

Disco Volante

by Paul Laffoley

I saw my first “foreign film” in 1951. It was not at The Telepix, The Translux, or The Brattle Theatre, but at Boston’s widest screen of the day, The RKO Keith Memorial Theatre on Tremont Street, halfway between Park and Boylston.

The director was not Victorrio Desica, Fritz Lang, Jean Cocteau, or Ingmar Bergman, but an American, Robert Wise, a Virgo born on September 10, 1914. What I am referring to is the classic flying saucer movie of the atomic age, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, direct from the film studios of 20th Century Fox.

Having been regaled since 1947 by stories of riding in flying saucers by the man who came to cut our bushes at my family home in Belmont Massachusetts, I was prepared to see the visionary and truly foreign film for the first time in a most unique way. He had been a recent emigrant from Belmonte, a small town in Italy near Naples, and spoke of how he and his autistic son were lifted by beams of light into a “disco volante” (Italian for flying saucer or disk). Shown new devices, new worlds, and glowing people hundreds of Earth years old, he claimed 17 rides in all. The “people” had given him the symbol of “The Order of Melchizedek” showing that one was worthy to aid in the development of “The Cosmic Task”. On the day he left, with trembling hand outstretched the medallion was offered. Seeing it safely in my grip, he extended a forefinger to my brow and uttered in broken English: “for the sake of the Almighty Spirit - Astound this world.”

At mid-century, there were basically three major film genres afoot: The Hollywood - The world is a light, bubbly, colorful fairytale of optimism; The Slavic Despair - Life is the shards remaining after the spectacular but necessarily tragic battle between freewill and fate; The Foreign (Origin Western Europe) - Life is in exceedingly bad taste, but by means of grace, charm and wit, in the end we will “outclass” reality itself.

Robert Wise chose The Foreign genre within which to couch his film because he was delivering a barbed message to an ideologically divided world beset with sentimentality but lacking humor. He was saying what people knew but were afraid to admit: The Cold War could suddenly become very hot, ending in an atomic holocaust. The Hollywood would be too optimistic, The Slavic Despair too hopeless. Instead he chose The Foreign, and rode the high ground between aristocratic distancing and the pop culture of his day, keeping the tension alive.

The movie has all the earmarks of The Foreign film, such as one of its sub-genres, the Film Noir: Black and white high-contrast photography which creates malevolent shadows that accompany the foreboding and super-serious background music written by Bernard Herrmann and augmented by the other-worldly sounds of the Theremin - the first electronic instrument. The plot is structured in cinema verite to convey candid or newsreel realism. There are scenes from Calcutta, Moscow, Paris, London, a pool room, a gas station, an amusement park, a draw bridge, etc. and, of course many scenes from downtown Washington D.C. Mock tabloids fill the screen with descriptions of “spacemen from Mars”. Prominent radio and T.V. reporters of the day are shown in cameo who play themselves. Elmer Davis (again), and Drew Pearson (who never took his hat off after age 35) spit staccato warnings. H.B. Carltonborn’s (“there’s good news tonight”) is offset by Gabriel Hester’s blithering paranoia.

But the most important aspect of The Foreign film is its use of subtitles. Both Hollywood and Slavic Despair when exported have little need of subtitles. Their simple plots, dramatic gestures and high action make these no more than silent films with

soundtracks. The Foreign film has as its essence the nature of language - it was the real beginning of the “talkies”. To a mid-century European, the American culture (and other cultures also) were seen as populated with the hopelessly mono-lingual and the artistically inferior.

The subtitle draws in an audience that does not speak the language presented, while blocking from that audience all nuance of meaning, the “lived experience” - the “untranslatable”. The subtitle for The Foreign film, therefore, is a control mechanism in the continuous international Kultur Kampf which lets the population of the Earth know the exact location of the “home office” of the world.

Robert Wise, knowing that America no longer conformed to the image held by most Europeans of a naive world whose culture is expressed by the Western or Jerry Lewis movie, took the theories of language of the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) to heart. Wise directed a Foreign film without subtitles. We hear English spoken (both Posh and Cockney), American (Midwestern and New England), Hindi, French, Russian, and, of course, the language of Klaatu’s home planet, which, according to Harry Bates, author of the story, was Europa, one of the four largest moons of Jupiter (one fourth the diameter of the Earth - smooth and icy but containing water). Klaatu, therefore, is a “Cosmic European”.

Wittgenstein claimed that no language can really be translated. There are only “family resemblances” of meaning, and no private languages either. Language is a game, therefore, which is known by inventing a new language. The intellectual bewitchment of the “untranslatable” is over, and the world according to Robert Wise is seen as truly international. In fact, he realized that the U.S.A. was becoming the entertainment capital of the world. America was willing to be the audience for the rest of the world and itself, as the view we held that reality is divided between the subjective and the objective began to blur and fade out.

The language of Klaatu is an imagined variation on Medieval Scientific Latin (circa 1238-1368 A.D.), which has almost English word order. For example, in the beginning of the movie when Klaatu leads off with a device “that will allow the President to study life on other planets”, he is shot in the arm and, device broken, Gort begins to use his almighty weapon upon all the Earth weapons in sight. Klaatu shouts to his faithful robot: “Gort Declato Brosco”. Everyone in the audience knows he means “Gort, stop using your death-ray”. Or, at the finale, when Klaatu has just delivered his lecture to the intellectuals of the world (the “I Am Leaving Now” speech) on why “the universe is growing smaller every day” - and the threatening implications the Earth poses to the established peace of the existing planetary system (the cosmic urbanism) along with the basic choice the total Earth must make - either get with the system or by eliminated: “Gort Baringa”. They turn heel in military fashion (Klaatu is in his black space suit) and enter the flying saucer, you know by context that means “Gort, Let’s move it.” The gathered throng watches stunned as the ship rises easily into the evening sky, passing swiftly to the oblivion of outerspace.

The first opportunity he gets, Klaatu enters his ship furtively, having awakened “the sleeping giant” Gort a minute before by means of a flashlight signal, so that he could dispatch the two

soldiers guarding the premises. Now inside the ship, Klaatu turns on "the interrossitor" (the ship's communication device with the home planet), Theremin style - he simply waves his hand in the air near the controls and says "emray Klaatu naruat macro proval brarato lukto denso implikit yavo tarri axell plakatio baringa degas". From the preceding action, the translation is obvious: "Klaatu reporting, there will have to be a slight change of plans dealing with this crude and tasteless planet. The people are beset with fear and stupidity, but I am confident I can handle the situation. Be home soon."

Several days before this in the late afternoon (April 10), the injured Klaatu is brought under heavy guard to Walter Reed Hospital and placed in room 306. Immediately, his convalescence is interrupted by a knock on the door. It is Mr. Harley, Secretary to the President of the United States. He wants to know why Mr. Klaatu came to Earth. Klaatu responds that his mission is of utmost importance but he will not talk to any one person or nation (he does not want to add to the Earth's irrational behavior and "petty squabbles"). Instead, Klaatu wants a meeting of all the chiefs of state since Mr. Harley claims the United Nations does not represent all nations of the world.

Mr. Harley returns the next day with the news that such a meeting is both ideologically unprecedented and too far for the leaders to come at short notice, and they would not agree to having the meeting in Lafayette Park directly behind the White House. This is where Klaatu landed his ship, right between two baseball diamonds, thinking they were existing "crop circles". An annoyed Klaatu responded with "I took five of your months to get here, traveling 250 million of your miles, we're neighbors", but then his mood softened as he looked out the window at ordinary people meandering about. "Perhaps before making any rash decisions" (like asking Gort to reduce the Earth to a burnt out cinder) "perhaps I should go out among the common people in order to discover the basis of the unreasoning attitudes". Klaatu escapes and eludes the surveillance of the military police to assume his guise as an Earthman. Before leaving the hospital, he steals the belongings of a Major Leon Michael Carpenter.

Near the climax of the action, Klaatu delivers his most famous line in his native tongue, the phrase everyone knows by heart:

"Gort Klaatu Brada Nikto." Because of circumstances surrounding the absolute necessity of these words being said to Gort by widow Helen Benson (played by Patrica Neal, who is a brunette in the movie and looks and acts like Donna Reed with permanent PMS), an exact translation is impossible. Klaatu is instructing her to say the phonemes correctly as they ride together in the cab. He has reached a point of desperation and isn't interested in giving her a foreign language lesson.

He first meets Helen when he "rents" a room in the same rooming house where she and her young son, Bobby, live. In fact, he ends up in the room next to hers. The rooming house is at 1412 Harvard Street North West - in the fashionable Georgetown section of the city, right off Massachusetts Avenue. It is Bobby, played by Billy Grey, who discovers that Klaatu has no "Earth money" - he brought only perfect diamonds ("they are easy to carry and they don't wear out") as money. He cannot exchange them without revealing his true identity. However, he does take two one dollar bills from Bobby in exchange for two diamonds ("I want to take you to the movies"). Klaatu, for the few days he lives incognito at the rooming house of Mrs. Croquette (played by Frances Bavier), lives like a homeless person on the charity of others. Apparently this is fine with Mrs. Croquette, a middle aged widow who is agog with pride and possessiveness when she realizes that "Mr. Carpenter" wants to stay. His tall, handsome appearance and demeanor, plus his use of language (Mrs. Croquette believes from his accent that he comes from a location a long way from Washington D.C., New England) to Mrs. Croquette are the reasons she feels he immediately "out-classes" all the rest of her boring boarders. Not once does she suspect who or what he really is.

Klaatu is played by Michael Rennie who, as a British repertory actor, puts on a performance that makes the rest of the cast look like "soap-opera" regulars, "walk-ons", or just rank amateurs - in short, real everyday people. This contrast is what gives Klaatu his alien or "other-worldly" ambiance. Robert Wise, of course, planned this carefully. He wanted Klaatu to have an image as a role model of human evolution: physically, intellectually, morally, and culturally superior to Earthlings. He comes from a planet that has no wars ("gee... that's a good idea," says Bobby). But as the "Earthman" Mr. Carpenter, he is shown stealing, mooch-



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ing, littering, moving about in disguise, lying to children, making technical errors (he claimed to be staying in room 309 at Walter Reed when the number on the door was 306). He offers the Earth a Hobson's Choice: either the Earth accepts the system of peace loving planets or it will be eliminated.

But other than these Earth-like imperfections, Robert Wise creates the character Klaatu in direct contrast to the images of aliens from outerspace most audiences are familiar with - war-mongering, blood thirsty, slimy, mutants ("with square heads, three big eyes and tentacles") bent on non-negotiable carnage and dedicated to the ultimate obliteration of all human life, and, of course, all depicted within architectural movie environments of eye-drugging fantasies of destruction, bolting action, bleeding color, special effects and monster budgets. Neither the images of aliens from the "Buck Rogers" or "Flash Gordon" serials of the 1930's, nor those depicted as soon as two years after the making of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, as in Byron Haskins' rendition of H.G. Wells *The War of the Worlds*, ever went off tradition as did the image of Klaatu.

Even the current "remake" of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, a monetary blockbuster called *Independence Day*, awash in sentimentality and pumped up politically correct patriotism, cannot come close, even with all its special effects, to subsuming the brilliance and originality of what Robert Wise accomplished. *Independence Day*, which contains film clips on a T.V. of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, has its flying saucer imitating the flight path of the Thanaton (Klaatu's ship). Proceedings from "Moon Base Alpha", a manhole cover from hell, approaches the earth from many vantage points. The one that heads toward Washington D.C. goes right over the Capitol Building, then follows the Mall, takes a right at the Washington Monument to then pass over the ellipse and its zero milestone (the polar axis of political power in the world), and then to hover in space over a 15 mile diameter of the U.S. Territory awaiting instructions from the mothership to blow up the White House. Klaatu and the Thanaton simply landed.

Even with all this, Rupert Murdoch (who bought out 20th Century Fox a few years ago and fancies himself a combination of Howard Hughes, Orson Welles, and William Randolph Hearst) could not pull it off. The script of *Independence Day*, loaded with references from everything from *Star Wars* to *Jurassic Park*, is in reality a remake of *The War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells. A "virus" gets the aliens in the end in both venues.

Murdoch cannot produce a Foreign Film, even though the technical crew is loaded with Europeans, such as the German director Roland Emmerich. This pastiche of set and plot is not even Science Fiction. It is an extravaganza like the lavish musicals mounted in the 1940's to give audiences weary from World

War II a moment of diversion. Today, it is "terrorwar" and street crime, which are targets for constructs of distraction.

Then again, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is not really Science Fiction. Neither is it an example of horror, nor of fantasy. Hugo Gersback, in the inaugural issue of *Amazing Stories* in 1926, defines the Literary genre of what he calls Science Fiction "... as a type of story - a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision" which he says begins with the works of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). It is a true escape from the present into the past or the future. By the time Robert Wise began working as a film director, he sensed the end was near for Science Fiction when he observed the academic literati begin to scour the "pot boiler" pulp fiction shops for the plot of their next "tome".

In 1961, Robert Heinlein (1907-1988) literally killed off Science Fiction with his seminal book *Stranger in a Strange Land*. It became not Science Fiction of the future but a set of instructions for the sixth incarnation of "The New Age" (the 1960's). From then on, Science Fiction became ad-hoc research and development for whoever would care to avail themselves of the ideas put forth. NASA used the *Star Trek T.V.* series for rogramming directives and inspiration. At exactly 10:56 PM EDT, July 20, 1969 when Neil Armstrong's foot first touched the Moon's surface, the wake for Science Fiction was over, and the lid of the coffin was closed forever.

Like all documentary films, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is cast in the present tense. The originality of Robert Wise was to show that Klaatu's world was possible to the Earthlings of 1951, their present. Like people entering a time machine for the first time, all sense of history and futurology vanish as an unexpected richness of the present moment is encountered.

Klaatu comes from a race of humanoids more biologically, culturally, intellectually, technologically, and morally advanced than us. As an individual not from the future, he is youthful in appearance while being 78 years old ("life expectancy is 130"). A flesh wound from an Earth bullet is healed overnight by means of some salve he brought with him. He is vulnerable to nature. He is not like the comic book character Superman who is a biological freak in our environment. When shot a second time, he dies. But with the aid of his faithful robot Gort (a cyclopean wonder of technology with absolute power to decide who lives or dies - played by Lock Martin), Klaatu's body is brought to life by a device on board his ship that "under certain circumstances will restore life for a limited period of time."

Professor Jacob Barnhardt (an Einstein-like character, played by Sam Jaffe) asks Klaatu, who has revealed his true identity to the professor, to provide "a little demonstration" of his power that would not hurt anyone but would dramatically emphasize the seriousness of Klaatu's mission. Klaatu replies, "would the day after tomorrow be all right?" We are about to witness the implications of a technology that is beyond human belief.

It is Sunday evening, April 13, and Klaatu has just shown "the smartest scientist on Earth" the solution to a problem in celestial mechanics that the professor had been working on "for weeks". Together, in the Barnhardt's study, Klaatu is like a visiting luminary from the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory at Harvard (which is what Mrs. Croquette believed) and Barnhardt becomes an aging "Woody Allen" who looks like he traded in his sense of humor for a degree from M.I.T.

At noon on the 15th, Klaatu effects "a brilliant idea that no one would have thought of". From 12:00 noon until 12:30, he neutralizes all electrical devices around the world, thus bringing the world to a standstill. But there are exceptions like hospitals and airplanes in flight, etc. Earth becomes the backdrop for total world-wide mediation.

During this one half hour, Helen and Klaatu are trapped between floors in an elevator at the Secretary of Commerce Building where Helen works. It is here that Klaatu not only reveals his true identity to Helen, but also a more detailed explanation of his mission than he had revealed to Professor Barnhardt. She now understands the fateful consequences for the future of

the Earth that his planet poses. She also discovers exactly how "alien" he really is.

Robert Wise had two "world class" geniuses in mind when he was developing the character Klaatu with the screenplay writer Edmund H. North. The first was Nikola Tesla (1856-1943), the Croatian born American inventor and electrical engineer, and second, Professor Leon Theremin (Ley Sergeyevich Teremin) (1896-1993) physicist and inventor of the world's first electronic instrument, the Thereminvox or the Etherphone in 1920 in the Soviet Union. Like Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519) before them, they did not "live in the future" while everyone else "lived in the past", but in the fullness of the present. While others, because of stupidity, simply did not perceive reality to the depths of that these men were able, they devoured the infinite possibilities that lay before them in the present.

In 1921, Karel Capek (1890-1938) first produced his universally acclaimed drama R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots). The image of the robot was little more than a human zombie.

In 1923, architect and set designer Frederick Kiesler (1890-1965) gave a production of R.U.R a more mechanical look, so that by 1926 when the film Metropolis appeared the first totally mechanical looking robot, "the False Marie" set the image for Gort (the planetary policeman or space peace cop - the godfather of Robocop). Gort is depicted as self-programming and in possession of absolute knowledge of who among all humanoids either individually or collectively initiates aggression, and he is prepared to eliminate the aggressors forthwith by means of a cyclopean death ray.

By 1888, Tesla had perfected the alternating current motor. In 1898 he invented simultaneously both radio and the world's first robot - a Telautomaton Boat. His death ray was completed in 1914. An article about it was seen in the July 11, 1934 issue of The New York Times when Tesla was 78 (the age of Klaatu). Other hints about Tesla occur in the movie, such as Tesla's habit of performing mathematical functions by threes or powers of threes. Klaatu changes his hospital room 306 into 309.

When Klaatu waves his hands in space in front of his ship's communication center in his disco volante, he is preparing to contact his home planet on the Etherphone of Theremin. While requesting a flashlight from Bobby Benson (the symbol of youthful openness and curiosity), Klaatu notices Bobby's electric train set and casually remarks about a train that does not need any tracks. Theremin in the late 1920's proposed an electronic bridge for superhighways, called The Lev (from the spelling of his first name in Russian and the first syllable of the English word "Levitation"). The bridge would "float" the weight of a truck across a 50ft. gap in space, 22ft above the crossroad supported only by an electromagnetic surface.

The model for the device that provides the temporary resurrection of Klaatu is the Vitatheremin, conceived of when a precious member of Theremin's New York circle of friends died unexpectedly in 1928. The device will revive a dead body within 12 hours of death by means of solenoids aimed at the chakras of the body, which first is covered with liquid crystal paint. Liquid crystals were known about since 1891. The liquid crystal indicates even the slightest electromagnetic activity in the corpse.

Both Tesla (the Croatian but fully committed to America) and Theremin (the Earth-Energy Russian but lukewarm Soviet spy) form the two halves of Klaatu's personality which is: preternaturally young (both); Mesmerizing (both); Formal in manners (Theremin); Aloof and romantically Platonic (Tesla was celibate his entire life); Boundless energy (neither slept much); Focused and driven by a mission (both); Eschewing the narrow, self-serving and stupid, yet willing to examine all possibilities.

The inverse of Klaatu is the Earthman Tom Stevens, the persistent and annoying suitor of the young widow Benson (played by Hugh Marlow - star of a popular T.V. series called I Led Three Lives, a drama about counter-espionage within the American Communist Cell). He is an insurance salesman, which places him lower on the food chain than either the shark or the lawyer. He is suspicious ("I never did trust the guy"); avaricious ("why doesn't he have any money?") and "I'm down here at Bleeker's

getting an appraisal of the diamond I found in his room"); traitorous ("get me General Cutler on the phone"); self-absorbed ("I don't care about the rest of the world"); and hypocritical ("I think the guy's a crook"). Tom represents the dark side of America during its peak - the 1950's. He is in one character the embodiment of McCarthyism - indiscriminate allegations and public unsubstantiated charges toward one considered subversive.

"Doubting Thomas" fingers Klaatu to the Army authorities and it is the reason why we see Klaatu and Helen in the back seat of a yellow cab (license H0012) as it speeds north on 14th Street from Harvard Street headed, they believe, to the safety of Professor Barnhardt's office. This is the scene where Klaatu instructs Helen in the famous phrase. But "Plan B in Zone 5" closes in on them. Klaatu and Helen panic and jump out of the cab. It is only a few blocks to Barnhardt's. Klaatu makes a run for it, but is shot down in the street. Helen, leaning over Klaatu hears what she thinks are his last words "get that message to Gort". His body is taken by the authorities to a police station across the street. Meanwhile, back at the ship, Gort, sensing Klaatu's death, melts the block of "K-L-9-3" he had been immobilized by, in time to receive Helen and hear her say for the second time "Gort Klaatu Brada Nikto". Now the meaning is clear, "Gort, I am dead, come get my body but don't destroy the Earth on the way over."

To me, the implications of The Day the Earth Stood Still for the Bauharoque are legion in the film's exaggerated theatricality and utopian overtones, but it was not until July 4, 1976, the publication date of Unbuilt America: Forgotten Architecture in the United States from Thomas Jefferson to the Space Age, by Allison Sky and Michelle Stone, that I realized why I like this movie so much - a movie I have seen over 750 times during the 45 years since it was first released. It is as much a part of architectural history as are the engravings of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1729-1778) or the renderings of Etienne-Louis Boulee (1728-1799).

Unbuilt Architecture has somehow sustained itself against the fortunes of fashion that have attempted to declare it irrelevant as opposed to the "truly" real "built architecture". In a sense, the movie was the first piece of collaborative architecture ever done by Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959). He was contacted in 1949 by Robert Wise to work on the set design because Wise knew of Wright's interest in flying saucers from drawings in progress using the flying saucer form. Both The Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church (built 1956) and the Sports Club for Huntington Hartford (unbuilt 1947) are examples.

Working with set designers, Thomas Little and Claude Carpenter, Wright came up with the classic flying saucer profile: the soliton wave or curve of normal distribution. The interior of the ship was "lifted" right out of The Johnson Wax Company Administrative Headquarters Wright had been working on since 1936. The horizontal translucent plastic tubing motif was a perfect foil for the Bauhaus-like control instruments. The metal that sheathes both Gort and the Thanaton was, as Wright said at the time, "...to imitate an experimental substance that I have heard about which acts like living tissue. If cut, the rift would appear to heal like a wound, leaving a continuous surface with no scar."

I have analyzed Klaatu's ship as a form and have discovered that it conforms to the divine proportion or Phi (0.382.../ 0.618...) in five separate ways, including not only linear but also mass and surface proportions. The traditional classical columnar orders (the Doric, the Ionic, the Corinthian, the Tuscan, the Roman Doric, and the Composite) only use Phi in three ways and for linear measurements only. To me, the form of the Thanaton, therefore, should be considered a new classical form.

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