

APOCALYPTIC REFLECTIONS IN DERRICKSON'S *THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL*

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Abstract

This article makes an analysis of Scott Derrickson's movie, The Day the Earth Stood Still, from eco-critical perspective focusing on the movie's representation of apocalyptic future world as resulted by human encroachment into nature. Set against the backdrop of the contemporary New York City, the movie juxtaposes urban development with the natural world, highlighting the conflict between the two. Borrowing the eco-critical insights from Lawrence Buell, Val Plumwood, Keelin McNab, and Timothy Luke, this article explores how Derrickson critiques anthropocentrism. Derrickson, through his nature-loving protagonist Klaatu, advocates for the reconsideration of human attitudes towards nature. This article examines how Derrickson presents Klaatu advocating for nature conservation, warning humanity the possible dangers about to take place in the environment due to their anthropocentric treatment over nature, and appeals for human-nature reconciliation as it is the urgency of the world today.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, apocalypse, coexistence, deep ecology, eco-criticism, extraterrestrial

Introduction

This article makes a critical examination of Scott Derrickson's movie, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* from the perspective of eco-criticism, highlighting the movie's exploration of anthropocentrism and its possible catastrophic consequences. Set in New York City, USA in the early 21st Century, the movie brings together the postmodern metropolitan environment with the influx of an extraterrestrial visitor to the earth named Klaatu, whose mission is to warn humanity about the possible dangers of environmental degradation as resulted by human encroachment into nature.

The protagonist of the movie, Klaatu, starred by Keanu Reeves, comes to the earth to convey a stark message for humanity that people's massive exploitation of nature threatens not only the earth but the entire universe. However, the short-sighted anthropocentric humans from the earth never take his warning and suggestion with any interest and seriousness. Derrickson critiques anthropocentrism throughout the movie

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presenting apocalyptic condition of the environment as resulted by human action over nature. Through the portrayal of the protagonist Klaatu as his mouthpiece of the movie and his companion, Dr. Helen Benson facing adversative effects of ecological dilapidation, Derrickson makes a sincere appeal for human reconciliation with nature. Klaatu's act of temporarily shutting down all the electrical systems of the Earth metaphorically implies for the urgency of freedom from anthropocentrism and embracing a more balanced coexistence with nature. The movie highlights the urgency of adopting strategies for sustainable future while it challenges its audience to reflect on their roles in the environment. Derrickson further presents the destructive consequences of human actions over the environment, and appeals for human-nature reconciliation for the sustainable future.

This article explores how Derrickson critiques anthropocentrism through his depiction of ecological dilapidation, and his appeal for the need for human-nature reconciliation as a commitment to ecological balance. While doing so, this article borrows theoretical insights from the ecocritical thinkers along with Lawrence Buell, Val Plumwood, Keelin McNab, and Timothy Luke, and seeks to illuminate the urgency of environmental awareness in contemporary society.

Review of Literature

Derrickson's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is a highly discussed movie among scholars and critics in the academic community. Critics from various of school of thoughts have discussed the movie from various perspectives and interpretations exploring its multiple themes and technical aspects. Exploring the theme of religious symbolism in the movie, Torry (1991) compares Klaatu to Jesus Christ, highlighting his role in the probable salvation of humanity in his article, "Apocalypse Then: Benefits of the Bomb in Fifties Science Fiction Films." Torry argues that the film "exploits the religious resonances of a visit from above by a wise, powerful, and concerned alien intelligence" (Torry, 1991, p. 12). For Torry, Klaatu resembles Christ as he faces similar betrayal, death, and resurrection, along with his message to humanity. This allegorical interpretation of Torry appeals the audience to reflect on the moral implications of the movie. Gabbard (1993), also interprets the movie from the similar angle showing similarity between Klaatu and Christ in his article, "Religious and Political Allegory in Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still*." Gabbard argues, "The most obvious aspects of the Christ allegory in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* involve Klaatu's death and resurrection. Like Jesus, he is killed by soldiers carrying out the orders of the political and military authority" (Gabbard, 1993, p. 152). Gabbard argues that Klaatu's death is similar to that of Christ's resurrection. He explores the theme of Christianity in the movie highlighting its exploration of sacrifice and redemption.

On the contrary, Leong (2010) explores the themes of ethnicity and multilingualism in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* in his article "Forms of Asian Americanness in

Contemporary Poetry.” Leong observes that the film presents a scene where these issues intertwine with the extraterrestrial, highlighting how Asianness in America has been associated with the foreign and threatening. Leong (2010) argues, “There is a curious scene in Scott Derrickson's 2008 remake of the sci-fi classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still* in which issues of race, foreignness, linguistic difference, and the extraterrestrial entangle” (Leong, 2010, p. 135). He further suggests that the film underscores the historical and ongoing association of Asianness with duplicity or danger in American society (Leong, 2010, p. 136).

Muñoz (2016), in his article, “The Alien as a Vehicle for Cosmopolitan Discourses: The Case of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*,” highlights over the theme of cosmopolitanism since it addresses the transnational challenges. Muñoz claims that the movie “presents cosmopolitanism as a perspective and way of acting that develops as a response to specific transnational challenges” (Muñoz, 2016, p. 123). By this, Muñoz claims that the movie addresses the issues which are not only local or of national concerns but the universal ones. Muñoz further supports this idea discussing how science fiction presents spatiotemporal issues through the metaphors for transnational connections and the global impacts of environmental dilapidation. Muñoz argues that *The Day the Earth Stood Still* explores key elements of globalization—technology and borders—while visualizing the transnational effects of environmental harm (Muñoz, 2016, p. 126). Muñoz stresses that the movie presents the scenes that depict global reactions to the alien’s transnational visits, reinforcing the universality and relevance of its message (Muñoz, 2016, p. 133).

The aforementioned critics have interpreted the movie, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, from various perspectives and angles. However, a much-detailed study of the movie from eco-critical approach is significant which this article attempts to. Through an eco-critical approach, this article aims to demonstrate how the film implicitly addresses the human-animal relationship through an ecological lens, thereby highlighting Derrickson's environmental consciousness.

Methods

This article follows library-based discourse analysis as a research method. It examines both primary and secondary data sources from the approach of critical discourse analysis. Primary data source includes Derrickson’s, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* while secondary data sources include reviews of the movie, books, articles and documents on eco-critical theories, and documents. It examines how information is constructed through language through thematic analysis of the movie borrowing theoretical insights from the critics and scholars of environmental literature.

Textual Analysis

Environmental awareness is usually the key point of environmental literature, motivating readers to take care of nature. In this argument, Buell, Heise, and Thornber (2011) stress that there is this indispensable connection between the environment and literary study.

They argue that eco-criticism or environmental criticism in literature and environmental studies is a large and interdisciplinary project. Its primary goal is to examine the environmental dimensions of literature. They argue:

Literature and environment studies—commonly called 'eco-criticism' or 'environmental criticism' in analogy to the more general term literary criticism—comprise an eclectic, pluriform, and cross-disciplinary initiative that aims to explore the environmental dimensions of literature and other creative media in a spirit of environmental concern not limited to any one method or commitment.

(Buell, Heise, & Thornber, 2011, p. 418)

Eco-criticism does not only concentrate at the place theory, instead, eco-critical thinking is identical to humanist geographers who view the sense of a place as a sum of individual affection, social construction, and physical geography. Nevertheless, the eco-analysis of critical issues in its practical approach often does not have the same human criterion for realignment from personal to communal experiences in the case of places. The diversity itself shows the open nature of both literary and environmental studies that accommodate multiple perspectives and methodologies when analyzing the ecological aspects of creative works.

In her essay “Anthropocentrism: Are Humans the Centre of Existence?” McNab (2010) argues that a significant portion of the global population subscribes to an anthropocentric worldview, rooted in the belief that humans are inherently “self-centered” and need not prioritize the well-being of other creatures. McNab states:

Anthropocentrism is supported by a large percentage of the world's population, as a result of the idea that human beings are self-centered and do not need to concern themselves with the well-being of other creatures. The reality of the situation lies within the borders of numerous countries that have experienced the effects of war, either through internal conflict or through the training of soldiers for future engagements.

(McNab, 2010, p. 113)

According to McNab, this anthropocentric perspective is prevalent in various countries that have faced the consequences of war, whether due to internal conflicts or military preparations. Many individuals worldwide actively endorse this viewpoint, asserting that humans are self-centered and that concern for other creatures is unnecessary. This belief is particularly entrenched in regions that have experienced the impacts of war, either through internal strife or the training of soldiers for future conflicts.

In the context of the movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Regina Jackson, portrayed by Kathy Bates, exemplifies this anthropocentric attitude. As a commander in the American military, Jackson asserts human dominion over Earth, declaring, “This is our planet” (Derrickson, 2008, 0:34:15) during her encounter with Klaatu, who has arrived to rescue all living creatures from the impending apocalypse. This scene powerfully illustrates the anthropocentric mindset that places humanity at the center of existence, often to the detriment of the broader ecological community. The scene

illustrates the human tendency to view the Earth as their exclusive possession, disregarding the reality that humans are merely temporary inhabitants of the planet. This moment exemplifies ethical hubris, as it highlights the mistaken belief that the Earth belongs solely to humanity, despite the fact that humans depend on the Earth for shelter and sustenance.

To be recognized as a true human being, there must be a profound unity between an individual's personal 'self' and their 'selves' within the broader context of nature and culture. This perspective emphasizes that authentic selfhood is achieved only when individuals establish a deep sense of oneness with nature, acknowledging their interconnectedness with both other human beings and the nonhuman elements of the natural world. The "human self" is thus not an isolated entity but an integral part of the complex web of life, encompassing both the human species and the natural environment.

This perspective also suggests that our understanding of nature is partially shaped by projecting idealized human qualities onto the natural world. This process "humanizes" various elements of nature—such as rocks, bacteria, trees, clouds, river systems, and animals—allowing us to perceive and realize their intrinsic essence as intertwined with our own. In defining authentic selfhood, Luke (1997), in his work *Ecocritique*, argues that genuine selfhood emerges through the mutual participation of humans and nature. Luke states:

"Real selfhood, it is claimed, derives from human unity with nature, realizing our mature personhood and uniqueness with all other human and nonhuman forms of being. Humanity must be 'naturalized'; that is, the 'human self' is not an atomistic ego, but a species-being and a Nature-being as a self-in-self, 'where Self stands for organic wholeness. Here, the essence of Nature, to a large extent, would appear to be a projection of an idealized humanity onto the natural world. Nature is 'humanized'...rocks, bacteria, trees, clouds, river systems, animals—and permits the realization of their inner essence."

(Luke, 1997, p. 15)

Luke argues that achieving the "human self" requires the boundaries between humanity and nature to blur and merge into a singular entity. Culture begins to take shape as a distinct identity when people acknowledge their relationship with and connection to their natural surroundings. Being cultured, then, implies being "naturalized" and recognizing this profound interdependence between humanity and the natural world. This perspective underscores that true human selfhood is realized when individuals embrace their intrinsic connection with nature, leading to a more holistic understanding of themselves and their place within the larger ecosystem. Additionally, it highlights the role of culture in shaping this understanding, as culture reflects how individuals perceive and relate to their environment.

In the context of the movie, the American military's efforts to prevent the aliens from entering Earth—under the assumption that the planet belongs exclusively to humans—further exemplify this anthropocentric attitude. This scene vividly portrays the

human-centric mindset that prioritizes humanity's interests above all else, even in the face of potential interspecies coexistence.

Figure 1

American Army Trying to Stop the Aliens from Entering Earth



(Derrickson, 2008, 0:18:43)

Source: The Researcher's Screenshot

Figure 2:

Alien Entering the Earth



(Derrickson, 2008, 0:23:28)

Source: The Researcher's Screenshot

In Figure 1 taken from *The Day the Earth Stood Still* reflects humanity's attitude of rejecting the arrival of alien beings on Earth. Despite the potentially benevolent intentions of these extraterrestrial visitors, humans respond with military force, demonstrating a refusal to accept ideas or entities that challenge their dominion over the planet. This reaction exemplifies the human rejection of organic unity with other beings, as they resist anything perceived as a threat to their control. However, in the face of these powerful alien entities, humanity's influence is diminished. Klaatu's security measures are so advanced that his mere presence incites horror and panic across the globe, prompting people to flee in fear for their lives.

Figure 2 depicts the alien's entry to Earth, which they undertake to deliver a message of rescue for all creatures from an impending disaster. However, humanity's refusal to accept advice from non-human entities ultimately leads to apocalyptic consequences. In line with this narrative, William Grey, in his essay "Environmental Value and Anthropocentrism," asserts the necessity of rejecting instrumentalism, urging the recognition of nonhuman entities as intrinsically valuable and their inclusion in moral discourse, "It is necessary to reject instrumentalism, that is, to acknowledge that nonhumans are intrinsically valuable, and to include them in the universe of moral discourse" (Grey, 1993, p. 98). Grey emphasizes the importance of moving beyond an instrumental view of nature, advocating for the inclusion of nonhuman entities in our ethical considerations.

In "Anthropocentrism: Are Humans the Centre of Existence?", McNab (2018) critiques the anthropocentric attitude of humans, which positions them as the supreme beings of the world. McNab argues, "When human beings place themselves in positions of superiority, they view the world as nothing more than a collection of objects, each amenable to study and control" (McNab, 2018, p. 115). McNab highlights how this mindset leads to the objectification of all other creatures, reducing their worth in the eyes of humanity. The scene involving Klaatu, a being with beneficial intentions, illustrates how humans perceive him as a threat rather than a helper, due to their entrenched anthropocentric views.

Plumwood (2002), in her essay "The Blindness of Centrism and Human Self-Enclosure," offers a comprehensive critique of anthropocentrism. She describes it as a fundamental structure shaping human rationality and belief systems, which normalizes various forms of self-centeredness and dispossession. Plumwood argues, "The centric structure accomplishes this by promoting insensitivity to the others' needs, agency and prior claims, as well as belief in the colonizer's apartness, superiority and right to conquer and master the other" (Plumwood, 2002, p. 118). Plumwood extends her critique to encompass Eurocentric, ethnocentric, and androcentric frameworks, illustrating how these centric structures perpetuate domination and exploitation, often justifying the subjugation of non-human entities and natural resources. Her analysis connects these patterns of dominance and hierarchy in human thought to the way nature is marginalized, despite humanity's dependence on it.

Figure 3:

Klaatu Telling His Purpose of Coming to Earth to Dr. Helen



(Derrickson, 2008, 0:46:04)

Source: The Researcher's Screenshot

In Figure 3, Klaatu reveals to Dr. Helen that his purpose for coming to Earth is to help its creatures avoid a forthcoming disaster. Dr. Helen is the only character in the film who responds positively to Klaatu's sentiments.

Grey (1993), in his essay "Environmental Value and Anthropocentrism," argues that certain expressions of deep ecology, while emphasizing the harmonious organization of all creatures, lack practical guidance for our judgments regarding the state of the world. Grey contends, "Deep ecology (in some of its formulations) attempts to prescind altogether from human concerns, and when this happens, it is difficult to see how anything useful can be said about praxis, or practical choice" (Grey, 1993, p. 100). Grey suggests that without the inclusion of recognizably anthropocentric elements, deep ecology struggles to provide a framework for evaluating what constitutes a better or worse state of affairs. He critiques the idea of adopting a purely "planetary perspective," which might render mass extinctions as mere biological occurrences, lacking practical implications for human decision-making.

In the context of the movie, the Earth and all its living organisms are on the brink of extinction, a situation Klaatu seeks to prevent. The following scene, set in Central Park, USA, depicts a new formation of the Earth, where all species and plants are rescued to preserve their existence.

In Figure 4, the film portrays the aliens' genuine effort to create a new Earth with the goal of preserving all life forms from an imminent catastrophe. This initiative is met with widespread approval from various species who recognize the necessity of such a drastic measure for their survival. However, human resistance emerges as a significant obstacle. Despite the looming threat of apocalypse, some humans resist the aliens'

mission, leading to conflict. This resistance highlights a dramatic tension between the aliens' noble intent and the opposition from the very species they aim to protect.

Figure 4

Alien-formed New Earth at Central Park, New York



(Derrickson, 2008, 0:48:49)

Source: The Researcher's Screenshot

Plumwood (2002) argues in her essay, "Towards a Dialogical Interspecies Ethics," that addressing ecological issues requires moving away from the tendency to 'Other' non-human entities. Instead, she advocates for a self-critical approach, termed "studying up," to uncover the origins of our ecological conflicts. Plumwood asserts, "An important corollary for knowledge gathering orientation is that the rationality of Othering our planetary partners must be countered by an alternative self-critical rationality of 'studying up' to find the source of our problems and difficulties with nature" (Plumwood, 2002, p. 167). This perspective urges us to shift from marginalizing non-human entities to engaging in introspection to understand the root causes of our ecological dilemmas. It calls for questioning our actions and beliefs that contribute to the antagonistic relationship between humanity and the environment.

A key conversation between Dr. Helen and Klaatu underscores the planet's peril due to human activities. Klaatu's statement, "This planet is dying. The human race is killing it." (Derrickson, 2008, 01:01:48–01:52) and his concern for Earth's survival highlight the severe environmental risks posed by human actions. Dr. Helen asks him, "So you've come here to help us." (Derrickson, 2008, 01:01:53–01:54), Klaatu says he did not come here to save only humans, a single species, but to save the entire Earth:

Klaatu: I said I came to save the Earth.

Helen: You came to save the Earth from us.

Klaatu: We can't risk the survival of this planet for the sake of one species.

Helen: What are you saying?

Klaatu: If the Earth dies, you die. If you die, the Earth survives. There are only a handful of planets in the cosmos that are capable of supporting complex life.

(Derrickson, 2008, 01:01:55–02:29)

This exchange emphasizes Klaatu's mission to save the Earth as a call for collective responsibility to ensure the planet's well-being, even if it means confronting human interests.

Buell (1995) contends that “Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary imagination has at its disposal” (p. 285), emphasizing the profound impact of apocalyptic themes on modern environmental discourse. This idea is vividly illustrated in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* when Klaatu warns humanity about the dire consequences of their actions, stating, “If the Earth dies, you die. If you die, the Earth survives” (Derrickson, 2008, 01:17:50). This moment in the film encapsulates the essence of apocalyptic imagery by highlighting the potential extinction of humanity due to environmental degradation, which aligns with Buell's assertion that the apocalyptic metaphor is a powerful tool for conveying the urgency of ecological crises.

Figure 5:

Klaatu and Dr. Helen in a Conversation



(Derrickson, 2008, 01:01:49)

Source: The Researcher's Screenshot

In Figure 5, Klaatu warns Dr. Helen about the imminent apocalypse, attributing the planet's peril to human activities. Klaatu's assertion that Earth's survival is paramount, even at the expense of human interests, emphasizes the urgent need for change. This

dialogue illustrates that the jeopardy facing the planet is a direct consequence of human actions and highlights the necessity for collective responsibility.

Rueckert (1996) critiques the anthropocentric worldview, emphasizing the dangers of human dominance over the natural world. He argues, “Human beings are signs of environmental threat due to their dominance over the earth, their anthropocentric vision, and their desire to conquer, domesticate, violate, and exploit natural things” (p. 113). This critique is poignantly reflected in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* when Klaatu declares, “I’m here to save the Earth... from you” (Derrickson, 2008, 00:59:27). Klaatu’s words mirror Rueckert’s argument by emphasizing the destructive consequences of human domination and the urgent need to reconsider humanity’s role in the natural world.

Rueckert’s observation further reveals that human attempts to control and exploit nature pose a significant threat to environmental stability, as humanity often overlooks the consequences of its destructive actions. Rueckert’s warning resonates strongly with the themes explored in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. In the film, the character of Gort visually represents this idea. Standing as an embodiment of extraterrestrial justice, Gort intervenes when humanity fails to recognize the limits of its technological prowess and environmental destruction. The image of Gort (Figure 6) with glowing eyes, prepared to act, symbolizes the response of the natural world—or an external force representing it—against human exploitation.

Figure 6:
Gort Ready to Intervene



(Derrickson, 2008, 0:48:25)

Source: The Researcher’s Screenshot

Figure 6 captures the critical moment when Gort prepares to unleash his power, reflecting nature’s retaliation against human arrogance and exploitation. The light emitting from

Gort's eyes signals impending action, underscoring the environmental message of the film that humanity's dominance and disregard for ecological balance will lead to dire consequences. The scene highlights the vulnerability of human existence in the face of nature's retribution, reinforcing Rueckert's critique of anthropocentrism and its destructive impact on the planet.

Glotfelty (1996) expresses deep concern about the ongoing conflict between humans and the environment, stating, "Human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support system" (p. xx). This concern is echoed in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* when Klaatu confronts humanity about their destructive behavior, saying, "Your planet? This is not your planet. No one owns the planet" (Derrickson, 2008, 00:48:52). This dialogue underscores the film's critique of anthropocentrism and highlights the devastating impact of human activities on Earth's ecosystems, resonating with Glotfelty's warning about the degradation of the planet's vital systems.

Chapaux, Mégret, and Natarajan (2023) discuss the increased focus on anthropocentrism in relation to global issues like species extinction and climate change. They note that the study of anthropocentrism has gained prominence across disciplines, emphasizing the need for ethical and sustainable approaches to environmental challenges: "The study of anthropocentrism has of late gained prominence in the context of the mass extinction of species, climate change, and environmental degradation" (Chapaux, Mégret, & Natarajan, 2023, p. 1).

Figure 7:

A City Being Destroyed by Metallic Swarms



(Derrickson, 2008, 01:31:39)

Source: The Researcher's Screenshot

In the film, this concept is depicted as mass extinction occurs despite advanced military efforts, with metal swarms consuming the world due to human hubris. The Figure 7 depicts a city being obliterated by swarms of metallic entities, symbolizing nature's retribution against human technological prowess. This powerful scene from the movie highlights the vulnerability of human infrastructure and innovation in the face of nature's retaliation. It serves as a dire reminder of the devastating consequences that can arise when humanity disregards ecological warnings and persists with environmentally destructive practices.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has attempted to justify the movie, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* as an ecocritical movie that critiques anthropocentrism presenting ecological and environmental issues through its cinematic expression. This article has examined how Derrickson, through the movie, underscores the possible dangers of anthropocentric worldview vividly depicting the destructive consequences of humanity's disrespect for ecological imbalance and environmental sustainability.

Borrowing the ecological insights from the ecological scholars Val Plumwood, William Rueckert, and Barry Commoner, and others, this article examines how the film articulates the dangers inherent in prioritizing human interests above all other forms of life. The narrative employs the character of Klaatu and the apocalyptic imagery of metallic swarms to illustrate the broader ecological principle of interconnectedness, which emphasizes the interdependence of all life forms and ecosystems.

Klaatu's mission and the ensuing destruction depicted in the movie serve as a potent reminder of the consequences of environmental negligence. The film highlights the urgent need for a paradigm shift away from anthropocentric perspectives toward a more eco-centric worldview that recognizes and respects the intrinsic value of all components of the natural world.

In presenting these themes, the movie not only critiques anthropocentrism but also acts as a cautionary tale about the potential for ecological disaster resulting from humanity's continued environmental exploitation and indifference. The cinematic portrayal of nature's retaliation underscores the critical need for responsible environmental stewardship and ethical considerations in our interactions with the planet.

Ultimately, this research affirms that *The Day the Earth Stood Still* effectively uses its narrative and visual elements to advocate for transformative change. It urges viewers to reconsider their environmental practices and attitudes, promoting a more holistic and respectful approach to coexistence with the natural world. Through its integration of philosophical insights and its dramatic depiction of ecological consequences, the film contributes meaningfully to the discourse on environmental ethics and sustainability.

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