

## ***THEM!* Notes**

### THE FILM

- Weird crossover: *Us* vs. *Them*, directed by Jordan Peele.
- Warner Bros. Not a B-movie, technically. Same year as *Godzilla*.
- *Godzilla Raids Again* opens like this with a survey plane, except this one is in the desert (sand sea).
- Little girl traumatized into silence. PTSD, shock. Not a Kenny. Good little actress.
- As absurd as this concept is, it's taken very seriously and treated with tremendous gravity—and it works.
- The film takes its time building tension, suspense, and mystery. We don't see the ants; just their aftermath.
- Dieticians were right: sugar is bad for you. It attracts giant ants.
- The noise the ants make is weird and unnerving. It sounds artificial.
- The howling wind in the second trailer scene creates great atmosphere.
- The dead bodies and aftermath are pretty gruesome for the time.
- I bet those are real ants in the sugar. No animals were harmed?
- I don't think turning the lights off was the best move, officer.
- The cops, naturally, think they're dealing with a serial killer.
- "Armored like a battleship." Was as big as one?
- 17 minutes in, and we finally meet the main character.
- That description of victim's autopsy sounds *horrifying*. He died five ways from Sunday.
- The rest of the cast doesn't show up until 20-21 minutes in.
- "She's a swell doctor, right"? "If she's the kind who treats the sick, I'll get a fever real quick." Ha!
- Like *Godzilla*: atomic mutations, nuclear tests, deaths by monsters, elderly scientist. Also like *Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*. Secrecy about monsters.
- The scene where the little girl is "awakened" is tense and shocking. She drops the title.
- Conflict: scientists and laymen. The latter don't understand. Old scientist is a bit out-of-touch.
- 28 minutes in, and we finally see one of the ants. The mystery is solved.
- Cop has a machine gun in his trunk?!
- Old scientist suddenly gets biblical, comparing the ants to a plague and quoting a verse about beasts ruling the earth." It's a phantom verse, though.
- Old scientist acts a bit childish at points, like in the helicopter.
- The shot of the ant standing over mound of bones is horrific.
- Cloud seeding? That was something I talked about in my previous podcast life. It's a throwaway line here.
- Surprisingly little recoil on the bazookas.

- With all this talk a nest with a colony of ants, it's interesting that there's almost never more than one on screen at a time. There were only three puppets made. All three are seen at the end.
- American flamethrowers solve everything, as Giant Monster Messages says.
- Pat is atypical for the time. She almost never screams and she's quite assertive to the men, reminding them of her expertise.
- An ant trapped in amber? Does Jurassic Park have that one?
- Educational segment on ants. It's like high school science class. (72-hour fight between males? "Only other creature who makes war?")
- Flying saucers shaped like ants in Brownsville, Texas? I'll ask Mr. Gold about it.
- I bet the pilot's story was inspired by the 1948 Mantell UFO incident. (See *Rodan* episode)
- Wilhelm scream!
- The ants' attacks are made personal with the mourning wives and mothers. One tells a story about her husband and sons.
- Woman spent the night with a "sick friend"—a married man. That was scandalous for the time. The cops speak with drunks, women of the night, and loony bin inmates about this. Must make their story hard to prove. Unreliable sources.
- There's a throwaway line about the Cold War "going hot." Joseph McCarthy hearings were being held that year (1954), but any connections to McCarthyism I find to be weak, at best. It has more to do with the atomic tests. That being said, it definitely taps into the fears of the time.
- L.A. is put under martial law. Terrifying.
- The needs of the many or the needs of the few: jeopardize the safety of the city to find two kids who are most likely dead.
- What happened to not using the flamethrower because of the kids?
- Great use of ant shadows on walls.
- The scientist prioritizes world safety over science in this.
- The climax is tense and claustrophobic.
- Ends on a foreboding note as to whether there are other ants from other nuclear tests out there, how man has entered a new and uncertain time with the nuclear age.

#### *Blu-ray Special Feature, "Ants"*

- Raw footage of takes for the ant puppets. It's kinda funny to watch.
- I think there's even some unused footage, like one of two puppets with a helicopter in the background.

#### *Wikipedia*

- When *Them!* began production in the fall of 1953, it was originally conceived to be in 3D and Warner Color. During pre-production, tests shots in color and 3D were made. A few color tests of the large-scale ant models were also made, but when it was time to shoot the 3D test, Warner Bros.' "All Media" 3D camera rig malfunctioned and no footage

could be filmed. The next day a memo was sent out that the color and 3D aspects of the production were to be scrapped; widescreen black-and-white would now be the film's presentation format. Warner Bros. hoped to emulate the "effective shock treatment" effect of its previous science fiction thriller *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*; ultimately, however, the film was never made in widescreen. Because of the preparation of certain scenes, many of the camera set-ups for 3D still remain in the film, like the opening titles and the flamethrowers shots aimed directly at the camera.[6]

- The title was originally a bright red with blue. Eastman Color. This was removed in home media releases.
- James Whitmore wore "lifts" in his shoes to compensate for the height difference between himself and James Arness. Whitmore also employed bits of "business" (hand gestures and motions) during scenes in which he appeared in order to draw more attention to his character when not speaking.[4]
- The Wilhelm scream, created three years earlier for the film *Distant Drums*...
- The giant ants, painted a purplish-green color, were constructed and operated by unseen technicians supervised by Ralph Ayers. During the climactic battle sequence in the Los Angeles sewers, there is a brief shot of one ant moving in the foreground with its side removed, revealing its mechanical interior.[4] This blunder has been obscured in the DVD releases of the film.[citation needed]
- The sounds the giant ants emit in the film were the calls of bird-voiced tree frogs mixed in with the calls of a wood thrush, hooded warbler, and red-bellied woodpecker. It was recorded at Indian Island, Georgia, on April 11, 1947, by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.[7]
- *Fallout 3*, which takes place in a post-apocalyptic irradiated wasteland, has a side-quest involving giant mutated fire ants titled "Those!" in homage to the film.[22]

### *IMDB*

- The late Leonard Nimoy has a bit part in the film as an Army Staff Sergeant who reads a news story off a teletype machine.

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### *Apocalypse Then by Bogue*

- Calls it one of the top ten best sci-fi films of the '50s.
- "When man entered the atomic age, he opened a door into a new world. What we eventually find in that new world, nobody can predict."
- Inspired by the success of *Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*. Like a police procedural; sober; realistic. The first "Big Bug" movie. The atomic mutation concept was still fresh and new.
- Bill Warren said that when Ben the cop died, the kids in the audience cried.
- Pat remains cool and professional while Robert actually screams once.
- Dr. Medford looked familiar, and now I know why: Edmund Gwen played Kris Kringle in *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*.

- There were two head and forequarters puppets and two full-sized puppets. Their feet don't touch the ground, which is usually hidden through camerawork. It was nominated for the Best Special Effects Oscar (lost to *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*).
- These don't look exactly like backyard ants; especially the eyes.
- The ants parallel fear of nuclear weapons. They multiply quickly (weapons are produced quickly); they could wipe out humanity in a year (nukes could do it fast); and their victory over them was uncertain (just like nuclear engagement). Not a localized threat like *Beast*. Indicative of "limited" nuclear wars that could be contained by the U.S.
- It took years of exposure to radiation to make the ants huge. This film was a little smarter than most.
- The ants are purely naturalistic.
- The military, scientists, and police—those in authority—are the heroes who win.
- The nuclear threat was impersonal to Americans, so this and other such movies are detached.
- American films of this era used radiation to make the natural unnatural (not so in Japanese cinema).
- Could more mutant insects arise? Open-ended.
- The last line is full of both wonder and unease.

*"The Nuclear Monsters That Terrorized the 1950s" by Waldman*

- People who want to talk about the jumpy, kitschy, gloriously lurid movie genre we now know as 1950s sci-fi usually start with Susan Sontag. This is not because Sontag is a bug-eyed alien or 50 feet tall but because she wrote, in 1965, the definitive essay on Cold War dystopian fantasy: "The Imagination of Disaster." "We live," she claimed in that piece, "under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror." The job of science fiction was at once to "lift us out of the unbearably humdrum ... by an escape into dangerous situations which have last-minute happy endings" and to "normalize what is psychologically unbearable, thereby inuring us to it."
- What they didn't do was challenge any of the social conventions that rendered such veiled discussions of nuclear power necessary in the first place. In their visions of atomic apocalypse, B-movies crystallized American paranoia without questioning it. They dehumanized otherness but turned a blind eye to how such dehumanization ended up feeding the nation's terrors. Deep down, these films had reactionary souls; Sontag finally concluded that they constituted an "inadequate response" to major socio-political issues.
- Between 1948 and 1962, Hollywood released more than 500 science-fiction features, which were widely distributed to movie palaces, neighborhood theaters, and drive-ins. Them!, a cautionary tale about giant irradiated ants, was Warner Bros.' highest-grossing film in 1954.
- Of course, as the French director Francois Truffaut wrote, "When a film achieves a certain success, it becomes a sociological event, and the question of its quality becomes secondary."

- As Peter Biskind wrote of the genre in *Seeing Is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us To Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties*, “where science caused the problem, science often solved it too.”
- Yet by the time 1950s filmmakers revived the genre, on-screen ghouls had lost all trace of pathos. They were meant to symbolize our supposed Communist foe: ruthless, cold-blooded as an insect or reptile, utterly strange. In fact, the ants in *Them!* sometimes seem more machine than creature (especially when, during a battle sequence, the side of one ant slips down, and you can see its mechanical insides whirring away). They are strong, smart, aggressive, collectivist, and impeccably organized. They communicate via an eerie keening that sounds almost like sonar. Their gleaming carapaces evoke the technology of war.
- Other sources:
  - *Keep Watching the Skies!*
  - <https://parkridgeclassicfilm.com/2013/10/25/them/>
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#### TOKU TOXIC: American Nuclear Tests in the 1950s

- There’s been a total of 2,212 conducted by eight nations since 1945. 1,032 were conducted by the U.S. at the Nevada Test Site, in the Pacific Ocean, in Amchitka Island of the Alaska Peninsula, Colorado, Mississippi, and New Mexico. The tests conducted until 1954 in the U.S. were Crossroads (1946), Sandstone (1948), Ranger (1951), Greenhouse (1951), Buster-Jangle (1951), Tumbler-Snapper (1952), Ivy (1952) (first H-bomb; “Codenamed ‘Mike’, the blast had an explosive yield of 10.4 mt, which was over 400 times the destructive force of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima”), Upshot-Knothole (1953), and Castle (Bravo) (1954).
- The first ever nuclear test was conducted July 16, 1945, in the Jornada del Muerto desert 35 miles southeast of Socorro, New Mexico, as part of the Manhattan Project. It was codenamed “Trinity” by J. Robert Oppenheimer, director of the director of the Los Alamos Laboratory where the bombs were developed, inspired by lines from John Donne poems. It was the same model of bomb as the “Fat Man,” the bomb dropped on Nagasaki (Wikipedia). Honestly, an entire podcast could be dedicated to just this test and still not cover all of its significance.
- The dangers of radiation were unknown at the time, and the test was conducted in secret, so no evacuations were ordered. Fallout from the blast was detected as far away as Indiana(!). Residents in the immediate area were exposed to over 20,000 milirems of radiation, which is 10,000 times the safety limit set by the Nuclear Regulatory Commissions thanks to breathing contaminated air and ingesting contaminated rainwater and goat’s milk, among other things. (<https://www.livescience.com/1698-atomic-bomb-test-exposed-civilians-radiation.html>)
- “The average yield for the atmospheric tests was 8.6 kilotons (kt). The fallout from the tests contained radionuclides and gases which were transported thousands of miles away from the NTS by winds. As a result, people living in the United States during these years were exposed to varying levels of radiation.”

- “Between 1951 and 1958, around 100 nuclear weapons tests were conducted in the atmosphere at the Nevada Test Site (NTS). Located about 100 km [75 miles] northwest of Las Vegas, the NTS was larger than many small countries, offering some 3,500 square km of undisturbed land.”
  - These were conducted by the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), which monitored peacetime atomic energy and technological development.
  - “On January 27, 1951, nuclear testing at the NTS officially began with the detonation of Shot Able, a 1-kiloton bomb, as part of Operation Ranger. Between 1951 and 1992, the U.S. government conducted a total of 1,021 nuclear tests here. Out of these tests 100 were atmospheric, and 921 were underground.”
  - Underground testing began here in September 1961 with Operation Nougat.
  - “The tests served various purposes such as: determining the impact of nuclear weapons on the physical environment and on manmade structures like military equipment; searching for possible peaceful uses of these weapons; testing the strength and effectiveness of new weapons; proof-testing existing weapons; and studying the effects of nuclear fallout. Some tests also involved military personnel who conducted operations near atomic ground zero, the point on the Earth’s surface closest to the detonation of a bomb, for the purpose of developing new battleground tactics. These tests occurred in four regions: “Frenchman Flat,” “Yucca Flat,” “Rainier Mesa,” and “Pahute Mesa.” “
  - “One example of the test series was Operation Plumbbob. The U.S. military conducted Operation Plumbbob from May 28 to October 7, 1957. This series of 29 nuclear tests was one of the longest and most comprehensive test series, and it became controversial after much of the operation was declassified. There were several goals during the Operation such as: improving weapon design, safety testing, conducting bio-medical experiments, and testing designs for thermonuclear systems. Plumbbob released large amounts of radioiodine (I-131) into the atmosphere producing about 32% of all civilian exposure due to atmospheric nuclear tests. About 3,000 servicemen were also exposed to high levels of radiation during Shot Smoky.”
  - “Mushroom clouds from the atmospheric tests could be seen up to 100 miles away in the distance. This led to increased tourism for Las Vegas, and throughout the 1950s and early 1960s the city capitalized on this interest. Many guests could see clouds, or bursts of light from hotel windows, and the hotels promoted these sights. Some casinos also hosted “dawn parties” and created atomic themed cocktails, encouraging visitors to view the tests. Calendars throughout the city also advertised detonation times, as well as the best viewing spots to see flashes or lights or mushroom clouds.”
  - “In 2010, the NTS was renamed the Nevada National Security Site (NNSS). The site is no longer used for nuclear weapons testing, but it is still used for U.S. national security needs. If deemed necessary, the site could be authorized again for nuclear weapons testing. The NNSS is now the preferred location for National Nuclear Security Administration defense programs, industry research, and

development efforts. The National Environmental Research Park is also located at this site. Both federal agencies and private industries conduct open air experiments here, focusing on emergency response techniques and test remediation.”

- “On August 5, 1963, President Kennedy, along with the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union, signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. This prohibited nuclear weapons tests and nuclear explosions underwater, in outer space, and in the atmosphere.”
- “On 10 May 1984, U.S. District Court Judge Bruce S. Jenkins ruled that radioactive fallout from above-ground nuclear tests in the 1950s had caused ten people to die of cancer and that the government was guilty of negligence in the way it had conducted the tests. It was the first time that the explosions at the NTS had been legally held to have caused cancers. The judge ruled that the government had also been negligent in failing to warn residents of Nevada, southern Utah and northern Arizona, who lived in the path of the tests' wind-borne fallout plumes, about the danger of radioactive contamination. The government was also said to have failed to measure distant radiation from the atomic blasts adequately and to inform the residents of ways to minimize the contamination.”
- “From 1955 to 1989, the average number of nuclear tests conducted every year was 55. Nuclear testing peaked in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The year 1962 alone saw as many as 178 tests: 96 conducted by the United States...”
- “...the United States' [last nuclear test was] on 23 September 1992.”
- Deposits of iodine-131 being carried downwind from the test sites may have killed as many 500,000 Americans thanks to contaminated air and milk (the cattle passed it on).
- International Day against Nuclear Tests (29 August).

#### Sources:

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