offered in extremis while hiding in the ruined house. Even when he compares the destruction of the Martians to the overthrow of Sennacharib, the king of Assyria who laid unsuccessful siege to Jerusalem,¹⁷ the narrator seems at best a reluctant deist forced into moments of desperately hopeful theism by the devastation with which he is faced.

Wells' more forceful comment on religion comes in the form of the Anglican curate from Weybridge, whom the narrator meets while escaping the initial attack and with whom he seeks shelter in the ruined house at Halliford. Irrational and eventually insane, the clear implication throughout the text is that

curate was driven so by the collision between his own religious worldview and the realization that (a) we are not alone in the universe, and (b) we are not necessarily the pinnacle of God's creation the Church has made us out to be. Though Wells ridicules this belief through the observations of the philosopher, the curate locates the Martian invasion in the conceptual world of a Christian caught up in the end-times. Like the Babylonians more than two millennia before, the Martians are the messengers (the "angels") of God, bringing the Almighty's judgment on a sinful and recaltrant humanity.

Wells consistently describes the curate in derogatory terms. "His face was a fair weakness," he writes, "his chin retreated," and his eyes were "blankly staring."¹⁸ Trapped together in the ruined house, the narrator came "to hate the curate's trick of helpless exclamation, his stupid rigidity of mind . . . He was as lacking in restraint as a silly woman. He would weep for hours together, and I verily believe that to the very end this spoilt child of life thought his weak tears in some way efficacious."¹⁹ Indeed, the narrator concludes, "he was one of those weak creatures, void of pride, timorous, anæmic, hateful souls, full of shifty cunning, who face neither God nor man, who face not even themselves."²⁰

Contrary to the quiet strength displayed by Pastor Collins in Pal's film, and the respect with which he is clearly regarded by the other characters, Wells' curate is almost a lampoon, a venal coward who sought refuge from the real world behind

the walls of the Weybridge church just as he hid from the Martians in the ruined house. The central demonstration of this occurs just after the narrator meets the curate, who is struggling to understand the significance of recent events. Desperate, though not really expecting a cogent answer, he asks the narrator:

'Why are these things permitted? What sins have we done? The morning service was over, I was walking through the roads to clear my brain for the afternoon, and then—fire, earthquake, death! As if it were Sodom and Gomorrah! All our work undone, all the work—What are these Martians?'

"What are we?" replies the narrator, but the curate continues:

'All the work—all the Sunday-schools—What have we done—what has Weybridge done? Everything gone—everything destroyed. The church! We rebuilt it only three years ago. Gone!—swept out of existence! Why?'²¹

Initially unable to manage a theodicy in the face of the invasion, before the narrator can answer the curate begins to interpret the attack in terms of his faith: this is the end of days, and the Martians are actually God's messengers of destruction to the modern world just as the Babylonians were to the Israelites two-and-a-half millennia before. It doesn't matter that the people of Weybridge were not like those of Sodom and Gomorrah; it doesn't matter that they rebuilt the church and held weekly church school classes. As he slips into madness, he points to the ruins of

his church and his community, and equating it somehow with the Whore of Babylon, he slightly misquotes Revelation 19:3, "The smoke of her burning goeth up forever and ever."²² He continues:

'This must be the beginning of the end,' he said, interrupting me. 'The end! The great and terrible day of the Lord! When men shall call upon the mountains and the rocks to fall upon them and hide them—hide them from the face of Him that sitteth upon the throne!'²³

At this point, the narrator stops trying to reason with the curate.

'Be a man!' said I. 'You are scared out of your wits! What good is religion if it collapses under calamity? Think of what earthquakes and floods, wars and volcanoes, have done before to men! Did you think God exempted Weybridge? He is not an insurance agent, man!'²⁴

As it is exemplified in the curate, Wells' point throughout the novel is precisely this: no matter how impressive its material and architectural trappings, religion does collapse under the weight of calamity. And, when the curate's actions place him in danger of discovery by the Martians, the narrator is forced to kill him. Although Steven Spielberg's 2005 remake of the film is, in many ways, more faithful to Wells' novel, and ends with the same lines about the Martians defeat by "the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon the earth," Spielberg avoids any real

allusion to religion beyond the fact that a church is destroyed when the first alien machine makes its appearance. Indeed, rather than a cleric, when the main character (Tom Cruise) is hiding with his daughter in the ruined house, it is with a would-be freedom fighter (Tim Robbins), whose character is modelled instead on the "survivalist-minded"²⁵ artilleryman of Wells' novel.

Not so the Pals' production.

Religion and Science in George Pal's *The War of the Worlds* (1953)

The Parity of Science and Religion

Following the opening narration and the establishing sequence, as the first Martian ship streaks across the screen in George Pal's *The War of the Worlds*, the shot cuts to a crowd gathered under the marquis of a movie theatre. Centered in the shot is the local pastor, the Rev. Dr. Matthew Collins (Lewis Martin). Dressed in clerical blacks and wearing a roman collar, his presence informs us from the beginning that, somehow, religion lies at the heart of this film. Indeed, the movie the crowd is either just letting out from, or just waiting to see, is Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949), a biblical story about the dominant lifeform brought low unexpectedly and by deception, but whose strength is regained in the end through the power of God. When the alien ship comes down, it crosses the wilderness, a church (which we might presume is pastored by the Rev. Collins), and finally the

theatre—which makes a connection both between the townspeople and the church, and between the crowd watching the "meteor" land and the movie-going audience in the theatre watching the film itself. The message is clear: these are people just like you in a time and a town just like yours.

Not surprisingly, though, the first people asked to look at the object critically are scientists from "Pacific Tech"—a thinly veiled reference to the California Institute of Technology (Caltech), the academic home of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Science, too, will play a pivotal role in the film, though not in conflict with religion to the degree that either the initial sequences or Wells' novel would suggest. Indeed, Pastor Collins is clearly an integral part of the town culture, and the manner in which the two representatives of science and religion are portrayed indicates the relative parity with which the two domains are treated in the film. When the crowd arrives at the impact site, no one elbows him aside to look at the "meteor," and the townspeople clearly defer to his judgment in matters that affect the community. As he walks out of the shot to "get a closer look" at the "meteor," the scientist, Dr. Clayton Forrester, drives into the shot. While Collins is on foot, Forrester arrives in the quintessential icon of twentieth-century innovation and technology—the automobile. At this point, they are not onscreen together; though given a kind of parity within their particular social domains, science and religion are initially kept separate in our field of vision.

They are brought together, however, both personally and professionally, through the character of Sylvia van Buren (Ann Robinson), who is both the pastor's niece and later the scientist's love interest. She is also the chorus, as it were, the one who explains the significance of events to the audience. For example, as she and Forrester (whom she has not recognized, despite having written her Master's thesis on "modern scientists") are walking towards the crater, she confidently explains to him that "a scientist is coming from Pacific Tech. He'll tell us. Clayton Forrester, ever heard of him? He's top man in astro and nuclear physics. He knows all about meteors."

This is also an indication that, despite the overt presence of the church, the clergy, and by implication, God, as a good 1950s science fiction film, the first line of exploration and explanation will be scientific. Though radioactivity plays no active part in the storyline, it is introduced here to establish both Forrester's credentials as a scientist and an appropriate aura of "scientific menace."²⁶ Where Forrester approaches the object with his Geiger counter, Collins will later approach the Martian war machine with his Bible. Where the scientist uses his instruments to explore the unknown, the minister uses his faith in an effort to effect a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Each comes with the emblem of his profession, and neither is initially privileged over the other.

As Forrester comes into the shot at the edge of the impact crater, he stands beside the minister, with Sylvia on his other side. She refers to the minister as "Uncle Matthew," and introduces him to Forrester as "Dr. Matthew Collins, pastor of the community church." Although Collins is very likely "the Rev. Dr.," Sylvia does not introduce him that way. He is presented to Forrester (and to the audience) as both a highly educated man and the town's moral center. He is not given a denominational affiliation, but, dressed in clerical blacks and collar, audiences are left free to map onto his character any tradition they choose. Later in the film, however, as Forrester searches for Sylvia during the final Martian attack on Los Angeles, denominational particularity will become more acute, recognizable, and significant.

A doctor of science and a doctor of divinity, their titles are equal, and the two men are placed on a level footing very unlike the Wells' novel. There is no animosity between them at all, and the mutual respect between the two domains of knowledge and experience continues throughout the film. Indeed, when Forrester decides to stay in town while the mysterious object cools off, Collins immediately invites him to stay at his house, presumably the manse or parsonage. The next evening, there is a square dance at the town hall, at which Collins is presented once again as the image of community standards in moderation. Though everyone else, including Forrester, is dressed in proper country dance attire, the pastor attends in

his clerical blacks and collar. When the power fails following the first Martian attack—though they are not yet aware of the cause—Collins calmly pulls out his pocket watch and reminds the crowd, "Well, we always play 'Good night, ladies' at twelve o'clock anyways. It must be nearly that now." The dance ends at midnight, presumably to give people time to be up for church the next morning.

After the second attack and the sighting of the second ship, Forrester says, "Sheriff, you better get word to the military. We're going to need them on this." Although he has no idea what they want or what they may have been reacting to when they attacked, in the face of the Martian ships the scientist (the cultural paragon of rationalism) immediately yields to the military option (the use of force). Here begins the division between the domains of religion and science.

Marines take up defensive positions around the object, and when the local sheriff arrives at the military command post, he is followed closely by Pastor Collins. While the sheriff walks quickly out of the shot, however, the camera follows Pastor Collins as he enters the tent and takes in the preparations for battle. The camera stays with him as he is introduced to the commanding officer immediately after Dr. Forrester, but before the Sheriff. Once again, in the narrative, science and religion are held in close proximity and neither is privileged over the other. For the audience, however, Pastor Collins, not Dr. Forrester or the military commander, is the focus throughout much of this scene. As the general is

introduced, we watch the action from behind the man of faith, over the shoulders of religion, as it were. And, when the alien ship first rises out of the crater, we are shown a full-face shot of the minister, who announces in awe: "Beings... from another world."

As soon as he says this, an important shift takes place in this sequence when the marine commander orders his troops to "Stand by to fire." First, a tight two-shot frames the Marine colonel, with Pastor Collins looking over his shoulder, as though giving his blessing to the military option. He acts, at that moment, rather like a chaplain. The opposing two-shot, with which the other is inter-cut, is also important for the dynamic of the film. Where Pastor Collins is in the frame with the marine commander; Dr. Forrester is framed with the "intelligence officer," General Mann. When the Martian warship rises, Forrester speaks, also in awe, but almost gleefully, "This is amazing. [The magnetic rays] must keep the opposing poles in balance and lift the machine." Where Collins sees the occupants of the craft, Forrester sees only their technology. The gap between religion and science widens a bit more.

Though it appears initially that, through the character of Pastor Collins, the church may be giving its blessing to the attack, as the troops prepare to fire on the Martian ships the pastor tries to reason with the marine commander.

COLLINS

But, Colonel, shooting's no good.

COLONEL

It's always been a good persuader.

COLLINS

Shouldn't you try to communicate with him first? Then shoot later if you have to?

There are a number of important things going on in this brief bit of dialogue. First, recalling his words, "Beings from another world," Collins does not refer to the aliens as "it," but "him." He personalizes them, presaging a line he will have a bit later on when he takes a position that many scientists involved in SETI research have taken, and which has been implied (if not repeated) in any number of alien invasion films: "If they're more advanced than us, they should be nearer the Creator for that reason." He is not willing, at least not without further evidence, to consign them the realm of the faceless enemy, the "it" on which we so readily make war. Second, in terms of the marine colonel's response, it is important to remember that when this film was released, Pearl Harbor—the attack that defined as much as anything else in the twentieth century the American perception of threat and the requisite military stance in the face of that threat—had taken place less than twelve years before and was still fresh in the public's mind. Third, the United States had only a relatively few years before finished the Second World War, in which

shooting proved a good persuader—especially firing off not one but two nuclear weapons on largely civilian populations. Fourth, few in the aftermath of the Second World War, especially those who had immigrated to the States from continental Europe, could not have seen in the Martians' systematic destruction of humanity echoes of the Nazi extermination programs that killed more than ten million Jews, gypsies, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, intellectuals, dissidents, and so forth. Both of these last two aspects would only be highlighted for audiences in 1953 by Pal's use of newsreel footage from the war at the beginning of the film. Finally, the United States was at that point also involved in the Korean conflict, which was the first hot war ostensibly fought to halt "communist aggression.”

Continued in Vol. 11, no. 2

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⁴ Cornils, Ingo. (2003). "The Martians Are Coming! War, Peace, Love, and Scientific Progress in H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* and Kurd Laßwitz's *Auf zwei Planeten*." *Comparative Literature* 55 (1): 36.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Cornils. 38

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Aldiss, Brian. (2005). "Introduction." *The War of the Worlds*, by H. G. Wells, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London and New York: Penguin Books). xviii.

⁹ Jancovich, Marc. (1996). *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press. 55

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¹¹ Tudor, Andrew. (1989). *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Film*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 54

¹² Cantril, Hadley, with Hazel Gaudet and Herta Herzog. (1940). *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic, with the Complete Script of the Famous Orson Welles Broadcast*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹³ Wells, H. G. ([1898] 2005). *The War of the Worlds*, ed. Patrick Parrinder. London and New York: Penguin Books.156

¹⁴ Wells. 139

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Wells. 149

¹⁷ Wells. 169

¹⁸ Wells. 69

¹⁹ Wells, 131

²⁰ Wells. 132

²¹ Wells. 70

²² Ibid.

²³ Wells. 71

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Disch, Thomas M. (1998). *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World*. New York: Touchstone. 187.

²⁶ Dante, Joe. (2005). "Commentary" on *The War of the Worlds*, dir. Byron Haskin, prod. George Pal (1953). Collector's Edition DVD. Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures