

The Eye of Gort

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Istvan Csicsery-Ronay**The Eye of Gort**

The British critic Peter Stockwell maintains that every person's concept of science fiction is based on early experiences with texts that were identified as science fiction and then became unconscious templates. He calls these "prototype texts" (7). Among sf films, one of the most important of these for me—and I believe also for my generation's understanding of the genre—is Robert Wise's 1951 film, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.

One of the most distinctive qualities of the (silent) film medium for the great Hungarian film theorist Béla Balázs was that it reveals what he called the face of things.¹ In this formulation of sublime humanism, Balázs felt that the camera and the experience of the audience participated in the encounter between the seeing consciousness—searching and contemplative at the same time—and the responding surface of the other. By revealing the face, not just of human characters but of landscapes and objects, film allows us to penetrate in a quasi-mystical way into the active, vital energies behind the iconic surface—a surface that cannot help but move, because the frames cannot help but move.

Even if it is extended to landscapes, Balázs's conception of face is clearly modeled on the human face projected on the big, silent, black-and-white screen, where the eye is drawn undistracted and unseen into the contemplation of another person—organized for us, as for all mammals, around the other's eyes.



The melodrama of sound film kept the silent face alive in haloes of ethereal lighting and hypnotic eye-lighting, bathed in romantic sonorities, more and more turning the experience of the face into one of narcissistic desire, eyes looking into each other's gazes, seeing the eyes that see each other. This is the regime of erotic scoping that formed the basis of Laura Mulvey's once-dominant notion of the camera's controlling male gaze, and the cult of the stars of desire.



What then do we do with this?



In recent years, there has been a lot of debate about the status of the gaze in film theory. The once-monolithic Lacanian bloc has fragmented into different positions, most of them hinging on different interpretations of the gaze. Todd McGowan in his book *The Real Gaze* (2007) has argued persuasively that the old Mulveyan notion of the male gaze is a misprision of Lacan's original idea, which is that the gaze can never be focalized from any concrete subject position. The gaze is what we are seen by in general, without our being able to see it. But there is no law that says we must stick to the sacred seminars—there are important alternative models of the gaze, from the Derridean animal gaze, the gaze of things,² and the gaze of the cinema itself, the look of the film looking back at the audience from the screen.³ Into this mix comes Gort. I admire Lacan, but I am fascinated by Gort. Gort provokes in a way I believe few other characters in cinema have ever done before him. Clearly associated with the golems of the European past, Gort nonetheless appears to us in a way that changes our understanding of the face, of the screen, and of sentient relations. What's more, this death-ray-projecting, colossally phallic guardian of the Law is part of a system of characters who explore each other's gazes in ways that are quite striking in cinema, connecting humanity, alien intelligences, and technological artifacts in a network not mainly of erotic fear and longing, but of an urgent will to trust.

So let's retell the story of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* the way I think it should be told. A young widow and her pre-teen son are bereft of their husband and father, who has been killed at Anzio in World War II. They live not in their own home but in a boarding house with a collection of adults, none of whom can be considered an adequate substitute for the absent father—they are clearly sterile physically, intellectually, and spiritually.

Into this situation arrives a man from another world. He appears to have all the qualities desirable to supplement the lacking father—he is elegant, intelligent, urbane, perceptive, and sensitive. He easily and naturally adopts



the role of a godfather. He has the mien of a noble European intellectual or political leader. He wears his stolen suit impeccably, he is versed in the world's affairs, and scientific knowledge flows from him as if it were his

mother tongue. He resembles Victor Laszlo from *Casablanca* (1942)—all that's missing is a white suit, and maybe a Gauloise cupped in his fingers. He treats diamonds like pennies. He seems to need no supplements or compensations. He is the good man embodied, phallic power at its best—a perfect potential father, husband, world leader. He accompanies the fatherless boy Bobby to his important scenes—the military cemetery where arrays of crosses over war dead stand in for dead men, and to the Lincoln Memorial to see the giant simulacrum of the father of modern enlightened democracy—far bigger than Gort—and to read his wise giant's words.



Did I say potentially perfect husband? It's one of the beauties of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* that the audience fully expects there to be an erotic-romantic love interest between the beautiful, bereft, socially unprotected mother and the courtly, strong, utterly nonviolent Klaatu—and yet this never happens. Wise's film establishes a relationship rare in Hollywood cinema, between a man and a woman that bypasses, or perhaps even “transcends,” the erotic. It depicts an adult heterosexual world in which the erotic has no place, and it is not missed.

But of course Klaatu, this ostensibly ideal humanoid male, to whom the audience would gladly cede full patriarchal power, is not actually the full embodiment of phallic presence. He is an emissary, a vessel of a commanding power, and as such is attached to a robot. This robot, as we gradually learn, has more power than Klaatu—it has been invested with the ultimate power of life and death over whole planetary civilizations. It is physically indestructible, it can bring the dead back to life, it protects and avenges directly. It has infinite patience, but when roused to action to defend or avenge the legate, it reveals its potent cyclopean eye. Now, this eye—after which my talk is named—is peculiar. For Gort does not need it to see. We are shown in a scene

when Klaatu sneaks away from the boarding house to signal Gort with his flashlight that Gort can perceive visual stimuli with this “eye” shielded. Gort raises this sheath not to see, but to destroy. To put it simply, Gort is endowed with an eye to annihilate what it gazes on.



This uncanny power has nothing to do with survival or curiosity. It is an Eye of Law. So we see a hierarchy emerge. Klaatu is somewhat subordinate in power to Gort, but Gort is created by Overlords and endowed with this destructive eye to keep his own creators in check. If Klaatu is a supplement to the traumatic and tragic lack of human phallic presence, Gort is a supplement to his own civilization’s lack of trustworthy rationality. If supplementation is power, Gort’s eye has more of it than Klaatu’s reasonable words.

Maybe you can already see what kind of story we have here. The eye, so central to psychoanalysis and fantasy, is a focal figure in this film. It is fascinating to trace the way characters look at each other. In a central scene, Helen Benson is stuck in an elevator with Klaatu at the precise moment the earth stands still.

Patricia Neal’s Helen examines Klaatu with more than a touch of suspicion, a touch of anxiety and confusion, but also with a will to trust—Michael Rennie’s Klaatu looks at her with a steady gaze lacking erotic signals, positive or negative. Helen is motivated by the need to trust this uncanny man, Klaatu by the need to trust this human being, who happens to be a woman and a mother and a “normal” (she is neither a scientist nor an official, she lacks any worldly power). Klaatu and Helen look at each other’s eyes—“at,” and not “into,” for neither can be sure of the other’s interior state, the complex of attachments and aversions that go to create a persona. Exchanges like this are usually in two- and three-shots in the film; but here we see one of the surprisingly few shot-reverse-shot sutures.



Defined by the fine chiaroscuro that Wise adopted from his mentor Val Lewton, the mise en scène accentuates the eyes—Helen's especially—and the estrangement of Klaatu's slightly eerie sculpted face. This is not the only such scene—think of Klaatu coming out of the shadows on several occasions, or the many times Helen gazes at Klaatu's eyes unsure of what she is seeing.

Helen probes Klaatu's eyes to see whether he is truthful, authentic, a real other instead of an impostor human. Klaatu observes her eye without his amused sardonic wonder, with a straight face. This is not the narcissism of eroticism. The other's eye and voice is not about self-imaging, seeking supplements for the Real in the lover's gaze and voice. What's at stake is not romantic love, the self-constitution of desire, but trust. Klaatu and Helen can eventually both say what Mickey Rooney says of Liz Taylor in *National Velvet* (1944), "She's not sweet on me, she trusts me."



On with our story. So Klaatu, the perfect male presence who is also serving and propped up by a giant robot that he did not program, turns out to be not so present after all. His power is dependent on that of a robot with a death-ray eye, who has a personal name (unless it means something like "Big Boy" in Overlordish). In order to prevent this Gort from destroying the planet with his eye (we presume), the dying Klaatu gives Helen the most familiar phrase of the film: "Gort, Klaatu barada nikto." The phrase is a piece of genius. It is never translated, so we have no one-to-one transposition. It has no "innerness," it is a functional speech act, pure and simple. We can speculate that *nikto* is a negative command, the Indo-galactic version of "ixnay on the earth snuff." But two words we do recognize: the names, Klaatu and Gort, clearly identify the sender of the message and its recipient. We can assume that Gort is programmed to respond to its own name—which means it recognizes itself, or at least distinguishes its identifying tag from all other utterances. And it recognizes Klaatu as the one who can give it either commands or decisive information. These words are Klaatu's power. His only direct power. And clearly they do not have to be direct, since he entrusts them to Helen. Gort is not programmed to respond to Klaatu's DNA or the timbre of his voice—the words can be spoken by anyone. But they are, nonetheless, a direct address to a named subject. We do not know whether it is a command or a suggestion; we do know it is Language.

So Klaatu's direct power is in fact something that he not only does not construct—he is constructed by it. As an emissary, his entire function is to warn, to advise, and even to save, but solely to preserve the mission. At no point does he become soft from tender L-U-V for a native girl and her people. The audience's subject-identification with the superior male Klaatu is in for a shock. Klaatu does not yield.

So when Klaatu is shot and killed by the defense forces, Helen, who has already lost a real husband and now a potential godfather for her son, has to convey this message to the robot or he will destroy everything else. To convey it, she must articulate it. It's an alien phrase—inspiring the audience to want to help Helen magically by learning it themselves. This weak vessel of

humanity has been entrusted to speak the saving words to the face of the colossus. The robot has melted away its super-plastic fetters. The first thing its sheathed eye “sees”—i.e., the first object of this world-annihilating power—is a human being; the audience sees it as a woman.



Helen backs away from the advancing hulking figure—coded male and phallic in almost every visual way. She falls and takes the traditional pose of the sexually vulnerable female victim, on the ground, with no escape. The “eye” is opening.



No one can rescue her; she is the only one who can effect a rescue. Where the normal contemporary film audience, trained in the protocols of romance and horror, see a sublimated rape scene (how could they not?), the film’s subject sees the prospects of genocide, indeed terracide. Helen delivers the message—

calling the colossus by name—and looks it in the eye. The same eyes that Helen had used to puzzle out and eventually to acknowledge trust in Klaatu she uses for what we can't avoid calling a personal encounter with the robot.



Gort seems to hesitate, as he always does before firing his ray. Message received, he resheathes his eye, and carries Helen to safety in the enclosure of the spaceship. In a reversal of the usual figuration that we are now familiar with, the robot-monster carries the human woman in its arms to protect her, keep her safe, and ultimately to allow her to witness its life-giving power. Gort then recharges his power eye to recover Klaatu's corpse, and returns to the spaceship, where we observe Gort reviving him (in one of the most beautiful compositions of the film).



So, what did we observe? The audience is not invited to feel displaced erotic desire, or if it is, it is only to cross it out. The subject position is constructed not by erotic investment, but by affective ethical investment—all with the tools of Hollywood romance.

In my comedy courses, I like to tell students that screwball comedy is very often a game of “phallus, phallus, who’s got the phallus?” We need to see that in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, too. The robot’s gaze seems to be the ultimate source of potency in this world. It is “male-ish,” utterly phallic, but not sexual. The audience’s natural desire to identify with the hero, Klaatu, and to be able to gaze at the heroine, is deflected into a different kind of gaze. Helen is not the “woman to be looked at.” Her female gaze is always equal to the encounter. Even if she is usually placed at a lower angle, she never averts her eyes or descends into a narcissistic self-regard or inner longing. And each of the film’s gazes reveals that there is a power behind it that can’t really be known, only looked for. Language—the Symbolic—has a different power; it is moveable, not tied to an individual body, and through the names of the phallic supplements—the all-destroyer with no will of its own and the free-agent commander with no power of his own—the reciprocal relations are mediated by a woman who has been lent the power of language and the power to “hail” the world destroyer. And perhaps she also has the power of language to command (the exact nature of her sentence is never clarified)—all without “understanding,” only trust. Thus she overlaps on one side with Gort, who has no “self-control” though he does have an identity, a name, and Great Power of destroying what he gazes at; and on the other with Klaatu, who has language and the symbolic order, but no direct power. The suture of these two phallic forces is an alien woman (alien to them), who stands in for—i.e., supplements—the human species on planet earth. And far from the struggle of individual wills to accommodate the mysterious attractive other, none of these characters really has much room to choose. It’s futile to point out that Helen has little agency—in the great scheme of the film, neither does Klaatu, neither does Gort. (Indeed, the only agent who still believes he has a choice in the matter is the contemptible would-be romantic suitor, Tom Stevens, the one character who never sees Gort.) Patricia Neal’s Helen is restless, probing, thinking; no human being can give her rest and satisfaction.

Žižek and his colleagues have written about the gaze of love—the way lovers looking into the supposed windows of each other’s souls must evade acknowledging that there is no there there “within.”⁴ Through lovers’ eyes we can only arrive at the Real, which has no love for love. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* also strangely has no love for love. What it has love for is respect, that curious word from the Latin that translates as “looking back at the other.” Helen and Klaatu see each other and trust each other, but perhaps that’s no big deal, since neither has the power to destroy with their gazes. Into this equivalence the film places the gaze of the robot. We may want to see this as a displaced figuration of technology, our own spirit of destruction embodied in robot guardians, or perhaps as technology that responds to the name not mainly of the father, but nonetheless of the Law.

This isn't about penetrating into the romantic other's depth, where we will find our ideal selves. It's about seeing face to face. For Wise, this is an extension of the aesthetic offered by the techniques of black and white melodrama, with its eyeline matches, shot-reverse-shots, and narrowly framed 2- and 3-shots. Characters use their eyes to probe, to threaten, to resist, and mainly to confront. Face-to-face intensifies drama. Eyes are brought into dialogue. And yet this is melodrama without melodrama; sentiment doesn't emanate from within attractive visages. It isn't intensive feeling, but extensive. There is compassion, but no mercy.

Gort has his death gaze—but let's be clear, he also has the power to resurrect, which he applies with eye shut and in silence. Klaatu has life-giving language—which is why he is the emissary to a world in which radio news, TV talking heads, screaming headlines, and diplomatic prevarication dominate public life. Klaatu can speak both English and alien command language. He is the one who can send the code—with the flashlight in alien Morse to Gort, or the message to the Overlords about stopping the world. He is the one that can read the code—and so correct Prof. Barnard's astrophysical equation.

The climax in the film is when Helen and Gort *exchange looks*—immediately after which she utters the words of negation. Klaatu has been killed, all power to moderate or preserve has gone to her. She carries the message, but she must undergo a trial: she must *face* Gort's look. We know that Gort probably could have heard the message long before he opened his eye; but the human doesn't know this. Helen believes, as does the audience and the film itself, that *she must be seen*, acknowledged by the gaze, if the message is to get through. That gives her a tiny window of opportunity in the tiny gap of mystery before Gort unleashes his death ray. She probes it, too, and so does the audience.

Gort is the one who matters most. Without expression, nonetheless his eye seems to probe. There's the odd and wonderful gap in his gaze that could be a moment of hesitation, which becomes the saving gap of Helen and the world. Instead of eroticism's hypnosis in the pool of self-supplementation, it is a moment of acknowledging the other's authority, in this case to carry a message from the male Overlord legate who has the only override code against a Nemesis-like cosmic technology, by a frail, ignorant, but exceedingly brave and trusting human woman, now truly alone with Klaatu dead. (Neither she nor the audience knows that Gort can resurrect him).

In the model of the triangulation of romantic desire associated with René Girard, the alien sometimes stands in for the object of desire compensating for the lack of an adequate human object.⁵ In this psychoanalytic model Klaatu stands for the object of desire, blocked by the competing and more erotically powerful third-term, in this case Gort, to whom in a sense Klaatu belongs—to whom he owes his mission, his code, and concretely his life. Complicating the matter is that Gort is not the origin of this state of obligation; he is the displacement, the vessel which now possesses like a colossal fetish the libidinal, aggressive powers that the Overlords felt required to extract from themselves. And if Klaatu's Overlords have an Unconscious minimally similar

to ours (and they surely do, given all the evidence of the film), then they transferred not only their aggression, but also their eros. Somewhere in that black box that is Gort the algorithm for eros is inextricably entwined with the one for thanatos—evident in the phallic eye and the propensity to burn worlds to cinders.

But the determinedly non-erotic universe of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* also leads us to imagine that it is possible to transcend the curse of romance, that Helen Benson never does abdicate her right to trust rather than to desire Klaatu, to understand rather than to “go sweet,” and to engage with the robot rather than to keep screaming. This is an aspect of desire, of course, but it is desire for a world in which we gladly give up sex and aggression together, to gain trust.

I’m sure the film can be read psychoanalytically as a superego romance—the desire for the Law, for the missing father, for the missing leader, for the Grand Phallus. But for me it is not really a romance, but a subversion, refusing frustration and consummation at every level. Despite the allegedly crypto-fascist message, it presents a set of problems in which voice and gaze become metaphorical vehicles for the existential connection of alien, human, and machine—all suspended between necessity and will, all needing to trust and be trusted.

NOTES

1. See especially “The Face of Things” in *Early Film Theory: Visible Man and the Spirit of Film* (46-51).
2. For two different perspectives on the gaze of objects or things, see Merleau-Ponty and Elkins.
3. See Dixon.
4. See Milan Dolar, “The Object Voice,” and Slavoj Žižek, “I hear you with my eyes”; or, *The Invisible Master*.”
5. See Girard (especially chaps. I and VIII) and Csicsery-Ronay (10-12).

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ABSTRACT

Robert Wise's 1951 sf film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is an anomalous classic. Klaatu appears to play the role of a noble masculine hero, supplementing the lack of positive phallic power in postwar America, acting as an extraterrestrial godfather to a bereft son and a potential partner for a bereft human woman, Helen Benson. He is instead a mediator between the more powerful phallic agent, Gort, and Helen as the carrier of a world-saving message. The film transcends conventional Hollywood tropes of romance, replacing erotic seduction with investment in trust. It does this by converting the technique of eyeline matches and reciprocal gazes characteristic of erotic melodrama into tropes of mutual ethical exploration and trust. The revolutionary contribution of the film is to include the gaze of the planet-destroying robot into this solicitation of trust.