The Day the Earth Stood Still notes:

1. Released in 1951, six years after World War II ended (atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki), and two years after the Soviet Union unexpectedly detonated its first atomic bomb. The U.S. had ventured into a new generation of nuclear weapon, the hydrogen bomb, which was many times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb. Early efforts, some of them led by atomic scientists, to control the spread of nuclear weapons had failed.

2. Directed by Robert Wise. The movie is often regarded as one of very few liberal or left-leaning science fiction movies of the 1950s, a time when fear of communism was rampant, leading to congressional hearings spearheaded by Senator Joseph McCarthy. DTESS says we should put aside nationalism and international suspicion in the interest of avoiding certain death if we use these new weapons. The science fiction format allowed the writer and director to make political points that would have gotten them in trouble if the movie purported to be a realistic look at contemporary events.

3. The importance of the scientists in the movie reflects the public’s attitude towards the scientists who, in secret, developed the atomic bomb during the world war. Professor Barnhart clearly resembles Albert Einstein, especially the fuzzy hair. Einstein was widely regarded as the smartest man on earth. He was also an important figure in the history of the atomic bomb, even though he wasn’t directly involved with the team that built it. After the war he was active in scientists’ efforts to control nuclear weapons. The movie seems to approve the idea that political leaders are too fearful, ignorant, and self-centered to take effective action to stop the spread of these weapons. Scientists, the movie implies, are better able to get past such narrow-minded thoughts. The spaceman Klaatu (played by English actor Michael Rennie) looks somewhat like the physicist who led the Manhattan Project that built the atomic bomb: J. Robert Oppenheimer. Oppenheimer was very tall, very thin, with a long face. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Oppenheimer for a picture of Oppenheimer. See http://www.soperfi.org.pe/galerias/displayimage.php?album=6&pos=1 for him with Einstein.

4. The movie plays with several themes seen in myth:

   a. Destruction myth. In the Bible and elsewhere, the world is brought to an end by an angry god who is fed up with mankind for one reason or another. In the movie, the world is threatened with annihilation if we don’t put aside nuclear weapons and missiles. Klaatu voices this threat, but who or what lies behind it?

   b. Covenant. In the Bible, this is an agreement between God and Noah in which God promises not to destroy mankind again. The movie reverses this: mankind must reach a covenant among themselves lest the world be destroyed.
c. Dying and Reviving Gods. Many gods in world mythology die and then come back to life. Jesus fits this pattern, but so does Dionysus and even Prometheus (he dies every day when his liver is eaten but comes back to life when it grows back). How does the movie use this theme? Is there supposed to be a parallel between Klaatu and Jesus?

d. Monsters. Myths are filled with monsters of one kind or another. The movie plays on our expectations that the spaceman is a monster but then we see he is human – or at least looks human. Moreover, Klaatu turns out to be the most human figure in the movie, except for Helen Benson. He is kind, thoughtful, patient. He tries to understand us, whereas it’s clear that nobody tries to understand HIM – especially Tom Stevens (Helen’s boyfriend). One sign of Klaatu’s humanity: he’s good with little Bobby, in explicit contrast to Stevens, who doesn’t want the kid around.

The real monster is the robot Gort. For most of the movie we assume that Gort is Klaatu’s servant, entirely under Klaatu’s control. What happens at the end that proves otherwise?

5. Other questions:

a. How does Klaatu convince the world of his power?
b. When does Klaatu tell Helen he is the spaceman?
c. What does Barnhart do in response to Klaatu’s request for an international meeting?
d. How does Stevens find out about Klaatu and what does he tell Helen when he says he’ll tell the police about the spaceman?
e. After Klaatu is hurt, Gort breaks out of the plastic cube he is encased in. He then sees Helen and moves toward her. What does this scene remind you of? What does their encounter LOOK LIKE?
f. Can you examine the relations between Klaatu, Gort, and Tom as a set of binaries built upon ideas of masculinity (what is manliness?) and the associated idea of violence? Is there a love triangle between Tom, Klaatu, and Helen – or even a love quadrangle if we throw in Gort?