

This Island Earth (1955) Newman / Arnold

P Michell, 2023

So called 'B Films' were the support for the main ('A') feature.

Aliens come to Earth seeking scientists to help them in their war. One of the biggest hits of the Universal science fiction era, the film was notable for its straightforward storyline and iconic costumes and makeup

Rex Reason (*Dr Cal Meacham*), Jeff Morrow (*Exeter*), Faith Domergue (*Dr Ruth Adams*), Lance Fuller (*Brack*), Russell Johnson (*Dr Steve Carlson*), Douglas Spencer (*The Monitor*), Robert Nichols (*Joe Wilson*), Karl L. Lindt (*Dr Adolph Engelborg*)

Art directors Alexander Golitzen, Richard H. Riedel **Editor** Virgil Vogel **Special photography** David S. Horsley, Clifford Stine **Musical supervision** Joseph Gershenson **Make up** Bud Westmore

Estimated cost US\$800,000 – a lot of money at the time. Huge success. Now considered one of the 1950s great sci-fi films.

Interestingly - had two directors one for earth and one for Metaluna. *Interocitors* feature in the film. Noted for its depiction of a paranoid America gripped by the 'red menace'. All would change with Rock and Roll. One of many Universal B grade sci-fi and monster films set the 'escape path' for the youth of the day. Most produced by William Alland.

Universal Studios' monster classics of the 1930s-1950s were in large part responsible for the birth of the legendary *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine (1958–2019, through various iterations), which subsequently inspired future creatives such as Stephen King, George Lucas, Guillermo del Toro, Steven Spielberg and others to both derive their own myths and revolutionize mass media. Full article here:

<https://medium.com/writing-for-your-life/classic-universal-sci-fi-flix-d38053d4cfad>

Creative Talent:

William Alland – Producer (30 credits)

Part of Orson Welles' Mercury Players - War of the World, Citizen Kane [narrated 'News on the March'], etc.

During World War II Alland was a combat pilot (50 missions over the South Pacific); in the post-war years he was the Peabody Award-winning producer of radio's ground breaking "Doorway to Life". He then turned movie producer, cranking out a series of features (mostly sci-fi films and Westerns) at Universal-International in the 1950s. Most of the 1950s Universal fantasy/sci-fi films listed below were produced by him.

Joseph M Newman (Director) (53 credits)

Jack Arnold (Director - uncredited) (86 credits)

Newman's most famous film would have to be the cult sci-fi This Island Earth (1955) - in which the main stars, it must be said, were the special effects--which features clever matte paintings and lush three-strip Technicolor photography. Newman's contribution to the film is somewhat diminished, however, by the fact that nearly half of it (set on the planet Metaluna) was re-shot by director Jack Arnold because the studio was unhappy with the initial result. Arnold, in the end, shot some of the most famous scenes, including the mutant attack and the escape through the tunnels.

Jack Arnold reigns supreme as one of the great director's of 1950s science-fiction features – mostly for Universal. His films are distinguished by moody black and white cinematography, solid acting, smart, thoughtful scripts, snappy pacing, a genuine heartfelt enthusiasm for the genre and plenty of eerie atmosphere.

Arnold made his name directing some the best b&w sci-fi films of the 1950s inc: It came from Outer Space (1953), The Creature from the Black Lagoon (1954), Tarantula (1955) and later the hilarious The Mouse that Roared (1959). [Mouse starred Peter Sellers in three roles! Very funny satirical low budget film.] He is un-credited in this film doing the spectacular Meataluna scenes in the last section of the film. Possibly other scenes too. From late 1950s on mostly TV work.

Was 'outed' as a communist in 1950s MCarthy Trials. But survived!

Interview:

I was surprised that you weren't chosen to direct This Island Earth, which was financially the most ambitious of the Universal science fiction films of the '50s.

"I had to go in and re-shoot a great deal of it. I was on what the studio called an "A" picture, The Lady Takes A Flyer with Lana Turner. They'd finished the principal photography of This Island Earth, cut it together, and it lacked a lot of things. So they asked me if I would help them, I went in and re-shot about half of it, but I didn't take credit for it. Specifically, I re-shot most of the footage once they reached the dying planet."

Franklin Coen – co-scriptwriter (25 credits)

Famous for scripting The Train (1964) with Burt Lancaster.

Clifford Stine – Cinematography

Known for Spartacus (1960) with Kirk Douglas. Photographer, in charge of the optical department at Universal during the 1950's. He became the 'go-to' guy at the studio for special visual effects, especially on creature features and science fiction movies. He was brought out of retirement to work on the Oscar-winning special effects for Earthquake (1974).

Jeff Morrow – Exeter (73 credits)

Began film acting in The Robe (1953) alternating with TV work. Lot of westerns on TV.

Faith Domergue – Dr Ruth Adams (57 credits)

She appeared in the first scary sci-film I saw as a child – It Came from Beneath the Sea (1955). (A giant octopus invades San Francisco.) In quite a few sci-films of the period and later TV work. Had terrible car accident c1940 - thrown through front window and spent 18 months plastic surgery. Ouch! Her most famous role is this film. An ‘almost’ star. Often portrayed strong female parts.

Trivia

Durgnat devotes some 14pp to this film in the book ‘Films and Feelings’ (1971).

Some European film reviewers noted the similarity to the Earth scientists being recruited by aliens to help them fight a war against other aliens with the American acquisition of German and other European scientists to help fight the [Cold War](#). (Wikipedia)

Interocitor and the unmanned jet flight both reflect advances in current technology. Colour TV was not available commercially. First Atlantic flight of an automatic bomber. Jets were not used commercially (Planes without propellers.).

There is a scene of being trapped in a vertical, transparent cylinder whose purpose is to avoid [the bends](#) on reaching the planet; similar tubes appear in the [Lost in Space](#) television show. (Wikipedia)

Infamous showman William Castle released a cut down version of the film in 8mm/16mm – as War of the Planets (1958). Two b&w versions: complete (10 mins) and Headline (3 mins)!

[This Island Earth](#) (1955), shot in Technicolor at Universal, Domergue played a scientist kidnapped by aliens and, with her colleagues, pressed into service defending their world against interplanetary attack. Helped by a clever script and make-up artist [Bud Westmore](#)'s \$24,000 creation of a bug-eyed mutant monster.

Special effects 2.5 years in the making.

Fun Fund Trivia - The mutant turns up in Star Wars (Ep IV) in the band at the bar.

The spinning earth would be used for the Universal logo.

[This Island Earth: 2 ½ Years in the Making](#) (2013) Griffith. Documentary - 40mins.

Reviews

[J Watts - Cinema Essentials.com](#) (edited)

This Island Earth is a quintessential 1950s sci-fi film, with flying saucers, alien beings, strange planets and weird monsters.

The film stars Rex Reason as leading scientist Dr. Cal Meacham. Meacham isn't one of those stuffy boring scientists. His job involves him flying fighter jets around and briefing hordes of journalists eager to know what major scientific problem he's working on next.

In the years before World War II, science fiction cinema, if it was attempted at all, usually meant stories about futuristic technology or mad scientists meddling with things they didn't understand. What it didn't usually mean was space ships and aliens, except in the occasional *Flash Gordon* serial.

But the flying saucer craze captured the public imagination in the early 1950s, fired by a blizzard of reports of strange craft and mysterious lights in the sky. So it wasn't long before the cinema began to explore stories about UFOs and alien beings. Inevitably, there was speculation about whether aliens who might visit Earth would be peaceful visitors or hostile ones. Two of the earliest films to feature visitors from outer space illustrated this uncertainty.

Released in 1951, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* starred Michael Rennie as an intelligent humanoid alien who has brought a message of peace and a warning to mankind about the dangers of nuclear weapons. The same year also saw the release of *The Thing from Another World*, in which a hostile alien creature terrorises a US research station at the North Pole.

Unusually, *This Island Earth* manages to present its aliens as neither entirely hostile or entirely peaceful, making them more nuanced than in most 1950s science fiction films. The aliens in *This Island Earth* are using and abusing human scientists for their own ends. But they are made more sympathetic by the fact that their planet is fighting for its survival and they are acting out of desperation.

The rulers of Metaluna, as represented by the Monitor (Douglas Spencer), embody the understandable fear that intellectually and technologically more advanced aliens would be hostile to humans and might regard them as their slaves or playthings. Mr Exeter represents the more optimistic view that more advanced beings would also have more enlightened attitudes.

Jeff Morrow gives the most interesting performance in the film as Mr Exeter, a character who is trying to do his best for his people in difficult circumstances. Exeter would rather not harm the humans he is relying on, but is subject to the orders of his less squeamish superiors. Exeter and the other aliens are humanoid, but have been given high foreheads to accommodate their presumably larger brains. In Exeter's case, he also has a white wig and stiff white eyebrows that make him look a little like his own *Thunderbirds* puppet.

The film's square jawed hero, Dr. Cal Meacham, is a wonderfully 1950s creation. A brilliant scientist, but one who's also tall, dark and handsome, with a deep baritone voice. He flies jet planes around, while sharply dressed in a range of over-sized suits and sports jackets, and spends his time off canoodling with beautiful lady scientists. Yes, he may be a scientist, but he's a cool scientist of the jet age, not some square. When he buzzes his

colleagues in the control tower, they instinctively duck their heads down, but then look at each other as if to say "What a guy!"

Rex Reason, Faith Domergue and Jeff Morrow all did much work in sci-fi and creature features in the 1950s, and Reason and Morrow would appear together again in the same producer's *The Creature Walks Among Us* in 1956. This was the second and last sequel to 1954's *Creature from the Black Lagoon*.

The first half of *This Island Earth* develops as a moderately intriguing mystery. Meacham gets drawn into Mr Exeter's mysterious "organisation", receiving advanced but minor pieces of equipment. He then builds the interociter machine, before being transported to the research facility. There he has lots of questions about exactly what's going on and why Exeter is so interested in developing nuclear fusion above all else. Meacham also wonders why his fellow scientists are so cagey and reluctant to speak to him. Particularly Dr Ruth Adams (Faith Domergue), who claims that they've never met before, although the two clearly have.

The second half of the film sees Cal Meacham, Ruth Adams and Mr Exeter travel to Metaluna. Here the film enters pure pulp sci-fi territory, with space ships, an interplanetary war, a fantastical planet and even a giant mutant creature. In these scenes the film pulls out all the stops with what was some impressive special effects work for 1955.

Inevitably, the effects don't look quite so special now, but they have a certain degree of 1950s charm. Some are a little bit wobbly, like the scene where Exeter's ship, a classic 1950s flying saucer, has to take evasive action to avoid an incoming enemy fireball. Others are complex for the time. These include a scene where the ship comes in to land on a model of the planet's ravaged surface, while a fireball streaks to the ground and impacts alongside. A later scene has Cal Meacham, Ruth Adams and Exeter travelling across the surface of Metaluna, with the strange planet represented by a giant matte painting background. These images could have been lifted straight from a 1950s pulp sci-fi magazine cover.

As well as the humanoids personified by Mr Exeter, on Metaluna the humans meet that other staple of pulp sci-fi, the bug-eyed monster. The monster, a mutant pronounced suggestively as "Mute-ant" by Exeter, is a classic man-in-a-rubber-suit 1950s sci-fi creation, a menacing creature with a bulbous head, exposed brain and huge long arms ending in giant pincers. Exeter explains that the creatures are similar to insects on Earth, although much larger, and have been trained to carry out simple tasks.

This particular creature has been trained to guard a corridor. But it obviously wants a more important role in the film than that, diligently reappearing to menace our heroes, and especially the heroine, at every opportunity.

This Island Earth was produced by William Alland, a former actor whose acting work had included small roles in Orson Welles' films *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *The Lady from*

Shanghai (1947). As a producer he specialised in creature features in the 1950s, making *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), *Tarantula* (1955) and *The Deadly Mantis* (1957).

The film was directed by Joseph M. Newman, and this is probably now his best known film. But a good proportion of the action of *This Island Earth* was actually directed by an uncredited Jack Arnold. Arnold re-shot the scenes on Metaluna. Arnold had worked regularly with William Alland, directing *It Came from Outer Space* and *Creature from the Black Lagoon*.

The film's script was written by Franklin Coen and Edward G. O'Callaghan and based on the novel by Raymond F. Jones of 1952. Although the film apparently doesn't bear that much relation to the book, Jones did at least supply one of the best and most poetic sci-fi titles of the era.

The script does have one particularly bizarre moment, when Meacham declares to the Metalunans that "Our true size is the size of our God". This strange line, delivered in defence of mankind but apropos of nothing much at all, suggests there was some concern about religious audiences accepting stories about life on other planets, unless something about God and Christianity was inserted very awkwardly into the film to reassure them. Maybe Universal had become concerned about the lack of any mention of Metaluna in *The Bible*.

This Island Earth was relatively well regarded at the time of its release, for a film of its type at least. *Variety* gave it a rave review, calling it "one of the most imaginative, fantastic and cleverly-conceived entries to date in the outer space film field". Raymond Durgnat also later wrote about the film at some length in the essay "The Wedding of Poetry and Pulp" in his 1967 book *Films and Feelings*.

The 1950s strain of sci-fi represented by *This Island Earth* fell out of favour quite quickly, its romantic view of space travel and other planets coming to seem naive within a few short years. The film's reputation has fallen in the years since its release, particularly as its' once vaunted special effects have come to seem a lot less special.

This Island Earth was also mocked in the 1996 feature film *Mystery Science Theater 3000: The Movie*, a spin off of the *Mystery Science Theater* TV series, something that's done its reputation no good at all.

The film's chief flaw is that its two halves don't seem to quite belong together and the audience is not softened up enough for the film's very different second half. The result is that the transition from intriguing mystery of the first part to the fantastical pulp sci-fi of the second can be a little jarring.

The film's two sections are also unbalanced, possibly partly because of the two separate directors. The Earthbound part is carefully and gradually developed, while the Metaluna and outer space scenes seem to be rushed through a little too quickly, with lots of

information thrown out and questions left hanging in the air, before a slightly hurried finale.

The ending also leaves the audience with the realisation that none of what's happened to the characters really had any consequence at all, as the human scientists weren't able to play any part in the saving of Metaluna. This leaves the story as a colourful, if slightly empty, adventure.

This Island Earth is weaker in script and plotting than *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and the themes and visuals are less interesting than the following year's *Forbidden Planet*. But there's something slightly treasurable about it anyway. From its stand up hero to its fantastical planet scapes, its cheesy monster and its hopes and fears about the potential and pitfalls of nuclear energy. Although not in any way a great film, *This Island Earth* is a cut above many of its contemporaries in the sci-fi genre and is still strangely irresistible for lovers of fifties sci-fi kitsch.

A Fun Sci-Fi Still Worth Seeing

Wade Wainio, 2022 – 1428elm.com

In many ways, William Alland's *This Island Earth* seems like just another 1950s sci-fi movie, and probably not the greatest one. At the same time, some of us will always love the whole scientist vs. aliens (vs. other aliens, vs. mutants) dynamic. Personally, I also appreciate when sci-fi promotes women as being as bold and adventurous as men.

In this case, it would be the character of Ruth Adams (Faith Domergue), but another example would be Wilma Deering as portrayed by Constance Moore in the 1930s *Buck Rogers* serial. Really, the only flaw with Ruth might be that she comes across as perhaps two cold and emotionless at times (Let's face it: In a lot of sci-fi/thriller/horror depictions, women are either extremely hysterical or almost devoid of emotion).

This Island Earth has plenty of classic sci-fi elements, such as human scientists building something despite knowing nothing about the device. They don't know if the "interocitor" is a doomsday device or a new kind of diesel engine, but they seem eager to follow the instructions for building it anyway. It has many different applications, from being an incredible power source to allowing communications between great distances (and probably home renovation and TV/VCR repair). Of course, the story does more than test equipment out.

Where does 'This Island Earth' take us?

Where do our good doctors, Ruth and Cal (Rex Reason) end up? Obviously, science fiction can take characters to many places. One can get sucked into a time-travel vortex, into outer space, or both. Well, these characters don't go noticeably back in time or into

the future, but end up on a wild ride nonetheless. And yes, their interactions with aliens threaten to create a chain reaction that could turn the world into a mess.

There's a story involving aliens (from planet Metaluna) who need human assistance to survive attacks from the hostile Zagons, but their leader (called "The Monitor," and played by Douglas Spencer) messes things up by kidnapping now-warmed Ruth and Cal. In villainous tradition, The Monitor wants to employ mind-control technology on the two humans and to conquer Earth.

To complicate things, we know The Monitor isn't merely trying to change the course of history but has survival on his mind. This adds a light layer of complexity to the situation, although The Monitor still isn't the most sympathetic villain to ever grace the silver screen.

There is also a heroic alien named Exeter (Jeff Morrow), who shows that not all aliens are like The Monitor. It's always valuable to have characters like this, who act as a voice of reason against those with devious plans. In fact, by the film's end, it's pretty hard not to like Exeter, who basically represents meaningful, actionable rebellion where it counts the most. Also, one shouldn't forget the presence of Neutron the cat, played by Orangey (a marmalade tabby cat who also appeared in things like *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *My Favorite Martian*, *Mission Impossible*, and the 1960s *Batman* TV series).

Final thoughts

All these years later, *This Island Earth* is still out there, both in terms of availability and being fantastical. I think it approaches the scientists as ordinary folks with special knowledge who end up in an extraordinary situation.

It's not the most action-oriented sci-fi flick ever made, but we do get to see an occasional brief struggle. In other words, *This Island Earth* probably would satisfy the action-hungry needs of the present moviegoing public, in general, provided they can appreciate a movie made in the 1950s (not everyone can).

So, if you are to watch *This Island Earth* for the first time, keep in mind that the film's sort of a well-meaning relic. This simple knowledge ought to temper any hostile reaction. Also, from a basic philosophical standpoint, this is yet another sci-fi movie suggesting that a scientific team's research gets them into trouble, as mankind gets too cocky and confident (or too big for its britches).

Lastly, there's also an implication that violence begets violence, or that individuals will want to fight those attempting to dominate them. Obviously, that's a theme one can find in many other sci-fi flicks involving hostile aliens, including that great guilty pleasure flick *Independence Day* (still a fun movie, though some would hesitate to admit it).

Interesting article from rogerebert.com. Not about this film but others from Universal.

Atom Age Feminists: The Women of '50s Sci-Fi

Bob Calhoun, 2013

On the surface, "Them!" (1954) is a movie about giant ants that attack Los Angeles, but there's also a surprisingly feminist subtext buried within its nuclear paranoia and insect Armageddon.

About a third into the film, a pair of square-jawed heroes played by James Arness and [James Whitmore](#) are about to make their descent into the giant anthill. The army has baked the hill with phosphorous and then filled its tunnels with cyanide gas. They think they've killed all the 15-foot-long ants that built the hill, but they have to go through its tunnels to make sure that no queens survived. Just as the Jameses are securing their gas masks, Dr. Pat Medord (Joan Weldon), an expert in myrmecology, the study of ants, insists on going with them. Arness, just one year before going on to embody American masculinity in a gazillion episodes of "Gunsmoke," tells her that the ant hill is no place for a woman.

"You wouldn't know what to look for," she tells him. "There isn't time to give you a crash course in insect pathology."

The doctor is right. The square-jawed heroes are the kind of men who just defeated fascism in World War II, but they have to overcome their gender bias if they're going to stop these mutated ants from destroying humankind. She's going into the anthill, and her struggles with so many male egos just to be taken seriously anticipates those that professional women would face for decades to come. By its nature, science fiction must look to the future even when it's set in the present.

And "Them!" isn't the only 50s science fiction film to depict monster-fighting feminists. Faith Domergue schools steely-eyed Navy man [Kenneth Tobey](#) in marine biology throughout "It Came from Beneath the Sea" (1955), Ray Harryhausen's giant octopus epic. In Sam Fuller's atomic scare movie "Hell and High Water" (1954), Bella Darvi, playing yet another attractive woman scientist, causes [Richard Widmark](#) to ask, "What makes a girl who looks like that get mixed up in science?" Ann Robinson plays an aspiring physicist in "[War of the Worlds](#)" (1953). The woman scientist character is so prevalent in these movies that Angela Stevens' ditzy housewife making martinis for her scientist husband (Richard Denning) in "Creature with the Atom Brain" (1955) seems strangely out of place.

[Universal International](#) probably did the most to forward the woman scientist archetype in "The Creature from the Black Lagoon" (1954), easily the most famous '50s monster movie and the only one to spark off a franchise as well as a pinball machine. Once you get past the series' dominant image of the gill-man making off with a wet Julie Adams in a tight one-piece swimsuit, you have portrayals of professional women wrestling with the conflict between career and family that is still fueling today's so-called "gender wars."

In the first "Creature" film, Julie Adams is torn between loyalty to her swaggering mentor (Richard Denning) and the sensitive scientist she loves (Richard Carlson). Fortunately for her, monster movie veteran Whit Bissell is on hand to tell her that Denning's "present position at the institute" is due to her "valuable research."

"He needed you just as much as you needed him," Bissell says right before being mauled by a clawed amphibian.

Since the Creature has a preference for educated women, Lori Nelson is cast as the conflicted scientist-in-a-swimsuit in the sequel, "Revenge of the Creature" (1955). When she isn't studying the Creature at an aquatic park in Florida, she muses to a smarmy [John Agar](#) about how she got started in "science, fish, ichthyology."

"Where will it all lead me?" she asks. "Most of the kids I went to undergraduate school with are already married and having children."

And not all liberated women of '50s science fiction had a Ph.D. As Helen Benson in "[The Day the Earth Stood Still](#)" (1951), [Patricia Neal](#) portrays a single mom who works at the Dept. of Commerce and lives in a Washington D.C. boarding house with her young son. Being a war widow, Mrs. Benson has attained the only socially acceptable form of single motherhood in 1951, but she still faces the grief of losing her husband while juggling childcare, dating and her career. In Neal's capable hands, Mrs. Benson (as she's mostly referred to) has the intellectual curiosity to befriend Klaatu (Michael Rennie), a persecuted alien on a peaceful mission, and the courage to face down Gort, a hulking silver robot with the power to destroy the Earth. Although she lacks a degree in myrmecology or physics, she's also never reduced to being a mere damsel in distress like her more educated sistren.

While it's highly doubtful that '50s filmmakers had female empowerment on their minds when they included so many assertive women in their lucrative science fiction releases, female empowerment resulted nonetheless, even if it was the accidental outcome of packaging a character that women could relate to with eye candy for the men. In her October 8, 2013 RogerEbert.com piece, "[Visual Pleasure and Voodoo Demographics: a Reflection on Woman and Film](#)," Carrie Rickey writes that "in the 1930s and 1940s each studio has female screenwriters to create female characters." If this practice was carried into the studio system's waning days in the '50s, it goes a long way towards explaining the nuanced portrayals of professional women in so many movies about rampaging monsters created by a science gone mad.

With the collapse of the studio system, the woman scientist character seemed to vanish from future remakes and re-imaginings of '50s science fiction movies even as more actual women scientists graduated from America's universities. Where Howard Hawks' "The Thing from Another World" (1951) sports an assertive Margaret Sheridan who holds her own with military men and scientists, [John Carpenter](#) remade the film in 1982 with an all-male cast. There are also no lady ichthyologists on the expedition to kill the shark in Steven Spielberg's "[Jaws](#)" (1975), Universal's slick updating of its "Creature from the

Black Lagoon" formula. Spielberg also has no space for educated women in his 2005 remake of "War of the Worlds," reducing Ann Robinson from the original to a cameo as a grandmother, and casting an 11-year-old [Dakota Fanning](#) in the film's most prominent female role.

[Dan O'Bannon](#) and [Ridley Scott](#) flew in the face of the then-current trend, however, when they created "[Alien](#)" (1979), their brutal (and uncredited) reinterpretation of "It! The Terror from Beyond Space" (1958). As Ripley, [Sigourney Weaver](#) outlasts the bearded captain of the Nostromo, a murderous android and the nearly indestructible xenomorph, and she continues doing this through a trio of sequels. Ripley is no continuation of the woman scientist of the '50s, but the logical progression from her that other filmmakers failed to embrace. Ripley is as much the voice of reason as Dr. Medford in "Them!", and she is also the square-jawed hero.