



# Salvation from the Skies: Convergent Analyses of Flying Saucers in American Cinema and Post-Freudian Psychology

Randy Laist, Ph.D., Andres Avila, Karen Azucena, Tayshaun Bookal, Brian Figueroa, Andrew Fleming, Zahkiyyah Frazier, Abigail Giron Marroquin, Lena Graham, Lashay Green, Morgan Johnson, Rayhan Khan, Ashton Landowski, Angelina Ledesma, Samantha Ledger, Glenn Manigault, Joseph Martin, Kyara Pereira, Marcella Ramos, Edival Rios, Lily Rodriguez, Kieran Ross, Ceezar Samson, Cheyann Tiffany, Alexander Torrens, Nathaniel Walter, Samantha Wilson  
College of Science and Society  
Department of English  
University of Bridgeport, Bridgeport, CT

## Abstract

*The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) is commonly recognized as one of the twentieth century's most influential science fiction films. Carl Gustav Jung is commonly recognized as one of the twentieth century's most influential theorists of human consciousness. Despite representing very different cultural discourses, the film and the psychologist both articulate a remarkably similar interpretation of the cultural phenomenon of alleged UFO sightings in the post-war period throughout Europe and the United States. Both texts represent the appearance of UFOs as a response to human anxiety about the precarity of planetary existence in the post-war period. The UFOs, both film and psychologist postulate, hold the promise of salvation from the aggressive instincts that had recently led to World War II and that threatened to imminently spark World War III. More than simply allowing an opportunity to read *The Day the Earth Stood Still* from a Jungian perspective, the correspondence between these two texts suggests the extent to which one profile of flying saucer mythology is its identity as a symptom of existential planetary dread.

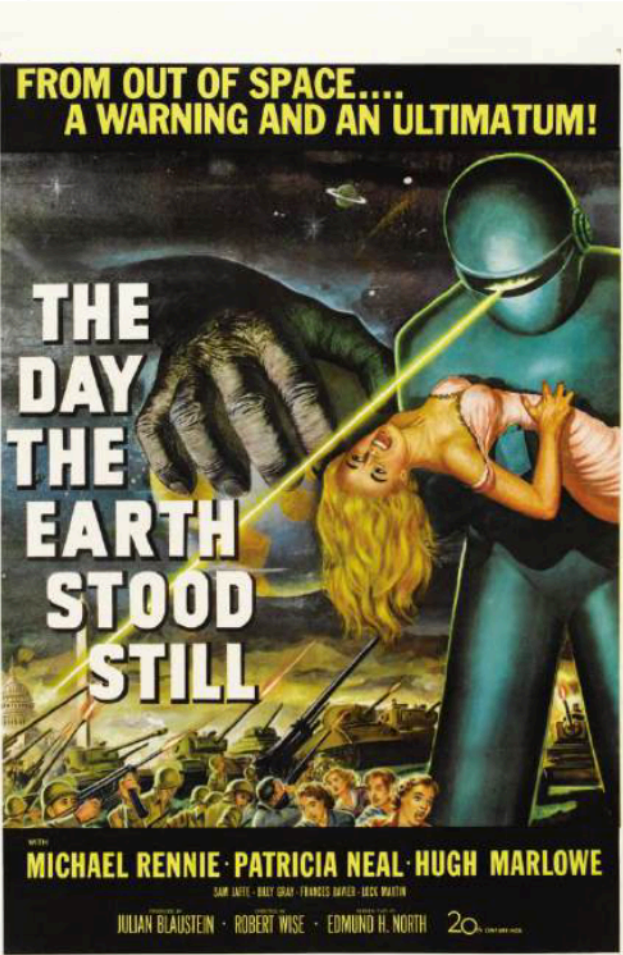
## Objectives

The objectives of this research project was to explore specific correspondences between the film, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and passages from Jung's 1958 book, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky*.

This project was undertaken in the interest not only of exploring these two texts, but also of identifying cultural and phenomenological perspectives on the meaning of UFO sightings, extra-terrestrial life, and planetary politics in the post-nuclear age.

## Methodology

Students performed close readings of passages from the Jung text in small groups and applied Jung's ideas to *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, which they had already seen and extensively analyzed.



## Reference

Jung, C.G. (1958 [1978]). *Flying Saucers: A modern myth of things seen in the skies*. Tr. F.C. Hull. Princeton.

## Results

### Correspondence #1: Collective human dread

Research sub-group: Bookal, Avila, Landowski, Torrens

Jung describes UFO rumors as being "based essentially on an omnipresent emotional foundation, in this case a psychological situation common to all mankind. The basis of this kind of rumor is an emotional tension having its cause in a situation of collective stress or danger" (p. 13).

The film repeatedly displays the anxiety of the crowds of people, whose faces reveal their dread and whose bodies recoil in fear of the unknown. Moreover, the movie insinuates that this fear is not exactly caused by the arrival of the flying saucer but is rather triggered by it. The fear itself goes back to the dysfunction that prevents the world leaders from being able to peaceably assemble to hear Klaatu's speech. The central part of the film consists of Klaatu's attempt (and ultimate failure) to understand human beings' "strange unreasoning attitudes."



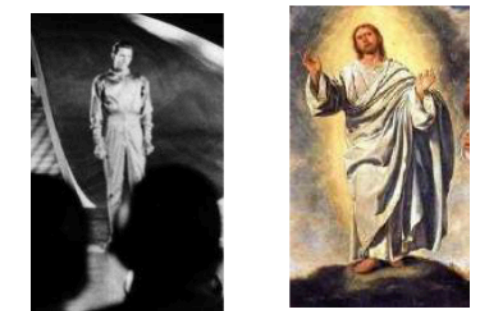
Crowds of humans gawk in their habitual state of xenophobic fear.

### Correspondence #2: The new religion

Research sub-group: Graham, Azucena, Manigault, Walter

Jung: "In the threatening situation in the world today, when people are beginning to see that everything is at stake, the projection-creating fantasy soars beyond the realm of earthly organizations and powers into the heavens, into interstellar space, where the rulers of human fate, the gods, once had their abode in the planets" (p. 14).

The film casts Klaatu the alien as a religious figure, similar to Jesus Christ, who, in the gospel narratives, comes to Earth in good will, makes human beings feel ashamed of their sinful behavior, is killed and resurrected, and ascends to heaven with a promise to return to pass his final judgement. In equating Klaatu with a spiritual figure offering redemption from original sin, the film echoes Jung's thesis that flying saucers are a modern instantiation of longings that have traditionally been expressed in religious terms.



Klaatu and Christ both address the humans before ascending to heaven.

### Correspondence #3: Atomic anxiety

Research sub-group: Ledesma, Figueroa, Martin, Rodriguez

Jung addresses conjectures that "the recent atomic explosions on earth ... had aroused the attention of these very much more advanced dwellers on Mars or Venus" (p. 15).

The reason for Klaatu's visit in the film is that the interplanetary community is aware that Earth has developed both nuclear weapons and space rockets, and their policy is to prevent any species from developing the capacity to harm their neighboring planets. In this way, both the film and Jung suggest a direct causality between the development of nuclear weapons and the arrival of phantasmic space beings, whose role is to defuse the planetary threat posed by nuclear war.

### Correspondence #4: Original Sin

Research sub-group: Samson, Fleming, Pereira

Jung addresses the speculation that "these visitors ... are not at all certain of being well received on earth" (p. 15).

The film verifies Jung's aliens' suspicions by dramatizing how Klaatu's flying saucer, immediately upon landing, is surrounded by tanks and artillery, and how Klaatu is shot immediately as he comes out of his craft and then again, fatally, as part of a systemic "search and destroy" manhunt. Both the rumors Jung describes and the portrait of human behavior depicted in the film serve as coded confessions on the part of mass-consciousness regarding the original sin of human aggressivity.

### Correspondence #5: Technological angels

Research sub-group: Frazier, Giron Marroquin, Ramos, Wilson

Jung: "These space-guests are sometimes idealized figures along the lines of technological angels who are concerned for our welfare" (p. 16).

"Technological angel" is an apt term to describe Klaatu, who descends from heaven with the angel wings of his interstellar spacecraft, communicates through equations in celestial mechanics, dresses in glittery raiment, pities the follies of the human race, brings news of heavenly events beyond the ken of his earthly audience, and offers human beings a path to salvation from both their own sin and from the eternal damnation threatened by the robot Gort, the archangels' wrathful sword.



Klaatu as a "technological angel"

### Correspondence #6: Projection

Research sub-group: Green, Johnson, Rios

Jung considers the coincidence that the "living myth" of flying saucers emerges "at the very time when human fantasy is seriously considering the possibility of space travel and of visiting or even invading other planets. We on our side want to fly to the Moon or Mars, and on their side the inhabitants of other planets in our system, and even of the fixed stars, want to fly to us" (p. 17).

In the same way that Jung explains the impression that UFOs are visiting us as a kind of mirror image of human beings' own aspiration to fly to other planets, Klaatu explains that human's innovation of space travel is one of the reasons why he is coming to earth. As a planetizing technology, space flight suggests the possibility of seeing earth from an "alien" perspective. According to the research sub-group, the militarized response to Klaatu dramatizes "guilt from humanity projected onto a film," and the character of Klaatu reflects the alien's promise to hold a mirror to humanity and show us ourselves as we appear from an external point of view.

### Correspondence #7:

Research sub-group: Khan, Tiffany, Ledger

Jung believed that the round shape of flying saucers indicated that they were variations on the mandala, the "apotropaic circle," the "prehistoric sun-wheel," or "the magic circle," signifying "a modern symbol of order, which organizes and embraces the psychic totality" (p. 20).

Klaatu's flying saucer is, of course, round, and circles of varying sizes also figure prominently in its interior. The symbol of roundness is also reflected in the film's opening sequence, which shows Klaatu's approach to the Earth itself, the roundness of which expresses a sense of totality that transcends the divisiveness and conflict that exists on the planet's surface.



Mandala shapes in the outline and interior of Klaatu's flying saucer

## Conclusions

The correspondence between these two texts suggest an array of interpretive possibilities, listed here in order from more limited and direct to more speculative and far-reaching.

1. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* can be interpreted profitably from a Jungian perspective.
2. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* can be used to illustrate critical points in Jung's analysis of UFO sightings.
3. Both texts triangulate specific aspects of mass-consciousness that prevailed in Europe and North America as post-war populations struggled to emotionally process the implications of emergent technologies and their planetary implications.
4. The mass-cultural phenomenon of UFO sightings can be interpreted as a symptom of global anxieties and fantasies.
5. Other films about UFOs may also be interpreted as reflections of, variations on, and/or departures from the "saviors from the skies" model articulated by these two texts.
6. Popular films can be analyzed productively for insights about socio-cultural reality.