



THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL

1951 (U.S.)

Director Robert Wise **Producer** Julian Blaustein **Screenplay** Edmund H. North, based on a story by Harry Bates **Photography** Leo Tover **Music** Bernhard Herrmann
Cast Michael Rennie, Patricia Neal, Sam Jaffe, Hugh Marlowe, Billy Gray, Frances Bavier, Lock Martin, Holly Bane, Marshall Bradford, John Brown, John Burton

Science fiction's power to generate and inject iconic images of great lasting power has never been more convincingly demonstrated than by Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Not only have the words "Klaatu barada nikto" entered the vast murky pool of 20th-century pop trivia (whatever they may actually mean), but the combined images of the silvery flying saucer having landed in the heart of Washington D.C., with the stolidly erect shape of the robot Gort rising up from its sensuous swell, have remained immediately recognizable, long past the film's moment of historical urgency.

For those familiar only with these pieces of trivia, the film itself might come as a surprise, least of all for its barely concealed Christian allegory: Klaatu (Michael Rennie), the alien emissary who is promptly shot after emerging from his ship, decides to forego his celebrity status and adopts the name "Carpenter" to walk unrecognized among humanity in order to learn more about us. A young woman Helen Benson (Neal) and her boy (Gray) learn to have faith in him. But even though, in an awesome show of force, he performs the miracle of cutting off

◀ It is ironic that the poster art is so violent, given that the film's most enduring message is one of peace.

global electricity for half an hour to get the attention not just of the ruling elite but of everybody, they need to shelter him from an increasingly hysterical public and paranoid military. After Helen's fiancé (Marlowe) betrays Klaatu's whereabouts to the authorities, the frantic manhunt ends with him shot down, this time fatally, on the streets of Washington. Gort, the robot, immobile at the landing site up to this moment, brings Klaatu

*"I'M IMPATIENT WITH STUPIDITY.
MY PEOPLE HAVE LEARNED TO LIVE
WITHOUT IT."* KLAATU

back from the dead, albeit temporarily, to deliver the message that brought him here to an astounded crowd, just in time, before both lift off into the heavens.

Though their messages would vary, American Cold War science-fiction films tended to be rather blunt. Some would assure audiences of the superiority of the U.S., others would address their anxieties, speaking of the unspeakable horrors of atomic war. Having been shot twice and hunted like an animal, Wise's alien emissary finally gets to speak his piece in the film's final scene: nobody cared while humans just killed each other, but now technology is about to extend their reach beyond their own planet. "Disarm or be destroyed" is the urgent message. Delivered with mythic simplicity, in the broad strokes of Christian allegory, and in strikingly memorable images, this message is worth repeated screenings even now. **FL**

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Despite readings of the Klaatu character as a Christ-like figure, it's harder to apply the same interpretation to the mute law-enforcement-bot Gort, shown here.

