

**Seeing the Saviour in the Stars:
Religion, Conformity, and *The Day the Earth Stood Still***

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Abstract

This article uses Robert Wise's 1951 film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* to interrogate the process by which particular cultural hegemonies become sedimented in commentarial and interpretive traditions. That is, since the late 1970s Wise's film has been all but consistently interpreted as a Christian allegory, something for which there is surprisingly little evidence in the story itself. After discussing this interpretive trajectory, the paper presents a brief alternate reading of the film, and, building on the work of Edward Said, offers the concept of "occidentalism" to account for the manner in which a Christian interpretation has come to have the power of the "authorized version."

He lay as if asleep, on his face the look of godlike nobility that had caused some of the ignorant to think him divine.

(Harry Bates, "Farewell to the Master")

This Earth of yours will be reduced to a burned-out cinder. Your choice is simple: join us and live in peace, or pursue your present course and face obliteration.

(Klaatu, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*)

[1] But for the fact that Darryl F. Zanuck, then head of 20th Century-Fox, offered contract director Robert Wise a script based loosely on “Farewell to the Master,” Harry Bates’ short story about first contact might have vanished into the dustbin of history, forgotten like so many thousands of other pulp offerings from the golden age of science fiction. It is not a particularly good story, not good enough, apparently, even to warrant mention on the cover of *Astounding* when it appeared in October 1940. That honour went to A.E. van Vogt’s now-classic tale, “Slan.” Unlike “Slan,” though, “Farewell to the Master” was brought to the silver screen as *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and, though it appeared to mixed reviews at the time, it has emerged as one of the most influential science fiction films of all time. In 1951, it was awarded a Golden Globe for “Best Film Promoting International Understanding,” while later that year the Ninth World Science-Fiction Convention honoured it as a “meritorious and outstanding achievement in the field of Science-Fiction Motion Pictures.” It ranks number eighty-two on the American Film Institute’s list of 100 Most Thrilling American Films, and one of its iconic images—the alien Klaatu first emerging from his spaceship—graces the cover of the 1997 edition of Bill Warren’s monumental history of 1950s science fiction cinema, *Keep Watching the Skies!* (1982). According to a 1997 survey, it is among the five films most often used in university and college courses in science fiction studies (Kuhn 1999, 1). From the music of Ringo Starr to the 1970s rock group, Klaatu, from intertextual references that still appear in science fiction cinema to the still-mysterious mantra, “Gort! Klaatu barada nikto,” Robert Wise’s *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) has invaded popular culture in a way matched by only a handful of science fiction films.

[2] Two principal issues underpin my consideration of the film here. First, since a significant number of popular and academic critics interpret the main character, Klaatu (Michael Rennie), as a Christ-figure, and the Klaatu story (either implicitly or explicitly) as an averted apocalypse based on a gospel allegory, I ask a relatively simple question: Is this a reasonable reading of the film? And, if not, why not? Second, and more importantly, since, as I will indeed suggest, a “Klaatu as Christ” interpretation of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is unreasonably eisegetic rather than textually exegetic—it reads the Christ-figure into the film rather than out of it—what does this tell us about the sedimentary process of interpretation, and the popular will to colonize cultural products in the name of a particular theology? That is, if it isn’t a Christ allegory, a cautionary tale that relies on thinly-veiled gospel analogies, why do so many people think it is, and what might that tell us about the relationship between dominant mythologies and emergent popular culture? Since the story itself is so well-known, I offer only a relatively brief synopsis here, and will consider other aspects in more detail below.

The Day the Earth Stood Still

[3] Amid panicked reports of an unidentified flying object buzzing around the world at over four thousand miles an hour, an enormous flying saucer lands on the Mall in Washington, D.C. For two hours it sits, while crowds of onlookers gather and squads of infantry supported by tanks and artillery watch nervously. Suddenly, an opening appears and Klaatu emerges. “We have come to visit you in peace and with good will,” he says, but he is shot the moment he approaches the soldiers and attempts to offer a gift. As he lies bleeding on the grass, his nearly three-meter tall robot, Gort (Lock Martin), appears and, firing a beam weapon from his helmet, begins to melt

the army's weapons into slag. Klaatu, however, stops him before he can harm any of the people in the crowd.

[4] Later, recuperating in Walter Reed Hospital, when Klaatu is visited by the secretary to the President of the United States, he insists that his message is for all humanity, not for any one group. "I'm not concerned, Mr. Harley, with the internal affairs of your planet. My mission here is not to solve your petty squabbles. It concerns the existence of every last creature on Earth."

When it becomes clear that a meeting with all Earth's leaders will not be possible, Klaatu steals a suit of clothes belonging, we learn later, to a "Maj. Carpenter," and escapes the hospital, eventually renting a room in a boarding house. The various boarders gathered around the breakfast table serve as metonyms for some of the "petty squabbles" Klaatu wants to avoid: one asks why the government isn't doing anything about the alien; another is convinced the saucer is from somewhere other than outer space—"and you know where I mean," she remarks ominously. The third, a young widow named Helen Benson (Patricia Neal), wonders how the alien visitor must be feeling, especially since he was attacked the moment he landed. All of this takes place around the aggravated ranting of real-life radio journalist Gabriel Heatter, who insists that "the monster must be found. He must be tracked down like a wild animal. He must be destroyed." Throughout, Klaatu looks on quietly, almost bemused.

[5] Befriending Helen's son, Bobby (Billy Gray), the movie's all-American kid, though one Warren considers "one of the least believable children in movies" (1982: 22), Klaatu explores some of the sights of Washington. Together they visit Arlington National Cemetery and stop at the grave of Bobby's father, who was killed at Anzio. Stunned by the sheer number of neatly arranged gravemarkers, Klaatu stares into the middle distance and tells the young boy that his people have learned to live without war. "Gee," says Bobby brightly, "that's a good idea." At the

Lincoln Memorial, Klaatu ponders the inscription of the Gettysburg Address carved beside Lincoln's statue, particularly that those who died in the cause of freedom shall not be forgotten and shall not have died in vain. "Those are great words," says Klaatu. "He must have been a great man." Through Bobby, Klaatu begins to see humanity in a different light than when he first arrived. His mission and his message, though, have not changed. Indeed, it could be argued that they have become more vital.

[6] Later that day, Klaatu and Bobby seek out "the smartest man in whole world," the physicist, Professor Barnhart (Sam Jaffe), a clear reference to Albert Einstein (though he lives on "Harvard Street" not Princeton). If the politicians won't listen, Klaatu reasons, perhaps the scientific community will give him a hearing. When he finally speaks with Barnhart, his purpose on our planet becomes clear. The dialogue at this point is singularly instructive in terms of the later interpretations of the film with which I am concerned:

KLAATU

We know from scientific observation that your planet has discovered a rudimentary kind of atomic energy. We also know that you're experimenting with rockets. So long as you were limited to fighting among yourselves, with your primitive tanks and aircraft, we were unconcerned. But soon, one of your nations will apply atomic energy to spaceships. That will create a threat to the peace and security of other planets. That, of course, we cannot tolerate.

BARNHART

What exactly is the nature of your mission, Mr. Klaatu?

KLAATU

I came here to warn you that by threatening danger, your planet faces danger. Very grave danger. I'm prepared, however, to offer a solution.

[7] Once again, Klaatu insists that his message is too important for any one people group or any one nation; since it concerns the fate of the entire planet, it must be made available to all, and not used for the political or military advantage of a few:

KLAATU

I confess my patience is wearing thin. Must I take drastic action in order to get a hearing? *Violent* action, since that seems to be the only thing your people understand. Leveling New York City, perhaps? Sinking the Rock of Gibraltar?

[8] When Barnhart asks the consequences of refusal or rejection of Klaatu's message, the alien emissary responds simply:

KLAATU

I'm afraid there is no alternative. In such a case, the planet Earth would have to be eliminated.

[9] Barnhart is astonished that "such power exists," but convinces Klaatu to arrange for a less destructive demonstration of his sincerity. Two days later, but for essential services—hospitals, and aircraft in flight, for example—all electrical power around the world shuts down. Nothing works anywhere, and for one half-hour the earth stands still.

[10] Throughout this, much of the B-story concerns Helen's boyfriend, Tom (Hugh Marlowe), an insurance salesman with a suspicious nature and a need to see his name in print. Uncovering

Klaatu's real identity, Tom sets in motion a military cordon that eventually results in the alien's death—shot in the street as he tries to reach Prof. Barnhart. As Klaatu lies in a jail cell, Gort kills the two soldiers “guarding” the ship and carries the alien's body back to the ship. There, it uses a machine to restore Klaatu to life “for a time.”

[11] In the final, climactic scene, scientists from around the world have gathered at Barnhart's request to hear Klaatu's message. Temporarily revived, Klaatu emerges from the ship, and makes his final speech. This is the heart of his message, the plea for which the film is best remembered, and, though lengthy, is worth quoting in full:

KLAATU

I am leaving soon, and you will forgive me if I speak bluntly.

The universe grows smaller every day, and the threat of aggression by any group anywhere can no longer be tolerated. There must be security for all, or no one is secure. Now this does not mean giving up any freedoms, except the freedom to act irresponsibly. Your ancestors knew this, when they made laws to govern themselves and hired policemen to enforce them. We of the other planets have long accepted this principle. We have an organization for the mutual protection of all planets and for the complete elimination of aggression.

The test of any such higher authority is, of course, the police force that supports it. For our policemen, we created a race of robots. Their function is to patrol the planets in spaceships like this one and preserve the peace. In matters of aggression, we have

given them absolute power over us. This power cannot be revoked.

At the first sign of violence, they act automatically against the aggressor. The penalty for provoking their action is too terrible to risk. The result is we live in peace, without arms or armies, secure in the knowledge that we are free from aggression and war, free to pursue more profitable enterprises.

Now, we do not pretend to have achieved perfection, but we do have a system—and it works. I came here to give you these facts. It is no concern of ours how you run your own planet, but if you threaten to extend your violence, this Earth of yours will be reduced to a burned-out cinder. Your choice is simple: join us and live in peace, or pursue your present course and face obliteration.

We shall be waiting for your answer. The decision is yours.

[12] Klaatu and Gort reenter the ship and it rises into the air, gradually shrinking until it has become only one of the myriad points of light in the dark night sky.

Seeing the Saviour in *The Day The Earth Stood Still*

[13] In “Teaching Religion and Film,” Paul Flescher and Robert Torry contend that the fact “that Klaatu, the alien visitor to the planet, is intended as a Christ-figure has long been recognized” (1998: ¶10; cf. Torry 1991, 12). Although, nearly a decade later, they offered a considerably more sophisticated, but no less theologically animated interpretation of the film (Flescher and Torry 2007, 49-52), the basic question of who has “long recognized” Klaatu as a Christ-figure—

and why—goes largely unanswered. By all accounts, it certainly wasn't the movie reviewers of the day.

[14] A little less than two weeks before its release, the *New York Times* published a publicity photo showing Gort carrying Helen through the corridors of Klaatu's spaceship. Slugged "The Monster Walks Again," the advertising is clearly intended to draw comparison with one of cinema horror's two most famous icons, Frankenstein's monster (the other, of course, being Dracula). Indeed, many of the advertising posters for the film depict Gort carrying a screaming, buxom blonde—an almost obligatory image from the earliest days of the sci-fi pulps to the cinema sci-fi of the 1950s—while doing death-ray battle with battalions of infantry and armour. Another showed Helen cowering before the monstrous Gort. In this poster, she is wearing a low-cut, strapless cocktail dress, not the considerably more conservative ensemble she wears in the film, and the headline reads: "The World Faced with Destruction by Strange 'Men' and Demonic Machines from a Distant Planet!"

[15] Media reviews of the film were decidedly mixed. At the *New York Times*, Bosley Crowther called it "a fable of ... absurd assumptions," "a tepid entertainment in what is anomalously labeled the science-fiction field" (1951), while the *Hartford Courant's* reviewer dubbed it "fascinating and well-worked out" (H.V.A. 1951). Splitting the difference, Mae Tinée wrote in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* that the cast gave "a moderately convincing air of realism to a story bedecked with hocus pocus" (1951). Mindful that the film was released in the midst of the anti-communist hysteria fomented by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Activities—an hysteria that hit Hollywood particularly hard in the years immediately following World War Two—Edwin Schallert wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* that Wise's film was "perhaps to be considered the last word in today's onslaught of science fiction on the

screen” (1951). That said, though, Schallert did not miss the opportunity to comment on the suspicion raised by McCarthy that much of Hollywood was little more than a propaganda machine for America’s enemies. “Certain subversive elements might,” he continued, “of course, see fit to turn the philosophy of this picture to account. While it is definitely a challenge to aggression of any kind and violence, it could also be construed as pacifistic. But there will be a deal of straining to make it into a propaganda film” (Schallert 1951). Calling it an “interplanetary melodrama,” though sounding a note of interpretive caution, B. R. Crisler wrote in the *Christian Science Monitor* that “it may be well to recall that Klaatu’s method of uniting the world by force, or threats thereof, has been tried by numerous powerful material systems, and has never worked yet” (1951). Twenty years after it was released, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was featured prominently in the film series, “Visions of the Future,” shown at the American Film Institute Theatre, though, as if recalling little more than the original advertising, the *Washington Post*’s reviewer commented only on “the lugubrious immensity of Gort, the robot emissary from beyond” (Kriegsman 1971).

[16] What is missing from all of these is precisely what later popular and academic commentators insist is central to the film. That is, if Klaatu is a Christ-figure, and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* a Christian allegory, these realities seem completely lost on those who reviewed the film when it was first released, and commented on it for at least two decades thereafter.

[17] In 1979, nearly thirty years after Klaatu’s ship first landed in theatres, Dennis Saleh compared the alien emissary’s flying saucer to the fiery wheel that, according to Hebrew scripture, the prophet Ezekiel saw in one of his many visions (see Ezek 1). Saleh continues that “Klaatu comes on a mission from the skies, in a great glowing wheel of a saucer. He represents transcendent power and has come to offer mankind salvation from holocaust. His stature in the

film and his fate suggest the figure of Christ and a science fiction version of the Ascension” (1979, 41). Indeed, from this point on and with a few rare exceptions (e.g., Barone 1996; Haspel 2006; Lyden 2003), both popular and academic interpretation of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* follows this gospel line.

[18] Proceeding from Saleh, the course of interpretive sedimentation is particularly instructive. As it progresses, as interpretation of the film as a Christian allegory becomes firmly embedded in the commentarial tradition, more and more aspects of that allegory are created and read into the text. Two years later, perhaps relying on Saleh’s interpretation, the gospel refrain was picked up by Carl Macek in the authoritative *Magill’s Survey of Cinema*. “It is easy to construe Klaatu as a Christ figure who sacrifices his life in order to preserve civilization,” he writes. “Simple situations such as his resurrection or his choice of ‘Carpenter’ as his surname when he passes for human underline the overt Christian philosophy of this so-called federation of advanced beings” (Macek 1981, 590). It is important to note at this point how the interpretation begins to depart from what is demonstrable in the film, how it takes on a more theologically eisegetic tone. Despite how most of these commentators depict it, for example, Klaatu does not *choose* “Carpenter” as his name. It just happens to be the name of the officer whose clothing the alien visitor steals in order to effect his escape from the hospital. That screenwriter Edmund North intended this to be seen as a subtle Christ reference is undisputed—and a topic to which I will return—but it is not the case that Klaatu selects this name from a variety of options. Similarly, and this is also something that I will discuss in more depth below, how one could consider the message Klaatu brings—conform to our interplanetary mandate or be destroyed by our robot army—an “overt Christian philosophy” is something of a mystery. As the interpretive sedimentation continues, however, what actually happens in the film is sublimated either to

laziness on the part of critics (who do not bother to see the film for themselves, but simply repeat what others have written) or to overarching ideological agendas on the part of those who are determined to see in the film support for a dominant religious order.

[19] One of the most influential entries into this sedimentary process is Krin Gabbard's 1982 article in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, in which he lays out a more elaborate framework of the Klaatu-as-Christ allegory and on which a number of later critical interpreters have explicitly relied (e.g., Hendershot 1999; Kozlovic 2001; Torry 1991):

Klaatu . . . emerges from his ship like Christ from the tomb and delivers a sermon to the assembled intellects of the world. Before he ascends back to the heavens, he tells them to spread the word that they are not alone in the universe. The god-like forces he represents will be watching the people of Earth to see that they uphold his teachings of peace and disarmament. Like Jesus at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Klaatu is with us 'always, even unto the end of the world' (Gabbard 1982, 152).

[20] Moreover, Gabbard sees Dr. Barnhardt less as Einstein than as a John the Baptist figure, who "symbolically baptizes Klaatu by verifying his superior intellect and by introducing him to the world's scientists who become the disciples of Klaatu by the film's end" (1982, 152). For her part, Helen Benson is the Mary Magdalene of the story, the one "who goes to the space ship/tomb and is the first to see the resurrected Klaatu" (Gabbard 1982: 152). Even if we accept Gabbard's tenuous reading of the "baptism" and credence his interpretation of Klaatu's message as a "sermon," there is no indication from the film that the assembled scientific community become anything even remotely resembling disciples by the end of the film, nor that they were commissioned to do anything other than abandon any plans for off-world violence. At best, they

are a church congregation cowed into submission and conformity by the fire-and-brimstone message Klaatu delivers. Similarly, Helen does not “approach” the spaceship in anything like the sense Gabbard implies; she is carried inside by Gort and imprisoned, essentially, while it retrieves Klaatu’s body for resuscitation.

[21] Gabbard’s analysis was not universally accepted, by any means. Bill Warren, whose massive compendium *Keep Watching the Skies!* remains the bible of 1950s science fiction films, notes only that “the principal resemblances between Klaatu and Jesus Christ are in the Earth name the spaceman adopts when he flees the hospital, which is Carpenter, and that he does indeed die and is resurrected. But that’s about the limit of it” (1982: 26). The same year, however, Kenneth Von Gunden and Stuart Stock collected what they considered the *Twenty All-Time Great Science Fiction Films*, and presented *The Day the Earth Stood Still* as “a modern retelling of the Christ story” (1982: 43). Gabbard himself concludes that the film’s “point is made all the more strikingly by reminding us that Klaatu’s message and Klaatu’s fate are very much like those of Christ himself” (1982: 153). “Bigotry against aliens,” wrote editor and film critic Peter Biskind a year later, “by extension becomes the heathen denial of Christ,” (1983, 152).

[22] Although he called the film “a fair example of leftish philosophizing dressed up in a quasi-religious setting,” (1986: 71), Terence Pettigrew continued the eisegetic sedimentation, extending and deepening the reading of the film as a Christian allegory:

As well as being a cypher for a benign and immeasurably tolerant alien force
Klaatu has an unmistakable touch of divinity about him. He is shot twice and each
time heals himself. He calls himself Carpenter, an obvious allusion to Christ’s
earthly trade. Finally, in case some of us have not spotted the clues, his departure

by spacecraft, having preached at length about living piously and decently, has a New Testament Ascension feel about it. Straying a little from the Church's teachings, Klaatu's recommendations are voiced with the calm authority of 'Someone Who Knows.' Not surprisingly, when the role of St Peter in *The Robe* needed to be filled shortly afterwards, the actor who played Klaatu, Michael Rennie, got the job (Pettigrew 1986, 71-72).

[23] One is forced to ask a number of questions from passages like this. First, has Pettigrew actually seen the film, since "benign and immeasurably tolerant" is the diametric opposite of what Klaatu actually says at a number of points? What is "an unmistakable touch of divinity," and how would we know it when we see it? Indeed, if one really wants to take the film seriously and split theological hairs, then consider one of the bedrock principles of Christian soteriology: that Jesus is ontologically divine and as such lived a completely sinless life. Yet, Klaatu breaks the venerable eighth commandment—"Thou shalt not steal" (Exod. 20:15)—when he takes Major Carpenter's clothing in order to make his escape from Walter Reed Hospital. This is even more ironic, since those who would overtly Christianize the film inevitably point to Klaatu's "choice" of Carpenter as an Earth name as indisputable evidence of his status as a Christ figure. Furthermore, what exactly is "a New Testament Ascension feel," or how does Klaatu healing himself necessarily indicate divinity? After all, some species of salamander have the ability to regenerate lost tails. More to the point, though, he does not "heal himself" in the second instance. But for Gort's intervention, he would still be lying dead in a metro Washington jail cell. The robot brings him back to their ship and uses alien technology that has the ability to restore life "for a time." Indeed, Klaatu tells Helen explicitly that he does not have the "power over life and death," but that such is reserved "for the Almighty Spirit." How different is this scene, then, from

a modern hospital emergency room, and how supernatural, magical, or divine would the “miracles” performed there appear to someone from the fourteenth century? Finally, Klaatu did not “preach” about “living piously and decently”; beyond his frustration and impatience with humanity, he said little about lifestyle, and nothing at all about piety or decency. Rather, at several points in the film, including his all-important address to the scientists, he said that he and the rest of the galaxy don’t care what people do on Earth, as long as they don’t extend their aggression off-world. Only when they threaten the peace and security of other worlds will the Gort robots be unleashed. The clear implication from this is that we can fight among ourselves, wipe each other out if we want, just as long as we don’t take anyone else in the universe with us. To insert the more plausible Cold War allusion here, “We don’t care what you people do in Russia, as long as you stay in Russia.” The less said about Pettigrew’s facile suggestion that Rennie’s portrayal of Klaatu as a Christ-figure made him the ideal candidate to play St. Paul in *The Robe* the better.

[24] By the 1990s, though, this trope was firmly embedded in the interpretive sediment. “The film has a clear parallel with the New Testament,” writes film studies scholar Mark Jancovich, “in which Klattu [sic] takes the role of Christ” (1996, 44; cf. Gianos 1998). Not only was the heaven-roaming Klaatu a Christ-figure,” insists Anton Kozlovic, a scholar who has proposed the most elaborate, if far-fetched framework for christologising popular cinema (2004; cf. Deacy 2005), “but many of the surrounding characters complemented his Christic role” (2001, ¶11). Indeed, when Klaatu is shot in the back as he tries to escape the military dragnet—he does not sacrifice his life, as Macek would have it (1981: 590)—according to Kozlovic, “he falls onto the ground in a cruciform pose (with appropriately bent knee), *the* Christic identifier” (2001, ¶6). Although it is hard to give credence to Kozlovic’s reading here, given that, by all accounts

(including his own), director Robert Wise knew nothing of Edmund North's subtextual Christian references when he was shooting the film, Matthew Etherden goes even further. Arguing not only for a number of substantial links between Christianity and *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, he even contends that there is a connection between Klaatu's display of alien power and events allegedly surrounding the death of Jesus:

Also demonstrations both of the power of God in the New Testament, and of the alien races in the film involve darkness descending [sic]. 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." (Etherden 2005, ¶14)

[25] From the simple inference that Klaatu is a Christ-figure based on his appropriation of the name "Carpenter" to Klaatu's "high regard for Christian values" (Cornea 2007: 38), the interpretive sediment has gathered every possible reference within the film and turned it to Christian advantage.

[26] In "Making the Earth Stand Still," a documentary included with the 20th Century-Fox "Studio Classics" DVD release of the film, director and film commentator Joe Dante followed the gospel line, that there was an attempt to make Klaatu appear "very Christ-like," but that it was not done in "a particularly pretentious way" (1995). For him, that interpretation is "there for people if they care to see it, and not if they don't" (Dante 1995). In the same documentary, the film's producer, Julian Blaustein, recalls that Edmund North inserted the references into the script, but at a very subtle level, not meant to be overt or blunt in any way (Blaustein 1995). "It was my private little joke," North admitted in an interview. "I never discussed this angle with

Blaustein or Wise because I didn't want it expressed. I had originally hoped the Christ comparison would be subliminal" (in Von Gunden and Stock 1982, 44; cf. Warren 1982, 26). "Honest to God," insists Wise, "none of us working on the picture knew it [was an allegory]; it was only later, after the picture came out, that people started noticing" (2004, 55). Indeed, as we have seen, it was much later.

A Brief Excursus: The Deuteronomic Bargain

[27] In light of what actually happens in the film—the threats Klaatu makes, his remarks about the relative lack of concern he and the rest of the interplanetary federation have for humanity *per se*, and, most importantly, the ultimatum he delivers in his final address—there are two ways to look at the interpretive stratum that has developed, this critical predilection for seeing the saviour on *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. On the one hand, given the violence and coercive evangelism that has plagued so much of Christian history, perhaps this is not such a problematic reading after all. Forced conversions, the crusades, the myriad wars of religion, both large and small, the Inquisition and the witch-hunts, and Christian colonisation that took place at the point of the sword from the British Isles to the banks of the Don, and from Europe to the Americas—perhaps a Christian reading of the film is not so out of place. On the other hand, I suspect this is *not* what any of the interpreters discussed above had in mind. That said, then, is there an interpretation of the text that draws closer to a readily identifiable biblical parallel? Yes. Rather than Ezekiel's wheel or a Klaatu-Christ, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* presents us with a clear cinematic example of the Deuteronomic bargain.

[28] The Deuteronomic bargain finds its origin in the barren desert west of the Jordan River, as Moses prepares the Hebrew people to enter Canaan. Knowing they will cross into the promised

land without him, Moses delivers a lengthy and often complicated list of instructions from Yahweh. At the end, however, everything comes down to a relatively simple choice:

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if our heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed (Deuteronomy 30: 15-18a).

[29] That is, conform or be destroyed.

[30] Now, consider for a moment what Klaatu actually says at key points in the film. First, he tells the President's chief of staff that he's not concerned "with the internal affairs of your planet. My mission here is not to solve your petty squabbles." Confronting Professor Barnhart, he admits that "So long as you were limited to fighting among yourselves, with your primitive tanks and aircraft, we were unconcerned." We could slaughter each other by the millions—the Soviet Union lost nearly 25 million people during World War Two, without the benefit of nuclear weapons—as long as we don't export our aggression off-world. Further, because that off-world capability now exists, unless he is given a hearing, Klaatu himself is willing to resort to "violent action." "Level New York City, perhaps?" he asks. At that time, New York City's population was nearly eight million. It is difficult to imagine Jesus suggesting to his disciples that he is willing to level Jerusalem just to get the people's attention! The most chilling words, of course, conclude his address to the scientists gathered around his spaceship:

KLAATU

It is no concern of ours how you run your own planet, but if you threaten to extend your violence, this Earth of yours will be reduced to a burned-out cinder. Your choice is simple: join us and live in peace, or pursue your present course and face obliteration.

[31] That is, conform or be destroyed. Rather than salvation at the hands of an alien messiah, Klaatu presents the same ultimatum that Yahweh made to the Hebrew people. Though there is no space here to consider it in detail, this reading points to the integral relationship between religion and fear, one far more common historically and comparatively than between religion and peace (cf. Cowan 2008). Readers may not be convinced by my interpretation of the film as a form of the Deuteronomic bargain, and that is fine. I offer it merely to demonstrate that the interpretive tradition that has developed since Saleh is hardly the only viable option, that other interpretive overlays fit the film as well or better.

Hegemony, Occidentalism, and the Inevitable Will to Theology

[32] In many ways, the interpretive sedimentation I have traced in this chapter is a case study in dominance, or, to use Antonio Gramsci's concept, cultural hegemony. As Edward Said interprets Gramsci, hegemony means that in non-totalitarian societies "certain cultural forms predominate over others, just as certain ideas are more influential than others" (1978, 7). Hegemony obtains, indeed it is most deeply rooted when those dominant cultural forms become the lenses through which even people who do not participate directly in them view the world. It is most insidious when we no longer even recognize that the lenses exist, or when we lose sight of the fact that there are other lenses that would work perfectly well (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1966). In terms of religion in the West, of course, this dominance means Christianity—whether one is a Christian

or not. In this particular case, it means the hegemony of a limited collection of idealistic understandings of Christianity, understandings largely divorced from or ignorant of the historical, theological, and ideological realities of the Christian religion as it has developed around the world, but which have permeated the interpretation of pop culture products such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. In many respects, these ideas/ideals have become the common sense of culture, the local currency of interpretation not because they are necessarily reasonable or correct, but because they are socially and culturally ascendant. They command cultural capital unavailable to competing interpretive templates. Klaatu is a Christ-figure not because he is or because Robert Wise intended him to be, but because the cultural dominance of Christianity has intruded into the interpretive process to make him so. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is “a modern retelling of the Christ story” (Von Gunden and Stock 1982, 43) not because this describes it most accurately, but because an idealistic version of the Christ story is so pervasive in Western culture that its effects are difficult to avoid and even more difficult to control. (For an example of how an explicitly anti-Christian novel—H.G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* ([1898] 2005)—was turned into an explicitly Christian film by George Pal in 1953, see Cowan 2007a, 2007b).

[33] At this point, some readers might think that I am suggesting consumers do not have the right to interpret popular culture products according to their own interests, agendas, and predilections, or that an analysis such as mine too closely echoes early theories of film criticism that painted audiences as passive receivers, receptors subject only to the meaning imposed by directors, writers, producers, and cinematographers. Nothing could be further from the truth. Cultural consumers are perfectly free to interpret books, songs, theatre, television shows, and movies in any way they please. Each of these products invites an interactive experience, something that relies at least as much (if not more) on what a reader, audience member, or viewer brings to their

interpretation as the author, writer, or director means to be experienced. Movies, as Joe Dante says, are in many ways Rorschach tests; “there is what you mean when you make them, and then there’s what people get out of them. And sometimes those two things are not always the same” (1995). This explains, for example, why a film as visually and narratively complex as *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999) really functions as a blank canvas for the audience, ready for interpretation as Christian messianism (Stucky 2005), Buddhist mythologising (Ford 2003), or Gnostic allegory (Flannery-Daily and Wagner 2001).

[34] What I am indicating is that the hegemony of particular cultural forms will dominate the interpretation of cultural products simply because the lenses they present are more readily available, they can be employed across a wider range of potential audiences with less need for initial or prefatory explanation, and, as a result of this, they can import readings into those products regardless of whether such readings are entirely justified. It is this hegemonic process of interpretation that warrants closer investigation. Rather than simply accept what have come to be regarded as the standard interpretations of a particular product—the authorized versions, as it were—it is important to take seriously the other side of the interactive equation: what is it that audience members bring that invites and embeds particular interpretations, and what does that tell us about the social relations between the audience and the product, the consumer and the consumed? Once again, this is not to say that those who want to interpret *Klaatu* as a Christ-figure and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* as a gospel allegory are not free to do so. Such is the right of anyone who has honoured an artist with his or her attention (and often admission or rental fee). What they ought not do, though, is suggest that this is The Meaning of the product, as though other meanings, other interpretations, other readings, other eisegeses, are by definition bounded out. How, for example, would a Sikh know to interpret *The Day the Earth Stood Still* as

a Christian allegory? How would a Jew or a Muslim—conversant with but not accepting of the Christ myth—interpret the film? Or a Zen Buddhist? Or an atheist? To suggest, as Krin Gabbard does (1982: 150), that *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is “all the more remarkable for its use of the Christ myth to make its point” presents a very limited range of interpretive possibilities, a range few commentators since Saleh seem willing to contest. Indeed, demonstrating a remarkably proscribed sense of religious intertextuality, it is as though invocation of the Christian gospel has foreclosed most if not all other interpretive options.

[35] This opens up the other term in the hegemonic equation, what I am calling “occidentalism,” a creative misreading of Edward Said’s famous concept, orientalism. According to Said, orientalism “can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it” (1978, 3); it is “an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness” (1978, 6; on Orientalism in cinema specifically, see Bernstein and Studlar 1997). Occidentalism is a species of this same process. However, if *orientalism* renders the different exotic and thereby exerts control over it, *occidentalism* renders the exotic familiar, enclosing it in non-contested interpretive spaces, bounding out competing interpretations, and exercising similar control. In this case, this means the hegemonic Christian filters in the West, lenses that focus exotic phenomena and render them familiar to Western audiences, or focus potentially threatening or disturbing phenomena and render them acceptable. A form of theological colonisation, we see this practice constantly deployed in Christian apocalyptic fiction and non-fiction (see, for example, Hunt 1989; Kirban 1970; LaHaye and Jenkins 1995; Lindsey 1970; cf. Cowan 2003; Frykholm 2004; Shuck 2005). In these, there is no

aspect of culture or society, no current event or emergent phenomenon that is not bent to serve the theological agenda of the authors.

[36] Critics may consider this creative misreading of Said, especially in light of the genre of cultural product I'm talking about—science fiction cinema—to be trivial at best, derogatory at worst. But this would be short-sighted. Indeed, it is the very “trivial” nature of the products, and their cultural ubiquity and polyvalence, that render this kind of interpretive process so insidious, so deeply embedded that it seems beyond reproach. Through occidentalism, the theological colonisation of pop cultural spaces renders the Christian lens normative, establishing and reinforcing the hegemony of Christian interpretations of the products that occupy these spaces, and sedimenting (to use Berger's and Luckmann's term; cf. 1966, 85-89) the Christian understanding as “recipe knowledge” (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 83), the taken-for-granted reading of the material.

[37] Occidentalism as I have described it here occurs in two principal valences, what we might call proactive and participative, both of which warrant further investigation across the spectrum of pop culture production and consumption. Proactive occidentalism encompasses those who intentionally interpret cultural products in the service of particular theological commitments and agendas. Usually writing for their coreligionists, in the case of Christianity this valence often contributes to the larger dimension of occidentalism simply by virtue of the ready availability of these interpretations in the cultural marketplace. That is, they often do not rely on dedicated venues (e.g., churches) or specialty outlets (e.g., Christian bookstores). The cultural dominance of Christianity ensures that many of their different interpretive products will find their way into mainstream markets. On the other hand, participative occidentalism refers to those who interpret pop cultural products in terms of a particular cultural hegemony, but do not do so because of an

explicit allegiance to the theological agendas inherent in that hegemony. Neither of these should be taken as discrete positions, hermetically sealed on from the other, but as endpoints on a continuum that defines the relative power of a particular cultural hegemony at a given time and place.

[38] Said continues that one of the characteristics of orientalism is its “flexible *positional* superiority,” a condition that privileges Western interpretations of “the Orient without ever losing ... the relative upper hand” (1978: 7). That is, the orientalist understanding has become common knowledge to the point where it is no longer questioned, regardless of the claims it makes. The same obtains in occidentalism. Christian interpretations can be overlaid on any number of cultural products, and according to whatever theological or hermeneutic frameworks the interpreters choose for three principal reasons. First, the Christian story, at least as it is nominally understood in the West, is ubiquitous enough that a careful delineation of the interpretive contours that rely on this story is largely unnecessary; those familiar with it will pick up the interpretive cue and fill in the blanks as needed. This is clearly illustrated in the interpretive sediment laid down around *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, as critics gradually read more and more of the Christian story into the UFO film. Second, elements of the Christian story are broad enough and contain enough elements of ordinary human experience that *not* to find something to interpret in this fashion would be surprising. Said cautions his readers that “one ought never assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies and myths” (1978: 6). Such is also the case with occidentalism. The problem here, though, which is most clearly demonstrated in Kozlovic’s putative “Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-Figure” (2004), is that superficial similarity in no way indicates coordinate relationship, causal connection, or subtextual significance. Put differently, not everyone who throws their

arms out is a Christ-figure, bent knee or no. Third, like the orientalism Said elucidates, occidentalism of the kind I describe operates at little or no risk of challenge or reciprocal interpretation. That is, there is relatively little chance that the cultural hegemony inherent in and reinforced by a Christian interpretation of something like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* will be held up to a counter-interpretive microscope by those who have other vested interests or agendas. Thus, to take an example from a different (though related) genre, a very conservative pastor can indulge his passion for Hammer horror films by reinterpreting them as part of his own religious repertoire, by rendering that which is exotic (which can mean frightening or threatening in some way) in terms of the hegemonically familiar. He can take cultural products that many of his coreligionists would understand as entirely inappropriate (if not downright blasphemous; cf. Stone 2001) and reinterpret them in terms of—and in the service of—his own conservative Christian agenda. Thus, Presbyterian minister Paul Leggett recasts horror film director Terence Fisher as Hammer Studio’s closet evangelist (see 2002; for a similar case using George Romero’s *Dead* films, see Paffenroth 2006). Although Jesuit film critic Richard Blake insists that movies “must not and cannot be baptized and then coerced into ecclesial servitude” (1991, 289), this does not stop it from happening. Indeed, as Catherine Barsotti and Robert Johnston note in the introduction to *Finding God in the Movies*, “God is present in the movies for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear . . . this book is meant to help Christians find God in the movies, to use reel faith to encourage and strengthen real faith” (2004, 12).

[39] In terms of the cultural hegemony of Christianity, the most obvious way this occidentalism occurs is through interpretive similitude: some product or element of popular culture is thought of as reflecting or being like some aspect of the gospel or the biblical story. Whether its creators intended the reference or not, the product is theologized—colonized in the service of a particular

religious understanding. Thus, Bertonneau and Paffenroth can proclaim of the venerable *Dr. Who* that “many of the Doctor’s nemeses bear a strong resemblance to the competitors of Christianity in Paul’s day,” that “television’s most famous science-fiction series, *Star Trek*, consistently portrays broad Christian ethics,” that, in *The Twilight Zone*, the “depiction of evil is predominantly and unmistakably Christian,” or that by investigating *The X-Files* we are taken into “a world deeply imbued with the imagery and urgency of Christian apocalyptic” (2006, 26, 27; cf. Porter and McLaren 1999). Like the interpretive sedimentation that has built up around *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, this process bounds out other, often more plausible readings, both for the intended audience, and, just as often, for those who rely on these readings to support their own interpretation.

[40] *The Day the Earth Stood Still* notwithstanding, the most heavily colonized of science fiction cinema is *Star Wars*, the most successful sci-fi series in the history of cinema. Here we see the effect of occidentalism at its fullest (cf. Dalton 2003; Staub 2005; Wilkinson 2000). In *Finding God in a Galaxy Far, Far Away*, for example, Baptist pastor Timothy Paul Jones reads his way through the series, beginning each short chapter by pairing a quote from one of the films with an analogous bible verse, and closing each with “Spiritual Exercises for the Serious Padawan,” all of which encourage readers to “Be Mindful of the True Force” (2005). In *Star Wars Jesus*, Caleb Grimes also works his way through all six films, similarly aligning passages and images from each with selected biblical texts designed to elucidate his Christian interpretation. Thus, one chapter begins with Obi-Wan Kenobi’s last words to Darth Vader as they battle in the Death Star’s docking bay: “If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine.” To this, Grimes adds, “The power paradox of Christ, this is”—plus an assortment of verses from the New Testament (2007, 69). Unlike many of his coreligionists who interpret a

wide range of cultural products in terms of their own religious views, in *The Gospel According to Star Wars* systematic theologian John McDowell wrestles with whether a theological reading of these films is appropriate at all (2007, xvii). Since the concerns he finds in the *Star Wars* saga coincide with those he regards as central to Christianity, however, not surprisingly he concludes that his is a worthwhile endeavour. He spends more time addressing the issue in terms of those who are “worried that *SW* is occultic, perhaps we could say *sinematic*” (McDowell 2007, xvii). The issue here is compatibility: can Christians safely watch *Star Wars*, or must it remain a guilty pleasure dutifully confessed on Sunday? In each of these cases, the authors read the films in terms of their own theological perspective, turning the series to Christian advantage, and seemingly unaware of the larger issues of cultural hegemony these interpretations reveal. (All this said, though, for a fascinating debate arguing that *Star Wars* has no redeemable spiritual or religious significance at all, see Brin and Stover 2006, esp. 97-134).

[41] Returning to *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, one of the final questions suggested by an occidental analysis of this kind is not “Why read the film as Christian allegory?” but “Why now?” That is, why does it seem to have taken nearly thirty years for what many critics consider the film’s obvious subtext to surface as part of the commentarial tradition? Though this would bear further investigation, two reasons suggest themselves. First, when the film was made, portrayal of Christ onscreen was largely limited to the biblical epic model, films such as *Quo Vadis* (LeRoy 1951) and *The Robe* (Koster 1953), a form considered more respectful of its topic than a UFO invasion story. Indeed, when the script was submitted to Joseph Breen and the Production Code Administration—Hollywood’s censorship board and principal moral watchdog (cf. Black 1994, 1997)—Breen’s office so objected to the notion that Gort could bring Klaatu back from the dead using alien technology that the line “No, that is a power reserved to the

Almighty Spirit” was added as a compromise (Von Gunden and Stock 1982, 44). Suggesting that Klaatu was an unsubtle reference to Jesus would clearly have put the film beyond the pale.

Second, by the late 1960s, especially with the rise of the counterculture and the numerous Jesus movements that emerged from it, a more relaxed attitude to the portrayal of Jesus prevailed.

While films like *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Jewison 1973) and *Godspell* (Greene 1973) appeared to bouquets and brickbats from audiences around the world, enterprising evangelists like Arthur Blessitt were turning other aspects of popular culture to the Christian cause. Most famous for an itinerant ministry in which he dragged a cross across several continents, whenever he stopped to talk with people Blessitt would pass out stickers that looked like current advertisements for Coca-Cola, but substituted “Jesus: He’s the Real Thing” and “Christ adds life!” (Blessitt and Oliver 1978). By this time, reading Klaatu as a Christ-figure would not have seemed out of place.

[42] Although, in his *Los Angeles Times* review of the film, Edwin Schallert may have countered potential concerns in the 1950s that *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was a propaganda film, it took the cultural hegemony of Christianity and the analytic will to theologize to make it one.

Postscript

[43] While I have considered only the 1951 version of the film, and the overt Christianizing of its message, an important comparison awaits between the original and the remake by Scott Derrickson (2008), which was released nearly a year after this essay was completed. Derrickson is best known for directing *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), a film that allowed him to talk freely about his own Christian commitment (see Cowan 2008).

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