

English 345: Cine/Technology

Nuclear Nightmare Film Summaries

Fail-Safe (Sidney Lumet, 1964), based on the 1962 Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler novel of the same title

A malfunction in the Strategic Air Command (SAC) mainframe causes Colonel Jack Grady's squadron to receive orders to fly beyond their fail-safe point and attack Moscow. Once the accidental attack order is discovered, the President and SAC endeavor to recall or shoot down the bombers. However, the squadron has been trained to ignore all radio communications once they receive an attack order. Grady even disregards the pleas of his wife. Throughout the crisis, congressional, military, and scientific experts offer advice, including Professor Walter Groeteschele, a civilian defense contractor who has created statistical models of survival in the event of an American first strike. Washington's efforts fail, and the President strikes a deal with the Soviet premier whereby the U.S. will bomb New York City once Moscow is attacked. Although the First Lady and the family of the President's close friend, Brigadier General Warren Black, are in the city, the President carries out his plan.

Them! (Gordon Douglas, 1954)

Sgt. Ben Peterson and his partner, Ed Blackburn, find a little girl wandering in the New Mexico desert. While searching for her parents, they find a wrecked trailer. They also discover a strange print and hear a high-pitched sound they cannot identify. The pair later find a storekeeper murdered and his store ransacked, bags of sugar spilled over the floor. Blackburn, who stays at the store to await the coroner while Peterson goes to see the little girl, is killed by something unseen. FBI agent Robert Graham joins the investigation, as do father and daughter scientists Drs. Harold and Patricia Medford from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Medfords ask where the first nuclear bomb was exploded and vaguely discuss theories amongst themselves, but will not share their analysis until they investigate further. Dr. Harold Medford visits the little girl, holding a vial of fluoric acid beneath her nose. She shouts, "Them!"—the first words she has spoken. When the Medfords, Graham and Peterson return to the trailer site, Dr. Patricia Medford is attacked by a giant ant, a mutation brought about by nuclear testing. The group searches out the ant's nest and manages to eradicate most of the insects. However, newborn queen and worker ants, who have wings, have already left the nest. A search locates the ants in the 700 miles of tunnels beneath Los Angeles. Military, police, and scientist join together in the killing of the ants. However, at the film's end, Harold Medford wonders what else will emerge from the door opened by nuclear technology.