

**Mapping Cultural Auracy:
the sonic politics of *The Day the Earth Stood Still***

by

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Anna Kassabian writes in *Hearing Film* (2001) that “classical Hollywood film music is a semiotic code, and that it can and should be subjected to various semiotic and cultural studies methods, such as discourse analysis and ideology critique” (p. 36). This paper examines the sound of a particular Hollywood film – the B-Grade 1950 science fiction ‘classic’, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) – in order to perform the kind of analysis Kassabian demands – but also to argue that the analysis needs to encompass not only music, but all sonic elements of the film. Further, the paper argues for development of a cultural auracy that will complement studies of verbal and visual literacies in multimodal and multimedia texts.

Background: sound studies

In *Hearing Film* Kassabian maps the development of film music studies, including Philip Tagg’s early work, *Kojak – 50 Seconds of television music* (1979) which categorizes features of film sound and their associated cultural meanings. She distinguishes this work from that of semioticians such as Nattiez (1975) whose work is more broadly discursive. Both of these theorists, however, argued against a more conventional notion of music as purely emotive, transcultural and transhistorical, and not ‘meaningful’ in

the same way as other forms of communication such as writing and visual arts.

Their work, along with the groundbreaking work of feminist musicologists such as Susan McClary (1986), prepared the ground for a wealth of contemporary studies that relate musical practice to social and cultural assumptions. As McClary argued:

... the Mozart piano concerto movement with which we are concerned neither makes up its own rules nor derives them from some abstract, absolute, transcendental source. Rather it depends heavily on conventions of eighteenth-century harmonic syntax, formal procedure, genre type, rhythmic propriety, gestural vocabulary, and associations. All of these conventions have histories: social histories marked with national, economic, class and gender – that is, political – interests. (McClary, 1986: 53)

Many recent semiotic theorists of music deploy categories and concepts derived from linguistic and structuralist analysis to explore the relationship between syntactical and other auditory properties of music and its social and cultural meanings (Monelle, 1992; Tarasti, 1994, 1995, 2002; Cumming, 2000; Reiner, 2000).

In film studies this work of relating music to meanings is recorded in texts such as Weis and Belton (1985), Claudia Gorbmann (1987), Bordwell and Thompson (1993), Michael Chion (1994, 1999) and, more recently, Anna Kassabian (2001). All address the strategies by which film music relates to audiences – how it incorporates the viewer into the narrative and its assumptions. Importantly, some of this work moves beyond music to sound, including Chion's *The Voice in Cinema* (1999), which recalls Kaja Silverman's earlier book, *The Acoustic Mirror* (1987), a study of the meanings of the female voice in film, and the collection edited by Larry Sider, Diane Freeman and Jerry Sider, *Soundscape: The School of Sound Lectures 1998-2001* (2003) that anthologizes work by theorists, composers and sound designers.

Many recent cultural studies of music have focused on its role in everyday life: for example, Michael Bull's study of the uses of personal stereos in *Sounding Out the City* (2000) and Tia DeNora's *Music in Everyday Life* (2000). Yet there is also a continuing interest in the relationship between specific sonic features and both the meanings they convey and the viewing positions they create – work that critically complements the

everyday life studies. Theo van Leeuwen's work (e.g. 1989, 1999) maps the acculturated meanings of music (and other kinds of sound) in television and film. Van Leeuwen's work, particularly the recent study, *Speech, Music, Sound* (1999) relates specific sonic elements to the meanings they carry for an audience – creating a kind of acoustic grammar.

In analyzing the sound of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* this paper engages a similar set of interests to van Leeuwen, attempting to locate the ways in which sonic features of this text constitute specific discourses for viewers. These discourses are constituted by particular sounds in themselves, by the interplay of sounds with other textual features, and by mobilising intertextual sonic (and other) references. In a sense, then, the paper develops a sonic or acoustic literacy – a cultural auracy – that is not unlike the verbal and visual literacies that guide our understanding and analysis of the words and visuals of film and other forms of multimedia text.

Background and cultural politics

The Day the Earth Stood Still (DESS) is a science fiction 'classic'. It was released in 1951 during the 'Golden Age' of science fiction film production. Along with many other films of this period –

Forbidden Planet (1956), *The Thing* (1951), *War of the Worlds* (1953), *Earth vs The Flying Saucers* (1956), *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (1958), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) – it is considered Cold War fiction. In these movies attacks from aliens are now seen as representations of xenophobic U.S. foreign policy; aliens are not to be trusted, most importantly because they sometimes attack from within, corrupting the body politic – as in *I Married a Monster from Outer Space*.

DESS is an unusual movie for the period; firstly, because its major alien figure, Klaatu (Michael Rennie) is presented not as combative and imperialistic but as peace-making. It is the conflict-ridden Earth that is presented as the potential predator. And secondly, because of the way the romantic sub-plot is resolved (further on this below).

In the movie Klaatu comes to Earth on a mission from a Federation of space-traveling worlds.



Fig.1: The spaceship in a Washington park, surrounded by armed troops and curious crowds¹

Recognizing that earth has now developed the capacity for space travel and for massive destruction (a reference to the atomic bomb), the Federation has come to warn the planet that they must stop using their technology to wage war as other planets foresee the possibility that they may take this martial approach to the resolution of difference into space. Instead they are invited to join the Federation, membership of which involves acceptance of an intergalactic police force of robots, of which Gort (Lock Martin), Klaatu's travel companion is the representative. These robots have the power to destroy an entire planet if it threatens the peace of others.

¹ All of the images appearing in the paper can be viewed at http://www.dvdmaniacs.net/Reviews/A-D/day_earth_stood_still.html

In the story Klaatu is shot when he first lands on Earth and taken to a military hospital where he tells the US Secretary of State about his mission and asks him to arrange a meeting of all Earth's Heads of State. Realising that he isn't getting anywhere with politicians, Klaatu clandestinely leaves the hospital and goes to stay in a boarding house in Washington in order to learn more about the inhabitants of Earth. There he encounters a young widow, Mrs Benson (Patricia Neal) and her son, Bobby (Billy Gray) with whom a number of significant exchanges take place. In one episode, Bobby takes Klaatu, now known as Mr Carpenter (a name subsequently interpreted as a reference to Christ, the carpenter) to Arlington Cemetery and then to the Lincoln Memorial, both of which are sites for a dialogue about ethics between the two – about the nature of war and the meaning of freedom. Klaatu/Carpenter also visits a famous scientist, Professor Barnhardt (Sam Jaffe), who offers to arrange a gathering of 'great minds' to whom Klaatu might speak, in place of the useless politicians who cannot even agree on a venue for a meeting. To make clear the importance of his visit to Earth Klaatu arranges a great display of power, which is that all electricity, except that of essential services (such as transport (planes in flight) and medical

(life-saving devices)), stops for half an hour – the day the Earth stood still.

Unfortunately, the Earth (represented by the U.S.) continues to act with the paranoia that has characterized it to date. With the help of Mrs Benson's jealous fiancée, Tom Stevens (Hugh Marlowe) Klaatu is tracked down and again shot, and only Mrs Benson's intervention (requested by Klaatu) saves Earth from destruction. Klaatu dies but is resuscitated (resurrected) by Gort; then appears briefly to warn Earth that, unless its nations can learn to work together, they face annihilation. He leaves after a caressing wave to Mrs Benson.

The politics of the movie is quite complex. It is a Cold War movie that satirizes the paranoia of the McCarthyist² U.S., yet it employs

² The reference here is to the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings conducted by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The Committee had been set up in the late 1930s to investigate extreme political activity (left-wing and right-wing) in the U.S., but under McCarthy's chairmanship in the 1940s came to focus on left wing thought and activity, which it labelled as communist. One particular focus for the Committee was Hollywood and its movie industry, which McCarthy and others saw as a means for the dissemination of left-wing – and, therefore, un-American – values and ideas. In the late 1940s the HUAC interrogated movie industry workers, some of whom such as playwright, Bertolt Brecht subsequently left the country; others such as the Hollywood Ten (a group of nine screenwriters and one director) refused to answer the HUAC's questions and were jailed for contempt. The Ten were later blacklisted by the Hollywood establishment. The problems many associated with the HUAC were both its suppression of non-mainstream political ideas and its demand that citizens should inform on one another. It was seen as generating an atmosphere of fear – of (political) difference, and of paranoia – either of appearing to be different (and therefore being informed on) or that fellow-citizens may be different from oneself. This combination of fear and paranoia described the political environment of many western countries during the Cold War, many of which engaged in their own forms of

the paranoia-making threat of massive weaponry (which arguably produced the McCarthyism in the first place) to argue its point. The sexual politics of the movie is also unusual for the time. Klaatu and Mrs Benson are clearly very fond of each other, but they don't pair off at the end of the movie³. Loyalty to Klaatu, and the considered ethical choice involved in that loyalty, ends the relationship between Mrs Benson and her fiancée; yet she asks nothing of Klaatu. For 1950s science fiction film, she seems a remarkably autonomous and courageous woman (though this may be an artefact of later readings of the movies, see Hawkins (2001)). Nevertheless, the conventions of romance that are usually observed in '50s film, including '50s SF film, are contravened. Klaatu leaves alone; Mrs Benson and Bobby stay alone. The Cold War politics and the sexual politics of the film reinforce one another. The denial of desire that we see in the separation of Klaatu and Mrs Benson signifies a world in which paranoid politics echoes a similar separation between the peoples of the world.

McCarthyism (e.g. in the U.K. this involved having universities inform on the political leanings of students (only Cambridge refused) and the blacklisting of left-wing writers such as Jack Lindsay).

³ The impact of this plot choice can be seen by comparison with the movie, *Stranger from Venus* (1954) that is basically a re-make of *DESS* in which the love affair between the alien and the earth-woman (again portrayed by Patricia Neal) is pursued conventionally.

So *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, directed by Robert Wise and written by Edmund H. North (based on a short story by Harry Bates), can be read as a critique of U.S. Cold War politics and the paranoia that fuelled it and that it generated. Specifically, it reads as a rejection of the practices we now associate with McCarthyism – a paranoid and violent rejection of difference.

This paper traces the ways in which the sound of the film generates the politics of its narrative. Key features of the sound design will be considered, including the use of theremins in the score composed by Bernard Herrmann, the score itself, the sonic quality of actors' voices, and the sound effects that constitute the everyday life of the Cold War U.S. under the stress of (alien) invasion.

The Theremin

The score of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is remembered now for two reasons: that it was part of the oeuvre of composer, Bernard Herrmann, and because it used the theremin, the forerunner of the Moog synthesizer.

The theremin was invented in 1919 by a Russian scientist, Lev Termen (later changed to Leon Theremin)⁴ and involves an electronic array that is 'played' by an operator waving her/his hands above it. It is characteristically high in pitch and timbre. Originally the theremin was played in classical music concerts, as part of a symphony orchestra, by aficionados such as Clara Rockmore⁵ in whose hands the theremin was said to sound like "a blend of the violin and the human voice"⁶. So, rather than opening up the potential for a new and different form of musical experience and challenging the definition of music itself, the theremin was worked into the classical repertoire, its sonic potential contained by the discourse of classical music.

From the late 1930s, however, the theremin found another use, in the soundtracks to Hollywood films. One of its most notable early uses was in Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), described by Phil Hayward as "one of Hollywood's first (conscious!) attempts to employ and represent aspects of Freudian theories" (Hayward,

⁴ See the history of the theremin at the following web sites: <http://www.interfold.com/rabit/Theremin.com>, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theremin>, <http://www.theremin.info/>, <http://www.thereminworld.com/learn.asp>

⁵ See the following web sites concerning Clara Rockmore: <http://www.thereminvox.com/article/articleview/21/1/22/>, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clara_Rockmore,

⁶ "Rockmore, as a classically-trained musician, used it to perform beautiful renditions of conventional classical works. Under her control, the Theremin sounded like a blend of the violin and the human voice." Viewed at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clara_Rockmore.

1997). Hayward also notes its use in Billy Wilder's *The Lost Weekend* (1945) to signify the "lure of alcohol as a specific, malignant force" (Hayward, 1997). In these uses the theremin's capacity to mimic the sound of a scream – particularly, the ululating sound of a person caught in the grip of a panic attack – is used to great effect, to represent sonically a state of emotional crisis and/or the reason for that crisis.

During the late 1940s and '50s the theremin was also used in science fiction films to represent other-worldliness, the sound of outer space. Here its combination of high pitch and vibrato is deployed to signify advanced technology, referencing as it does the 'unnatural' sounds of machine technology (cf, van Leeuwen, 1999: 135). In movies such as *Rocketship X-M* (1950), *It Came from Outer Space* (1953) and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* the sound of the theremin introduces an alien into our midst; the theremin sonically represents difference. This second usage may seem very different from the first, however, as the politics of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* demonstrates, they are related. The hysteria created by the xenophobic politics of the post-War period, itself a reaction to the development of the atomic bomb and its threat of total annihilation, is sonically enacted in the theremin's

representation of difference – or perhaps, more correctly, of otherness. For what the use of the theremin in these movies signifies is the emotional crisis – the panic – caused by the failure to accept difference (other-worldly or earthly) and its reduction to a negative and degraded form of the known, the other. In other words, the theremin enacts its own sonic politics, signifying the irrational panic created and manipulated by the Cold War politics of the 1940s and '50s – the period during which these films were made.

The maestro, Bernard Herrmann

As noted earlier, the other reason for the fame of the film's score is that it was part of the portfolio of Bernard Herrmann. Today Herrmann's name is most closely associated with the director, Alfred Hitchcock though he also worked on many other film projects, including the soundtrack to *Citizen Kane* (1941), *The Ghost and Mrs Muir* (1947), the original *Cape Fear* (1962), *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Obsession* (1976), as well as music for episodes of *The Twilight Zone* (1959⁷). With Hitchcock as director Herrmann composed the scores for *The Trouble with Harry* (1955), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956),

⁷ Herrmann wrote the music for a number of *Twilight Zone* episodes, including Season One episodes, "The Lonely" (31 November 1959) and "Walking Distance" (30 October 1959).

Vertigo (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), and, perhaps the most famous, *Psycho* (1960).

As all of these films indicate, Herrmann was a master at the creation of suspense; the knife attack theme from *Psycho* is one of the iconic moments in the history of the film score. Paul Tonks notes that, for *Psycho*, by using only the string section of an orchestra, Herrmann composed a soundtrack sonically consonant with Hitchcock's choice to film the movie in black and white (Tonks, 2001: 33). In other words, Herrmann was able to gauge the emotional requirement of a score with great precision and deliver an appropriate sonic response. This is evident not only in the scores that engage with extreme emotions of panic or terror, but also in the quirky score for the black comedy, *The Trouble with Harry* and in the cerebral romance of the score for *The Ghost and Mrs Muir*.

Herrmann's scores are also characterized by their sparseness. As composer and theorist, John Morgan notes, "...too often music is considered wallpaper rather than a creative element in movies." By contrast, Herrmann's aim was, he argued, to "stimulate

appreciation of, and ... pride in life.” (Luchs, 1998, on-line⁸) In other words, Herrmann’s music is not simply background (wallpaper) to the narrative, nor does it simply provide an emotional dimension to the plot; it is an essential narrative element that has as much to do with the meaning potential of the film as the visuals or the script. Further, the minimalism of his scores highlights their sonic contributions to both the narrative and the politics of the films.

In *The Day the Earth Stood Still* Herrmann’s score is heard at moments of both emotional intensity and other-worldliness. The richest section of this score is the opening overture, which plays over the title sequence to the film. This is a full orchestral score, prominently featuring piano and brass instruments along with the eerie-sounding theremins. The emotional response to this sequence – anticipation at the beginning of a story (extra-diegetic), intrigue and concern as the journey to Earth is identified (diegetic) – is imbricated with the other-worldliness of the events portrayed (the movement through space). Already, then, the score develops a politics; that the other-worldly is associated primarily with

⁸ Kurt Luchs, “Garden of Evil: An Interview with John Morgan” (May 1998): viewed at http://www.uib.no/herrmann/articles/interview_morgan001/

feelings of intrigue and concern (though there are also indications of wonder).

This same combination continues through the opening scenes of the movie, as the spaceship is tracked moving through Earth's atmosphere. In these scenes the score resolves into the staccato piano introduced in the opening movement. Here what van Leeuwen calls the 'disjunctive articulation of the melodic phrase' and which he associates with 'the idea of a lively and energetic approach, or a bold and forceful attack' (1999: 109-10) functions as a sonic representation of 'butterflies in the stomach' – acoustic anxiety.



Fig.2: Communication officers relay news of the spaceship's arrival

Visually, we move from a view of the ocean to U.S. and British radar stations whose attendants note the passage of the spaceship, buildings in India and a Calcutta broadcaster (his

microphone labelled 'Calcutta Radio') reading a report (apparently about the spaceship), people in a French village gathered around a radio listening to a broadcast (again, apparently about the spaceship), a B.B.C. broadcaster reading a report of the unidentified craft, a U.S. broadcaster identifying himself as Elmer Davis (himself) who also acknowledges the craft, followed by a series of images of people in their everyday lives all apparently listening to radio broadcasts of this event – a taxi-driver and his woman passenger, a petrol pump attendant and the woman whose car he is filling, men in a barbershop, a group on a porch, men in a pool hall, a group outside a radio shop, and finally a Washington broadcaster who identifies himself as H.V. Kaltenborn (himself) who introduces a sequence of images of Washington and its people – tourists and locals enjoying the spring weather. Herrmann's score signifies the increasing sense of concern as the spaceship becomes visible across the globe. And implicit in this concern – sonically represented by the staccato piano – is the xenophobia that soon becomes apparent in the treatment of the visitor.

This awareness of xenophobia is reinforced in the script when a television reporter, Drew Pearson (himself) makes a special broadcast to acknowledge the appearance of the spaceship:

... We bring you this special radio television broadcast in order to give you the very latest information on an amazing phenomenon – the arrival of a spaceship in Washington. Government and Defence Department officials are concerned by reports of panic in several large Eastern cities. I'm authorized to assure you that so far there is no reasonable cause for alarm. The rumours of invading armies and mass destruction are based on hysteria and are absolutely false. I repeat, these rumours are absolutely false.

So the script aligns the appearance of the spaceship with panic and hysteria, generated by rumours. Further, in the invention of rumours familiar from Earth mythology/history (invading armies, mass destruction), it identifies the transformation of difference (unknown) into otherness (known). Herrmann's score also interrelates these two responses – hysteria and panic with the perception of difference – and reinforces the narrative point that the identification of this perception and affect is the result of a

particular kind of politics, marked by xenophobia. Herrmann's score prefixes this verbal exposition of McCarthyist paranoia, and continues to reinforce this critical discourse throughout the film.

As noted earlier, Herrmann's score is minimalist and much of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* has no musical component, so the scored scenes are very striking. For example, when the spaceship first opens, we hear the theme we come to associate with Klaatu – theremin and brass (trumpet and tuba), relatively high in pitch and timbre, but with a bass undertone. Schafer (1986) writes that the instruments used to signify the sublime or the superhuman are those that lie outside the range of the human voice: "This is most evident in church music, where the extremely high and low notes of the church organ can be used to suggest the voices of God and the celestial beings." (p. 122) Also, as van Leeuwen (among others) has noted, pitch is highly gendered with women using lower pitch and men higher pitch, combined with loudness, to assert dominance. In both cases, however, it is the lower pitch that is the unmarked case for dominance, with its implicit suggestion of threat: "... low voices are often seen as threatening and dangerous. In operas the tenor is the hero, the bass or baritone the villain. Very low, rumbling sound effects can be

particularly ominous” (van Leeuwen, 1999: 108) So the Klaatu theme combines the ethereal, celestial and God-like – all of which are beneficent, with the power and potential threat that accompanies that non-human divinity.



Fig.3: Klaatu’s (Michael Rennie) first appearance outside the spaceship

And interestingly, the bass is heard both with visuals of Klaatu and the massed Earth (U.S.) military, in both cases signifying this combination of power and threat. After one of the soldiers panics and shoots Klaatu, however, we hear the Gort theme – trumpet and bass drum, deep bass sounds signifying power and potential menace (the judgmental God in ecclesiastical music), and theremins that locate the threat as alien. In a sense Gort’s theme is the obverse of Klaatu’s, emphasizing his power and potential threat, along with his alienness; whereas for Klaatu, the prominence of higher pitch sounds (theremin and brass) opened

up the potential for his non-humanness to be interpreted as cerebral and/or celestial.

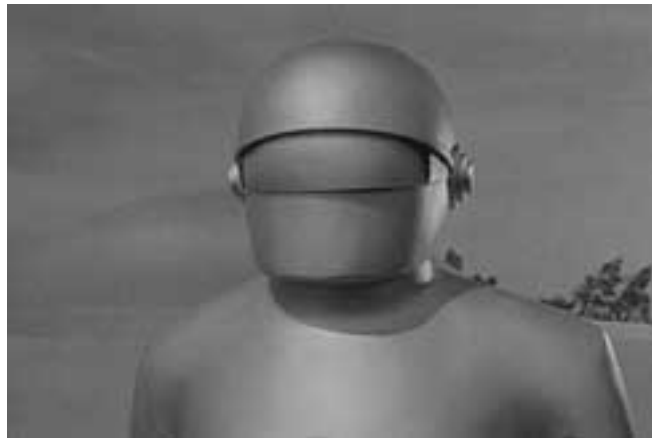


Fig.4: Gort (Lock Martin) outside the spaceship

Herrmann uses the contrast between the two – Klaatu’s cerebral, perhaps spiritual theme echoed in the Christ-like persona he assumes in the story, and Gort’s uncompromising threat – to spell out the alternatives for Earth in the story. The people of Earth can either adopt the peaceful, even serene, manner of Klaatu or they can continue their conflict, in which case they will have to deal with Gort – which is to say, with ultimately uncontrollable force that is capable of destroying the planet.

Politically, this traces an ambiguity in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* that remains unresolved, which is that Klaatu acknowledges that the interplanetary peace is maintained by the threat of massive,

destructive force. This is uncomfortably like Reagan's Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) scenario, except that the force is not held by individual participants but by an impartial (non-human) third party, the robot police.

Sonically, Herrmann's Klaatu and Gort themes enact this contradiction. The Klaatu theme, with its other-worldly tones, constitutes him as not only alien, but transcendent. This is a tonality we have learned, culturally and intertextually, to associate with spirituality and the 'higher' feelings (Schafer, 1986: 122). In Kassabian's terms, this is an aspect of music's (not only Hollywood music's) 'semiotic code'. Klaatu's message and the way of life he represents are thereby constituted musically/sonically as spiritually and ethically superior/advanced. The only time music associated with Earth has anything like this spirituality is the minimalist minor pitch trumpet scoring that accompanies Klaatu's discussion about war with Bobby at the Arlington Cemetery, where, we learn, Bobby's father is buried. This simple modulation between two notes in a minor scale signifies the absolute reverse of the triumphalism that is usually associated with the major scale of a military brass band. With this simple choice, the score signifies not only Bobby's private sorrow at the loss of his father, but also the

public or social tragedy of the cost of military conflict (even when it results in triumph), which is Klaatu's focus.

By contrast, the Gort theme encodes the threat of ultimate power through sounds conventionally associated in Western music with menace or absolute judgmental authority – the deep bass (of war) drums, overlaid with the theremins that locate this force as beyond Earthly control. And here again Herrmann's score encodes the political ambiguity of the narrative: it may be that Earth is being offered an opportunity to live in peace (sonically identified with Klaatu), but it does so under the threat of destruction (sonically, Gort). In other words, the narrative does not offer the hope of a peace so profound that it eradicates the need for force.

Alternatively, however, we may read this as a deconstructive statement of Earth politics: that the likely outcome of its current (Cold War) politics is the destruction of the planet. So Gort represents the horror of the nuclear conflagration that seemed the next step in the Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union. Sonically, this destructive power is articulated in the Gort theme, which is the sound of the world's end. That is, the theremin that, throughout the film, signifies both difference and the 'othering' that

is the Cold War (West and Soviet) response to difference, is used in the Gort theme to identify the logical end to this xenophobic politics – absolute destruction. In the words of Klaatu’s final speech: “This Earth of yours will be reduced to a burnt out cinder.” (“Klaatu’s Speech”: on-line source)

As noted earlier, Herrmann’s score is minimal and accompanies significant plot and narrative events⁹. Most of these incidents involve either the Klaatu or Gort theme (or both), used to enact sonically the film’s explication of Cold War politics. In these scenes the score articulates the anxiety and fear generated less by actual aliens than by rumours about aliens – whether those aliens are from another planet or, as one of the boarding-house occupants, Mrs Barley (Frances Bavier) opines, “ come[s] from right here on earth – and you know where I mean.” In other scenes the score has an equally significant role. For example, the plaintive trumpet solo at the Arlington Cemetery musically communicates the sorrow of loss – personal and social – realized in those thousands of graves. This scoring, of course, recalls the

⁹ Incidents include: the arrival of the spaceship, the appearance of Klaatu, Gort’s appearance after Klaatu is shot, Klaatu’s discussions with Bobby about war and freedom at Arlington and at the Lincoln Memorial, Bobby’s nocturnal pursuit of Klaatu and discovery of his identity, Klaatu’s visit to the spaceship, the immobilization of Earth, Gort’s reactivation after Klaatu is shot and killed, the final scenes where Klaatu takes his leave.

trumpet solo, “The Last Post” traditionally played at military funerals; however, it is more than simply referential. The trumpet’s high pitch reflects the heightened affect of Bobby’s childish tenor voice as he sonically conveys his distress at his father’s death. The dialogue between Klaatu and Bobby can be understood from the pitch contours of their dialogue, even without the script. Bobby’s vocal distress and its musical complement is paralleled by the raised pitch of Klaatu’s voice as he expresses his wonder and dismay at so many deaths caused by war. Klaatu’s voice then returns to its usual deep rich timbre, when he explains to Bobby that, on his planet, there are no wars. The acoustic resolution of the exchange on Klaatu’s low (pitch) warm (timbre) voice locates the ethical judgment with Klaatu and his peaceful, anti-militaristic stance. So, in this example, Herrmann’s score deploys intertextual reference (to the funeral music) and to the grieving human voice (Bobby) to constitute an argument against militarism (Klaatu).

The voices of the actors are another element of the sound of the film, which, along with the special sound effects and the everyday sounds, are part of the sonic meaning potential of the film. Each of these sonic elements contributes to the story, to the film narrative, and to the politics that motivates it. They, like the score, make

meaning by reference to a “semiotic code” that viewers learn through their hours of film viewing.

Voices

Human voices dominate the opening scenes of the movie – broadcast voices speaking in a variety of languages and accents. The juxtaposition of the agitated (staccato) piano of the score and the broadcast voices (Indian, French, British, American) relates the two sonically and politically. The broadcast voices may be read as simply articulating the same urgency as the score (so that the relationship between the two is redundant) or they may be implicated in the production of this agitation (so their relationship is cumulative). Later scenes suggest the latter is more usual; Herrmann’s score rarely plays a redundant role in a script. Which, at the same time, confirms the function of the voices – even those whose words are not comprehensible by an English-speaking audience – in generating a narrative, and politics, critical of that paranoia.

As noted above, soon after the arrival of the spacecraft and its passengers, Klaatu is shot and taken to a military hospital. This is where we first clearly see him (before this his face has been

covered by a helmet) and hear him in conversation with others. Klaatu's voice is marked by his cultivated accent, low pitch and resonant (non-nasal) timbre. His accent is more 'English' than that of the others heard in these scenes – the doctors, soldiers, and the politician (Secretary of State, Harley). In terms of its semiotic coding, an Anglicised accent in the 1950s typically signified intellectual ability, social sophistication and often ethical superiority. It was the accent affected by the upper middle classes of all former English colonies; characters with this accent were typically the heroes of the tale. So Klaatu is sonically coded as hero, even before his role in the story is clear.

When Klaatu leaves the hospital, looking for accommodation, his journey is constituted by a series of overlapping radio broadcasts. Again the sound of voices constitutes both the narrative and its politics, as the voices vary in all of the sonic qualities – and their associated meanings – described by van Leeuwen: “(i) *tension*, (ii) *roughness*, (iii) *breathiness*, (iv) *loudness*, (v) *pitch register*, (vi) *vibrato* and (vii) *nasality*” (1999: 140). For example, we hear a man's voice – not tense or rough or breathy or unnecessarily loud, low in pitch and vibrato and non-nasal – articulating a controlled, authoritative response. We also hear a male voice that carries

many of the markers of panic – tense, rough, breathy, loud, higher in pitch than the authoritative masculine, with vibrato and nasality – that signify fear, anxiety, potential panic.¹⁰ This is followed by another male voice, which is controlled, smooth, low in pitch and vibrato and non-nasal – sonically reiterating the measured calm of the first voice – and which accompanies Klaatu’s entry into the boarding-house where he meets local people. When he enters the house, all of the inhabitants are grouped around the television from which we hear the authoritative male voice of Drew Pearson. Michel Chion writes that “*the presence of a human voice structures the sonic space that contains it.*” (Chion, 1999: 5; italics in original). So Klaatu’s sonic space is structured not by the ambient noises of his walk through the city, but by those broadcast voices that create the forward movement of the narrative (is Klaatu walking into danger?) and its politics (how will Klaatu/the reasonable man resolve the hysteria created by xenophobic/Cold War politics?).

Chion also writes that the voice is implicated with notions of boundaries, of limits: “[t]he voice has to do with boundaries and shores.” (Chion, 1999: 114) – an understanding that he refers to Denis Vasse’s work on the fetus’s perception of sound as

¹⁰ Note that while the film does play with the gender roles of that time, sonically the voices of the actors tend to reproduce quite conventional genderings and relationships.

“inextricably linked with the coenesthetic sensations of a tension and a boundary that are not yet those of skin, of tactility.” (Vasse quoted in Chion, 1999: 114) Individual voices identify the boundaries of the individual being¹¹. So Klaatu’s voice identifies him as a character, with his specific qualities or characteristics that can be identified semiotically, as described above. The other speaking characters in the film are similarly located by their voices; that is, can be identified by the semiotic qualities of their voices as having a particular role in the narrative, and the politics, of the film. However, apart from the brief opening pastiche of broadcasters around the world, most of the broadcasts we hear are disembodied; only Drew Pearson is consistently shown (embodied) making television broadcasts.

Chion writes of the voice in film that does not have a body, the *acousmêtre*, that this is often an omniscient, all-knowing voice – the voice-over that determines and/or interprets the narrative. In this scene we have a series of acousmatic voices (voices without bodies) that, through their overlaps, *create* boundaries – and those

¹¹ Chion reminds us that it is important not to unreflexively associate voices and characters/actors, though the realist narrative deployed by most films encourages this kind of unthinking identification or naturalization of the voice. He notes that the dubbing of voices from one language to another demonstrates the provisional nature of these associations as one actor may be dubbed by a number of different voices. Only iconic actors such as Sean Connery are consistently dubbed by the same voice.

boundaries are not only sonic, but also semic. While one, solitary broadcast (acousmatic) voice might seem omniscient or all-knowing, the accumulation of broadcast voices deconstructs that perceived omniscience and, instead, identifies the voices as specific and located (spatiotemporally and politically). So this overlapping of bodiless, faceless voices operates as a metaphor for the interweave of fears, suspicions, lies and threats that constitutes Cold War politics with its xenophobic boundary-marking. Klaatu's journey through the city is a journey into and through that politics and its delimiting spatiality.

This interrogation of xenophobia continues at the boarding-house:



Fig.5: Klaatu (Michael Rennie: far right) next to Mrs Benson (Patricia Neal) at the boarding-house

Klaatu's difference is noted soon after his arrival when the landlady, Mrs Crockett says to Klaatu/Mr Carpenter: "You're a

long way from home, aren't you, Mr Carpenter?." For just a moment the audience, along with Klaatu, suspects he has been identified. But to Klaatu's query, "How did you know?" Mrs Crockett answers: "I can tell a New England accent a mile away." This exchange not only identifies Klaatu as not local, as different, but also sonically locates his difference – as upper middle class and, therefore, semiotically coded as intellectually, culturally and morally superior.

This sonic classing of Klaatu reveals simultaneously the meanings associated with this upper middle class positioning. Sonically, Klaatu's voice has already been noted as unstressed and in control, smooth, non-breathy, not loud, low in pitch, firm and non-nasal – signifying authority, control, ease, dominant or normative masculinity. Which are simultaneously the acculturated attributes of an upper middle class man.

Vocally the character most like Klaatu is Mrs Benson. Though her accent is not as cultivated as his, her low, husky voice differentiates her from the other women in the cast, whose voices are more conventionally high in pitch and vibrato. In fact, Mrs Benson's voice is deeper and more sonorous than that of most of

the men, including her fiancée. Mrs Benson's voice has a certain tension, though for her this tends to signify self-control (whereas in a man it may suggest lack of authority); it is smooth, breathy or husky, low in pitch and vibrato, and non-nasal – which, in a female voice, signify assertiveness, self-possession and sensuality. In van Leeuwen's terms, Mrs Benson's voice identifies her with "the 'dangerous woman' stereotype" (van Leeuwen, 1999: 134), which predicts the unconventional role she subsequently plays.

Vocally, then, Mrs Benson is identified with Klaatu. Both are sonically located as self-possessed and authoritative, though their spheres of influence are, at first glance, very different (global, domestic). Yet, perhaps one of the most subversive features of the gendering of this narrative, is that Mrs Benson's influence extends from the domestic, where she has been located (widow with child and fiancée), to the global when she chooses to assist Klaatu in his quest to ensure world peace rather than supporting her fiancée (who betrays Klaatu to the military). And it is this dissident move beyond the domestic, from the private to the public sphere, which positions Mrs Benson as 'dangerous' in terms of conventional gendering. This action mirrors Klaatu's own decision to base his decision about the future of Earth by immersing itself in

the everyday (domestic) lives of its inhabitants; for him, too, the private and public spheres are intertwined. This reintegration of public and private – the domestic and political worlds of the Cold War era – place them outside the hysterica of their world –the diegetic world of the text, which is also the Cold War world of the 1950s.

The other character of particular vocal interest is Gort, the robot who is mute. Chion writes of the mute that he, like the acousmêtre, challenges the notion of boundaries; the mute, too, can appear omniscient because his/her voicelessness does not allow her/him to be located.

The mute character elicits *doubt* regarding what he knows and can do (and also regarding the knowledge and powers of others), and this factor defines his position in the narrative structure. There is uncertainty about boundaries. Bodies without voices, as well as voices without bodies, similarly seem to have no clear parameters. (Chion, 1999: 97-8)

Gort's mute resistance to the military and scientists who are attempting to dismantle him situate him outside their control. They

have no physical access to him, certainly; but more than this, Gort signifies power outside human control. He is what humans unleash on themselves if they cannot work together.

Chion also notes a significant difference between the mute and the acousmètre, which is that the mute does not appear alone; the significance of the mute is only clear in the context of the voices around him. This context gives him his power:

He's rarely the protagonist or the crux of the plot; most often he's a secondary character, marginal and tangential, but also somehow positioned intimately close to the heart of the mystery. ... The mute is considered the guardian of the secret, and we are accustomed to him serving in this way. So the presence of a mute character clues us in to the fact that there is a secret. (Chion, 1999: 96)

In *The Day the Earth Stood Still* Gort represents the 'secret' of nuclear devastation: "This world of yours ... reduced to a burnt out cinder." And, as Gort's non-specificity indicates, this is not a devastation confined to one state or country or continent; it cannot be defined and confined. But Gort may also represent another kind of non-specific danger – the threat to the social body

generated by the culture of secrecy and of fear associated with inward-turning, xenophobic politics. The two threats are not unrelated, of course. It was the threat of mutual nuclear destruction that fuelled the paranoia of the Cold War, a paranoia that erupted in the body of the state as a cancer of mistrust and fear. This affliction affected both major powers of the Cold War – the United States and the U.S.S.R. – each of which developed its own secret service (C.I.A., K.G.B.), its own regimes of popular control, its own politics of fear. Gort's silence is a mute indictment of these 'secret' state apparatuses and the methods of control they deploy which, his presence suggests, are as destructive as the weaponry that enforce them.

Chion described voice as “the first of special effects” (Chion, 1999: 169) and this analysis of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* attests to the power of voice to make meanings, irrespective of the words spoken (or not) by a character. DESS is particularly concerned with the politics of fear, as Klaatu/Mr Carpenter explains to a reporter interviewing people at the spaceship landing site: “I am fearful when I see people substituting fear for reason....”



Fig.6: Klaatu (Michael Rennie) and Bobby (Billy Gray) at the landing site, where they are approached by a outside broadcast reporter

In the Cold War that fear was expressed by a plethora of voices, each more hysterical or strident than the last, predicting the takeover of the state by the enemy – either from outside or, more worryingly, from within. In the latter case, and this was the motivation behind the infamous House Un-American Activities Committee hearings chaired by Senator Joseph McCarthy, the state invited its citizens to inform on each other – often in order to prevent their own prosecution¹². The babel of accusatory voices that constituted this practice is echoed in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* by the broadcast voices that form a vocal mesh for the film. These are voices without bodies, but not voices without politics. They, like Gort, represent the suffusion of the social body by xenophobic fear that can be manipulated against those who are

¹² Refer to footnote 1

different – both inside and outside the state boundaries. Furthermore, it is clear by their enunciation and volume (as well as context) that these voices are mediated, which locates the role of the media in the politics of the Cold War¹³. So *The Day the Earth Stood Still* uses the juxtaposition and overlapping of voices, along with ostensible voice qualities, to deconstruct the practice of xenophobia.

The film also uses specific properties of voices to constitute (socially, culturally) the characters who enact the film narrative. As noted above, the conventional associations (semiotic codes) of qualities such as pitch and timbre are mobilized to indicate that some characters – Klaatu, Mrs Benson, and, we might add here, the broadcaster Drew Pearson – are rational beings who resist the xenophobia, and related hysteria, of the citizens of Washington – and, by implication, of the U.S.A. and other western societies. These characters are identified as positive forces whose role in the narrative is to reveal the negative forces that threaten their world. Gort's silence, on the other hand, signifies the consequence of the failure to deal with these negative forces – the destruction of their (way of) life.

¹³ The fact that all the broadcasters are played by themselves, rather than by actors, reinforces the film's engagement with the role and power of the media.

As noted earlier, the sound of the film includes other sonic features, such as special sound effects and everyday, ambient sounds. Again, these sounds are an essential part of the soundscape of the film and create particular meanings for the text. They, too, are essential to its politics.

Sound effects

The special sound effects of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* include the sound of the spaceship and of Gort's laser, which establish the alien nature of the visitors. Otherwise, much of the sound is ambient noise, the sound of everyday life, which in Cold War Washington includes the noise of military vehicles, along with the radio and television broadcasts that spread the news of the spaceship's arrival and conjecture about its purpose. These sonic elements have a diegetic function in promoting the development of the story, enhancing viewer identification with the people frightened by the arrival of the alien and enabling a classic realist reading of the *mise-en-scene*. However, they achieve more than simple identification. The choice of sounds in the film builds a nuanced understanding of the politics of the 1950s as experienced by people in their everyday lives.

Again we might consider the opening scenes of the film, which establish its characteristic soundscape (see Appendix for mapping of sound in the opening scenes, and in Klaatu's escape from the hospital):

- Humming noises of craft in flight; lots of reverb; wind up sound as it settles (Special sound effect)
- Sounds of busy traffic: sirens, jeep noise, more sirens, heavier transport (APCs)
- Machinery noises: switchboard, press
- Voices in b/ground – hubbub; Sound of guns being cocked; Crowd noise – hubbub
- Guns being cocked
- Gun shot
- Crowd panic voices: high pitch
- High pitch oscillation to signify 'ray gun' (Special sound effect)
- Squeal of tires as officer's car arrives
- Footsteps
- Knock on door
- Scrape of chair on uncarpeted floor

These sounds are mediated for viewers by the score, the voices, and the dialogue in which they are embedded; even so, they do, in themselves, identify the society of the story. This is a society in which everyday life is disrupted by a startling intrusion – a craft from another world and its strange inhabitants (the special sound effects). Sonically this society is characterized as urban (street sounds with vehicles) and technologically-advanced (machinery noises, switchboard, vehicles), under police and military

protection/surveillance (sirens, jeeps, APCs, guns being cocked, gun shot) and media-saturated (rolling presses, and the many broadcast voices). The people themselves are both curious (initial hubbub around the spaceship) and apt to panic (the shrieks when Gort opens fire).

These sounds are fundamental to the story in that they sketch the nature of the society addressed by the film. While it may not seem odd to mobilize the military if a spaceship arrives in a city, that action nevertheless identifies the nature of that society – as one in which everyday life includes the presence of state authority (police, military). And this is significant in the context of the story, which locates the recourse to military force as a major problem for the society. The other factor that is significant for the story is its dependence on technology, highlighted by the event central to the story – Klaatu's stopping of (most) electric power on Earth for a specific period. This technology, along with the nuclear technology that Klaatu identifies as powering his own craft (and, implicitly, of potentially powering Earth vehicles), is the reason that Earth's people must confront their own martial behaviours. So these sounds spell out both the nature of the society (a military-industrial complex) and its problems (the interdependence of the military and

the industrial). The simultaneous evocation of the media locates the means by which much debate about the nature of the society takes place – and reflexively situates the film as part of this debate.

The soundscape of the film may appear quite ‘natural’, enabling direct viewer identification with the story and its characters: in classical terms, suturing the viewer into the narrative. However, it is worth noting that this soundscape enables the narrative of the film; is part of this narrative. A pastoral soundscape would have a different effect on viewers; suggest different meanings; and constitute a different narrative. Again a contrast might be drawn with *Stranger from Venus* (1954) that is set in a more rural, English landscape.

The special sound effects are fairly minimal by contemporary standards, but served the purpose of highlighting the ‘difference’ of the extraterrestrial visitors as well as their power, which Earth’s militarism and xenophobic politics render a threat. In this opening sequence they include the sounds of the spacecraft and of Gort’s laser (‘ray gun’). The sound of the spacecraft varies from a low pitch sound with a lot of vibrato to a high pitch, where the vibrato is

so speeded up that it becomes constant – a sound profile that we associate with machinery or technology (as noted earlier in relation to the theremin). Interestingly, the low pitch, high vibrato hum of the spaceship in flight is not necessarily threatening; as a sonic profile it is relatively soothing – and the sound that accompanies the landing is technological but not necessarily threatening. So the alien arrival is different, and technologically advanced, but not necessarily a source of fear – as the crowds gathered around the spacecraft attest. Politically, this association is important to the narrative as it establishes sonically that ‘difference’ does not necessarily equate with danger or threat.

However, there is a point at which an association is drawn between technology and danger. The sound effect used with Gort’s laser employs a similar sonic profile to the landing – again a high pitch vibration, though with perceptible oscillation, that reproduces the sound of early cathode ray tubes. The pulsing rhythm of the laser, decreasing in duration (speeding up) as the weapon is deployed, sonically articulates fear and anxiety – visually (and vocally) realized when the crowd panics and runs in fear. In particular, the rhythmic pulsing of the laser attests to the fact that it is a construct – not a ‘natural’ sound – with an operator

who is therefore responsible for the technology and its deployment. The more lethal the technology, the more anxiety it is likely to generate in those who do not control it.

From the beginning of the film, then, a sonic politics operates that associates the deployment of high technology with fear and anxiety, an association made apparent when the operator of the technology is alien. The subversive politics of this film lies with its attempt to demonstrate that this fear and anxiety is not simply consequent on a visit from a technologically sophisticated 'other', but is the everyday state of being that has been engendered in this society by its development of a potentially lethal technology. So these sound effects confront viewers with the power that will be unleashed on them unless the Cold War is peacefully concluded and the weaponry associated with it is brought under control. And they also signify the fear (social and individual) generated by thirty years of the Cold War and its continuing threat of nuclear conflagration – as well as the ambient anxiety that accompanied this threat and was intermittently directed within the state at those who seemed 'different'. Like Klaatu they were in danger of being denounced, hunted down and destroyed – if not directly physically,

then by the annihilation of their reputation, career, financial status and so ability to live an effective and fulfilling life.

The crucial point made by Klaatu within the narrative, and politically by the narrative of the film, is that technology cannot be separated from the social and cultural environment in which it was produced, and in which it is then a major and sometimes determining practice. Nor can social and political practices be divorced from the everyday context of people's lives – and vice-versa. From the very beginning the sound effects deployed in the film demonstrate the interrelationship of technology, social and cultural practices and institutions, and everyday lives through their embodied effect – and affect – as viewers experience the pulsing, high pitch laser and the frightened screams of onlookers to the first conflict between aliens and their own (military) representatives, prompted as it is by a gunshot from one of their own soldiers.

B.D. (Before Dolby)

Before concluding this study of sound in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* it is worth noting that the film is a pre-Dolby movie. As such the dynamic contrast of its soundtrack is considerably lower than that of Dolby sound movies, such as *Star Wars* (1977). Dolby

sound is more 'analytic' (Chion, 1999: 168) in that it enables a higher degree of precision in the marking and/or placement of particular sonic elements, and hence the creation of specific meanings. By contrast, the soundtrack of pre-Dolby films is suffused with noise, a level of ambient sound that sonically interrelates all characters and events. So the silences are less marked, essentially less silent, than those of Dolby sound. Of course, this soundscape was not designed for this film, not intentional, and yet it has the effect of generating a particular politics – or, at least, of contributing to the narrative in such a way as to generate that politics. In *The Day the Earth Stood Still* it works against the xenophobic 'othering' that is the target of Klaatu's concern in the story, and of the narrative politics – because it connects all of those involved in the story; sonically, they are all part of the same environment/society – which is, ultimately, Klaatu's message.

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates the contribution of all sonic elements of the film, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* to its story of alien invasion, its narrative about the Cold War, and its deconstructive analysis of xenophobic politics. Just as we might study the

contribution of individual visual elements (mise-en-scene, actors, special effects, lighting, camera angles, editing) this study has shown that all sonic elements (score, particular use of instrumentation, voice, special sound effects, everyday sound) have a critical role to play in the production of a film, and are amenable to analysis. Kassabian's call for the analysis of classical Hollywood music as a 'semiotic code' is thereby extended to all these different sound elements, which are embedded in the learned listening practices, the cultural auracy, of the viewing – and listening – audience.

By locating the semiosis or meaning-making practices of these sonic features we are able to analyse their role in the production of the narrative and its politics. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is a particularly interesting film to analyse because it was politically innovative. The film did not follow the usual 1950s SF film convention of reproducing the xenophobic fear of the outsider that was characteristic of Cold War politics. Instead it challenged that practice and the politics of surveillance and fear that accompanied it. This analysis demonstrates how the different sonic elements of the film enabled that political critique.

This kind of analysis can be extended to all other (sonic) events or texts, giving cultural analysts yet another way of exploring and understanding the politics of an event or situation.

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