



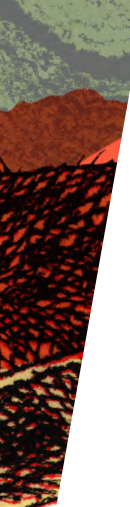
GIANT INSECTS

THE UNWITTING STARS
OF THE MIDCENTURY SCREEN

ALL NEW!!! NEVER BEFORE SEEN!!!

In the explosion of cinematic horrors that populated the screens of the 1950s, amongst the flying saucers and vapors, stalked a much more recognizable group of creatures -- common insects, blown up to larger than life proportions. Beginning with *Them!* in 1954, the first movie to bring six-legged stars to the screen, big bugs became a familiar sight until the end of the decade.

Most of the American movies in the giant insect class were released from 1954 until the end of the decade. Towards the end of that six year span it got to the point that a giant bird spider (*The Spider*, 1958) needed no explanation. The images of terrible insects and arachnids crawling across the screen had become so prevalent, the public needed very little convincing



of the existence of this creature. After all, the spider, like the hoard of scorpions released by a volcano in *The Black Scorpion* (1957), was living fairly peacefully in the earth until disturbed, as creatures are wont to do.

A natural and earthly habitat is in contrast to the origins of most of the stars of the big bug movies, who like many mid-century characters, were born out of the prevalence of atomic anxieties and the fear of nuclear destruction. The ants who star in *Them!* are found

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mutated as the result of nuclear weapons testing. The eponymous beast in *Tarantula* (1955) was the result of an injection of radioactive nutrient concocted by a rogue scientist in a desert lab that causes it to explode in size. As Bogue writes, “The spider symbolizes the bomb...growing, just as in real life the nuclear threat kept growing.”



THE ORIGINS OF DESTRUCTION

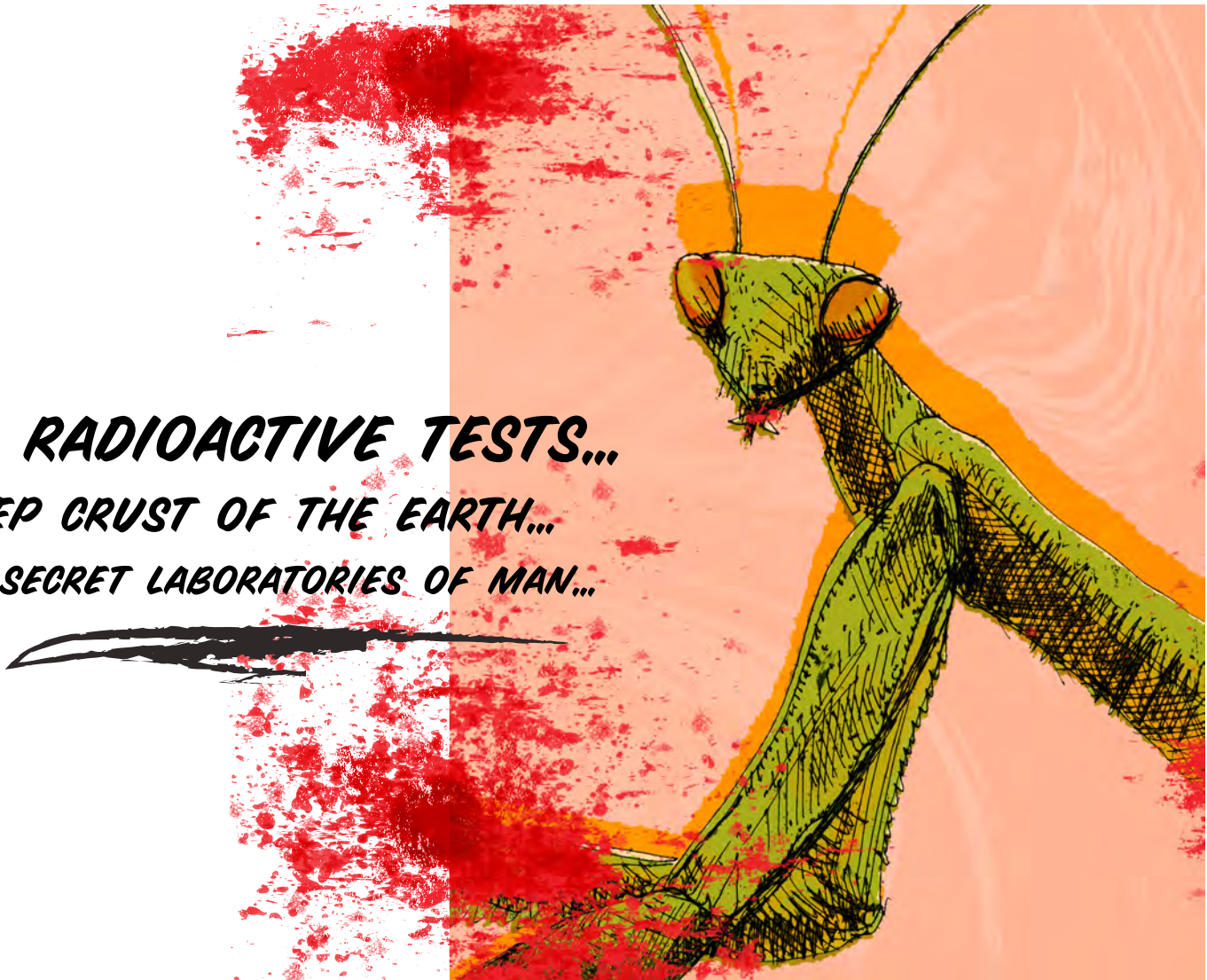
It becomes evident that in these scenarios, the offending insect itself was not spontaneously possessed of the idea to wreak havoc or born a bloodthirsty creature, but rather it was provoked in some way by man -- the same way an atom itself is no cause for concern, but splitting it may be. There is an overarching

morality to most of these movies, related to the desired moralities of the day. The lesson presented in Tarantula is that government oversight is preferable to unintended consequences of a rogue scientist. Other films serve to highlight an American comfort with the ability of the military to defeat a looming threat.

While the presence of a giant insect or arachnid itself is enough to inspire fear, and definitely monstrous enough to create effective entertainment in

the theatre before the overt "realism" of computer blended special effects, we can see from the origins of these villainous creatures that they themselves are not the truesources of fear. The big bug movies, as with a great deal of films featuring monsters, only serve to highlight our own creeping paranoias, by giving a recognizable form to abstract fears more likely to induce the desired reaction in the audience. The primal disgust reaction, the attempts to shock and amaze, and the

***FROM RADIOACTIVE TESTS...
THE DEEP CRUST OF THE EARTH...
AND THE SECRET LABORATORIES OF MAN...***





BLOODTHIRSTY CREATURES??? **OR SIMPLY** **MISUNDERSTOOD???**

storylines themselves are all used to dress a psychological skeleton with everyday anxieties, which in the 1950s were largely atomic in nature.

When we stop to undress the film in this manner, we see that it is not the insects themselves we desire to run from, but rather the societal and social ills and upheavals we feel most powerless to stop or control. The ability to represent those abstract emotions through a physically imposing, realistically absurd creature is the ability to channel and relieve those unspoken emotions.

This explains the decline of atomic monsters as the 50s came to an end, although the primal impact of creepy crawly figures have not been forgotten – the irradiated variety having been replaced with swarming, burrowing and genetically modified cousins to house more contemporary expressions of fear.

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