‘The Great Disillusionment’: H.G. Wells, Mankind, and Aliens in American Invasion Horror Films of the 1950s

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H.G. Well’s 1898 novel *The War of The Worlds* (published initially in 1897 as a series of installments in *Pearson’s Magazine*) establishes many of the key thematic conventions and entertaining plot details evinced in ‘alien invasion horror’ cinema of the two subsequent centuries, most especially in American science fiction films of the 1950s. Aliens as vampires from a dying planet, as violent parasites, as rampaging machines, as brains-without-hearts using high-tech heat rays on their human victims, originated in Wells’ seminal work; the deeper levels of social criticism found in the novel also making their way into such films. Though it is doubtless true that mid-century Hollywood alien invasion films frequently reflected Cold War paranoia towards either ‘Red Scare’ fears of Soviet invasion on the one hand, or of McCarthy-era “creeping conformity” (1) on the other, these films (and even some of those of today) are also culturally centered within the original literary mythopoeia of Wells’ milestone science fiction ‘blueprint’. As the Hollywood producer George Pal noted of the 50s, “*War of the Worlds* had become especially timely”. (2)

For the purposes of this discussion, it is accepted that films such as *The Thing from Another World* (Dir: Christian Nyby, 1951), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Dir: Robert Wise, 1951), *This Island Earth* (Dir: Joseph M. Newman, 1955), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Dir: Don Siegel, 1956), *The Monolith Monsters* (Dir: John Sherwood, 1957), to cite some of the examples considered, are not *auteurist* artifacts. As Robert Stam observes:

The filmmaker is not an untrammeled artist; he/she is immersed in material contingencies…The film author also requires collaborators. Even a low budget feature can involve more than a score of people working over an extended period…Writers, cinematographers, composers, stars, corporate executives all collaborate in film authorship (3)

Given the quintessentially collaborative nature of film, one cannot state categorically that links to the novel *The War of the Worlds* are always examples of deliberate allusion or literary borrowing by a central filmic ‘auteur’ (though in some cases they undoubtedly are); rather, it is suggested that the films discussed were created via a cultural milieu wherein the symbols, analogies, linkages and themes of Wells’ mythopoetic novel comprised an integral part.

It is also accepted that any subsequent artistic interpretation of a literary original such as *The War of the Worlds* (especially in a new medium) perforce involves a change of perspective. For Orson Welles, his seminal 1938 broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* exploited Wells’ novel to underscore his own concern about the credibility attributed to broadcast news by the listening public of the period: "Radio in those days, before the tube and the transistor, wasn't just a noise in somebody's pocket - it was the voice of authority. Too much so. At least, I thought so. It was time for someone to take the starch out of some of that authority: hence my broadcast".(4) The same alteration of focus and re-interpretation is at work in the 1950s films considered.

American science-fiction movies of the 1950s evince a wide quality continuum, which included ‘serious’, technically sophisticated films, such as *It Came from Outer Space* (Dir: Jack Arnold, 1953) and cheaply made, popular ‘B’ items (often simply ‘drive-in’ fare), including, *Kronos* (Dir: Kurt Neumann, 1957),

and, last and probably least, *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (Dir: Ed Wood Jr., 1959), universally considered (perhaps unhelpfully) the "worst movie ever made" (5). The practical artistic realities of this filmic spectrum were perhaps best expressed by Jeff Morrow, commenting on *The Giant Claw* (Dir: Fred Sears, 1957), in which he played the scientist hero, locked in mortal combat with a gigantic alien bird from a "godforsaken anti-matter galaxy" (6):

We shot the film before we ever got a look at this monster that was supposed to be so terrifying. The producers promised us that the special effects would be first class. The director…just told us, 'All right, now you see the bird up there, and you're scared to death! Use your imagination.' But the first time we actually got to see it was the night of the premiere. The audience couldn't stop laughing. We were up there on screen looking like idiots, treating this silly buzzard like it was the scariest thing in the world. We felt cheated, that's for sure... (7)

However, even in many seemingly unprepossessing American science fiction films of the 50s ('Fright Night' TV late show fare for the decades following, which in the post-9/11 world have become reassuringly nostalgic) there is often a concern with more thoughtful thematic and symbolic implications similar to those in 'quality' invasion films, and likewise descended from Wellsian imagery and themes.

The Wellsian Blueprint

Wells' visionary foray in *The War of the Worlds* into literary 'special effects', Martian heat rays, poisonous Black Smoke, bio-mechanical tripods, flying machines and, perhaps, ecology-altering red weed, are less significant than what the invasion reveals about Western Imperialism in the late Victorian period generally, with its "infinite complacency" (8) engrained racism/colonialism, and unquestioning belief in the value of unbridled technological progress, intellectual growth, and social Darwinism:

...men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter...It is curious to recall some of the mental habits of those departed days. At most terrestrial men fancied there might be other men upon Mars, perhaps inferior to themselves and ready to welcome a missionary enterprise. Yet across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us. And early in the twentieth century came the great disillusionment. [p. 5].

A central purpose of the novel is to force the shocked reader to realize that the vampiric, tentacled, relentless Martians who are basically bent on genocide, "the murder of mankind" [p. 117], as a ruthless industrial process (the tripods carry a contrivance "like a gigantic fisherman's basket [p. 51] for harvesting the *homo sapien* 'catch') have more than a few things in common with their supposed human 'victims':

And before we judge of them too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit? [p. 7]

Ziauddin Sardar contends that late 20th century science fiction is little more than a Western narrative genre aimed at promoting Western cultural ascendancy: "Wherever one looks, the colonising, imperial

mission of science fiction is hard to miss" (9). For Wells in *The War of the Worlds*, however, Western man's imperial spirit and colonial exploitation are most definitely qualified and undercut through their thematic connection with the technocratic Martians' cull of mankind to extract blood—the latter a motif also discernible in 1950s alien invasion films. Wells' Martians "took the fresh, living blood of other creatures, and injected it into their own veins" [p. 141], but as the narrator unsentimentally notes:

The bare idea of this is no doubt horribly repulsive to us, but at the same time I think we should remember how repulsive our carnivorous habits would seem to an intelligent rabbit [p. 141].

At the point in the novel where Wells illustrates the spiritual bankruptcy of organized Christianity, the connection between the extra-terrestrial vampires and European, colonial Man is made even clearer; the sniveling Curate the narrator encounters during his adventures is, in the last stages of distress and panic, unable to reconcile the brutal facts of the Martian invasion with his faith:

"Why are these things permitted? What sins have we done?...fire, earthquake, death! As if it were Sodom and Gomorrah! All are work undone, all the work—What are these Martians?" [p. 77]

As the narrator mordantly replies, "'What are we?'" [p. 77]. Almost a century later, Ripley, the disillusioned xenomorph-destroyer in the film *Aliens* (Dir: James Cameron, 1986) asks wearily: "You know…I don't know which species is worse". (10) In *The War of the Worlds*, this may similarly be a moot point.

For Wells, the alien invasion scenario not only exposes uncomfortable Them/Us linkages, but reveals much about society's internal flaws. It shatters, for example, cherished British illusions about their intrinsic, civilised decency; as the narrator's brother unflatteringly describes "the roaring wave of fear" seizing London "the greatest city in the world":

…by midday even the railway organizations, were…guttering, softening, running at last in that swift liquefaction of the social body…revolvers were fired, people stabbed, and the policemen who had been sent to direct the traffic…were breaking the heads of the people they were called out to protect [102].

Furthermore, as the Martians represent a mechanistic, collectivist force indistinguishable from the machines they operate, late nineteenth-century British man is characterised by soul-less conformity; the Artilleryman, despite his drunken, futile dreaminess, has telling points to make about 'respectable' society:

"They haven't any spirit in them—no proud dreams and no proud lusts…I've seen hundreds of 'em, bit of breakfast in hand, running wild and shining to catch their little season-ticket train, for fear they'd get dismissed if they didn't; working at businesses they were afraid to take the trouble to understand; skedaddling back…keeping indoors after dinner for fear of the back streets; and sleeping with the wives they married, not because they wanted them, but because they had a bit of money that would make for safety in their one little miserable skedaddle through the world" [p. 176]

Don Siegel, the director of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* claimed mischievously that the message of his iconic film (despite the varied critical discussion surrounding it), is actually about:

"…Pods. Not those that come from outer space…People are pods. Many of my associates are certainly pods. They have no feelings. They exist, breathe, sleep. To be a pod means that you have no passion, no anger, the spark has left you". (11)

Many mid-century invasion films (including Siegel's) are "ambiguous in the rendering of the alien Other" (12), not least for the purpose of pointing out deficiencies in human society, a theme at least partly based on *The War of the Worlds*.

It is also no coincidence that the Martians destroy and pollute the environment (much as industrialised nineteenth-century man does); the poisonous Black Smoke leaves a scummy residue in water, the red weed transforms the green English landscape (possibly a deliberate environmental alteration by the Martians), growing over ruined houses, streets and fields. Appropriately, Wells' aliens are in fact destroyed by their insufficient respect for the power of Nature/the ecosystem, despite prolonged observation of Earth and careful planning: "Martians—dead!—slain by the putrefactive and disease bacteria against which their systems were unprepared; slain, after all man's devices had failed, by the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon this earth" [p. 191]. Even the technologically advanced make serious mistakes.

In *The War of the Worlds* the catastrophic, almost cinematic destruction of the cutting-edge Royal Navy warship 'Thunder Child' by the Martian heat rays (for example), is perhaps less important for Wells than the emotive images of panicked refugees trying to crowd onto trains in a desperate attempt to escape London, or the visions of burnt, contorted corpses and unthinkable devastation which haunt the narrator. In the end it is the narrator's yearning quest for his lost wife which matters: "And strangest of all is to hold my wife's hand again, and to think, that I have counted her, and that she has counted me, among the dead" (p. 196). Heart in *The War of the Worlds* is more important than Head, the last image in the novel being clasped human hands.

It is thus symbolically significant that the Martians - whatever their technical accomplishments - are the embodiment of brains (and distorted ones at that), without heart: "They were heads—merely heads" [p.141]. Wells, a firm believer in evolution, warns mankind in this novel that the emotionally empty Martians are what the human species may become if it continues to idolize intellect, machines and 'progress' at the expense of passion and humanity. The negative symbolic import of "intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic" [p. 3] is, adumbrated in the bloated crania of many 1950s filmic aliens, including the aliens who inject their human victims with alcohol in *Invasion of the Saucer Men* (Dir: Edward Cahn, 1957), and the (interestingly, from a Wellsian point of view) sex-crazed, criminal xenomorph "Gor" in *The Brain from Planet Arous* (Dir: Nathan H. Duran, 1957).

The narrator of *The War of the Worlds* believes that the alien invasion has taught previously unimaginative mankind about the possibilities of the human future -for example, travel through "the inanimate vastness of sidereal space" [p. 204] - but also about the vulnerability of planet Earth, and of the very species itself. Humanity's future in the "twentieth century" [p. 3] will be filled with dread, insecurity and something akin to '50s-style' paranoia, the Martians perhaps returning to finish the job: "…the shooting stars, will bring with them as they fall an unavoidable apprehension to all the sons of men" [p. 203]. It is an open, potentially pessimistic *fin de siècle* question as to whether Man or Martian will prevail: "To them, and not to us, perhaps, is the future ordained. [p. 204].

"Perhaps the blood of this planet will answer…"

The Martians' alien evil is underscored at the beginning of *The War of The Worlds*, as the narrator recalls his pre-invasion glimpse of their home planet through an observatory telescope:

And invisible to me because it was so remote and small, flying swiftly and steadily towards me across that incredible distance, drawing nearer every minute by so many thousands of miles, came…the Thing that was to bring so much struggle and calamity and death to the earth [p. 9].

It is perhaps not too fanciful to suggest that Wells' emphasis on "Thing" may have provided an inspiration for the title of *The Thing from Another World* (1951); a film which may, in many respects, be regarded as the first major 'alien invasion horror' film of the 1950s, based on John W. Campbell Jr.'s substantially modified 1938 short story "Who Goes There?" Though apparently a black/white tale of good (i.e. USAF personnel, American scientists and a reporter) versus evil (a predatory, seemingly indestructible, 'vegetable' Martian), an uncomfortable ambiguity similar to *The War of the Worlds* can also be discerned. The 'Thing' in this case is, like the Wellsian version, a slaughtering vampire; whose seedling offspring cries which, shockingly, resemble those made by human babies. Here too, the xenomorph is associated with vegetation (as are the pods in the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), a possible echo of Well's "red weed".

The narrative is made more ambiguous, in particular, by the actions of the lead researcher, Dr. Carrington, "a pluralist mad scientist" (13) who believes that the alien's obviously superior intellect/technology and emotionless character, must be a sign of an advanced civilization (a parallelism Wells rubbishes consistently in *The War of the Worlds*), from which humans "could learn secrets that have been hidden from man since the beginning" (14). Significantly, Carrington also feeds the Martian's botanic "Thinglings" (15) from the beleaguered Antarctic research station's blood bank, making him an accomplice to the Martian's vampirism. Jancovich perceives *The Thing from Another World* as a rejection of Fordism, and class-based "scientific-technical rationality" (16), in favour of the common-man 'heart', and pragmatic vitality represented by the American airmen combating the monster, as well as Nikki (Carrington's secretary, and the hero's love interest). As Sam Sunderland observes, Howard Hawks "takes only a production credit for this low-budget exercise, but his filmmaking style transcends Christian Nyby's nominal direction: rapid-fire, overlapping dialogue, an ensemble of comrades whose professionalism is tempered by wisecracks, and unsentimental female characters…recall Hawks's signature works" (17). The film's emphasis on the ultimate success of a democratic, feisty and rag-tag group of 'common men' (another Hawks' filmic signature) is thematically congruent with Well's emphasis on the primacy of heart and emotion at the end of *The War of the Worlds*. In *The Thing from Another World*, is it the effete scientists who are literally bloodless and who suffer the only fatalities, the Martian invader cutting the throats of two researchers, then placing their carcasses above a bed of alien seedlings so that the dripping blood would feed his growing offspring.

Though the alien is finally destroyed through the leadership of the film's hero (Captain Patrick Hendry—the potential allusion to Patrick Henry and 'Give me liberty or give me death' probably not being coincidental), and a lethal jolt of electricity, paranoid questions (as in *The War of the Worlds*) are raised about a possible recurrence - "Watch the skies" intones the journalist, Scotty. More significantly, within the filmic narrative of *The Thing from Another World* (at one level an edifying celebration of American military courage for a post World War II public and support of the cultural *status quo*), there remains the unpalatable suggestion that the dangers to mankind posed by alien invasions are internal as well as external (Carrington holds Hendry and his crew at gunpoint to try to stop them destroying the

Martian monster, towards which he has become protective and sympathetic); as the Artilleryman confidently asserts about mankind in *The War of the Worlds*:

"Very likely these Martians will make pets of some of them; train them to do tricks—who knows—get sentimental over the pet boy who grew up and had to be killed. And some, maybe, they will train to hunt us...There's men who'd do it cheerful. What nonsense to pretend there isn't." [177].

In the novel, the narrator finally "succumbed" (p. 177) to this supremely misanthropic belief; human loyalties cannot be taken for granted in the face of the unthinkable. Indeed, in an pre-production version of the Lederer script of *The Thing from Another World* the alien kills Carrington, spurring Scotty ('Skeely' in the earlier draft) to remark at the end "Both monsters are dead" (18). The film's embodiment of a "popular unease about where science had brought humanity" (19), likewise reflects Wells' questioning of the suggestion that technological 'progress' is universally beneficial or unproblematically positive.

By contrast, the film version of *The War of The Worlds* (Dir: Byron Haskin, 1953), omits the ironies of the original novel, the narrative being a simplistic Cold War patriotic fable, paranoiac about ruthless, godless Martian invaders, obviously Soviet avatars, versus the forces of Good (the United States). In Barré Lyndon's script, the sniveling Curate of the novel is replaced by the courageous Pastor Dr. Matthew Collins, who is martyred as he approaches a Martian tripod reciting the Lord's Prayer. Embodying Christian courage and inclusiveness (though perhaps, in the film's mythology, a naïve liberalism), he observes to his skeptical niece, Sylvia van Buren:

Matthew: They are living creatures out there.
Sylvia: But they're not human. Dr. Forrester says they are some kind of advanced civilization.
Matthew: If they're more advanced than us, they should be nearer the Creator for that reason…No real attempt has been made to communicate with them, you know. (20)

Gone is Well's caustic rejection of organized religion, and the film ends literally in Church (where the hero, Dr. Clayton Forrester is finally reunited with Sylvia). As a Military Policeman remarks near the end of the film Forrester, the rationalistic scientist thrilled by the wonders of Martian technology ("Fantastic!" he blurts out when he observes first observes a tripod), looks "kinda lost", and has to enter numerous churches before he finds Sylvia, his love interest; some of the other scientists are also now in the pews.

The 'Thunder Child' warship is replaced in the Haskin film by the Atom Bomb (delivered to target by the USAF's bat-like 'Flying Wing'), which similarly fails to stop the Martians, and the drunken, deluded Artilleryman of the novel is morphed into the courageous (if obviously named) "General Mann". It is strongly suggested in Haskin's film that only God is responsible for delivering mankind from the cold, rationalistic evil of the Martians.

For Wells, "the rout of civilization, of the massacre of mankind" [p. 117] has as much to do with the fragility and fragmented nature of human society as with Martian technological and intellectual superiority. In Haskin's film version of *The War of the Worlds* the danger is solely from implacable alien enemies (interestingly, the Martian's vampirism is omitted in the film); the foundations of American society are basically sound, as the mob that destroys the Pacific Tech trucks (carrying, in effect, mankind's last chance to defeat the Martians) comprises "thieves, robbers, worse" (21) on the fringes of society.

Wells' criticism (especially of passionless social conformity) is, however, evinced in *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, though it seems at first as if this film is also a simple them/us, good/bad narrative. The aliens are, again, parasitical alien plants, sucking the life out of the residents of Santa Mira, California during sleep, replacing them with replicas, the latter connected to each other on the basis of a collectivist, emotionless intelligence. Based on the 1955 novel by Jack Finney first serialized in *Colliers Magazine* (1954), as one recent reviewer succinctly put it: "This film can be seen as a paranoid 1950s warning against those Damn Commies or, conversely, as a metaphor for the tyranny of McCarthyism (or the totalitarian system of Your Choice)" (22).

A main difference between the humans and their alien replicas in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is the replicants lack of emotion (something which might have appealed to Dr. Carrington in *The Thing from Another World*) and, at the same time, their undeniable sense of 'belonging'. As the alien replica of Dr. Kaufman (the town psychiatrist) promises Miles Bennell (the rebellious town doctor desperate to escape and warn the world of the danger), and his love interest, Becky Driscoll:

Less than a month ago, Santa Mira was like any other town. People with nothing but problems. Then, out of the sky came a solution. Seeds drifting through space for years took root in a farmer's field. From the seeds came pods which had the power to reproduce themselves in the exact likeness of any form of life...Your new bodies are growing in there…There is no pain. Suddenly, while you're asleep, they'll absorb your minds, your memories and you're reborn into an untroubled world...Tomorrow you'll be one of us...There's no need for love...Love. Desire. Ambition. Faith. Without them, life is so simple, believe me. (23)

Interestingly Miles and Becky, who only pretend to have been absorbed, are discovered when Becky shows emotion by screaming when a dog is nearly run over by a truck, having been advised by Miles: "Keep your eyes a little wide and blank. Show no interest or excitement." (24)

Whether the aliens represent Soviet invaders, Fifth Columnists (Santa Mira becomes the distribution point for the pods, which are being trucked across the United States), or embody zombified Eisenhower-era suburbanites, it is the denial of emotion and individual freedom which are the film's main issues. When Miles, the rebellious loner, attempts to alert the rest of the country (after Becky has been absorbed), he is pictured staggering onto a highway, trying to stop cars, to warn the occupants of the danger:

One of the most striking and famous sequences in the film is where Miles, having finally escaped from Santa Mira, suddenly finds himself on a highway with hundreds of cars passing him, full of people who are unwilling to listen to him, and thus unwilling to save themselves. The setting is dark with Miles in a sea of machines; the people are hiding within these machines, perhaps the first step toward becoming pods. (25)

In the original ending of the film (which is at odds with the unconvincingly optimistic conclusion of Finney's novel, *The Body Snatchers*), the frantic Miles is left alone by the aliens who come upon the scene: "Wait. Let him go. They'll never believe him." (26). As one reviewer claims, the actual message of the film (before it was altered by Allied Artists executives) is simply that "it is the monsters who will prevail" (27), a sentiment certainly in keeping with Wells' unapologetic speculations in *The War of the Worlds*: "To them, and not to us, perhaps, is the future ordained" [p. 204].

The substitution of a more hopeful final scene, wherein the authorities finally believe Miles, after a truck full of pods is overturned in an accident is, even so, resonant of *The War of the Worlds*, one of Wells' points being that extra-terrestrial intellectual/organizational/technological superiority are no protection against error (failing, in the case of the Martians to appreciate the dangers of seemingly insignificant bacterial life) or accident (exposure of the aliens' plans in *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* because of a traffic mishap and an arrogant underestimation of human tenacity).

Another Wellsian filmic portrayal of vampiristic aliens is evinced in *Not of this Earth*, wherein a spy from a technologically advanced, but dying planet (Davanna), masquerading as a man named Paul Johnson, harvests human victims, primarily homeless indigents on the fringes of society. Like the Martians in *The War of the Worlds* the Davannites have no problem with murder, on the simple basis that they have the right to exploit inferior species for their own purposes, as Johnson reveals in a teleconference with his superior:

Commander: Speak of the Earth creatures
Johnson: They are second stage subhuman, weak and full of fright…
Perhaps the blood of this planet will answer. (28)

Ominously, Johnson refers later to the "30 cubits" (29) of blood teleported to his home planet, the Biblical reference (albeit inanely misusing 'cubits') underscoring the suggestion that this vanguard of the Davannite invasion resembles an Old Testament plague. Though villainous, when talking to the nurse attending him, Nadine Storey, Johnson suggests a possible cure for cancer that has occurred to him while poring over books at the local library: not out of concern for humankind, but because it is a challenging scientific puzzle. In *Not of This Earth*, as in Wells' novel, advanced intelligence does not imply benignity. Motive and moral intention matter.

After Johnson is killed when he loses control of his car, Nadine and Harry (the motorcycle policeman who gave chase to him) philosophize at his grave, which bears the epitaph: "Here Lies a Man Who Was Not of This Earth":

Harry: In a way I feel sorry for him…buried so far from home, so far from everyone he knew.
Nadine: I can't feel sorry for him. He had no emotions as we know them. He was a foreign thing come here to destroy us. (30)

In this case the Wellsian "thing" aspect of the invader is primary, but the "Man" in the epitaph resonates with the ambiguity of the alien/mankind connection posited in *The War of the Worlds*. During the final moments in *Not of this Earth*, however, a man in dark glasses is seen walking up to the grave from a distance, just behind the couple—obviously a replacement for Johnson, who similarly wore sunglasses to cover his deadly "Atomic eyes". As in *The War of the Worlds*, this invasion nightmare may not be over.

Wells' depiction of the aliens as parasites, both figurative and literal vampires--with motives and foibles which uncomfortably resemble those of terrestrial man--is likewise reflected in *Kronos*, "a textbook example of 1950s science fiction" (31). The cube-like, extra-terrestrial Kronos is basically a huge mobile battery, sucking energy from any available earthly power source, growing progressively larger. When talking to Dr. Leslie Gaskell, the hero of the film, Dr. Eliot (whose mind has been taken over by aliens, and is directing Kronos on its course of destruction) makes the connection between alien rampage and human behaviour clear:

Eliot: ... their planet has become depleted of energy.
Gaskell: How can that be?
Eliot: What has happened to them may well happen here, if we continue using our resources at the present rate. Now they are sending down accumulators to find and store up new sources of energy...Kronos is only the first. If he succeeds more will come, drain the Earth of energy, of every last bit of power. (32)

That Man and Alien exhibit the same irresponsible, rapacious resource consumption adds to the ideological messaging and complexity of the film, in keeping with Wells' linkages in *The War of the Worlds*. Even though *Kronos* is decidedly 'B' movie fare, it "has been widely praised both for its above-average storyline and its farsighted portrayal of the consequences of over consumption of natural and man-made resources" (33). The negative imagery of alien-as-mechanism is also reminiscent of Wells' portrayal of the Martians oneness with their tripods. As Irving Block (the film's producer and special effects artist) observed of the mechanical monster of the title: "I wanted it to be anthropomorphic" (34).

"Indescribable... indestructible... insatiable!"
The complexity evinced in films such as *The Thing from Another World*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and even *Kronos* would seem harder to find in the kind of 'B' film which features one dimensional monsters and simplistic plots: for example, the mindless carnivore in *The Blob* (Dir: Irvin S. Yeaworth, jr., 1958), or the "Mammoth skyscrapers of stone thundering across the Earth!" (35) in *The Monolith Monsters* (Dir: John Sherwood, 1957).

Yet even in these apparently pedestrian, unprepossessing 'B' films, there is often a thematic allusiveness that has, at its root, the Wellsian 'alien invasion horror' blueprint of *The War of the Worlds*. In *The Monolith Monsters*, the alien invader is in this case not an intelligent vampire, but a natural brute force:

Opening Narration: From time immemorial, Earth has been bombarded by objects from outer space. Bits and pieces of the universe, piercing our atmosphere in an invasion that never ends. Meteors, the shooting stars on which so many Earthly wishes have been born…In every moment of every day they come, from planets belonging to stars whose dying light is too far away to be seen. From infinity, they come, meteors. Another strange calling card from the limitless reaches of space. Its substance unknown, its secrets unexplored. The meteor lies dormant in the night, waiting. (36)

This is suggestive of the ominous associations between extra-terrestrial invasion and meteors depicted in *The War of the Worlds*: "…the shooting stars, will bring with them as they fall an unavoidable apprehension to all the sons of men" [p. 203], and in this film the resulting crystals (which, in keeping with Wells' vampire imagery, still manage to absorb bodily fluids from any human they encounter) are only stopped by the hero (Dave Miller) blowing up a dam and, basically, drowning them in a dry gulch, which is, ironically, a local eyesore. Here, as in Wells' novel, the seemingly insignificant natural world is actually the source of mankind's salvation:

Dave Miller: Martin, you always called that dry lake Mother Nature's worst mistake. Looks like now she knew what she was doing, huh? (37)

Even at the conclusion of *The Blob*, a superficially trite teenage 'sci-fi' about a mindless alien invader, initially titled "The Molten Meteor" (38), there are more complex issues at work. The film considers

'generation-gap' themes, with skeptically dismissive adult authority figures pitted against young people, some of whom have actually seen the monster (another pseudo-vampire, "Bloated with the blood of its victims!" (39) according to the film's tagline) and who want to alert the townspeople. By the end, somewhat optimistically, young and old have joined together to defeat the Blob by freezing it with C02 fire extinguishers. The hero, Steve Andrews, questions what the next step will be, adumbrating perhaps an early global warming scenario and a 1950s concern with the ultimate stability of the environment in the face of untrammeled industrialisation:

Steve: What are they gonna do with that thing, Dave?
Dave [the Sheriff]: Well, the Air Force is sending a GlobeMaster in. They're flyin' it to the Arctic.
Steve: It's not dead, is it?
Dave: No, it's not.
Steve: Just frozen.
Dave: I don't think it can be killed, but at least we've got it stopped.
Steve: Yeah, as long as the Arctic stays cold. (40)

For Wells too, the environment saves mankind, and is also mankind's responsibility. Whether the future belongs to man or Blob (or Martian) is, in this film as in Well's novel, an open question. The thematic import of this 'serious' dialogue at the end of a 1950s 'teen flick' is underscored in the last scene of the movie, where the crated creature of the title is shown floating by parachute onto the Arctic ice, 'The End' title changing, almost accusingly, into a question mark. Interestingly, in the 1988 remake of *The Blob* (Dir: Chuck Russell), the rampaging monster is in fact a man-made terror.

"We Mean You No Harm"

In the 1950s one can see at least two distinct strands in American 'alien invasion' movies, those that posit the 'evil', hostile alien, an avatar derived from Wells' *The War of the Worlds* and apparently non-Wellsian 'good aliens', who are benefactors and friends of mankind. Key examples of the latter are *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Dir: Robert Wise, 1951), *It Came from Outer Space* (Dir: Jack Arnold, 1953), and *This Island Earth* (Dir: Joseph M. Newman, 1955). Given the negative artistic origins of the modern 'alien invader' myth in Wells, however, the 'benevolent' alien concept is often viewed with significant ambiguity and reservation by 1950s American film makers.

The Day the Earth Stood Still (in contrast to *The Thing from Another World*, released the same year) shows the invading alien (in this case the seemingly benevolent, handsome and wise interplanetary emissary, Klaatu) as not only technically, physically and scientifically superior to mankind, but as having a higher moral integrity as well. A kind of antidote to early 50s American xenophobic fear of the 'Other' (Soviets, Communists, Foreigners), the film also addresses the potential for nuclear holocaust arising from the accelerating Arms Race.

In *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, mankind is shown as violent, fearful, paranoid, and trivial, with the possible exception of Klaatu's 'friend' (Helen Benson), her young son, Bobby, and the Einstein-like scientist Professor Jacob Barnhardt (to whom Klaatu gives his warning of mankind's imminent destruction). Indeed, Klaatu's jealous rival (and Helen's boyfriend), Tom Stevens, intends to turn in the fugitive alien (disguised as 'John Carpenter') for the reward, no matter what that means to the fate of humanity:

Helen: Tom, you mustn't -- ! You don't know what you're doing! It isn't just you and Mr. Carpenter. The rest of the world, is involved!
Tom: (exasperated) I don't care about the rest of the world! (41)

Klaatu is killed by a public obsessed with the prejudicial belief that he is an evil alien invader; in a hopeful, feminist twist, Earth is saved by a courageous woman, Helen giving Gort (Klaatu's sinister robotic companion, who has already started a killing spree) Klaatu's dying message: "Gort! Klaatu -- barada – nikto"(42). Temporarily resuscitated by Gort, Klaatu's warning to the world is straightforward, and says nothing positive about human nature:

Klaatu: We of the other planets…have an organization for the mutual protection of all planets… The test of any such higher authority, of course, is the police force that supports it. For our policemen, we created a race of robots (indicating Gort). Their function is to patrol the planets…and preserve the peace. In matters of aggression we have given them absolute power over us…And the penalty for provoking their action is too terrible to risk…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. (43)

This is potentially a more edifying view of alien intervention than that which appears in most American alien invasion films the 1950s, though the suggestion of imposed interplanetary control and the terrifying aspects of Gort (and the concept of giving machines freedom to destroy worlds) sheds some dubiety on the film's message, which Christine Cornea sees as a dubious celebration of "the ideology of global, free market, capitalism and white, paternal rule" (44). It is perhaps useful to bear in mind that in the 1940 short story from which the screenplay was adapted, Harry Bates' "Farewell to the Master", it is the robot (called 'Gnut') who is actually in charge, using Klaatu merely as a kind of biologically acceptable 'front man'. As Cliff, the curious reporter in the story finds to his horror:

"You misunderstand," said Gnut, still gently, and quietly spoke four more words. As Cliff heard them a mist passed over his eyes and his body went numb.

As he recovered and his eyes came back to focus he saw the great ship disappear. It just suddenly was not there anymore. He fell back a step or two. In his ears, like great bells, rang Gnut's last words. Never, never was he to disclose them til the day he came to die.

"You misunderstand," the mighty robot had said. "*I* am the master." (45)

The shock and disquiet associated here with the idea of an Artificial Intelligence being the judge of mankind's ultimate survival is also present in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (it is not particularly reassuring, for example, that Helen has to utter Klaatu's 'abort' order to Gort twice, the robot obviously preparing to vapourise the messenger with his heat ray after the first attempt).

It is perhaps sobering to contemplate that the plot, and the ambivalence, of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is also reflected at the end of the 1950s in the execrable *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, wherein Ed Wood's invading aliens (tantalizingly named Eros and Tanna), arrive on Earth to save mankind from destruction through humanity's eventual discovery of deadly, weapons-grade "solarbonite"; regrettably, part of the aliens' Klaatu-like paternalism involves 'Plan 9': creating zombies from freshly-buried corpses, as a way of attracting the attention of world governments, so that the latter will heed Eros' and Tanna's

extra-terrestrial warnings. As the film's theatrical poster unambiguously promises: "UNSPEAKABLE HORRORS FROM OUTER SPACE PARALYZE THE LIVING AND RESURRECT THE DEAD!" (46) So much for high-minded extra-terrestrial beneficence.

At a different filmic level, is Jack Arnold's 1953 3-D film *It Came from Outer Space*, based on Ray Bradbury's short story "The Meteor". Interestingly, Bradbury gave the studio two story scenarios from which to choose when making the film, involving either malicious or benevolent aliens (47). In the film there is, however, an ambivalent tension between the sinister and the kindly, perhaps originating in the two options, or in the cultural reservations toward the very idea of a 'good' xenomorph. Though the extra-terrestrials in this case are not invaders, but interstellar wayfarers whose ship has crashed in Arizona, they remain an unsettling presence throughout the film. An eerie, foreboding atmosphere is carefully constructed by Arnold's cinematography of the desert, depicting it as a threatening, hostile setting: in effect, "alien terrain" (48). The aliens are not shown until well into the film and, like Wells' Martians, observe mankind at a distance (the theremin musical score adds to the fear surrounding these 'surveillance' scenes). The suggestion of 'being watched' by 'something out there' is palpable.

The uniform emotional reaction to the aliens in the film (who, when they appear, basically comprise expansive crania, and a Cyclops-like eye surrounded by a writhing, gelatinous mass) is uniformly one of revulsion. Even the hero, the amateur astronomer and writer John Putnam (who sees the ship land in the first place, and tries to persuade his fellow townsfolk of the event) is unable to hide his disgust on first seeing these extra-terrestrial visitors: "horrible!" (49). At one level the stimulation of audience fear towards the aliens is thematically intended to demonstrate that people, ignorantly, would destroy anything they "didn't understand" (50). The suggestion that the aliens are "intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic" [p. 5] to use Wells' words, never dissipates, however; one of the extra-terrestrials (a replica of Putnam's girlfriend, Ellen Fields) attempts to vapourise him, and the coldness of the alien hostage-takers remains consistent, something Putnam's idealism does little to dispel, despite the xenomorphs' assertion that: "We have souls and minds and we are good…we understand more" (51). They are more than ready to frighten human beings by reverting to their actual form at various points and, more significantly, to use their technology to destroy the earth: "Give us time, time, or terrible things will happen. Things so terrible you have yet to dream of them". (52) By the end of *It Came from Outer Space* (the "It" in the title clearly recalling Wells' "Thing" characterization of the inhumane/unhuman Martians in *The War of the Worlds*), the audience is perhaps relieved, rather than regretful, about their ultimate departure. Interestingly, one of the working titles for the film was the tellingly unambiguous "Atomic Monsters" (53).

A mixed response to putatively 'benevolent' beings from outer space is also reflected in *This Island Earth* (Dir: Joseph M. Newman, 1955). While this particular 'quality' science-fiction was derived from a novel by Raymond F. Jones (originally serialized in the magazine *Thrilling Wonder Stories*), *This Island Earth* can be related to the Wellsian themes in *The War of the Worlds* involving the linkages between supreme extra-terrestrial intelligence and the sense of 'entitlement' this implies (i.e. domination of inferior species—or in the case of mankind itself, races). Also suggested are connections between intellectual/technical superiority and the monstrous/mechanistic.

In this case, extra-terrestrials from a civilization involved in an interplanetary war visit Earth, led by the apparently benign and cerebral 'Exeter', with a view to recruiting human scientists to help them save their home world, 'Metaluna', in a scenario obviously suggestive of the American use of Nazi scientists in the post-WWII period to defend against the Communist enemy. The aliens set prospective researchers an

ingenious intelligence test, involving the assembly of an 'Interocitor' (a two-way television communicator that is also a deadly 'Neutrino ray' weapon) from a mail order electronics catalogue offering free parts—an obvious parody of the 1950s American 'build-it-at-home' craze catered for by companies such as Heathkit and Meissner.

Though the Earthlings, including Cal Meacham and Dr. Ruth Adams (the hero and heroine of *This Island Earth*) are sequestered at a secret research facility, and reassured by Exeter's reasonableness and enthusiasm, it quickly becomes clear that the aliens are factionalized, with such xenomorphic characters as 'Brack' disliking the whole idea of using humans without subjecting them to the "Thought Transformer" (54), and gleefully killing people off when it comes time to evacuate from Earth. It transpires that most of the scientists have already been brainwashed by the Metalunans' mind-control "sun lamp" (55). When the humans are taken by flying saucer to the war-torn Metaluna (which is under incessant bombardment from the planet Zagon), the 'Monitor' (the planetary leader), utterly dismisses Exeter's respect for humans, and also informs Meacham and Adams of his long-standing intention to 'relocate' Metalunan society to Earth:

Our knowledge and weapons would make us your superiors, naturally…It is indeed typical that you Earth people refuse to believe in the superiority of any world—but your own. Children looking into a magnifying glass, imagining the image you see is the image of your true size…do you still insist, Exeter, that we can allow any of these Earth creatures to have free minds?...You have wasted our time…take them to the Thought Transference Chamber. (56)

Consummate intelligence in Wells and this film does not imply benevolence, though Exeter (obviously a solitary ideological dissident untypical of his race), helps Meacham and Adams escape Metaluna and return to Earth. Interestingly, he is mortally wounded before taking off by a monstrous Metalunan "Mu-tant" which has a large, brain-like head.

"We Have Souls and Minds"…but are we good?

In conclusion, examination of selected American alien invasion horror films from across the quality spectrum reveals not only a sometimes surprising thematic complexity and ambiguity, but also unmistakable signs of the original depictions of extraterrestrial assault found in *The War of the Worlds*—and to a greater degree than has previously been discerned. Particularly noteworthy are Well's characterization of alien invaders as vampires, parasites, technologically advanced (and heartless) distorted intellects, bent on harvesting mankind or exploiting Earth itself (i.e. with behaviour uncomfortably similar to that of rampaging, industrial, 20th century man). As the beleagured American President realizes after contact with an invading alien in *Independence Day* (Dir: Roland Emmerich, 1996), a film also based on *The War of the Worlds*:

He wanted me to understand. He communicated with me…They're like locusts. They travel from planet to planet, their whole civilization. After they've consumed every natural resource they move on. And we're next. (57)

Wells' 1898 themes, social criticism and visual formulations influenced Hollywood alien invasion films of the 1950s (and beyond), possibly as much as the contemporary social, political and cultural factors indirectly mirrored in them; McCarthyism, the Arms Race, the Space Race, The Red Scare, the Civil Rights Movement, the nascent Conservation movement artistically accompany echoes of Wells' late Victorian "great disillusionment" [p. 3]. If it is the case that "Retelling is the *sine qua non* of culture"

(58), then *The War of the Worlds* provided an artistic original which perfectly suited mid-century American science-fiction film-makers eager to depict the concerns and human issues of their own times.

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