

Them (1954) Gordon Douglas

P Michell, Feb 2017.

We begin our foray into the 1950s with this iconic sci-fi film. Known as the 'B' movie at the time as it would be cheaply made and support a more 'superior' film. (The days of double features.) Them is now acknowledged as the forerunner of most sci-fi scary films like Aliens.

Described as a 'radiation-anxiety' movie.

Wikipedia states – one of the first 'nuclear monster' films, and first 'big bug' movie. Other films would capitalise on this – animals being altered by nuclear / chemical waste. (More recently our destruction of the environment. There was a popular belief that cockroaches and ants would somehow survive a nuclear blast.

For those interested in the accuracy of this visit:

Youtube –

<https://youtu.be/LxCYQvGNoGY>

The Mythbusters analyse cockroaches, fruit flies and flour beetles with varying degrees of radiation.

Insects were a popular domain to be made larger – The Fly (1958), Tarantula (1955) are just some. Sea animals also were made larger – It Came from Beneath the Sea (1955), Beast from 20,000 Fathoms (1953), Creature from Black Lagoon (1954).

Saul Bass whose primary job was designing titles for films (Psycho, etc.) directed Phase IV (1974) where desert ants use common intelligence to wreak havoc. Invading ants have featured in the film – The Naked Jungle (1954).

Scary earth/underwater animals - 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea (1954) dealt with a giant (normal) squid. Journey to Centre of the Earth (1959) had giant iguanas. Jaws (1975) transferred the menace to the ocean. (Also the popularisation of the blockbuster and sci-fi scary genre.)

Interestingly invading spiders seems to strike a raw nerve with us- Tarantula morphed into – Kingdom of the Spiders (1977), Arachnophobia (1990), Eight Legged Freaks (2002). Probably due for another release ...

Made at Warner Bros who during the 1930s were making gritty film noir gangster films. During the 1940s film noir reigned supreme with Bogart and Bacall and the rest of the gang!

Despite initial unwillingness to make film it was to become a major hit for the studio. Biggest grossing film for the year. Example of team effort in making a film.

Producer: David Weisbart
Director: Gordon M. Douglas

Screenplay: Russell S. Hughes, Ted Sherdeman, George Worthing Yates (story)
Art Direction: Stanley Fleischer
Cinematography: Sidney Hickox
Costume Design: Edith Head, Moss Mabry
Film Editing: Thomas Reilly
Original Music: Bronislau Kaper
Visual Effects: Dick Smith
Cast: James Whitmore (Sgt. Ben Peterson), Edmund Gwenn (Dr. Harold Medford), Joan Weldon (Dr. Patricia Medford), James Arness (Robert Graham), Onslow Stevens (Brigadier General Robert O'Brien), Sean McClory (Major Kibbee), Fess Parker (Alan Crotty), Sandy Drescher (the Ellinson Girl), Olin Howlin (Jensen).
BW-94m.

Gordon Douglas (1907-1993)

Prolific filmmaker – over 100 films and shorts. Most not so good. 'I have a large family to feed' he argued. Began working with Hal Roach (silent films) as a gag writer. Other films of note – The Detective (1968). They Call Me Mr Tibbs (1970). Typical – I was Communist for FBI (1951).

Titbits:

What happened in 1954 ... note ... that rationing ended in UK.
After much legal hassles ... segregation in schools was finally illegal
Senator McCarthy censured ... ending communist witch hunts .
<http://www.thepeoplehistory.com/1954.html>

Nuclear Monsters that Terrorised the 1950s

http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/nuclear_power/2013/01/nuclear_monster_movies_sci_fi_films_in_the_1950s_were_terrifying_escapism.html

10 great American Sci-Fi Films of the 1950s from BFI

<http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/lists/10-great-50s-american-sci-fi-films>

Analysis with much Trivia:

In one of the most intriguing openings in science fiction cinema, a little girl, wandering across the desert in a state of deep shock, is spotted by two New Mexico highway troopers who take her to safety. Nearby, they discover a trailer home that has been partially demolished by some unknown force and inside there is evidence of a bloody struggle. Later, when one of the police officers is gathering evidence at another site of destruction (a ransacked country store), he hears a strange, high pitched sound coming closer and closer until he's confronted with the horrifying source - the last thing he will ever see. Meanwhile, doctors try to jolt the little girl

out of her catatonic state, finally succeeding with a formic acid sample, similar to traces found at the crime scene. The child becomes wildly agitated upon smelling the odor, screaming, "THEM! - THEM!", hence the title of the film which means GIANT ANTS!

A precursor to all the giant insect movies of the fifties, **Them!** (1954) was also one of the first science fiction thrillers to issue a warning about the dangers of nuclear testing and radioactivity in the aftermath of the atomic bomb's creation. The film is truly unique in its conception - the first half is constructed like a detective thriller, the second half works as a fantasy adventure with the army and FBI agents invading the storm drains beneath Los Angeles where they hope to locate and destroy the queen ant's nest. **Them!** also has a welcome sense of humor that sometimes emerges during unexpected but appropriate moments, such as the sequence with the airline pilot (Fess Parker) who is being held for observation at a Brownsville, Texas, mental institution (No one believes his eyewitness account of the mutant ants). These comic touches are not surprising in light of director Gordon Douglas' earlier career: he got his start working for producer Hal Roach, directing *Our Gang* comedy shorts and Laurel and Hardy features like *Saps at Sea* (1940). And when Douglas first read the script for **Them!**, he thought it would make an ideal vehicle for Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin! Luckily, Douglas didn't treat the film as a farce once production began and directed the film in the same terse, fast-paced style of *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* (1950) and *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (1951), two first-rate crime thrillers he previously directed for Warner Brothers.

But if anyone deserves credit for the film's success, it's Ted Sherdeman, a former staff producer at Warner Bros. who was instrumental in developing the project. First, he commissioned the original story from George Worthing Yates, which appeared as a diary account about giant ants nesting in the New York subway. Sherdeman later told Steve Rubin of *Cinefantastique* magazine that "the idea appealed to me very much because, aside from man, ants are the only creatures in the world who plan and wage war, and nobody trusted the atomic bomb at that time." Yates was also hired to write the screenplay but his version proved to be cost prohibitive since it would have required far too many special effects sequences. Russell Hughes, a contract writer for Warners, was brought in for a rewrite and it was he who fashioned the narrative as a detective story that transitions into a chase thriller in the second half, culminating in a climax at the Santa Monica pier. Unfortunately, Hughes died prematurely from a heart attack, completing only 20 pages of the script, but Sherdeman, undaunted, completed the screenplay himself, though he was forced to change the ending. The cost of renting the Santa Monica pier for one day was too expensive so the storm drains below Los Angeles became the setting for the film's finale. This was actually a much better choice since the dank tunnels provided a much more eerie and claustrophobic atmosphere.

Sherdeman's next hurdle after the scripting was convincing his superiors to produce the movie. He tried to generate interest with drawings and a beautifully shot 16mm film about ants made by two UCLA entomologists (their footage would later be

developed into a film for Walt Disney - *The Living Desert*, 1953). He even went to the trouble of having art designer Larry Meiggs create a three-foot ant head with movable antennae and mandibles which convinced WB executive Steve Trilling to shoot a film test. When studio mogul Jack L. Warner, who wasn't interested in making giant ant movies, saw the test footage, he knew he could sell the idea to a rival studio and offered it to 20th-Century-Fox.

Sherdeman's cherished project almost ended there and would have if he hadn't convinced WB producer Walter McCuhan that the studio was making a big mistake. When McCuhan found out how much Fox was willing to pay for the story, he suddenly realized the commercial potential of **Them!** and finally got Warner Brothers to back the project. The studio left the casting up to Sherdeman though they initially opposed his choice of Edmund Gwenn for the role of Dr. Harold Medford (they thought he was too old for the part!). But Sherdeman held firm and cast the film with a wonderful group of character actors including James Whitmore as the ill-fated Sgt. Peterson, James Arness as FBI agent Robert Graham, singer Joan Weldon as Dr. Patricia Medford and, in minor roles, Onslow Stevens, Leonard Nimoy, Dub Taylor, William Schallert, Olin Howlin as a wino (he later played the first victim of *The Blob*, 1958), and most memorably, Fess Parker.

As for the actual filming of **Them!**, *Cinefantastique* correspondent Steve Rubin wrote that "Two main ants were constructed, one fully, the other minus the hindquarters and mounted on a boom for mobility. Behind this, a whole crew, mounted on a dolly, manipulated the various knobs and levers that made the mechanical model come alive. Douglas laughed: "You would have a shot where an ant comes into the picture and if you glanced back behind the creature you would see about 20 guys, all sweating like hell!" A number of "extra" ants were also constructed for scenes where large numbers of the creatures appeared, but where mobility was not essential. These ant models were equipped only with heads and antenna that would be activated by the force from the wind-machines used to whip up the sand storms required on the desert locations."

Them! had originally been conceived as a 3-D feature in color and the giant ants were given a purplish shade of green; their eyes were a soapy looking mixture of reds and blues that changed shades constantly and made them appear to be alive. Unfortunately, these effects were lost when Warner Brothers decided to release the film in black and white without the 3-D effect to save costs. Nevertheless, the film still proved to be enormously successful when released, becoming one of the studio's top grossing films of the year and even receiving favorable reviews from critics who usually dismissed horror and sci-fi films. *The New York Times* review proclaimed **Them!** "one ominous view of a terrifyingly new world" and that "it is definitely a chiller....fascinating to watch." Jack Warner remained unconvinced, however, and told his staff after a screening, "Anyone who wants to make any more ant pictures will go to Republic!" Obviously, the studio mogul was a poor judge of science fiction films for **Them!** is among the best, a cautionary tale about the dangers of the atom bomb and a frightening view of nature run amok.

By Jeff Stafford

David Vineyard Says:

Jan, 2010

THEM! comes very close to the procedural noir school that was pioneered by films like HOUSE ON 92ND STREET and BOOMERANG, and then brilliantly used by Anthony Mann in T-MEN, BORDER INCIDENT, and HE WALKED BY NIGHT. John Sturges and Robert Wise took a note from this later in THE SATAN BUG and ANDROMEDA STRAIN.

Even the presence of Whitmore (ASPHALT JUNGLE) and Arness (THE PEOPLE VS O'HARA) relates back to the noir films of the era.

And it is no accident that the rather silly plot — giant mutated ants — is made plausible and suspenseful by the dry technical details of a police investigation. Still I have to wonder if it wasn't also influenced by Boulting's SEVEN DAYS TO NOON (1950), a similar procedural drama about a scientist with a suitcase nuclear device (which didn't exist then and still doesn't despite how popular it remains with fiction writers) hunted down as London is evacuated.

But Mike is dead on that the whole procedural noir genre that spawned DRAGNET influenced the style and structure of this one, which incidentally is one of the best sf films of the era. For another sf film that follows the procedural noir structure to some extent, Nigel Kneale's THE CREEPING UNKNOWN (1956), the first of the Quatermass films also makes use of the same basic style, right down to the presence of Jack Warner, whose role on the series DIXON OF DOCK GREEN made him as iconic to British cop shows as Webb was here.

And of course noir in general influenced films like INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS. In fact, as with the western and the historical genre there is a whole sub-category of science fiction noir with films like these, THE 49TH MAN, THE POWER, and others.

<http://mysteryfile.com/blog/?p=1731>

Wikipedia – Reception of Them

Them! was released in June 1954^[3] and by the end of that year, had accrued US \$2 million in distributors' domestic (U.S. and Canada) rentals, making it the year's 51st biggest earner.^[7]^[Note 1] [Paul's note: General rule of thumb is same again for world wide gross – thus total of \$4 million.] According to an article in *The Slate*, this was Warner Bros. highest-grossing film that year.^[8] However, *1954 In Film* lists two other films from Warner Bros. that earned more in gross.

From contemporary reviews, the *Monthly Film Bulletin* stated that despite the

science fiction film genre being new it had developed several sub-divisions including "the other-wordly, the primaeval-monstrous, the neo-monstrous, the planet-ary-visitant, etc." and that "*Them!* is a "well-built example of the neo-monstrous" "less absurdly sensational than most"^[9] Discussing the ant monsters in the film, the review referred to them as "reasonably horrible-they do not entirely avoid the impression of mock-up that is almost inevitable when over-lifesize creatures have to be constructed and moved" while noting that they were "considerably more conceivable than those prehistoric remnants that have recently been emerging from bog and iceberg."^[9] The review commented on the cast as "like most science fiction, [the film] is on the whole serviceably rather than excitingly cast" and the crew was noted, stating the direction was "smoothly machined", and the film has "decent writing" though "more short cuts might have been taking", finding that the start of the film was too slow.^[9] *The New York Times* review noted "... from the moment James Whitmore, playing a New Mexico state trooper, discovers a six-year-old moppet wandering around the desert in a state of shock, to the time when the cause of that mental trauma is traced and destroyed, *Them!* is taut science fiction."^[10] The reviewer in *Variety* opined it was a "top-notch science fiction shocker. It has a well-plotted story, expertly directed and acted in a matter-of-fact style to rate a chiller payoff and thoroughly satisfy the fans of hackle-raising melodrama."^{[11][12]}

Since its original release, *Them!* has become generally regarded as one of the very best science fiction films of the 1950s. [Bill Warren](#) described the film as " ... tight, fast-paced and credible ... [T]he picture is suspenseful."^[3] [Phil Hardy's *The Aurum Film Encyclopedia: Science Fiction*](#) noted, "Directed by [Gordon] Douglas in semi-documentary fashion, *Them!* is one of the best American science fiction films of the fifties."^[13] [Danny Peary](#) believed the film "Ranks with *The Thing* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* as the best of the countless 50s science fiction films."^[14] In the *Time Out Film Guide*, [David Pirie](#) wrote, "By far the best of the 50s cycle of 'creature features' ... retains a good part of its power today."^[15] The [review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes](#) reported a 100% approval rating with an average rating of 7.6/10, based on 26 reviews. The website's consensus reads, "One of the best creature features of the early atomic age, *Them!* features effectively menacing special effects and avoids the self-parody that would taint later monster movies."^[16]

Them! was nominated for an [Oscar](#) for its special effects^[17] and won a [Golden Reel Award](#) for best sound editing.^[18] The film has been nominated for two [American Film Institute](#) lists, [AFI's 100 Years...100 Thrills](#) ^[19] and [AFI's 10 Top 10](#) (science fiction genre).^[20]