

The Day the Earth Stood Still (2008)

Rated PG-13 Our Rating: V-3 ; L- 1; S/N- 2. Length: 1 hour 43 min.

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.' But Noah found favour in the sight of the Lord.
Genesis 6:5-8

From the heavens you uttered judgment; the earth feared and was still Psalm 76:8

Whenever they remake a great classic, filmmakers risk great disappointment with audiences. Keenu Reeves takes on the role as the alien Klaatu. Michael Rennie role as the alien Klaatu. that we remember and cherish the original. That is certainly true with this film, The Day the Earth Stood Still having been shown often on TV and readily available on video for the past 57 years. The film received many accolades from outside the then tight circle of science fiction fans. I remember that even my father, who usually ridiculed my devotion to science fiction,

thought this was a very good film.

The simplicity and the theological underpinnings of the original are lost in this remake, seemingly swallowed up by the special effects that reveal how skimpy they were in the original, but also how peripheral they really are to a good story. Also, the theme has been changed—from judgment on our inability to live in peace to the currently popular environmental theme, our misuse of the earth.

The flying saucer gives way to a huge mysterious ball this time, which is spotted hurtling through space at an impossible velocity and calculated to create devastating impact when it collides with Earth. Then, unexpectedly, it slows down and lands not in Washington, the seat of government, but in New York City, the seat of commerce. Of course, the troops are called out as Klaatu (Keanu Reeves) and Gort (a very streamlined version that reminded me of Batman's suit) emerges. A trigger-happy soldier fires, injuring the alien, who is taken to a hospital where he quickly undergoes a strange transformation that turns his alien body into a human form that can breathe our atmosphere and speak our language.

Astro-biologist Dr. Helen Benson (Jennifer Connelly) is one of a team of experts called in to assist the government in dealing with this unprecedented situation. Representing the President of the United States is Secretary of Defense Regina Jackson (Kathy Bates).

Klaatu wants to speak with the heads of all governments, but the Secretary refuses, she seeing him from a national security position. Dr. Benson, thinking otherwise, assists in his escape, and thus begins an intense manhunt. A sub-theme that becomes important is Helen's strained relationship with her stepson Jacob (Jaden Smith), who misses his deceased father so intensely that he cannot see that she too grieves for him.

During this hunt/chase sequence everything that Klaatu observes convinces him that the decision of his superiors to exterminate humanity is correct, though when he makes contact (at a MacDonalds!) with a fellow alien who had been sent to earth decades earlier, his colleague refuses to return to the space orb with him. "They are a destructive race," he says, "but there is another side. I love them." The question thus arises will Helen be able to show Klaatu this "other side" and convince him that humanity deserves a second chance.

I suspect that those who have not seen the original film might enjoy this remake more than those of us who have. Watching the new version in Imax is impressive, as are the special effects (I especially liked the shot of the glowing sphere passing above St. Patrick's cathedral, as seen looking up from sidewalk level), but there is no substitute ofr the original's intelligently written script and its conception of the role of Klaatu. It does provide an opportunity for a group to watch both versions and then discuss and compare the context out of which each of the films arose. As Bob Dylan's song puts it, "The times, they are changing." Whether for the better or not, you can decide.

For reflection/Discussion There are spoilers in the following.

1. What seems to be Klaatu's purpose in coming to Earth? What do you think of the reception that he is give? How does this confirm the judgment rendered against humanity?
2. How does Dr. Helen Benson show "the other side" ? And how does Secretary of Defense Regina Jackson develop in her understanding of the alien?
3. One of the scientists makes a reference to the "ark," but leaves out "Noah's." How does this begin to show the de-theologizing of the original? When Klaatu and Jacob are talking about death and restoring life, what does Klaatu answer? Sound like a New Age statement? For those who have

seen the original, what does Klaatu say in regard to a Creator?

4. The role of Klaatu as a Christ figure: how is the original emphasis diluted in this version? Note that Edmund H. North, writer of the 1951 script, told an interviewer that for the sequence in which Klaatu hides out at a boarding house he gave the alien the name "Mr. Carpenter," calling this his little private joke to see if anyone made the connection. Does Klaatu have to assume an alias in this version, or is Helen aware of his identity from the very start of their relationship?

5. A good time could be had comparing the political/cultural setting of the two films. In 1951 what dominated the world stage: the possibility of atomic annihilation, or the waste of the planet? What was the standing in society of the church and Christianity in comparison to 2008? How was the form of the space ship influenced by the controversy over flying saucers? Another film, obviously greatly influenced by Day..., is the delightful so-called children's film *The Iron Giant*. Set in the early 1950s, it captures well the almost paranoia of the times in regards to the Cold War, nuclear weapons, flying saucers and space aliens.

6. Compare the endings. How is the warning that Klaatu leaves us with in the 1951 version more open-ended, making this like a parable? What affects Klaatu in the new version so that he changes his view of humanity? How do the two films seem to view judgment? In this respect, which seems more tempered with mercy? Compare both films with judgment in the Scripture passages. Who in the latter is deemed proper in executing it, and who is to exercise restraint?