

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

THEM! (1954)

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THEM is recognized as the first 'big bug' movie, and one of the first nuclear monster flicks. It was a major money-maker for Warner Brothers and was nominated for an Oscar for special effects. It stars several actors who had, or went on to, fame, particularly in TV. Edmund Gwenn, the elderly entomologist, was best known for playing Kris Kringle in 'Miracle on 34th Street' (still on TV at Christmas). James Whitmore had a long career in TV and in movies. Partly based on his performance in THEM (and his sheer height), James Arness got the role of Marshall Matt Dillon in 'Gunsmoke'. Also based on his performance in THEM, Fess Parker was hired by Disney to play Davey Crockett and Daniel Boone. THEM was originally supposed to be filmed in color and 3-D, but there was a problem with the cameras. Instead, it was shot in widescreen and black-and-white. The title sequence alone remains in red lettering, with the letters coming out towards the audience (probably for the 3-D effect). Several other shots remain that were set up for 3-D.



Released in 1954, THEM reflects the Cold War era, when the U.S. and Soviet governments viewed each other not only as philosophical enemies (democracy and freedom versus communism) but also as physical enemies, each racing to build the larger nuclear arsenal under the theory of 'Mutually Assured Destruction'. Movie-goers at this time knew the effects of the nuclear bombs dropped on Japan, and were well aware of bomb tests in the American west. They lived every day unsure of Soviet intentions, and believed it possible that Russia could launch an unprovoked attack. Around the world, hot spots like Korea and the Middle East ratcheted up tensions and the possibility of an all nuclear war.

Plot Synopsis

THEM takes place in New Mexico, near Alamogordo. This location is critical because it is near White Sands Missile Grounds, where the first atomic test was conducted (10 years prior to the time of the film). The film opens with an aerial shot looking down on the desert from an aircraft. This shot immediately establishes that this area is open, isolated and desolate; a lot can happen out here without anyone knowing. Policemen Ben Peterson (James Whitmore) finds a small girl wandering alone across the sand, mute and unable to say what happened. The mystery deepens when a wrecked trailer is discovered. Clearly this is not a robbery – the only thing missing is sugar – and the metal seems to be pulled outward, not punched inward. Also, a nearby shop is destroyed and its sugar also missing. A high-pitched twittering sound is heard at the scene, but the police assume it is

the wind. The police find strange markings in the sand, make a cast, and send it in for identification. The trailer turns out to be owned by a federal agent on vacation, a clever device to bring in FBI agent Graham (James Arness) and the federal authorities (USDA, military) as a whole.

In an unexpected twist, two entomologists, the Medfords (Edmund Gwenn, Joan Weldon), from the U.S. Department of Agriculture arrive in New Mexico; they saw the plaster cast and want to visit the wrecked trailer. The time frame isn't clear. How quickly has the plaster cast made its way through the FBI to the USDA, then to these particular specialists? The movie assumes a remarkably short time. Nevertheless, the entomologists ask immediately to see the little girl. Dr. Medford clearly suspects something we don't, because in a key scene, he uses formic acid to bring the girl out of her trance. She yells 'Them, Them!' (maybe the first-ever use of a pronoun in panic).



The law officers and scientists visit the wrecked trailer, finding more tracks and hearing more sounds. Finally, the culprit is revealed – a giant ant. Dr. Medford recommends shooting at the antennae, because 'ants see poorly'. The dead ant confirms Dr. Medford's suspicion that exposure to radiation from the nearby nuclear tests 10 years previous mutated ants into giant killers. The dead ant is a forager, so there must be a queen and a nest nearby. After an aerial search, the nest is found and plans made to kill the workers with cyanide gas. After visiting the nest, Pat Medford determines that two queens have escaped, so the government has an all-out effort to screen news reports for unusual activity, without directly alerting the press or public to what is going on. Their search pays off. A pilot in Texas sights a UFO shaped like a giant ant. Visited in the psych ward, the pilot reconfirms his story. This is one of two times in the movie where 'crazy people' provide key information. The pilot is kept locked up after his interview, so that the public cannot hear his story.

One queen ends up on a freighter carrying, surprise, sugar. A Navy ship sinks the freighter, but then is held out at sea, again to avoid spilling the beans to the public. In Los Angeles, another 'crazy person' (a drunk in a hospital) provides a second piece of crucial information, that he saw giant ants in the LA storm sewer system. A major assault is planned, and the military declare martial law. The climax of the movie occurs in the sewers, with the army searching for the ants as well as two missing children. As in the first scene of the movie, when he rushes to help the small girl, Policeman Peterson finds and saves the two boys, but at the cost of his life. FBI agent Graham and the military have a final battle with the ants, destroying the queen and eggs with flamethrowers. Although the insects are destroyed, the ending is ambiguous. Are there more ants out there, undiscovered? Will there be mutations of other insects? What about the other bombs exploded in the desert over the last ten years? Dr. Medford has the final warning: 'We opened a door into a new world in the atomic age.' By opening this door, or the genie's bottle, or Pandora's box, man (Medford intones earlier in the movie), '...may be witnesses to a Biblical prophecy come true – and there shall be destruction and darkness come over the creation, and the beast shall reign over the earth.' Man may destroy himself, not by his own hand using the bomb, but simply by dabbling in science in the first place.

The Players

The authority figures – the FBI agent and policeman – are handsome, well-dressed, heroic figures. Cinema De Merde's (2008) review of the movie describes Arness as 'a typical 50s blond [and bland]

handsome dude with shoulders about a yard across' and Whitmore as 'the classic, upstanding 50s American cop...he looks like he's craved out of wood...My God is he handsome...Holy shit is he hot.' Both are protective of the weak, Whitmore of the three kids and Arness of the female entomologist. Both are ready for military action at the drop of a hat, and in fact fire an array of weapons, including flame throwers, at the ants. Today, it would seem strange for a guy to go from street clothes in one scene, to blasting away in a military uniform. But in the mid-1950s, many men in the movie audience would have served in or just after World War II, or in the Korean War (which ended in 1953). Thus many would be familiar with weapons and military protocol, and perhaps even still part of the National Guard. Even the drunk in the movie seems to have military experience!

The entomologist, Dr. Medford, is inevitably played by an older gentleman with glasses, is less tidy than the handsome lawmen, and uses a lot of scientific terms. As in 'Jaws' (another classic 'animal' horror movie), one of the scientist's purposes in a horror film is to act as a narrator, providing the necessary background information about biology – in this case, ant biology (how else would our heroes know to shoot antennae?). Dr. Medford does this through explanations to the other characters and through a short film – at the same time, bringing the audience up to speed on ants as 'ravaging beasts'. He is a stereotyped absent-minded academic, totally focused on the job at hand (getting off the plane and demanding to see the child right away). Nothing stands in the way of proving his theory. That said, despite his age and science jargon, his judgment is not questioned and he is respected as scientists and doctors were in the 1950s.

The most interesting character is Medford's daughter, Pat. When we first see her, she is a typical 1950s woman – skirt, pretty hat, and handbag - even while exploring a desert crime scene. She is saved from an ant by the FBI agent, helplessly falling as she struggles to run away in sand in high heels. She is clearly the object of the agent's amorous affection, and it is uncomfortable for the men to call her 'doctor'. However, she IS a doctor and an entomologist. How interesting in 1954! She does not go by the name Patricia, or Patty, but by the androgynous 'Pat'. She proves herself knowledgeable and tough by insisting on going into the ant mound, despite the danger, and dons male clothing to do so. It is Pat who discovers that two queens have left the nest, sparking a search, and she directs the men to destroy what is left in the nest.



In some ways, she is more competent than her father. For example, he cannot figure out how to use the radio in the airplane, but she acts like an old pro. Why this tolerance of a woman in a non-traditional role? My thought is that Pat is an 'extension' of her father. She interprets his scientific lingo to others, and acts as his eyes and ears when he cannot physically go somewhere (for example, into the nest). Although she has a PhD, her work is in connection with, and relation to, her father, and she really does not have her own career. So while the movie pushes boundaries by featuring a female entomologist, in a sense Pat is also playing the good daughter and caregiver to her father, a non-threatening role acceptable to a 1950s audience.

The military in general in this movie, and authority more broadly (the government), is viewed favorably in THEM. What is particularly striking is the tolerance for secrecy shown at many points in

the story. Other than Ben Peterson and a few other local cops, police are not told what is happening. Reporters are rebuffed and prevented from filing a story. A private citizen, the pilot Mr. Crotty, is held against his will in the psychiatric ward until further notice, and a Navy ship is kept out to sea. What appear to be military personnel pour over communications (Are they tapping phone calls? Listening in on conversations?) looking for key words. Los Angeles is held under martial law without really telling people what is going on. Today, with email access, cell phones, texting/ twittering and other means of instant electronic communications, this sort of censorship sounds like something from Iran or North Korea. Yet to a 1950s audience, this appears to be acceptable, just part of doing business – an attitude that the government knows what it is doing and this is for our own good. This would not be acceptable today.

Ants Rule

The use of an insect in the story line is crucial. The goal is to show the potential impact of the atomic age on living things, and radiation exposure turns a small, easily-overlooked creature into a giant killing machine. Once enlarged, the ants simply act as they normally do, seeking sugar, then turning to other food sources (people) when the sweets run out. The use of ants specifically makes sense, since they are common in the desert and would be present at the site of the atomic testing. Furthermore, ants live in nests underground, so they would initially not be discovered. Their underground habits then enable the dramatic climax of the film, where the army hunts and kills ants in the Los Angeles sewer system.

From an entomological standpoint, many things are ‘correct’ but there are obvious errors as well. In general, the ant structure and biology are true (ants ‘don’t see well’ and ‘breathe through their sides’). However, the ants were too hairy, in some instances appeared downright shaggy, rather than being covered with delicate sensory hairs. The antennae are hilariously floppy and shaggy. Many ants are attracted to sugary substance, and some are predaceous with large mandibles. The mandibles in this case were used for grasping humans around their mid section. In addition to mandibles, ants have formic acid for defense. It is the smell of formic acid that brings the small girl in the movie out of her trance, and reinforces Dr. Medford’s suspicion that she was terrorized by ants. Ant nests are made up of tunnels and chambers, and there are different castes that work and reproduce. Reproductives are winged (four wings, not two!) and disperse by flight to mate and establish a new nest. In this movie, the mating flight allows the authorities to track one of the queens to Texas. In the movie, the ants skip the larval stage entirely – a convenient result of the ‘radiation’ – which means the army only needs to kill eggs and workers. Finally, another key that enables people to locate the ants is the high pitched twittering sound that they make ‘to communicate’. Ants do not communicate through sound, but instead use chemical cues.

Legacy

The box office success of THEM inspired a slew of giant arthropod movies in the last 1950s, including ‘Tarantula’, ‘Beginning of the End’, ‘The Deadly Mantis’, and ‘The Black Scorpion’. Later ant horror films include ‘Phase IV’ (1974) in which pollution-exposure causes ants to attack people. In ‘Empire of the Ants’ (1977 - “It’s no picnic!”), starring a young Joan Collins, radioactive waste creates evil killer ants. However, THEM remains the first big bug flick, and one of the best.

Citations

Cinema de Merde. 2008. THEM. http://www.cinemademerde.com/Them_1954.shtml

Wikipedia entry, THEM <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Them!>

Horror-Wood webzine. Them ants crash the atomic picnic. <http://www.horror-wood.com/them.htm>