

*Interdisciplinary:
Film and Cultural Studies, History*

The Battle for Dominance in the Skies: How Sci-Fi Films Reflected Societal and Political Concerns during the Space Race

Luke Collins '24
Harvard-Westlake School
California, USA

Abstract

The Cold War era coincided with a rapid rise in the popularity and influence of science fiction films. These movies often used allegories to track the political atmosphere of the times, such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), an examination of foreign infiltration released at the height of McCarthyism and the Red Scare. Other early Cold War-era films, such as *Destination Moon* (1950) helped to set the stage for acceptance of space exploration as a realistic and achievable goal. Once the Space Race was in full swing, the American public was exposed to more films highlighting the dangers posed not only by potential nuclear annihilation but also by technology itself. Prominent examples are two masterpieces, both directed by Stanley Kubrick: *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). President Kennedy relied on two main themes to justify the immense costs involved with the Space Race: a fear of Soviet domination paired with appeals to American Exceptionalism and American national identity as explorers of new frontiers. This paper examines how contemporaneous films tracked societal and political concerns during the Cold War and pivotal years of the Space Race, thus helping the American public contemplate and understand the risks and benefits associated with new technologies and space exploration.

Introduction

“Listen now, for the sound that forevermore separates the old from the new.”

– NBC radio network announcer on the night of October 4, 1957, describing the beeping sound emanating from the Sputnik satellite as it crossed over the United States.¹

American fears about the Cold War escalated dramatically when the Soviet Union suddenly announced to the world that they had successfully deployed the world’s first artificial satellite, Sputnik I. By the time the American public was made aware of Sputnik, the satellite had already passed over the US twice without being detected.² With the launching of Sputnik, the morale of US citizens was severely tested. Stephen King, the horror writer, recalled years later that he was watching a movie when an announcement interrupted, telling the audience about the launch of Sputnik. King describes the utter disbelief that followed and how America’s national image as a nearly invincible country was shattered in an instant.³ During World War II, while Europeans suffered heavy damage from the Nazis, not a single bomb was dropped on the continental United States, which added to this heightened sense of American invincibility going into the Cold War.

By the time of the Sputnik launch, the Cold War was already a decade old. Throughout the entire Cold War, popular films played an important role in both shaping public thought toward the Soviets and in garnering support for the United States’ immense military spending to combat this new adversary. During these years, the science fiction genre markedly flourished. Sci-fi books and films revealed to the public, often hyperbolically, both the risks and opportunities of venturing into space. Science fiction films from the Cold War era helped the American public contemplate and understand the issues associated with new technologies and space exploration and eventually helped support the decision to push forward and explore space and push humanity toward the unknown.

¹ Paul Dickson, “Sputnik’s Impact on America,” PBS, November 5, 2007, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/sputnik-impact-on-america/>.

² Roger Launius, *Reaching for the Moon: A Short History of the Space Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

³ William McConnell, *Living through the Space Race* (Detroit: Greenhaven Press, 2006), 104.

The Early Years of the Cold War

The first decade of the Cold War is distinguished by America's extreme anti-communism and an intense apprehension of nuclear war. Americans had recently witnessed the power of atomic weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Sci-fi literature had eerily foreshadowed the dropping of the atomic bomb decades before; the use of atomic weaponry was common in science fiction magazines and comics prior to the bombing. Ray Bradbury, the science fiction author, claimed in response to the bombings that he was not surprised and that he, "had read about it and thought about it for years!" Additionally, H.G. Wells, another science fiction author, predicted the atomic bomb decades prior.⁴ Since the representations of the atomic bomb in science fiction proved correct, the American public could hardly be blamed for their paranoia of aliens, space exploration, and technology as we entered the Cold War.

After the conclusion of World War II, Soviet forces, led by Stalin, began to push into Eastern Europe. To the democratic nations of the world, the Soviet Union had seemingly replaced the Nazis in trying to spread their radical political ideas. Churchill chillingly described the division in Europe by stating, "An iron curtain has descended."⁵ The rise of communism in China and North Korea added to the fears of Americans, implying that communism was spreading like wildfire and that the US might be the next to succumb to its grasp. Another fear common in the US was the idea that communist spies had infiltrated the government and were in abundance in everyday society. Joseph McCarthy, a Wisconsin senator, stated (with scant evidence) that there were 205 "known communists" in the State Department. McCarthy, having been put into the spotlight by the media, planted the idea in the public that communist subversion could be genuine. In the face of these threats, both real and perceived, the global stage was set for intense competition between the superpowers.⁶

Science fiction films during the 1950s, exemplified by Don Siegel's 1956 classic *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, reflected and intensified the prevailing Cold War anxieties by allegorically portraying the fear of communist infiltration and forced conformity in American society. *Body*

⁴ For information on sci-fi literature, Ray Bradbury and H.G. Wells see Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1994), 257.

⁵ For info on Churchill and resources sent into Europe, see Charles Bahmueller, *The 1950s in America*, (Hackensack: Salem Press, 2005).

⁶ For info on McCarthyism and the Red Scare, see Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in the Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (Oxford University Press, 1990).

Snatchers presents a chilling narrative where extraterrestrial beings replace humans with emotionless duplicates, mirroring the perceived threat of communist infiltration during the Cold War era. The film captures the fear of losing individuality and succumbing to conformity, a concern deeply rooted in the societal climate of McCarthyism and the Red Scare. The film's narrative unfolds in a small town where residents are gradually replaced by pod-like replicas, mirroring the paranoia and distrust prevalent during the time. The film effectively amplifies the audience's anxieties by capitalizing on the political climate of the era, emphasizing the importance of vigilance and the preservation of individuality in the face of a perceived outside threat. *Body Snatchers'* underlying threats of conformity and the loss of individuality resonated with audiences who were already grappling with the notion of a potential communist invasion, making it a significant cultural artifact of the era.

In parallel with the dystopian vision of *Body Snatchers*, these early Cold War years also planted the seeds of the possibilities of space exploration. *Destination Moon* (1950) depicts a story of four astronauts who must overcome several obstacles to successfully land on the Moon.⁷ This groundbreaking film not only kickstarted the rise of science fiction media in the 1950s but was also praised for portraying space travel in an accurate way to appeal to a wide range of audiences, something that was rare in sci-fi media up to this point.⁸ One film reviewer pointed out that even though a scientist in the film mentioned how the first nation to have missiles on the Moon would control Earth, the most captivating aspect of the film is that, "it is exciting to climb aboard the ship with those four men ... to wiggle and squirm with them in agony as their silver tube roars into space."⁹ To American citizens who were invigorated by ideas of American Exceptionalism after having prevailed in WWII, space offered a seemingly new goal that was previously thought to be unreachable.¹⁰ *Destination Moon* helped further motivate the American people by making it seem like the audience was right there on the ship with the astronauts; through this film, science fiction was close to becoming reality.

One other major theme of the early Cold War science fiction films is that Americans and the US Government were unquestionably the "good guys." In this period with rapid new technological

⁷ Irving Pichel, *Destination Moon* (Eagle-Lion Classics), 1950.

⁸ Bradley Schauer, "The Greatest Exploitation Special Ever": *Destination Moon and Postwar Independent Distribution* (Film History 27, no. 1 (2015)), 1-28.

⁹ Bosley Crowther, *Destination Moon, George Pal Version of Rocket Voyage, New Film at Mayfair*, (*New York Times*, June 28, 1950).

¹⁰ Robert Allison, *History in Dispute* (Detroit, MI: St. James Press, 2000), 241.

development, the government had to justify its efforts to the public; science fiction media helped bolster public support for the government by demonstrating how the government could help if things went awry. *The War of the Worlds*, a film released in 1953 based on the famous book by H.G. Wells, depicts an alien invasion of Earth and the government's efforts to fight back against these hostile Martians. It bolsters the idea that when humanity ventures into space, the US military would be willing to defend against any threats found.¹¹

The Rise of the Space Race

The Space Race became the key battlefield in the Cold War and kicked into high gear in the late 1950s through the 1960s. Several years after the historic achievement of the Sputnik satellite, the Soviets achieved another milestone when Yuri Gagarin successfully completed the first human orbital flight. Americans began to question the strength of the Soviets in comparison to their own, and since scientific advancements in space were seen as representative of military might on earth, these early Soviet achievements were seen as signs that the US was falling behind and helped to kickstart America's full engagement in the Space Race.¹²

In partial response to the Soviet's achievements, President Eisenhower enacted the National Aeronautics and Space Act in 1958. This pivotal legislation created NASA, an independent agency dedicated to the peaceful exploration of space.¹³ In essence, Eisenhower's act was a tangible response to the public sentiment that had been nurtured by science fiction films like *Destination Moon*. By establishing a national framework for space exploration, the United States demonstrated its readiness to step beyond the confines of Earth, a move that was as much a product of the Space Race's geopolitical importance as it was a response to the societal excitement that space travel was possible. The US had come to recognize that space exploration was becoming a military necessity.¹⁴

President John F. Kennedy was quick to realize the importance of the Soviet's early superiority in the Space Race. In his inaugural address, JFK described the situation as one where each superpower, despite the

¹¹ Byron Haskin, *The War of the Worlds*, (Paramount Pictures, 1953).

¹² Lily Rothman, "Read TIME's Original Report on the Sputnik 1 Launch," Time, October 3, 2017, <https://time.com/4958422/sputnik-1957-report/>.

¹³ Miles Waggoner, "Space Act Signed 15 Years Ago," *NASA Technical Reports Server*, July 29, 1973,

<https://ntrs.nasa.gov/api/citations/19730019136/downloads/19730019136.pdf>.

¹⁴ Allison, *History in Dispute*.

immense costs involved and despite already having the capacity to fully destroy the other, was “both racing to alter the uncertain balance of terror that stays the hand of mankind’s final war.”¹⁵ JFK realized that this idea of the Balance of Terror (later known as the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)) would quickly become imbalanced if the Soviets were able to expand upon their Sputnik achievement and extend their lead in the Space Race.¹⁶

In JFK’s famous 1962 “We Choose to Go to the Moon” speech, he sets out the importance of the US fully entering and winning the Space Race.

We set sail on this new sea because there is new knowledge to be gained, and new rights to be won, and they must be won and used for the progress of all people. For space science, like nuclear science and all technology, has no conscience of its own. Whether it will become a force for good or ill depends on Man, and only if the United States occupies a position of pre-eminence can we help decide whether this new ocean will be a sea of peace or a new terrifying theater of war.¹⁷

Elsewhere in this speech and other related speeches to Congress, President Kennedy sets forth the goal of landing a man on the Moon by the end of the decade. In addition to the fear and danger of Soviet space superiority, Kennedy also alludes to ideas of American Exceptionalism in arguing for the importance of the space program to uphold the idea that the US was the leading technological power.¹⁸ In its way, space represented the same frontier that the New World was to the early colonists, and this call for America to uphold its legacy of exploration helped bolster national support for the Space Race.¹⁹ All these factors, from fear of Soviet superiority to this hopeful message about American Exceptionalism, helped JFK and his successors maintain Congressional and public support for the prodigious investments that were crucial in the Space Race.

¹⁵ John F. Kennedy, “President John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address,” Speech, January 20, 1961.

¹⁶ For information on nuclear deterrence theories and doctrines see David McDonough, “Nuclear Superiority or Mutually Assured Deterrence: The Development of the US Nuclear Deterrent,” *International Journal* vol. 60 no. 3 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.2307/40204064>.

¹⁷ John F. Kennedy, “Address at Rice University on the Nation’s Space Effort,” Speech, Rice University, September 12, 1962.

¹⁸ Allison, *History in Dispute*, 256.

¹⁹ Allison, *History in Dispute*.

Kennedy's dual justifications of fear and hope become central themes throughout the Space Race. His inaugural address recognition that a war between the superpowers would be "mankind's final war" was quickly put to the test in October 1962 by the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the placement of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. Not even two decades removed from the end of WWII, the Cuban Missile Crisis forced humanity to again confront the terrifying prospect of global devastation. In response to this crisis, the US, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union passed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963, which signaled an international acknowledgment of the need to limit the development of nukes.²⁰

At the same time as geopolitical tensions during the Cold War escalated, the threat of nuclear annihilation provided a grim backdrop for the era's science fiction narratives. Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* released in 1964 is a stark reflection of this reality that satirically portrays the absurdity and grave consequences of nuclear warfare.²¹ Released only two years after the Cuban Missile Crisis concluded, the film tells a dark and comedic story of a worst-case scenario where one crazed general can launch bombs at the USSR, causing imminent nuclear destruction. A critic in the *New York Times* stated that the film "manifests no reverence for American ideals" and it "indulges in the most insidious and highly dangerous form of public opinion tampering."²² While the film was not initially well-received by the public, talk of Dr. Strangelove in the media certainly had US citizens thinking about atomic annihilation. The fact that the film implied that one person could bring about nuclear annihilation was a terrifying idea that most people initially dismissed as an exaggerated hyperbole. In retrospect, the film was reasonably accurate in displaying the ease of access to the US nuclear arsenal. President Eisenhower had agreed to let high-ranking officers authorize nuclear weapons in the case of an emergency if the President was not available, and nuclear weapons worldwide were often poorly handled, stored without any locks, and transported by unsafe means. For example, Harold Agnew, a Los Alamos physicist, mentioned how he saw German planes with Iron Crosses carrying American atomic bombs.²³

²⁰ Boyer, *Bomb's Early Light*, 356.

²¹ Stanley Kubrick, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, (Columbia Pictures, 1964).

²² Michael Getler, *Strangelove Reactions*, (*New York Times*, March 1, 1964).

²³ For information on Eisenhower, nuclear bombs, and Harold Agnew, see Eric Schlosser, *Almost Everything in 'Dr. Strangelove' Was True*, (*The New Yorker*, January 17, 2014).

Through its biting wit and exaggerated characters, *Dr. Strangelove* magnifies the anxiety surrounding the nuclear arms race, showcasing the potentially catastrophic outcomes resulting from human error, miscommunication, and the inherent dangers of an unchecked nuclear arsenal. The film serves as a scathing critique of the geopolitical tensions and a haunting reminder of the devastating power of nuclear weapons.

Kennedy's parallel hopeful message and appeal to American Exceptionalism and frontier spirit was reflected in the film *First Men in the Moon* (1964) directed by Nathan Juran and based on the novel by H.G. Wells. Released in the same year as *Dr. Strangelove*, this film depicted a fictional lunar expedition and the discovery of an advanced lunar civilization. *First Men* presents an alternative realm of wonder and adventure, providing a temporary respite from the all-consuming fear associated with nuclear annihilation on Earth.

President Kennedy argued that the US was not losing the Space Race because we lacked resources or brainpower, but because we lacked unity and a common goal.²⁴ Kennedy's speeches and early American space programs such as the *Mercury* and the *Apollo* missions set off a period highlighting what Americans could accomplish when the best minds come together for the singular goal of getting to the Moon.²⁵ This sense of hope and solidarity was underscored by stories of the human spirit prevailing in sci-fi films. *Marooned*, a popular film in theaters in 1969, tells the story of three American astronauts who get stranded in orbit.²⁶ Suspense continues to build as the crew's oxygen level decreases. *Marooned* highlighted the strength of unity and the need to stay together during desperate times, with the film's last scene ending when the rescue shuttle is launched.²⁷

With the Space Race in full swing by the mid-1960s, films began to examine not just the dangers of space exploration, but of advanced technology itself. The best and most famous of these is Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey*, where a crew is attempting to find the origins of mysterious black monoliths found on both Earth and the Moon; the crew is accompanied by a seemingly infallible artificial

²⁴ McConnell, *Living through the Space Race*, 36.

²⁵ For information on the early American space programs, see John Logsdon and Roger Launius, eds., Volume VII, *Human Spaceflight: Projects Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo* (Washington DC: National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 2008), 387-439, digital file.

²⁶ John Sturges, *Marooned* (Columbia Pictures, 1969).

²⁷ Howard Thompson, *The Screen: Marooned, Space Film, Opens the New Ziegfeld*, (New York Times, December 19, 1969).

intelligence named HAL 9000, which in the end decides to kill the crew rather than disclose classified data about the monoliths.²⁸

This film deeply resonates with the idea that our technological creations, for example, atomic bombs or artificial intelligence, could potentially become destructive to us. This fear was particularly exemplified in the development of ICBMs and the deployment of automated systems in various aspects of society, from applications ranging from domestic life to space exploration. A well-known example of these continuing atomic fears is a political advertisement aired by the Lyndon B. Johnson campaign in the election of 1964, known as the “Daisy” ad, which depicts a young girl counting the petals as she plucks them off from a daisy and then cuts to an explosion of a nuclear bomb.²⁹ The fact that politicians were using the threat of nuclear annihilation as a primary justification for their election shows just how strongly this fear was rooted in society at that time.

While world leaders and later presidents recognized the need for solidarity to triumph over the Soviets, they also recognized how space could be a mechanism to not only beat Communism but also bring together democracy. JFK’s successor Lyndon B. Johnson acknowledged the risk of space exploration but also realized that it could usher in a new age of peace since space did not hold past legacies that plagued international relations up until that point.³⁰ If nations proceeded on their own, they would just extend their policies into space. Therefore, unity not only among the US citizens but also among all democratic countries was necessary.

The Late Years of the Cold War

On July 20, 1969, an estimated 600 million people worldwide (one-fifth of the world’s population) watched as Neil Armstrong became the first man on the Moon.³¹ The Moon Landing was a significant victory for the United States and fulfilled the promise of a lunar landing made by President Kennedy nearly a decade earlier. In another parallel to the movies, news coverage of the Moon Landing was cinematic in scale,

²⁸ Stanley Kubrick, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968).

²⁹ Dan Nowicki, “Daisy Girl’ political ad still haunting 50 years later,” USA Today, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2014/09/07/daisy-girl-political-ad-still-haunting-50-years-later/15246667/>.

³⁰ McConnell, *Living through the Space Race*, 30-36.

³¹ Tiffany Hsu, “The Apollo 11 Mission Was Also a Global Media Sensation,” New York Times, July 15, 2019, accessed July 29, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/15/business/media/apollo-11-television-media.html>.

with the lead producer of CBS News describing their 32 hours of coverage as “a big blockbuster kind of motion picture,” with costumes, animation, and a news coverage team so large that the end credits lasted for seven minutes.³²

By the early 1970s, the superpowers had spent enormous amounts on the Space Race and expanding their respective military power. Finally realizing that they each had enough nuclear weapons to destroy the other many times over, both sides began to seek a thawing of their relationship. A major consequence of this easing of tensions was the movement towards nuclear arms control, including the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) signed in 1972 resulting in the United States and the Soviet Union agreeing to limit the number of nuclear warheads, marking a significant change in the environment of the Cold War. SALT represented a recognition from both superpowers that a perpetual arms race would benefit no one.³³ At the same time, the growing acceptance of the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (a successor to Kennedy’s Balance of Terror) helped to somewhat calm the public that nuclear annihilation would be kept at bay, at least for the time being.

These improved relations extended directly to the Space Race itself. JFK himself foresaw this ideal of unified mankind working together in this new frontier. One less well-remembered aspect of Kennedy’s *Moon Speeches* was the vision he laid out for cooperation between the great powers.

There is no strife, no prejudice, no national conflict in outer space as yet. Its hazards are hostile to us all. Its conquest deserves the best of all mankind, and its opportunity for peaceful cooperation may never come again.³⁴

The idea that the Soviets could cooperate with us in space was reflected in both *Destination Moon* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Both movies feature scenes in which Soviet astronauts attempt to come to the aid of American astronauts in distress. These scenes would likely have been unimaginable to American audiences in the early years of the Cold War, but now we see depictions again of the Soviets as part of our shared humanity. JFK’s original vision of cooperation in space between the

³² Hsu, “The Apollo 11 Mission”

³³ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 199-201.

³⁴ John F. Kennedy, “Address at Rice University on the Nation’s Space Effort,” Speech, Rice University, September 12, 1962.

great powers was reflected in the “Agreement Concerning Cooperation in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space for Peaceful Purposes,” signed by President Nixon and Soviet Premier Kosygin in Moscow in May 1972. This newfound spirit of cooperation reached its apex with another major milestone on July 17, 1975, when the superpowers embarked on their first joint space mission, the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project, marking the end of the Space Race.³⁵

Throughout the 1970s, science fiction films and television continued with the dual themes of hope and fear that Kennedy had originally set forth. *The Andromeda Strain* (1971) is a film that explores the government’s handling of a public health crisis utilizing science and technology when a deadly virus is brought to Earth from space.³⁶ *Star Wars* (1977) highlighted an epic space battle between the forces of good and evil.³⁷ One of the top-grossing movies of all time, the cultural importance of *Star Wars* was recognized by the National Society of Film Critics as the most influential film of the 1970s.³⁸

In 1983, the world perhaps came the closest to a nuclear disaster since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Stanislav Petrov was an officer in the Soviet Air Defense Forces whose role was to monitor any potential nuclear launch by the US. On the morning of September 26, 1983, the computer systems Petrov was looking at indicated that the US had launched five nuclear missiles at the Soviet Union.³⁹ It was a time of heightened tension between the superpowers because, just three weeks earlier, the Soviets had shot down a Korean Airlines Boeing 747 passenger plane, killing all onboard, including a US Congressman.⁴⁰ It was against this backdrop that Petrov had to react to the signals coming from his computer screen, while all his training and protocol required that he immediately respond to a US nuclear attack by launching Soviet nuclear missiles in return. Petrov had a hunch that his computer system

³⁵ Eric Betz, “Apollo-Soyuz Mission: When the Space Race Ended,” *Astronomy*, July 21, 2020, accessed July 29, 2023, <https://www.astronomy.com/space-exploration/apollo-soyuz-mission-when-the-space-race-ended/>.

³⁶ Robert Wise, *The Andromeda Strain*, (Universal Pictures, 1971).

³⁷ George Lucas, *Star Wars*, (20th Century Fox, 1977).

³⁸ Jay Carr, *The A List: The National Society of Film Critics’ 100 Essential Films* (Cambridge (Mass.): Da Capo Press, 2002).

³⁹ Greg Myre, “Stanislav Petrov, ‘The Man Who Saved the World,’ Dies At 77,” NPR, September 18, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/09/18/551792129/stanislav-petrov-the-man-who-saved-the-world-dies-at-77>.

⁴⁰ Philip Taubman, “Theories and Conspiracy Theories,” *The New York Times*, April 21, 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/04/21/books/theories-and-conspiracy-theories.html>.

was malfunctioning, which turned out to be correct. The story of this false alarm incident did not emerge until many years later.⁴¹

In cinemas, 1983 also saw the release of the thriller *War Games*, which brought together several of the major Cold War science fiction themes of the prior decades. A teenage hacker accidentally sets off a US military AI computer system designed to retaliate against the Soviets in the event of a nuclear attack. The hero causes the AI to run multiple simulations of “unwinnable” scenarios by first teaching it Tic-Tac-Toe, and then the AI applies its new knowledge to conclude that any nuclear war is unwinnable. Kennedy’s doctrines of the “balance of terror” and MAD had held true – our common humanity and survival relied on neither superpower being able to win the Cold War to achieve this balance.

Just six short years after the Petrov false alarm incident and the release of the *War Games*, President George H.W. Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev declared an end to the Cold War at the Malta Summit in December 1989.⁴² Two years later, on Christmas Day, 1991, the Soviet hammer and sickle flag was lowered from the Kremlin for the last time as the Soviet Union collapsed.⁴³

Conclusion

At its core, the Cold War was a battle of communist versus capitalist ideologies as well as a battle for military superiority. While the Space Race was the major proxy battle for highlighting each side’s technological abilities and potential military might, it also catalyzed social movements and other arenas where this ideological battle took place. For example, one major consequence of the Space Race was the rise of the environmental movement. Images of Earth taken from space helped people appreciate the fragility of the planet, and commentators have noted that it is no coincidence that the first Earth Day occurred within a year of the Moon Landing.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Myre, “Stanislav Petrov.”

⁴² Joshua Shiffrin, “The Malta Summit and US-Soviet Relations: Testing the Waters amidst Stormy Seas,” Wilson Center, accessed July 29, 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-malta-summit-and-us-soviet-relations-testing-the-waters-amidst-stormy-seas>.

⁴³ US Department of State Office of the Historian, *The Collapse of the Soviet Union*.

⁴⁴ Mike Wall, “Earth Day at 50: How Apollo 8’s ‘Earthrise’ Photo Helped Spark the First Celebration,” Space.com, April 14, 2022, accessed July 29, 2023, <https://www.space.com/earthrise-image-apollo-8-earth-day-50th-anniversary.html>.

While the Space Race deeply affected films during the Cold War era, the battle for space supremacy extended its influence on popular culture beyond the movies and onto multiple arenas. In the sports world, the 1980 United States Olympic hockey team's "Miracle on Ice" victory over the Soviet Union is still widely considered the greatest upset in the history of sports.⁴⁵ In entertainment, technology, and futurism became prominent themes. Disneyland created an entire section of its amusement park called Tomorrowland, with themed rides and attractions such as the Astro-Orbiter, the Flight to the Moon, and the still-running Space Mountain roller coaster.⁴⁶

Soviet art during this period was controlled by the state and consisted almost entirely of themes of Socialist Realism, focused on images of heroic workers and farmers. With state restrictions on the type of art permitted, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is not a single prominent individual Soviet artist from the Space Race era.⁴⁷ In contrast, this era saw the rise in the popularity and influence of Abstract Expressionism in the United States, led by artists such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko.⁴⁸ Abstract Expressionism, with its emphasis on the avant-garde, individualism, and freedom of expression, stood in stark contrast to the ideas of conformity and the collective good represented in Soviet art.

But movies, with their wide reach and ability to be watched and re-watched by millions of viewers, remain perhaps the best cultural artifact with which to understand the Cold War. The deep interplay between science fiction cinema and societal and political concerns has proven to be a persistent relationship that continues to shape and reflect our collective consciousness to this day. Through examining this genre, particularly about the Space Race, we gain a window into both the common fears and hopes that were often mirrored in political speeches and acts of the time. Even near the end of the Cold War, the fact that President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative to deter nuclear attacks against the US was nicknamed "*Star Wars*" reflects the symbolic resonance of science fiction imagery in political thought. The nickname

⁴⁵ Jeff Chase, "The 50 Biggest Upsets in Sports History," Bleacher Report, January 26, 2012, accessed July 29, 2023, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1036181-the-50-biggest-upsets-in-sports-history>.

⁴⁶ Herb Leibacher, "The History of Space in Disney World," World of Walt, April 3, 2019, accessed July 29, 2023, <https://worldofwalt.com/the-history-of-space-in-disney-world.html>.

⁴⁷ For an overview of Soviet art during the Cold War, see Evgenij Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁴⁸ Eva Cockcroft, *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 127.

was a fitting coda to science fiction's role in helping the American public frame and contemplate the many difficult public policy decisions we faced because of the risks created by the Cold War.

Bibliography

Allison, Robert J., ed. *History in Dispute*. Vol. 2: American Social and Political Movements, 1945-2000: Pursuit of Liberty. Detroit, MI: St. James Press, 2000. *Gale eBooks* (accessed February 8, 2023).
<https://link.gale.com/apps/pub/1TXO/GVRL?u=nort57071&sid=bookmark-GVRL>.

The Andromeda Strain. Directed by Robert Wise. Universal Pictures, 1971.

Bahmueller, Charles F. "Cold War." Edited by John C. Super. *The 1950s in America*. Hackensack: Salem Press, 2005. Accessed May 31, 2023.
<http://proxy.hw.com/login?url=https://online-salempress-com.proxy.hw.com/articleDetails.do?bookId=133>

Betz, Eric. "Apollo-Soyuz Mission: When the Space Race Ended." *Astronomy*, July 21, 2020. Accessed July 29, 2023.
<https://www.astronomy.com/space-exploration/apollo-soyuz-mission-when-the-space-race-ended/>.

Boyer, Paul S. *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*. Nachdr. ed. Chapel Hill, NC [u.a.]: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1994.

Carr, Jay. *The A List: The National Society of Film Critics' 100 Essential Films*. Cambridge (Mass.): Da Capo Press, 2002.

Chase, Jeff. "The 50 Biggest Upsets in Sports History." *Bleacher Report*, January 26, 2012. Accessed July 29, 2023.
<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1036181-the-50-biggest-upsets-in-sports-history>.

Cockcroft, Eva. *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Crowther, Bosley. "Destination Moon, George Pal Version of Rocket Voyage, New Film at Mayfair." *New York Times*, June 28, 1950.
<https://nyti.ms/3LDF1kK>.

Destination Moon. Directed by Irving Pichel. Eagle-Lion Classics, 1950.

Dickson, Paul. "Sputnik's Impact on America." *PBS*, November 5, 2007.
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/sputnik-impact-on-america/>.

Dobrenko, Evgenij. *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

Dorau, Bethany Groff. "Launching of the Sputnik Satellite." Edited by Michael Shally-Jensen. *Defining Documents in American History: The Cold War (1945-1991)*. Hackensack: Salem Press, 2016. Accessed February 13, 2023. <http://proxy.hw.com/login?url=online.salempress.com>.

Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Columbia Pictures, 1964.

Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Columbia Pictures, 1964.

First Men in the Moon. Directed by Nathan Juran. Columbia Pictures, 1964.

Fried, Richard M. *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. Digital file.

Gaddis, John Lewis. *The Cold War: A New History*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007.

Getler, Michael. "Strangelove Reactions." *New York Times*, March 1, 1964. Accessed May 1, 2023. <https://nyti.ms/3LnAktV>.

Goodman, David. "Radio and the Intelligent Listener: The War of the Worlds Panic." Oxford Academic. Last modified April 2011. Accessed May 30, 2023. <https://academic.oup.com/book/3693/chapter/145077697>.

Hsu, Tiffany. "The Apollo 11 Mission Was Also a Global Media Sensation." *New York Times*, July 15, 2019. Accessed July 29, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/15/business/media/apollo-11-television-media.html>.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers. Directed by Don Siegel. Allied Artists Pictures, 1962.

K.A. Cuordileone. *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*. Hoboken: Routledge, 2012. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.proxy.hw.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=506592&site=ehost-live>.

Kennedy, John F. "President John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address." Speech, January 20, 1961. <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-john-f-kennedys-inaugural-address>.

Kennedy, John F. "Address at Rice University on the Nation's Space Effort." Speech, Rice University, September 12, 1962. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/address-at-rice-university-on-the-nations-space-effort>.

Kennedy, John F. "Commencement Address at American University." Speech, American University, June 10, 1963. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/american-university-19630610>.

Launius, Roger D. *Reaching for the Moon: A Short History of the Space Race*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.hw.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2149384&site=ehost-live>.

Leibacher, Herb. "The History of Space in Disney World." *World of Walt*, April 3, 2019. Accessed July 29, 2023. <https://worldofwalt.com/the-history-of-space-in-disney-world.html>.

Logsdon, John, and Roger Launius, eds. *Volume VII, Human Spaceflight: Projects Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo*. Washington DC: National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 2008. Digital file.

Marooned. Directed by John Sturges. Columbia Pictures, 1969.

McConnell, William S. *Living through the Space Race*. Detroit: Greenhaven Press, 2006.

McDonough, David S. "Nuclear Superiority or Mutually Assured Deterrence: The Development of the US Nuclear Deterrent." *International Journal* 60, no. 3 (2005): 811–823. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40204064>.

Myre, Greg. "Stanislav Petrov, 'The Man Who Saved the World,' Dies At 77." *NPR*, September 18, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/09/18/551792129/stanislav-petrov-the-man-who-saved-the-world-dies-at-77>.

“The 1960s: Science and Technology: Overview.” *American Decades*, edited by Judith S. Baughman, et al., vol. 7: 1960-1969, Gale, 2001. *Gale eBooks*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3468302478/GVRL?u=nort57071&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=5913ddfc. Accessed 8 Feb. 2023.

Nowicki, Dan. “‘Daisy Girl’ political ad still haunting 50 years later.” *USA Today*.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2014/09/07/daisy-girl-political-ad-still-haunting-50-years-later/15246667/>.

O'Brien, Michael. “Old Myths/New Insights: History and Dr. King.” *The History Teacher* 22, no. 1 (1988): 49–65.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/493098>.

Pfeiffer, L.. “First Men in the Moon.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, June 27, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/First-Men-in-the-Moon>.

Richard Paul, and Steven Moss. *We Could Not Fail: The First African Americans in the Space Program*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2015. <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.hw.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=957135&site=ehost-live>.

Rothman, Lily. “Read TIME’s Original Report on the Sputnik 1 Launch.” *Time*, October 3, 2017. <https://time.com/4958422/sputnik-1957-report/>.

Schauer, Bradley. “‘The Greatest Exploitation Special Ever’: *Destination Moon* and Postwar Independent Distribution.” *Film History* 27, no. 1 (2015): 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.2979/filmhistory.27.1.1>.

Schlosser, Eric. “Almost Everything in ‘Dr. Strangelove’ Was True.” *The New Yorker*, January 17, 2014. Accessed March 13, 2023. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/almost-everything-in-dr-strangelove-was-true>.

Shiffrinson, Joshua. “The Malta Summit and US-Soviet Relations: Testing the Waters amidst Stormy Seas.” *Wilson Center*. Accessed July 29, 2023. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-malta-summit-and-us-soviet-relations-testing-the-waters-amidst-stormy-seas>.

Star Wars: A New Hope. Directed by George Lucas. 20th Century Fox, 1977.

Taubman, Philip. "Theories and Conspiracy Theories." *The New York Times*, April 21, 1985.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1985/04/21/books/theories-and-conspiracy-theories.html>.

Thompson, Howard. "The Screen: Marooned, Space Film, Opens the New Ziegfeld." *New York Times*, December 19, 1969.

<https://nyti.ms/41VIgK0>.

Tonguetto, Peter. "The Fake News of Orson Welles: The War of the Worlds at 80." *National Endowment for the Humanities*, Fall 2018.

<https://www.neh.gov/article/fake-news-orson-welles-war-worlds-80>.

Tucker, Spencer C., ed. *The Encyclopedia of the Cold War: A Political, Social, and Military History*. Vol. 4. 5 vols. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2007. *Gale eBooks* (accessed February 8, 2023). <https://link-gale-com.proxy.hw.com/apps/pub/3MRC/GVRL?u=nort57071&sid=bookmark-GVRL>.

2001: A Space Odyssey. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968.

US Department of State Office of the Historian. *The Collapse of the Soviet Union*. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/collapse-soviet-union>.

Waggoner, Miles. "Space Act Signed 15 Years Ago." *NASA Technical Reports Server*. Last modified July 29, 1973.

<https://ntrs.nasa.gov/api/citations/19730019136/downloads/19730019136.pdf>.

Wall, Mike. "Earth Day at 50: How Apollo 8's 'Earthrise' Photo Helped Spark the First Celebration." *Space.com*, April 14, 2022. Accessed July 29, 2023. <https://www.space.com/earthrise-image-apollo-8-earth-day-50th-anniversary.html>.

WarGames. Directed by John Badham. MGM/UA Entertainment Company, 1983.

The War of the Worlds. Directed by Byron Haskin. Paramount Pictures, 1953.