California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

From the SelectedWorks of Richard Besel

2014

# The Day Environmentalism Stood Still: Film, Myth, and the Ecological Jeremiad

Richard Besel

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/rbesel/17/

# Myth in the Modern World

## *Essays on Intersections with Ideology and Culture*

*Edited by* DAVID WHITT
*and* JOHN PERLICH

McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
*Jefferson, North Carolina*

2014

# The Day Environmentalism Stood Still

## *Film, Myth and the Ecological Jeremiad*

RICHARD D. BESEL

The 1951 film *The Day the Earth Stood Still,* directed by Robert Wise and starring Michael Rennie and Patricia Neal, has long been recognized by movie critics as a science fiction classic. The motion picture tells the tale of an alien visitor, Klaatu, who warns humankind that their recent space explorations and appetite for violence has their galactic neighbors concerned. Historically situated during the Cold War, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (*DESS* ) can be read as a commentary against nuclear weapons and a source of pacifist ideology. By the end of the film, inhabitants of Earth are faced with a grave choice—humans either need to correct their moral failings or face extermination.

In 2008, *DESS* was remade under the direction of Scott Derrickson. Starring Keanu Reeves and Jennifer Connelly, the re-imagining replaced the Cold War narrative with an environmental message. It is no longer humanity's predisposition for violence that is of concern to our galactic peers, but the irresponsible stewardship of our planet. In Derrickson's rendering, humanity is once again given a choice—stop traumatizing the Earth or confront extinction.

Although the two *DESS* films were created and released nearly sixty years apart, Michael Shermer observes in his comparison of the two movies that the 2008 version "closely parallels Robert Wise's 1951 science fiction film classic that was a Cold War warning shrouded in a Christ allegory" (Shermer, 2008, p. 68). Despite their numerous similarities to one another, each film received dramatically different responses from their respective audiences. According to film scholar M. Keith Booker, the original *DESS* is "a courageous film that





can rightly claim to be the first truly important work of American science fiction cinema" (Booker, 2006, p. 27). As the first of its kind, Booker also notes that the movie "paved the way for future developments in the genre, setting the stage for the explosion in SF films that marked the decade of the 1950s" (Booker, 2006, p. 27). *Village Voice* critic James L. Hoberman observes that the 1951 *DESS* "would become the best-loved science fiction film of the Cold War era" and the eventual "precursor to, if not inspiration for, Steven Spielberg's 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind' and 'E.T.: The Extraterrestrial'" (Hoberman, 2008, p. 4). Without a doubt, the original version of *DESS* is "a landmark of American science fiction cinema" (Booker, 2006, p. 31). In contrast to its predecessor, the 2008 remake of *DESS* was the target of much harsh criticism. For example, the *New York Times* film critic Anthony Scott blasted the film because he felt the movie's "scenario and many of its scenes feel ripped off rather than freshly imagined ... we can surely do better" (Scott, 2008, p. C7). Viewing the film from a different perspective, theologian Ted Peters concurs with Scott when he writes the film "could have hit a home run. Instead, it struck out" (Peters, 2009, p. 121).

Given the obvious similarities between the films, how does one make scholarly sense of their drastically different audience reactions? I argue the *DESS* films are understood best from a mythic perspective that recognizes minute differences in the films' rhetorical forms. More specifically, I contend both films expose audiences to what media studies scholar A. Susan Owen calls a "cinematic jeremiad," or a list of lamentations in which the possibility of salvation from a spiritual, material, or moral downfall is still possible (Owen, 2002, p. 250). Working within a broadly mythic framework and following two recent strands in jeremiad scholarship, this essay illustrates that films can accomplish the mythic work of the jeremiad and that there is additional evidence for the existence of a unique subset of the jeremiad known as the ecological jeremiad. In addition, this essay advances scholarly understanding of the jeremiad by arguing the *DESS* films underscore the rhetorical and mythic limits of the ecological jeremiad. The films provided audience members with different types of empowerment; the first gave a sense of mythic hope and the second left audiences enlightened, but impotent. Before analyzing the films, a consideration of myth in film and an explication of the rhetorical form known as the jeremiad are in order.

## *Myth in/and Science Fiction Film*

In an interview with Bill Moyers, Joseph Campbell noted that if one were to look up a dictionary definition of "myth," one would most likely find ref-

erences to "stories about gods" (Campbell and Moyers, 1988, p. 22). Of course, this definition is too simplistic for Campbell. He expands: "myths are metaphorical of spiritual potentiality in the human being, and the same powers that animate our life animate the life of the world" (Campbell and Moyers, 1988, p. 22). Like Campbell, and many others who have studied myth in a variety of cultures and contexts, this essay begins with a broad understanding of what constitutes a myth. Myths

> are productions of the human imagination. Their images, consequently, though derived from the material world and its supposed history, are, like dreams, revelations of the deepest hopes, desires and fears, potentialities and conflicts, of the human will [Campbell, 1985, p. 55].

Myths thus serve a variety of practical, spiritual, and cultural needs. Myths often help us to "address important questions which a culture is asking about itself" (McGuire, 1977, p. 3).

While folk tales and stories have been the traditional artifacts of mythic study, such as in Campbell's work, in recent years scholars have turned their attention to mediated myths, especially science fiction and fantasy movies. For Stuart Voytilla (1999), in his book *Myth and the Movies*, "Whether rooted in scientific speculation or inspired by imagination's fancy, Science Fiction and Fantasy allow us to go where we've never been, see what we could never see, and behold what we dare to imagine" (p. 260). In other words, movies serve many of the same functions that traditional oral and written myths have served in the past. Some have even gone so far as to suggest that today "science fiction is our mythology" (Shermer, 2008, p. 70). In *Millennial Mythmaking*, the editors of this book have pointed out that "contemporary myths, particularly science fiction and fantasy texts, can provide socio-cultural commentary on who we are, what we have created, and where we may be going" (Perlich & Whitt, 2010, p. 3; also see Whitt & Perlich, 2008). That movies and science fiction texts, such as *Star Wars* or *Planet of the Apes,* can be studied from a mythic perspective seems justified given these recent observations.

While movies generally may be studied for their mythic components, this approach seems especially appropriate for the two *DESS* movies. According to Shermer, "Both touch on timeless mythic themes: destruction and redemption, death and resurrection, mortality and immortality, individual liberty and group unity, national sovereignty and global community, and, of course, scientists playing God and technology run amok" (Shermer, 2008, p. 70). While I agree with Shermer's observation about the movies' content, the mythic themes he mentions do not help scholars understand the rhetorical form that is used to bring these themes to the audiences' attention. This is where a consideration of the jeremiad is particularly relevant.



## *The Dynamic Jeremiad*

The American jeremiad is a rhetorical form that finds its origins in the Puritan discourses of the late 1600s. Perry Miller suggests that this "political sermon" may actually be America's first distinct literary genre (Bercovitch, 1978, pp. xiv). This rhetorical form was used often during "ritual-communal occasions and it intertwined practical spiritual guidance on matters of religion and public affairs" (Johannesen, 1985, p. 158). Foundational to this form of expression was the Puritans' mythic belief that they were "a company of Christians not only called but chosen, and chosen not only for heaven but as instruments of a sacred historical design" (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 6). Turning to scriptures about the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, who explained divine reasons for impending disasters, the Puritans understood God's covenant to bless Israel to extend to the new world, the new Israel (Stoda and Dionisopoulos, 2000, p. 32). However, the promise of prosperity via divine blessing was bound to conditions of pious living. The Puritans' covenant with God "had to do not with eternal salvation of the elect of God but with a pledge to perform a mission within the world" (Minter, 1974, p. 48). The jeremiad was thus part of the mythic ritual of a "culture on an errand" (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 23; Browne, 1992), an errand to carryout God's will in the new world.

As religious-political leaders confronted drought, perceptions of moral decay, and the harsh realities of their new environment, the jeremiad was eventually appropriated as a "state of the covenant address" (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 4). Societal ills were viewed as the consequences of breaking the community's covenant with God. Early speakers were often cast in the roles of prophet, "acting as a kind of intermediary between the god-like authoritative message source and the intended audience" (Stoda and Dionisopoulos, 2000, pp. 31–32). However, the traditional jeremiad was not a purely apocalyptic rhetoric designed to foretell the coming destruction of the community; it was simultaneously a mythic rhetoric of hope and redemption.

Although there are some minor disagreements between jeremiad scholars about the elements that constitute this rhetorical form (Johannesen, 1985, p. 157), there is enough agreement to offer a general overview. First, to borrow a phrase from Minter (1974), the traditional jeremiad includes a "cataloging of calamity" (p. 49). In other words, a rhetor confronts audience members with a detailed review of current afflictions. Second, the rhetor blames the current crisis on the community's refusal to keep its covenant with God. In a traditional jeremiad, this primarily involves the citation of biblical excerpts and spiritual leaders as a means of highlighting what constitutes sin. Societal

ills are viewed as God's punishment for those who refuse to live a pious life while carrying on with His work in the New World. However, the jeremiad is not exclusively a divinely inspired disciplinary form. The rhetor, finally, suggests that by repenting and reaffirming the sacred covenant the community can overcome its ills. By following the advice of the Jeremiah, audience members can halt God's wrath and once again bask in the glory of God's grace.

As American culture changed over time, so too did the jeremiad. According to rhetoric scholar Richard Johannesen, "as this rhetorical form evolved into the 1700s, this faith in the errand or mission to fulfill God's plan increasingly was expanded from all Puritans to include all Protestants and eventually all American citizens" (Johannesen, 1985, p. 158). However, soon after the errand included those of different faith traditions, a secular version of the American jeremiad emerged. Politicians soon adopted the new form to "give meaning and significance to the present by contending that today's public policies must measure up to past ideals" (Johannesen, 1985, p. 160). The review of current afflictions, the determination of blame, and a return to better times are all present in the secular mythic form, but biblical scripture and the principles of religious leaders are replaced by our nation's documents of origin and the principles of our founding fathers. This is not to say that the traditional form is no longer used; spiritual leaders still employ this form on a regular basis (Mitchell and Phipps, 1985). To this day, both the traditional and secular forms of the jeremiad remain rhetorically and mythically potent in the hands of skilled orators and storytellers such as Jerry Falwell and Ronald Reagan.

Despite its widespread use and popular appeal, the secular jeremiad has been heavily criticized. In his study of Robert F. Kennedy's use of the form in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., public address scholar John Murphy claims that "while rhetors employing the jeremiad may call for political change to end discord, the jeremiad limits the scope of reform and the depth of social criticism" (Murphy, 1990, p. 402). Indeed, how does one advocate for social change when one simultaneously calls for a return to our founding principles? Murphy explains, "The form of the jeremiad directs what might otherwise be a search for social and political alternatives into a celebration of the values of the culture and of change within the status quo" (Murphy, 1990, p. 404). This "oxymoronic potential" of the jeremiad leads many scholars to question the form's effectiveness (Owen, 2002, p. 253). In addition to noting the form's limitations, scholars have also begun to develop two new strands of jeremiad research relevant for this chapter, one visual and one environmental.

For communication scholar A. Susan Owen, the jeremiad's presence in texts is not limited to traditional public addresses. In her study of the movie



*Saving Private Ryan* (1998), Owen encourages jeremiad scholars to take seriously the visual turn in rhetorical and cultural studies. Owen successfully argues that *Saving Private Ryan* is a "fully developed cinematic jeremiad" (Owen, 2002, p. 250). Illustrating how director Steven Spielberg skillfully responds to America's post–Vietnam national identity crisis with a World War II movie that maintains and perpetuates American mythic structures by arguing war is sometimes necessary, she clearly places the movie within the jeremiad genre. For example, the killing of the Jewish American soldier by a German officer is especially powerful. The slow stabbing of Mellish, while another American soldier stands paralyzed, reminds us that inaction has serious consequences. In their study of Al Gore's 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth,* Thomas Rosteck and Thomas S. Frentz (2009) argue Gore takes on the heroic role of Jeremiah. In the opening scene of the film, they note how Gore takes us from "the sublime peace of the riverbank" to "the frightening vision of impending global disaster" if we do not stop our immoral and polluting actions (p. 6). Although this movie appears to be about Gore's journey, it is the audience who are asked to act. Rosteck and Frentz concur with Owen's assessment about the presence of the jeremiad in contemporary cinema.

In addition to a visual strand, recent jeremiad scholarship suggests we are witnessing the emergence of a new form called the "environmental jeremiad." Dan Buehler (1998) has noticed the use of the jeremiad in Theodore Roosevelt's calls for additional conservation efforts, and John Opie and Norbert Elliot (1996) have noted the importance of the form in American environmental discourse. Opie and Elliot even go so far as to argue that the jeremiad is "the best rhetorical device for handling a most difficult subject—the representation of the American people in their environment" (Opie & Elliot, 1996, p. 35). Like the traditional and secular jeremiads, the environmental jeremiad follows the same three-part division. However, the covenant is now what Dylan Wolfe (2008) has called an "ecological covenant" (p. 11). Rather than breaking a covenant with God or straying from the principles of our founding fathers, the environmental jeremiad suggests that ecological principles of balance have been upset. Evidence of what these principles are is often found in quotations from heroes of the environmental movement (i.e., Aldo Leopold, John Muir, and Rachel Carson). Humans suffer nature's wrath, not God's, should they no longer live in harmony with the world around them. The environmental Jeremiah is thus one who catalogues environmental calamities, highlights how we are "out of balance" with nature, and suggests a restoration of harmony through changes in lifestyle. With this understanding of the dynamic form known as the jeremiad, it is appropriate to examine the *DESS* movies in turn.

## The Day the Earth Stood Still *(1951)*

Based on the 1940 Harry Bates short story "Farewell to the Master," the first *DESS* film opens with ominous music characteristic of 1950s science fiction movies as the credits are displayed in front of stars and space. As the black and white picture moves to Earth, the viewer is immediately made aware that something is not right when a soldier stationed at a radar monitor exclaims to one of his peers, "Call headquarters! Get the Lieutenant!" The news that the United States military is tracking an unidentified flying object (UFO) moving at a blistering 4,000 miles per hour quickly spreads throughout the world as scenes of people listening to radio reports in a variety of languages fill the screen. Shortly thereafter, images of monuments disclose the alien's choice for a landing location: The spaceship makes its approach amid panicking onlookers as it descends on a park in Washington, D.C.

The film wastes little time before moving into its first important action scene. Scrambling to make first contact, local police rush to the landing site and are soon joined by Army troops from nearby Fort Meyers. The alien Klaatu (Michael Rennie) finally emerges from the metallic spacecraft that has had "every eye, every weapon" trained on the ship for nearly two hours. His humanoid form seems similar to that of the earthlings, but he dons an unusual headdress and carries an unknown handheld device. Despite his first words, "We have come to visit you in peace and with goodwill," Klaatu's attempts to give the object to a representative of Earth are nervously mistaken as a sign of aggression. Klaatu is shot by a young soldier and falls to the ground as screams are heard in the background. While soldiers attempt to make sense of what has transpired, the eight feet tall robot Gort (Lock Martin) emerges from the ship. The soldiers pull back and the crowd retreats as additional screams fill the air. Viewers see Gort's face shield rise, revealing what appears to be a light or energy source where one would expect to see its eyes. Without saying a word, beams of energy shoot from the light source and destroy all of the earthlings' weapons surrounding the alien ship until the wounded Klaatu calls him off. Rising slowly, Klaatu divulges that with the unknown object, intended as a gift for the U.S. President, humans could have studied life on other planets. A soldier in command arrives in a jeep and orders that Klaatu be taken to Walter Reed Hospital for treatment.

More than simply an opening scene, the interactions between Klaatu and the human soldiers underscore the first of many mythic themes in the movie and provide the viewers with the first components of the jeremiad form. If the jeremiad provides audience members with a "cataloging of calamity" (Minter, 1974, p. 49), the first calamity in the movie's register is society's overly paranoid



and militaristic culture. Indeed, the film teaches us lessons about how humans are supposed to (re)act when faced with questions about weapons, war, and other beings. In this sense, the movie speaks rather directly to Campbell's contention that myth addresses humanity's "deepest hopes, desires and fears, potentialities and conflicts" (Campbell, 1985, p. 55). How many myths exist where listeners are told to "do unto others," or "follow the golden rule" in some form or another? The opening scene suggests that the peaceful and reciprocal covenant with one another that has been passed down for so many generations in a variety of traditions has been forgotten; our new social contract with one another is not founded on faith, connection, and love of life, but on distrust, destruction, and death to others.

The opening scene also sets the stage for an additional element of the jeremiad, that of a superior power capable of threatening humanity's very existence if people do not restore the covenant. The observation that violence (the shooting of Klaatu) begets loss of knowledge and understanding (destruction of the technology to study life on other planets) is not sufficient to consider the movie a jeremiad. The introduction of Gort, after Klaatu's shooting, reminds audience members that a refusal to live by a peaceful covenant does not just allow you to analogically fall out of God's good graces, but it entails suffering God's wrath. Klaatu takes on the role of Jeremiah, speaking on behalf of alien civilizations "out there" while Gort is the first of many technological advancements audience members will encounter that give Klaatu's threats an added dimension of credibility.

While at Walter Reed Hospital, Klaatu meets Mr. Harley (Frank Conroy), a member of the President's cabinet. Klaatu reveals to Mr. Harley that he has a message that must be shared with leaders from all of the world's nations, further evidence of his role as a Jeremiah. Mr. Harley, in wishing to keep any information the alien has to offer restricted to the U.S. government, attempts to persuade Klaatu that the logistics of such a request would be too difficult and that the world is one "full of tensions and suspicions." Klaatu refuses to deliver his message to one person only and proceeds to tell Mr. Harley, "I am not concerned 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." Once again, the jeremiad is present heavily in this scene of the movie. Klaatu's speedy recovery acts as another sign of alien superiority, while his ability to transcend "petty" politics reminds viewers of the kinds of "sins" humanity should avoid. He even goes so far as to suggest he is only impatient with "stupidity" when Mr. Harley insists gathering the nation's leaders together would be impossible. Mr. Harley's interest in looking out for one nation's concerns instead of the concerns of the world at large speaks to Shermer's obser-

vation about of the mythic binary of "national sovereignty" versus "global community" (Shermer, 2008, p. 70). Mr. Harley represents all that is wrong with the way humans interact with one another: characterizing others as "evil," manipulating others with only self interest in mind, and disregarding any sense of the communal good.

Upon Klaatu's miraculous recovery from his wound with the application of a foreign salve, he escapes from the hospital to be amongst Earth's people. After stealing a suit, Klaatu decides to assume the identity of the suit's owner, a Mr. Carpenter. Of course, numerous observers have argued for a strong Christian allusion within the movie seeing that Jesus was a carpenter. While the analysis in this essay does not dispute those observations, the Christian influence does not simply function to deliver mythic content, but it also strengthens the function of the jeremiad, a form that was closely related to Christian religious traditions in early America. As it will soon become apparent, the parallels between the resurrection stories related to Jesus and the encounters Klaatu experiences in the film are unmistakable.

Seeking refuge in a boarding house with his new identity, Klaatu meets the caring widow Helen Benson (Patricia Neal), her son Bobby (Billy Gray), and Helen's beau Tom Stephens (Hugh Marlowe). In his attempts to reserve judgment, Klaatu decides it wise to discover why humans behave the way they do. During his first breakfast at the boarding house, Klaatu listens to a host of arguments about the "space man," fear mongering, and international politics. Befriending Bobby, Klaatu learns about American culture by visiting Arlington National Cemetery, the place where Bobby's father is buried. Disappointed to discover the cemetery is populated by those who have died in wars past, Klaatu and Bobby then visit the Lincoln memorial, where Klaatu comments on the wisdom the sixteenth president must have had. Much like the use of founding fathers in a secular jeremiad, audience members are offered lessons about peace and war, right and wrong, and life and death. Realizing he needs to speak to a "great man," Klaatu asks Bobby who he believes is the "greatest philosopher" and "smartest man" in America. Bobby answers, "Professor Barnhardt, I guess."

After solving an equation the Einstein-like Professor Barnhardt (Sam Jaffe) had been struggling to address for some time, the professor realizes immediately Mr. Carpenter's real identity. Klaatu reveals the purpose of his mission to Barnhardt—that Earth's galactic neighbors are concerned about humanity's aggressive disposition combined with their recent acquisition of atomic energy and wish to bring Earth back into peaceful alignment—and asks for his assistance. His warning is delivered in a jeremiad form: "By threatening danger, your planet faces danger. I am prepared, however, to offer a solution." Barnhardt reluctantly agrees to gather the world's scientists together to receive Klaatu's message, but also asks for a peaceful demonstration of the alien's power to "dramatize" for the Earth's people the situation's seriousness. Klaatu agrees to give Barnhardt, and the world, the demonstration.



Unknown to Klaatu, Bobby has followed him and discovered his true identity as Klaatu returns to his ship to set in motion the necessary preparations for the demonstration of force requested by Professor Barnhardt. Tom Stephens eventually discovers Mr. Carpenter's true identity as well, via Bobby, and reveals it to the authorities despite Helen's pleas not to do so. When Helen attempts to explain that the rest of the world is involved in his decision to reveal Klaatu's identity and location, Tom responds, "I don't care about the rest of the world." Helen is dismayed by what Tom has done and leaves him. Before the implementation of his demonstration, Klaatu informs Helen that should anything happen to him she is to tell Gort "Klaatu barado nikto"—one of the most well-known lines in science fiction movie history. During Klaatu's demonstration, for thirty minutes every mechanical device on the planet is disabled or frozen because the "electricity has been neutralized," with the exception of those that would lead to loss of life. In other words, it is "the day the earth stood still." Tom's self-centered actions represent society's moral failings and the demonstration once again illustrates the alien culture's far superior technology when compared to Earth's advancements, giving added legitimacy to Klaatu's extinction threat.

After Klaatu's demonstration, the military steps up their efforts to track him down, quarantining Washington, D.C. With Tom's help, the military finds Klaatu and shoots him in the back before he can attend the scheduled meeting of the world's scientists. Helen successfully escapes apprehension and flees the scene, now desperate to get Klaatu's message to Gort. Somehow aware of the shooting, Gort kills the two soldiers guarding it as the robot considers its next step. Helen fearfully delivers the message "Klaatu barado nikto" to the towering robot; soon after, Gort forces Helen into the ship while it retrieves Klaatu's body. Upon the robot's return, Helen watches and is amazed by what appears to be the robot's ability to resurrect the fallen divine-like hero. Much like Christ, Klaatu appears to be raised from the dead despite his insistence that even his species does not have the power that belongs to the "Almighty Spirit." The mythic resurrection narrative is present nonetheless.

In the final scene of the movie, the newly resurrected Klaatu emerges from his vehicle before the gathered scientists. He delivers his message as planned, telling the representatives, "There must be security for all, or no one is secure. This does not mean giving up any freedom except the freedom to act irresponsibly." Klaatu goes on to say:

> I came here to give you the 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 rests with you.

Klaatu then returns to his ship, and leaves just as he came. The final scene of the movie acts as a synecdoche (a part representing the whole) for how the entire film functions as a mythically themed cinematic jeremiad. Klaatu, acting as the warning bearer, tells the earthlings what they are doing wrong: acting out of self-interest instead of for the communal good, participating in acts of violence against one another, and developing technologies that could irreversibly damage all that exists. As the alien Jeremiah, Klaatu's threat appears to be made in self-defense when he notes certain destruction is to follow, "*if* you threaten to extend your violence." In other words, it is not yet too late for humanity to redeem itself in the eyes of superior beings much like the early Puritans believe they needed to remain in God's good grace. No judgment has yet been made about humanity's fate; Earth has been given one final chance at redemption. By returning to a peaceful covenant, and extending that covenant to our behavior with other earthlings and our galactic neighbors, humans can once again live in harmony and without fear.

## The Day the Earth Stood Still *(2008)*

Unlike the first *DESS*, the 2008 rendition begins in 1928 atop the snowy, Karakoram Mountains of India, where an unidentified climber (Keanu Reeves) stumbles upon a mystical, glowing sphere. Adventurously, the bearded human uses his pickaxe to chip away the ice that has encased the alien shape, only to be knocked out by a blinding light. After regaining consciousness, the mountaineer discovers the sphere is now gone and that he has a circular scar on his right hand. The movie then fades to "present day" Princeton University, where a lecture about extreme organisms is being given by astrobiologist Dr. Helen Benson (Jennifer Connelly). Viewers do not yet know the purpose of the alien sphere, nor do they yet know the reason for the scar on the mountaineer's hand. The early introduction of Dr. Benson is also a deviation from the original screenplay. Whereas the introductions of the modest Helen Benson and her son Bobby come late in the first film, the introductions of the highly educated Helen and her rebellious step-son Jacob (Jaden Smith) surface almost immediately in the second. It is not until first contact that the similarities between the two movies become apparent.



After discovering Earth is on a collision course with an unknown object moving through space, U.S. government officials retrieve Dr. Benson from her home and urgently caravan her to an airport where she joins a number of other scientific experts. Dr. Benson is briefed that the object is expected to hit New York, and that the U.S. government has gathered the scientists as part of an "aftermath" response team. However, rather than having to deal with the destructive impact of an asteroid, the luminescent object slows down and lands in New York's Central Park.

Once the dust from the landing clears, rather than facing a saucer as in the first movie, the alien craft is a giant sphere similar to the one encountered by the mountaineer in the opening scene of the movie. As in the initial *DESS*, local police and the military surround the vessel. An alien humanoid emerges from the craft through what appears to be a glowing passage. Accompanied by slower, tension-building music, the alien reaches out to Dr. Benson, but is immediately shot by an unidentified, nervous soldier. As in the first film, the robot Gort emerges from the light of the craft and disables all weapons and mechanical devices, but this time with some kind of electromagnetic pulse rather than energy beams. The humans and police dogs are also sonically debilitated until the wounded alien calls off the robot. Although it would be tempting to suggest the second *DESS* develops the same mythic lessons about weapons, militarism, and how we are to treat one another that are observed in the first movie, the message is not as clear. Noticeably absent are the alien's lines about arriving in peace and with goodwill. Without the stark discursive contrast between peace and violence, it is possible to read this early scene as a realistic depiction of how a first encounter with an alien species could go wrong because of nerves rather that a paranoid and overly militaristic culture. As it will soon be made clear in the film, the kind of violence the alien is concerned with is not violence directed toward other humanoid forms of life in the galaxy, but other forms of life already on the planet. But audience members are still left with an uncertain list of lamentations for the jeremiad form. However, as with the 1951 film, the demonstration of superior force is still made clear with the presence of Gort, now a computer-enhanced, twelve feet tall behemoth of a robot.

Paralleling the original *DESS* storyline, the wounded visitor is rushed to a nearby hospital. Unlike the first film, the alien does not yet appear in human form. Doctors discover that the alien has actually been encased in some kind of biological, gray flesh-like material that functions simultaneously as a bio-engineered spacesuit and incubator. After removing the bullet, a surgeon notices the outer layer has begun to fall away. He accelerates the process, only to find what appears to be a forming human within the cocoon. They isolate

the alien, and it quickly grows into who appears to be the mountaineer from the opening scene. The audience is thus made aware that the scar on the mountaineer's hand was a DNA sample, and the alien who has emerged from the gray material has taken on his human form. Unlike the first film, the second offers a scientifically up-to-date and biologically informed explanation for why the alien appears as he does.

Once the alien fully matures and (re)gains consciousness, he appears miraculously to have a grasp of the English language already. As the world markets react to the news of the alien visitor, a member of the President's cabinet, Secretary of Defense Regina Jackson (Kathy Bates), becomes the "eyes and ears" of the administration. As additional, smaller spheres begin to land in various locations scattered around the globe, their purposes unknown, Jackson meets with the alien visitor. He tells Dr. Benson his name is Klaatu. The scientific superiority of the alien culture is made apparent through their knowledge of biological, rather than purely mechanical, engineering. As in the first film, Klaatu tells Secretary Jackson that his purpose will be explained to a gathering of world leaders, but she refuses to allow this. She encourages him to tell her alone why he has come to "our planet." He turns to her and asks, somewhat offended, "Your planet?" It is here that the environmental message of the movie becomes visible for the first time. The mythic themes of individual property and free market capitalism are pitted against communal ownership and the symbiotic relationships of all beings. When she replies, "Yes, this is our planet," Klaatu clearly responds, "No, it is not."

Paranoid about Klaatu's intentions, Secretary Jackson orders that the alien be placed in a drug-induced state and interrogated. Believing the actions to hold Klaatu against his will are unnecessary and, perhaps, even unjustified, Dr. Benson helps Klaatu escape from the interrogation facility. Again, Helen's role as an important character in the storyline is developed in a way it is not in the first version. With every resource at the government's disposal attempting to track him down, and with the reopening of his gunshot wound, Klaatu contacts Helen to retrieve the medicinal cocoon sample she obtained from his bioengineered spacesuit. With her help, his wound is healed. When she asks him if he is a friend to "us," he responds, "I'm a friend to the Earth."

The use of the jeremiad in both films is clear. However, the second develops an ecological jeremiad. In much the same way Dylan Wolfe (2008) has observed the development of an "ecological covenant" in environmental jeremiads, Klaatu's poignant reminder that we are in a state of balance with other beings, a kind of symbiosis, teaches viewers that any activity that upsets that balance could be met with harsh consequences, including extinction. Although Wolfe is the only scholar to date who has argued for the existence of an explicit



environmental jeremiad, the second *DESS* film suggests its use is ubiquitous in our society and in a variety of media. However, in the following scene there are variations in the form that hinder its reception significantly.

Unlike the first *DESS*, the recent version contains a scene where Klaatu meets other alien visitors who have been living among the humans. In a meeting with Mr. Wu (James Hong) at a McDonald's, arranged with Helen's help and with Jacob in tow, the audience learns that Klaatu wishes to reason with the humans. However, Mr. Wu points out humans are "not a reasonable race"; instead, with his seventy years of firsthand knowledge, Mr. Wu has concluded humans are "destructive" and "won't change." Klaatu responds, "It's decided then." It is in this scene where audiences encounter a change in the jeremiad form. Rather than offering hope of survival and the possibility of redemption for the sins humans have committed against nature, the superior beings have passed judgment, thereby emphasizing the apocalyptic elements of the film. However, doing so limits the effectiveness of the jeremiad. Stoda and Dionisopoulos (2000), for example, have argued, "even when an audience is willing to acknowledge the speaker's claim to enact the role of the prophet, there may be limits concerning how threatening the message can be to the audience's self-image, or how readily they will accept the prescribed act of expiation" (p. 47). In this scene, judgment in favor of humanity's extermination is passed over fast-food tea served in a paper cup, thereby limiting the redemptive aspects of the form because humans are never given a chance to correct their wrong actions.

With the decision to exterminate humans now made, the small spheres scattered around the globe begin to capture various forms of life so that Earth's biodiversity can be restored after the extermination. Like the first movie, the Christian allusions to powerful god-like beings are clear, further adding legitimacy to the jeremiad threat. The extermination is analogous to the flood myth, with the small spheres functioning like a giant Noah's "Ark," as Secretary Jackson noted; in a scene where Klaatu makes contact with one of the spheres, he walks on water; and yet in another scene, Klaatu raises from the dead a police officer he has killed in self defense. Confronted by Helen, Klaatu reveals humanity's sin, that the covenant of balance and harmony has been broken: "This planet is dying. The human race is killing it." When asked if Klaatu is there to help the humans, Klaatu simply answers, "no." In a startling follow-up, Klaatu reveals the logic of extermination to Helen: "If the Earth dies, you die. If you die, the Earth survives." In her attempts to convince Klaatu that humans should be extended a second chance, that "we can change," she takes Klaatu to meet with Professor Barnhardt (John Cleese).

That the second *DESS* film uses the jeremiad form is clear in Klaatu's

encounter with professor Barnhardt. After helping the professor with an equation and hearing Bach playing in the background, Klaatu states he finds the music, "beautiful." Professor Barnhardt observes, "so we're not so different after all." Despite having already passed judgment on the human race, Klaatu begins to change his mind about exterminating the species. Professor Barnhardt pleads with the alien, "every civilization reaches a crisis point eventually" and begs Klaatu to help humanity. After discovering that Klaatu's race only evolved after being threatened with destruction, the professor points out, "that's where we are. You say we're on the brink of destruction and you're right. But it's only on the brink that people find the will to change. Only at the precipice do we evolve." These lines echo the logic of the jeremiad. Just when it appears that Klaatu is about to change his mind, authorities interrupt the conversation. Similar to the first film, the young boy, Jacob, has revealed the alien's location. It is only after witnessing Helen's connection with Jacob that Klaatu finally changes his mind. However, the extermination process has already begun.

Although the first *DESS* film does not reveal how humans were to be exterminated, the second makes the process explicit. Audiences discover that the giant robot Gort is actually made up of nano-insects that multiply by consuming all matter around them. By the time Klaatu decides humans deserve a second chance, the robot has already disintegrated into an exponentially expanding swarm. To stop the nano-insects, Klaatu must electronically disable them, forcing humans to "pay a price to your way of life." This act requires that all electricity on the planet be forever halted, thus revealing the "day the earth stood still." Although humans are given a second chance at redemption, they are left technologically crippled.

## *Conclusion*

In this essay, I have analyzed two *DESS* films from a broadly mythic perspective while recognizing minute differences in the films' rhetorical forms. From this analysis, I draw a number of conclusions. First, this essay provides additional arguments and support for two additional strands of jeremiad scholarship. Similar to A. Susan Owen's (2002) observations, this essay illustrates the presence of the jeremiad form in film, a cinematic jeremiad. Extending the observations made by scholars such as Dylan Wolfe (2008), this essay also demonstrates how the jeremiad form is now used as an ecological jeremiad in texts other than books, thereby providing an additional rhetorical resource for the advancement of mythic understandings and lessons to movie- going audiences. However, this analysis also reveals how the *DESS* films underscore the rhetorical and mythic limits of the ecological jeremiad.



How do we account for the different reactions to the two films given the similarities in forms? I argue the key distinction between the films has to with how far the second takes the threat found within the jeremiad form, thereby alienating part of its audience. According to Mark Jendrysik (2008), the jeremiad can only function within a delicate balance: "In effect, modern Americans want to be told things are bad. But, as I will demonstrate, they also want to be only lightly chastised before being let off the hook" (p. 4). The analysis in this essay concurs with Jendrysik's observations. In the first *DESS*, audiences were not left crippled at the hands of the more technologically advanced beings. In the second, the aliens appear less like gods and more like beings who made a mistake and left humanity to suffer the consequences of their bad decision-making. Audience members were faced with different levels of empowerment in each of the films, giving the original mythical and rhetorical traction the second could never attain. In other words, the possibility of humans engaging in redemptive action was left intact in the first film, but severely limited in the second. Humans were to be led by a group of their best and brightest as they tackled the challenges of peace. In the second, humanity is left in an uncertain state with no one to lead them. Evidence for this interpretation is also found in some of the reviews of the more recent film. According to Peters (2009), "the 2008 version leaves us without the equivalent of a church—that is, without a prophetic fraternity of scientists within terrestrial society to carry on the mission of advocating ecological health, let alone global peace" (p. 124). It was this difference in the jeremiad form that limits the audiences perceived ability to engage in right action. In terms of environmental communication, practitioners and scholars should observe where use of the jeremiad may go too far in its level of threat. Mythic lessons about the environment delivered in rhetorical forms such as the jeremiad should spur audience feelings of an optimistic future (*DESS* 1951) and not leave audiences wondering what they are supposed to do next (*DESS* 2008). The last thing those using an environmental jeremiad want is to discover they have gone so far with their threat that they have actually created conditions for the day that environmentalism stands still.

## References

Bercovitch, S. (1978). *The American jeremiad.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Blaustein, J. (producer), and Wise, R. (director). (1951). *The day the Earth stood still* [Motion Picture]. United States: 20th Century–Fox.

Booker, M.K. (2006). *Alternative Americas: Science fiction film and American culture.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

Browne, S.H. (1992). Samuel Danforth's "Errand into the wilderness" and the discourse of arrival in early American culture. *Communication Quarterly 40,* 91–101.
Buehler, D.O. (1998). Permanence and change in Theodore Roosevelt's conservation jeremiad. *Western Journal of Communication* 62, 439–458.
Campbell, J. (1985). *The inner reaches of outer space.* New York: Alfred Van Der Marck.
Campbell, J., and Moyers, B. (1988). *The power of myth.* New York: Doubleday.
Hoberman, J. (2008, November 2). The Cold War sci-fi parable that fell to Earth. *New York Times,* p. 4.
Jendrysik, M.S. (2008). *Modern Jeremiahs: Contemporary visions of American decline.* New York: Lexington.
Johannesen, R.L. (1985). The jeremiad and Jenkin Lloyd Jones. *Communication Monographs* 52, 156–172.
Jones, J.M., and Rowland, R.C. (2005). A covenant-affirming jeremiad: The post-presidential ideological appeals of Ronald Wilson Reagan. *Communication Studies* 56, 157–174.
Minter, D. (1974). The Puritan jeremiad as a literary form. In S. Bercovitch (ed.), *The American Puritan imagination: Essays in revaluation* (pp. 45–55). New York: Cambridge University Press.
Mitchell, M.E., and Phipps, K.S. (1985). The jeremiad in contemporary fundamentalism: Jerry Falwell's "Listen America." *Religious Communication Today,* 54–62.
Murphy, J.M. (1990). "A time of shame and sorrow": Robert F. Kennedy and theAmerican jeremiad. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76, 401–414.
Opie, J., and Elliot, N. (1996). Tracking the elusive jeremiad: The rhetorical character of American environmental discourse. In J.G. Cantrill and C.L. Oravec (eds.), *The symbolic Earth: Discourse and our creation of the environment* (pp. 9–37). Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.
Owen, A.S. (2002). Memory, war and American identity: "Saving Private Ryan" as cinematic jeremiad. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, 249–282.
Perlich, J., and Whitt, D. (2010). *Millennial mythmaking: Essays on the power of science fiction and fantasy literature, films and games.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
Peters, T. (2009). Klaatu barada nikto: Reviewing "The Day the Earth Stood Still." *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 48, 121–125.
Scott, A.O. (2008, December 12). It's all over, earthlings. *New York Times,* p. C7.
Shermer, M. (2008). Klaatu Gort redux. *Skeptic* 14, 68–70.
Singer, R. (2010). Neoliberal style, the American re-generation, and ecological jeremiad in Thomas Friedman's "Code Gree." *Environmental Communication* 4, 35–151.
Stoda, M., and Dionisopoulos, G.N. (2000). Jeremiad at Harvard: Solzhenitsyn and "The world split apart." *Western Journal of Communication* 64, 28–52.
Stoff, E., Boardman, P.H., Goodman, G. (producers), and Derrickson, S.(director). (2008). *The day the Earth stood still* [Motion Picture]. United States: 20th Century–Fox.
Voytilla, S. (1999). *Myth and the movies: Discovering the mythic structure of 50 unforgettable films.* Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions.
Whitt, D., and Perlich, J. (2008). *Sith, slayers, stargates, & cyborgs: Modern mythology in the new millennium.* New York: Peter Lang.
Wolfe, D. (2008). The ecological jeremiad, the American myth, and the vivid force of color in Dr. Seuss's "The Lorax." *Environmental Communication* 2, 3–24.

PART 3
REALITY BITES

# Fields of Dreams and Gods of the Gridiron

## *The Trinity of Myth, Sport and the Hero*

KAREN L. HARTMAN

Myths hold a long and complex grasp on how humankind makes sense of the world. Like a hand stretched out that alternately clutches and loosens its grip, myths work themselves into our society where they grope along the spectrum of obvious untruths and clear reality. Myths, however, serve a fundamental part of cultures providing early humans ways to understand life, death, and the creation of the universe. Today humans still rely on them to guide their actions and offer explanations for chaos. The necessity of myths and their ability to create reality quickly reveals the power myths hold.

At the heart of myth, and this essay, lies the role of language to create symbolically and socially constructed meaning. This rhetorical viewpoint of myth emphasizes the struggle over symbols to create meaning as well as the ability for the meanings of the symbols to evolve. Custodians of myths impose a rhetorical frame on events and constantly reinscribe the major components of the relevant myth. For example, American agriculture was long sustained by the myth of the yeoman farmer as the ideal citizen. Jefferson and other founders of the Republic taught that the farmer had a stronger sense of responsibility and morality than city dwellers or wage workers and that the Republic could only be sustained by a large mass of small family farmers. This myth could not survive massive urbanization and industrialization, and though it survives as an aesthetic bit of nostalgia, it is dead as a living force. Myths can become highly coherent and powerful forces, but they can also lose power or evolve over time depending on the rhetoric that surrounds them.