

**An Official 'Bad-Bug-Movie' Review**  
**ENT 812, Insects in the Cinema**  
**Michigan State University**

The Beginning of the End  
Reviewed by Dan Hulbert

“Dr. Wainright, you're a scientist, you know what grasshoppers can do.  
I'm a soldier, I know what guns can do.”  
So Big...we had to coin a new word for it...NEWMENDOUS!

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New thrills! New shocks! New terror!

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The screen's first full-length science-fiction thriller with real live creatures!  
(Taglines from IMDB)

THE BEGINNING OF THE END (TBE) follows the formula of THEM in many ways (some parts are nearly identical) although there are important differences. TBE did not appear to win any major awards, and frankly I think the special effects are better in THEM. The main characters are played by Peter Graves and Peggy Castle. Graves had already appeared in a number of movies (several science fiction ones) and would appear in many more movies as well as television shows (Mission Impossible, Airplane and Airplane II to name a few). Castle had already been in many B-movies and TBE was one of the last she ever did. She did do television shows until 1964 when she retired. All of the creature effects were done using a technique called “rear projection” in which the actors are filmed far up-stage while a large projection of a grasshopper is shown far down-stage. The effect is a huge grasshopper terrorizing Illinois.

TBE was released in 1957, so similar social and political values as in THEM are evident. Most notably attitudes towards the government are overwhelmingly positive. To give some historical context for the year 1957: Eisenhower was president and expanding the nation's nuclear arsenal, the Cold War was in full swing, the Korean war had ended a couple years earlier (1953), there was growth of the suburbs as middle class (white) Americans became more financially stable, the sexual revolution had not quite started which is made painfully obvious by the uncomfortably chaste onscreen relationship between Greaves' and Castle's characters.

### Plot Synopsis

TBE takes place first in a couple small towns in Illinois and ends in Chicago. This is not especially necessary to the plot as the same movie could have taken place in any state that has a major city on a body of water.

### Act I

The movie starts with two cops investigating a suspicious accident that has no explanation (sound familiar?). Upon further investigation, the police discover that an entire small town has been entirely reduced to ruins and its inhabitants are completely missing. At this point the military takes over the investigation and begins questioning people who were near the town shortly before it was destroyed. It is clear from their questioning that they suspect that some sort of bombing occurred (from the Reds?!). Throughout this, Audrey Aimes (Castle) is

trying to investigate what happened for her news company. The military does let her in on what they know, but on the condition she keeps it secret until the military says it is ok to tell the public (which she agrees to!).

While investigating what has happened, Aimes goes to a USDA research lab because it had radioactive substances which she thought could have been the source of the destruction. There she meets Dr. Ed Wainwright (Graves), the very debonair entomologist who is the director of the lab.



This man is an entomologist

Dr. Wainwright shows Aimes comically huge fruits and vegetables which he created by using radiation. He says that the radiation caused unrestricted growth as long as they had enough radioactive food (sort of true I guess, only in real life I think it's more like cancer). Then the two of them go and investigate a nearby grain silo which had been suspiciously destroyed. There, Wainwright deduces that the silo was demolished from the inside out (sound familiar!?). After a few minutes of poking around, a loud chirping noise is heard and a giant grasshopper appears and eats Wainwright's deaf and mute assistant (he was deaf and mute from exposure to radiation). Wainwright then whisks Miss Aimes to safety where they then try, unsuccessfully at first, to convince the military that giant grasshoppers are to blame for the destruction. Once the commanding officer sees the grasshoppers for himself, he decides to use the Illinois National Guard to stop the mutant grasshoppers, although Wainwright thinks they should go big or go home and just call the regular army. The Grasshoppers then overwhelm the National Guard and eventually the regular military (holy shit, tanks can't even stop these things!) and make their way to Chicago. Wainwright at some point during all this says some dramatic line about how these

giant insects could usher a new era in which humans are annihilated, but then has to dumb it down for Miss Aimes by saying it could be “the beginning of the end!” (there is also some suggestion of romance between Wainwright and Aimes)

## Act II

With the grasshoppers from hell occupying Chicago, the commanding officer tells his plan to evacuate the city and then nuke it. Wainwright, the studly scientist, says that he could come up with a way to imitate the grasshopper’s call and lure them into Lake Michigan where they will drown. The CO gives Wainwright until the following morning to come up with something or Chicago gets nuked. The grasshoppers meanwhile are relatively sedate because of the cooler night temperatures (actual science) leaving Wainwright to get some undistracted scientisting done with some complicated looking oscillators. In the nick of time Dr Wainwright (whose hair is almost perfect despite just pulling an all-nighter) manages to use the oscillators to create a sound that attracts the grasshoppers. With the bombing mission halted, Wainwright lures all the grasshoppers to the building with the oscillators. After some tense and suspenseful moments, a boat offshore with a loud speaker plays the same sound which causes the grasshoppers to march like lemmings into Lake Michigan. Aimes and Wainwright, having just saved the day, share a deliberately platonic embrace. The end

Moral of the story: Radiation + Mother Nature = The Beginning of the End (in so many words)

### The Players

The Military – Good guys, very similar to THEM. Even the entomologist served in the military during “the war.” An important difference between TBE and THEM is that the military is unable to stop the insects without resorting to the Bomb.

The entomologist, Dr. Wainwright- Now this is a big difference between TBE and THEM. Dr. Wainwright is not only sexy, he is capable. He is able to single handedly hold off several giant grasshoppers with only a machine gun (something that a small army of tanks could not do). In the end, it is he and his science that save the day. There is, however, some condescension towards him from the military (see the quote at the beginning) but it’s ok, because he was right in the end.

The woman, Miss Aimes - An interesting character. She starts the movie as an independent successful journalist who is well respected by the military. As the movie progresses and she gets to know Dr. Wainwright, she becomes progressively more useless. By the end of the movie, she is little more than the doctor’s side-kick...a good role model to 50’s women everywhere.



“My husband wouldn’t want me to be a driving character the whole movie”

- Audrey Aimes (probably)

### The Grasshoppers!

I thought that grasshoppers were an interesting choice of monster. They have more sinister connotation than ants

(plagues and locusts) but they are not necessary for the movie. Many different animals could have eaten the radioactive plant food and then got locked into the silo and grown to disturbing proportions, any animal which is an agricultural pest would probably have worked well. Grasshoppers were probably chosen because of their ravenous reputation, which can be devastating even when they are normal sized.

From a scientific standpoint, some things were pretty funny and other things were done well. An example of something done well, in my opinion, was the sound the grasshoppers made. Compared to THEM it was a more realistic sound and (marginally) less annoying. Also, it was stated that the grasshoppers would be too large to fly, which would be true for a 10 ft+ grasshopper (it also couldn't get enough oxygen to its tissues, but I guess I am willing to suspend my disbelief). The last good thing the movie did (that I'm going to talk about) was the fact that the grasshoppers were not active at night because of lower temperatures. It was a good plot device and was also accurate.

### Special Effects

The movie made extensive use of a technique called rear projection to create the illusion of giant grasshoppers. With this technique, grasshoppers would be filmed before hand and then projected on a giant screen behind the actors when the scene was shot. Another effect used to create huge grasshoppers was simply film the grasshoppers walking around on photographs of skyscrapers.

### Legacy

This was one of the giant arthropod movies inspired by THEM and was not nearly as successful. It won no major awards, although it does have a cult following now and is featured on an episode of Mystery Science Theater 3000

