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SCHLOCK

AND AWE

Coveted by collectors, an inspiration to illustrators; the influence of 1950s sci-fi cinema poster art is still with us.

STORY Ray Edgar



FROM THE SECOND it was announced, to the massive PR invasion that ensued, everyone knew intelligent life forms, vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded our cinema multiplexes with envious eyes ... and slowly, inexorably, were drawing up their marketing plans against us.

More surprising are the means with which they executed them. For if we are to judge Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* by its promotional posters alone, the film looks like the most expensive schlock movie ever made. But this is far from criticism. It is

in those inspirational B-grade posters from the 1950s and '60s that one of the last great eras of American poster illustration flourished.

To promote the latest remake of *The War of the Worlds*, Spielberg's art department digitally mutates two time-worn tactics. In one poster a menacing claw grips the Earth, recalling the classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Another utilises the monolithic, stone typography that its zero-budget predecessors had exploited (having seen it work so well in *Ben Hur*) as yet another illustrative element to detonate in their poster art.

"These 1950s creations represent deep-seated anxieties of nuclear war and Communist expansion; just as now *War of the Worlds* is viewed as a metaphor for the war on terrorism."



STARRING WALTER PIDGEON · ANNE FRANCIS · LESLIE NIELSEN
 WITH WARREN STEVENS AND INTRODUCING ROBBY, THE ROBOT
 DIRECTED BY FRED McLEOD WILCOX · PRODUCED BY NICHOLAS NAYFACK
 SCREEN PLAY BY CYRIL HUME
 BASED ON A STORY BY IRVING BLOCK AND ALLEN ADLER
 PHOTOGRAPHED IN EASTMAN COLOR
 IN CINEMASCOPE AND COLOR
 A METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PICTURE

Facing page: Saucer-men invade 1950s America.
 Right: In *Forbidden Planet*, Walter Pidgeon and Robby the Robot preside over an idyllic planet in an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

While the rest of the illustrator's arsenal – bikini-clad women in the creature's clutches, panicking teens and tormented authority figures – may have been inappropriate, Spielberg might well have adopted the other device lovingly employed by '50s impresarios: a city spectacularly laid waste by oversized monsters. Which leads to the biggest difference between exploitation and homage – subtlety. A word not used regularly of B-grade film producers such as Jack Arnold and Roger Corman.

Closer to carnival barkers than strict auteurs, these schlockmeisters used lurid posters to herald the freaks they brought to drive-ins and flea-pit cinemas each week: teenage werewolves, creatures from black lagoons, beasts from 20,000 fathoms, attacking 50-foot women. While de Mille might be the father of the cinematic spectacle, Corman, Arnold, and James Nicholson popularised sci-fi cinema's now ubiquitous formula of special-effects extravaganzas and high-concept, gadget-strewn mayhem. Aside from a handful of films, the only thing that wasn't entirely crap was the posters.

The spectacular success of *King Kong's* 1952 re-release inspired younger producers with an eye for a buck to make more oversized calamity-inducing creatures. These 1950s creations represent deep-seated anxieties of nuclear war and Communist expansion, just as *War of the Worlds* is now viewed as a metaphor for the war on terrorism.

The problem is that in the earlier films, the paranoid subtext relies on a singular – and always flimsily executed – special effect. Instead of Willis O'Brien's groundbreaking stop-motion animation for *King Kong*, irradiated monsters took ridiculous form week after exploitative week: crabs, leeches,

“Aside from a small handful of films, the only thing that wasn't entirely crap was the promotional posters.”

she-wolves, dinosaurs, 'kongas', and colossal men. Audiences gasped at jerry-built effects, chuckled at clunky scenery, laughed at lumpy outlines in monster suits and pooh-poohed papier mâché behemoths. Often the promise of 'colour' was but the climax of a black-and-white film. No wonder the advertising is celebrated. Where Spielberg put the action on screen, Corman put it into the poster.

Illustrator Albert Kallis told Stephen Rebello, in an article in *Cinefantastique*, of one theatre owner “cornering him at a convention, saying ‘if we could put sprocket holes on your ad campaigns, then we'd really have something!’” But in some ways, that would have spoiled the fun.

“It was almost a complicit understanding that this was showmanship,” says Mick Broderick, author of *Nuclear Movies*. “You couldn't see a number of

Roger Corman films on the basis of the advertising material and not know that the lurid posters would never be matched by what you saw on screen.”

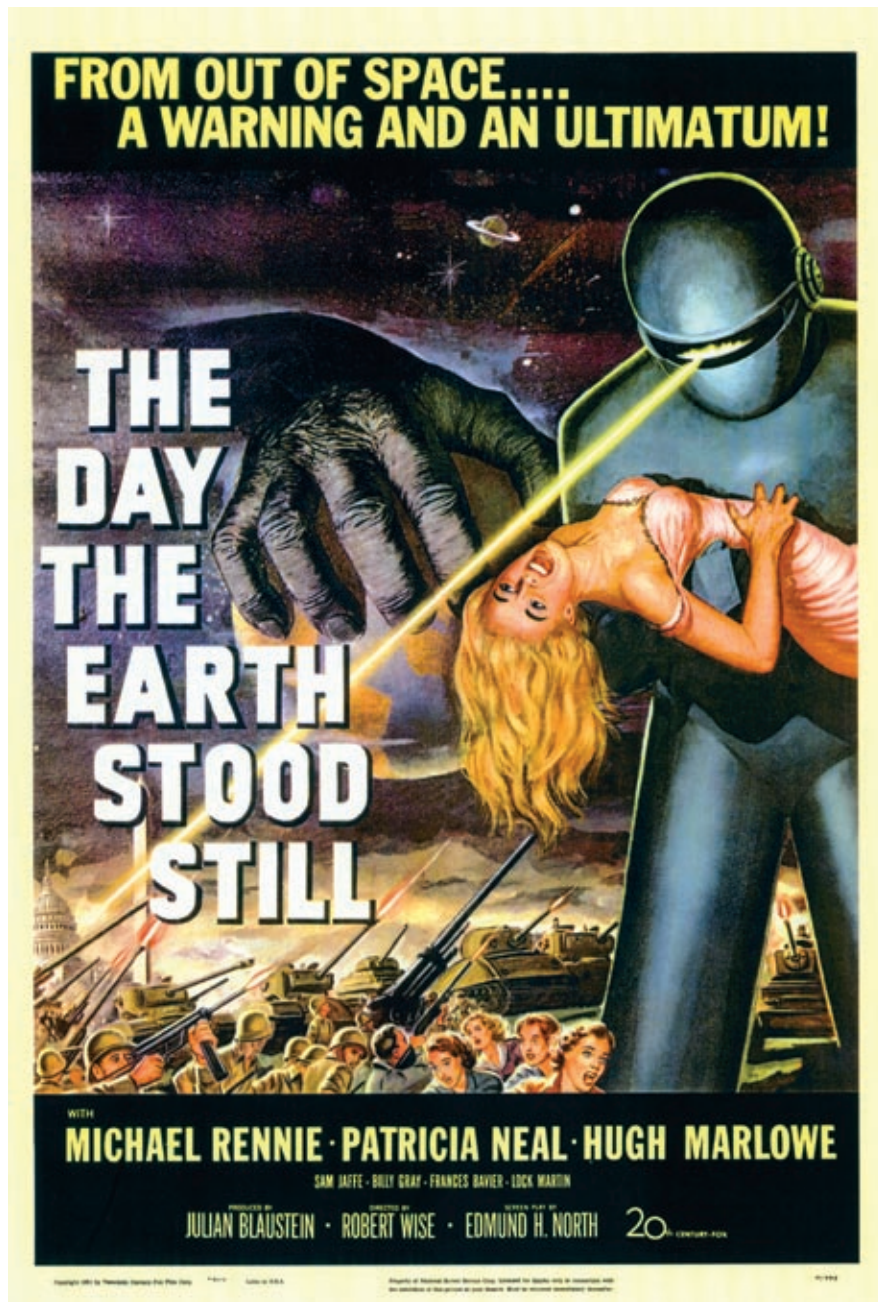
Much like a friend's exaggerated sexual exploits, these irresistibly garish posters were built on sex, lies and anticipation. Titillated by the gross-out graphics, hormonal audiences howled at the Moon and tooted horns at ludicrous outrage. Or ignored the film altogether and made out instead.

While the films might be seen as kitsch or cult, the posters were of a higher order. In an era that celebrated monsters, the three giants of post-war Hollywood poster design – Albert Kallis, Reynold Brown and Joseph Smith – were all exceptional draftsmen with a penchant for detailed destruction who also taught at art colleges and made tidy sums selling their own paintings.

Brown did more than 250 campaigns from 1950 to the late '60s. Kallis worked for graphic legend Saul Bass before Corman wooed him with artistic freedom, while Smith did everything from *Ben Hur's* famous type to the first *Jaws* illustration.

Prized by collectors, with originals commanding figures of \$10,000 (and climbing), the posters continue to inspire more mainstream contemporary directors such as Spielberg and Tim Burton. As Burton said after making *Mars Attacks*, his 1997 homage to '50s schlock, “Growing up on movies about Martians with big brains stays with you.” But it's an odds-on bet that it's the half-life of an irradiated poster that burnt into his memory. 🇨🇦

RAY EDGAR is features editor of *Monument*, an Australian magazine of architecture and design.



ATTACK OF THE 50 FT. WOMAN



Facing page: Michael Rennie told Earthlings to behave in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.
Right: Would you like a little misogyny with that? The girls fought back in *Attack of the 50ft Woman*.

starring ALLISON HAYES · WILLIAM HUDSON · YVETTE VICKERS · PRODUCED BY BERNARD WOOLNER
DIRECTED BY NATHAN HERTZ · WRITTEN BY MARK HANNA · AN ALLIED ARTISTS PICTURE