Science Fiction Films and Cold War Anxiety

History of the American Cinema   
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Science fiction films became a major Hollywood genre in the 1950s. Through imaginative narratives and special effects, hundreds of science fiction films presented indirect expressions of anxiety about the possibility of a nuclear holocaust or a Communist invasion of America. These fears were expressed in various guises, such as aliens using mind control, monstrous mutants unleashed by radioactive fallout, radiation's terrible effects on human life, and scientists obsessed with dangerous experiments. Although both government and private groups discouraged criticism of U.S. policies and expressions of fear about national security during the Cold War, the producers of science fiction films were generally left alone by government regulators and the private groups that tried to shape public opinion. Controversy over the development of atomic weapons and potential consequences had been repressed in public debates and in other film genres,2 but it could be recast in stories about mutant ants and grasshoppers, pods that took over people's minds, space travel, and the nuclear destruction of civilizations on other planets. By dislocating the narratives to different times and/or different worlds, the science fiction genre catered to public anxiety about the bomb and communism. In most of the films, scientists and/or the military managed to vanquish the enemy, offering reassurance that these threats could be overcome. In films where destruction had already taken place, the endings offered hope and redemption. Thus the science fiction films of the Cold War era may be generally interpreted as advocating the idea that Americans would be able to cope with external threats to their security.

…the genre did not really "take off" until 1950, for a variety of reasons. First, if the Hollywood science fiction genre was largely a response to nuclear anxiety, that anxiety received a huge boost when the Russians successfully tested an atomic bomb in 1949. Second, science fiction literature, as represented by such figures as authors Robert Heinlein and Ray Bradbury and editor John W. Campbell, was booming in the early 1950s…

While science was both implicit and explicit in the science fiction films of the 1950s, it was explained simplistically. Scientists were often represented as troublesome idealists or obstructionists because they wanted to save a destructive species or phenomenon in order to study it. Scientists were either represented as responsible for the problems that arose, or they were responsible for finding solutions to whatever was threatening the planet. Government officials and the military were often represented as heroes who fought the enemy; or, conversely, they were portrayed as ignorant of the peaceful intentions of the invaders and often as hotheads who just wanted to obliterate the threat. Aliens were frequently portrayed as superior to earthlings in intelligence and technology, perhaps representing what Americans feared in the Soviets. Likewise, mutants that resulted from atomic radiation, such as gigantic ants and locusts, were represented as socially organized and conforming in ways that many Americans perceived the Bolsheviks to be. A further essential theme was secrecy: scientists, or government officials, or the military, or all three, were hiding from the public the amazing events ultimately revealed in these films.

[The key historical point to be made about the science fiction films of the 1950s is that they came about "in direct relationship to the increasing public concern about communism and the fear of a nuclear disaster."](http://intent.bingads.com/?q=Interest+Rates+for+Mortgages&reqId=45d55dd3e6cd4cbaa0cd1d680a9c786f&form=PSN910&adpk=11666483&TracingTag=PSrc6&setmkt=en-us&useSiteUrl=false&sptid=default&sec=ARBowU4LlhvNfT0m7mW0VJ781zu%2buDIGX%2fLzQ%2fx%2fBygk0yBRV6iY9gAr7oxpSkYDwjK5aV8F3Z6JtkqlbzswdDIX)[8](http://intent.bingads.com/?q=Interest+Rates+for+Mortgages&reqId=45d55dd3e6cd4cbaa0cd1d680a9c786f&form=PSN910&adpk=11666483&TracingTag=PSrc6&setmkt=en-us&useSiteUrl=false&sptid=default&sec=ARBowU4LlhvNfT0m7mW0VJ781zu%2buDIGX%2fLzQ%2fx%2fBygk0yBRV6iY9gAr7oxpSkYDwjK5aV8F3Z6JtkqlbzswdDIX)[Phil Hardy, editor of the](http://intent.bingads.com/?q=Interest+Rates+for+Mortgages&reqId=45d55dd3e6cd4cbaa0cd1d680a9c786f&form=PSN910&adpk=11666483&TracingTag=PSrc6&setmkt=en-us&useSiteUrl=false&sptid=default&sec=ARBowU4LlhvNfT0m7mW0VJ781zu%2buDIGX%2fLzQ%2fx%2fBygk0yBRV6iY9gAr7oxpSkYDwjK5aV8F3Z6JtkqlbzswdDIX)*[Overlook Film Encyclopedia: Science Fiction](http://intent.bingads.com/?q=Interest+Rates+for+Mortgages&reqId=45d55dd3e6cd4cbaa0cd1d680a9c786f&form=PSN910&adpk=11666483&TracingTag=PSrc6&setmkt=en-us&useSiteUrl=false&sptid=default&sec=ARBowU4LlhvNfT0m7mW0VJ781zu%2buDIGX%2fLzQ%2fx%2fBygk0yBRV6iY9gAr7oxpSkYDwjK5aV8F3Z6JtkqlbzswdDIX)*[, wrote "Lurking behind every frame of fifties Science Fiction … is the fear of nuclear Armageddon. So much so that by the end of the decade monsters of all shapes and sizes were introduced with nothing but a muttered comment about radiation as the justification for their appearance."](http://intent.bingads.com/?q=Interest+Rates+for+Mortgages&reqId=45d55dd3e6cd4cbaa0cd1d680a9c786f&form=PSN910&adpk=11666483&TracingTag=PSrc6&setmkt=en-us&useSiteUrl=false&sptid=default&sec=ARBowU4LlhvNfT0m7mW0VJ781zu%2buDIGX%2fLzQ%2fx%2fBygk0yBRV6iY9gAr7oxpSkYDwjK5aV8F3Z6JtkqlbzswdDIX)[9](http://intent.bingads.com/?q=Interest+Rates+for+Mortgages&reqId=45d55dd3e6cd4cbaa0cd1d680a9c786f&form=PSN910&adpk=11666483&TracingTag=PSrc6&setmkt=en-us&useSiteUrl=false&sptid=default&sec=ARBowU4LlhvNfT0m7mW0VJ781zu%2buDIGX%2fLzQ%2fx%2fBygk0yBRV6iY9gAr7oxpSkYDwjK5aV8F3Z6JtkqlbzswdDIX)[The near deluge of 1950s science fiction films was part of a fearful and anxious American cultural climate. As historian Paul Boyer said, "for all its exotic trappings, science fiction is best understood as a commentary on contemporary issues."](http://intent.bingads.com/?q=Interest+Rates+for+Mortgages&reqId=45d55dd3e6cd4cbaa0cd1d680a9c786f&form=PSN910&adpk=11666483&TracingTag=PSrc6&setmkt=en-us&useSiteUrl=false&sptid=default&sec=ARBowU4LlhvNfT0m7mW0VJ781zu%2buDIGX%2fLzQ%2fx%2fBygk0yBRV6iY9gAr7oxpSkYDwjK5aV8F3Z6JtkqlbzswdDIX)[10](http://intent.bingads.com/?q=Interest+Rates+for+Mortgages&reqId=45d55dd3e6cd4cbaa0cd1d680a9c786f&form=PSN910&adpk=11666483&TracingTag=PSrc6&setmkt=en-us&useSiteUrl=false&sptid=default&sec=ARBowU4LlhvNfT0m7mW0VJ781zu%2buDIGX%2fLzQ%2fx%2fBygk0yBRV6iY9gAr7oxpSkYDwjK5aV8F3Z6JtkqlbzswdDIX)

Four major themes can be seen in the science fiction films of the fifties: (1) Extraterrestrial travel, (2) Alien invasion and infiltration, (3) Mutants, metamorphosis, and resurrection of extinct species, and (4) Near annihilation or the end of the Earth. Each of these themes related, at least indirectly, to the world events of the 1950s and reflected the fear and anxiety of the atomic age and the Cold War. The themes were Hollywood's version of a nation coming to grips with its postwar knowledge that humanity could destroy itself as well as the paranoia that had resulted from the red scare, in which Communists appeared to be infiltrating and subverting normal American life and values. Victorious in World War II, Americans now feared failure in the face of atomic and nuclear energy in the hands of the enemy. Science fiction films tended to merge the fear of a Communist takeover with the fear of annihilation, particularly in the form of invasion from outside forces…

Most films found a way to defeat the alien or monstrous threat, but even when civilization was destroyed a message of hope remained…humanity is given chance to regenerate itself with a new Adam and Eve…

If science fiction is, as Eric Rabkin has stated, about "the problems and possibilities posed by meeting the new, the unexpected, the alien," then American science fiction films of the 1950s are a very focused and topical version of this general definition. Whether realistic or fantasy-oriented, these films revolve around fears of nuclear weapons and Communist domination. The films are not all the same, they vary markedly in story, symbolism, and attitude toward the threat, but they are certainly aimed at specific political and scientific problems. The appeal of the 1950s cycle of science fiction films lies mainly in the outpouring of imaginative renderings of simple and specific fears.