

THE UNKNOWNNS

SYNOPSIS & PITCH

Jeff Thelen



QUIXOTIC

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QUICK OVERVIEW

TITLE: The Unknowns

GENRE: Science Fiction / Horror

LOGLINE: One night in 1948, members of an Air Force task force investigating the recent global outbreak of UFOs gather for a cocktail party when something crashes in the woods behind the house...

WRITER/DIRECTOR: Jeff Thelen

RATING: PG-13 (projected) for scenes of terror and violence

ESTIMATED SCHEDULE: 21 Days (Principal Photography)

BUDGET: 150k-1m

RECENT SIMILAR FILMS

The following are recent, low to mid budget films, similar in theme or approach, with UFOs or aliens as subject, and without major stars.

The Fourth Kind (2009). Budget: \$10m. Gross: \$47m. Rotten Tomatoes: 19%.

Skyline (2010). Budget: \$10m. Gross: \$78m. Rotten Tomatoes: 15%.

Monsters (2010). Budget: \$500k. Gross: \$4m. Rotten Tomatoes: 72%.

Dark Skies (2013). Budget: \$3.5m. Gross: \$26.4m. Rotten Tomatoes: 40%.

Extraterrestrial (2014). Budget: \$3m. Gross: Unknown. Rotten Tomatoes: 31%.

Area 51 (2015). Budget: \$5m. Gross: Unknown. Released VOD.

10 Cloverfield Lane (2016). Budget: \$15m. Gross: \$108m. Rotten Tomatoes: 90%.



Inside "Project Sign"

What Is It?

"The Unknowns" is a formally 1950's science-fiction film infused with more sophisticated, contemporary attitudes toward UFOs and aliens.

The story takes place over a single night in 1948, at the height of the "flying saucer" outbreak that led the world to embrace the startling idea that the earth was being visited by unknown entities.

Unlike similar stories such as "The X-Files," the film takes place in the factual, historical context when the Air Force took the UFO threat very seriously. It places the fictional counterparts of Project Sign in a face-to-face encounter with the phenomena, whose very existence they had struggled to deny.

The first half of the film is similar in content and technique to talky melodramas of the period, particularly films such as Douglas Sirk's All That Heaven Allows, with a little Rebel Without a Cause thrown in. The viewer should expect Jane Wyman to enter weeping at any moment. It is

deliberately melodramatic and theatrical.

In the second half, when the UFOs arrive, the film's content and technique switches to a far more contemporary approach to science fiction horror. The polite, civilized patten established in the first half is overthrown as the aliens descend on the party. The film devolves into surreal horror. Survival becomes the highest priority.

Why 1948?

"The Unknowns" takes place over one night in 1948, during the early years of the "Flying Saucer Scare" that swept the globe in the late 40's and into the 50's.

Our intention was to write a UFO script that takes place within the factual, historical context of the Air Force's efforts to investigate the phenomenon during that period. Many film-goers, especially younger ones, are unaware of the UFO outbreak of the 1940's or of the Air Force investigations under the auspices of Project Sign, Grudge, and Blue Book. These projects were staffed by serious men--field investigators, researchers, scientists, and analysts.

By placing the story in that historical setting, we thought it would lend the film and its subject gravity, authenticity, as well as uniqueness. I am not aware of any recent films that take place in that historical setting ("The X-Files" TV show was a more contemporary spin on Project Blue Book with extra-added conspiratorial goodness).

Moreover, the historical context naturally lends itself to the dramatic irony that unfolds when the team finds itself face to face with the phenomenon.

They Came From Elsewhere!

We wanted to infuse the story with a more sophisticated contemporary view of the UFO phenomenon.

UFOs (the term was not coined until 1953) were viewed in the 1950s in a frivolous light. Where they were taken seriously, the popular view was that they were visitors from another planet.

This is, in fact, still the prevailing popular view today. In our opinion, it is outdated and wrong.

Although we are more sophisticated in our attitudes toward UFOs and aliens than in 1950, the popular conception of aliens as space-men has not really changed. This is certainly true in our movies. Countless films, including Close Encounters of the Third Kind, E.T., Independence Day, Signs, Knowing, or the more recent Arrival*, are no different in their views of UFOs than 1956's Earth vs. the Flying Saucers.

Our research leads us to think that the more prevailing concept today among serious theorists is the parapsychological, multi-universe theory put forth by John Keel and Jacques Vallee. Simply put, the phenomena are akin to ghosts, devils, angels and gods. A mind-blowing concept, but it is also difficult, slippery, and not nearly as easily digested as the Spacemen from Mars theory.

We attempted to work this theory into the script for "The Unknowns" since it provides an important and fascinating alternate perspective on the phenomenon, one that many viewers are not aware of. In the film, silver flying saucers do appear and the aliens do attack, as expected--but there are many touches that support the idea that the phenomena are akin to the paranormal: doorbells ring unaccountably; the dead call up on the telephone; stones rain down in the house; table-tops split; space ships burst from the earth; and, most importantly, the crash site is an other-worldly dream terrain.

*Arrival (2016) does hint at a different view of UFOs as interstellar space-craft. In the end, the ships simply vanish like clouds.

Danger!

Finally, we wanted to contrast the polite, civilized culture of the 1950s with the brutal "reality" of an alien attack.

Whatever else it was, the 1950s as presented here was an age of relative grace and taste and politesse; of intellectual vigor and high seriousness. The film's officers and their wives had lived and fought through the most brutal war known to mankind. They bear the scars of battle and they survived. Scientific advances thrust them into the Jet Age, the Space Age, and the Age of the Atom

Bomb.

And now, suddenly, they are entering uncharted territory of bizarre dimensions: the flying saucer invasion. The general impression, expressed in their official reports and by the die-hard sceptics among them, is that flying saucers are preposterous nonsense.

This should be the impression given by the first half of the picture. The wealthy manor. The elegant cocktail party. The white gloves and petticoats. The comfortable family. The assurance of the military that all is well. The light banter about flying discs from Venus. We are secure in our homes. There is safety in the glow of the TV, in science and technology, in mathematics and psychology.

And then they arrive.

The normality of the 1950s established at the outset stands in stark contrast to the abnormality, the sheer madness of the flying saucers, the crash, the surreal dream-world terrain, the irrational invasion.

No one survives.

The aliens attack the party brutally and matter-of-factly. It is violent, scary, weird, nihilistic. It is a modern horror film. The aliens kill without reason; and they take care to mop up the blood afterwards, leaving only mystery in their wake.

Because, as Carl asserts, mystery is the very essence of "The Unknowns."

Tech Notes

Technically, the first half of the film should be sympathetic with the period aesthetic of 1950's melodramas: a clean look, high lighting, and a fluid, unobtrusive camera merely observing without comment. Technologies should include (faux) Technicolor and wide-screen, even back-projection.

In the second half, when the UFOs arrive, a more modern approach should be adopted, with rapid cutting, meaningful montage, shadowy lighting, and a pro-active camera.

DRY AS DUST SYNOPSIS

*Note. There are 14 main characters in the script. A list of each is provided at the end of this document for convenience.

Party Like It's 1948

Members of the Air Force intelligence task force, Project Sign, and their wives meet for a cocktail party at the country estate of their commander, **Major Walter Durrell**.

Over the course of the first half-hour, the company gathers for the party and we are introduced to a variety of characters and their personal dramas, in the manner of a 1950's melodrama.

The members of the team include **Lieutenant Monty McCormick**, whose face was burnt off in a fiery crash following an encounter with a UFO; **Dr. Carl Mason**, a psychologist steeped in parapsychology with radical views on UFOs; **Captain John Wallace**, a staunch realist; and **Wolfgang Graf**, a consulting professor of astrophysics, another die-hard sceptic of UFOs. **Staff Sergeant Paco Santos** serves as adjutant to Major Durrell.

As the party gathers steam, the team assembles in the library to discuss some official business. The Major will be handing in to the Pentagon the project's official report, and he would like every member to sign it. The report states simply that 1) the phenomena are not of foreign origin and 2) that they do not represent a threat.

Monty and Carl object to the report, arguing that a significant percentage of sightings remain classified as "Unknowns" whose threat cannot be properly assessed.

A shouting match erupts between the two factions, revealing cracks in the team: the sceptics on one side and the "true believers" on the other. John and Wolfgang argue that "The Unknowns" are insignificant and, given better data, would prove to be, like majority of sightings, simply mistaken natural phenomena or aircraft.

Carl, on the other hand, theorizes that they are not spacecraft, as popularly imagined, but are instead paranormal

entities akin to ghost and demons--inscrutable and potentially very dangerous.

Although even-handed, the Major is frustrated in his desire to keep the team unified.

While the men argue over the nature of "The Unknowns," the ladies gather around the guest of honor, **Rachel Golding**, a vivacious, free-spirited author who has been assigned to write an article on the project.

The ladies include **Donna Durrell**, the commander's wife--a mother of three, including a new-born, it is at Donna's family estate that the party takes place; **Edith Wallace**, John's wife and Donna's friend; and **Jane McCormick**, Monty's wife, a broken woman whose marriage has been decimated since her husband's accident and his subsequent obsession with UFOs.

The Durrell children also make a brief appearance. **Betty**, the eldest, breezes in and out as she leaves on a movie date. **James** is a serious, angst-ridden teen, who dismisses his father's work as embarrassing; he flees the party to work on his motorcycle in the garage.

The tireless maid, **Louisa**, attends to the baby in the kitchen; while the aging manservant, **Marcus**, pours the drinks.

Thus is the stage set.

It Begins

Later, at the drive-in theater, Betty is too busy wrestling with her date in the front seat to see the massed formation of UFOs soaring over the town.

By then the party is in full swing. The drinks flow; guests sing around the piano; the men and women flirt.

While John and the Major, as the authoritative voice of the Project, try to minimize the significance of the "Unknowns" to Rachel, there is a phone call from the base: the switchboards are flooded with calls from across the state reporting unknown lights in the sky. The Major sends his Staff Sergeant, Paco, to return to base to assess the situation.

Paco is driving back to base when his windshield shatters suddenly as a flying saucer zooms across the road just feet overhead.

Back at the Durell house, the party-goers grow anxious. The air is electric with foreboding. For over a year, the airmen have investigated hundreds of sightings; their official report implicitly denies their existence. And yet now, suddenly, the skies outside are chock-full.

"If the Galactic Phone Rings, Do Not Pick Up..."

Strange things obtain.

Things that seem to support Carl's theory that UFOs are akin to paranormal phenomena from another time and space.

The doorbell rings repeatedly--but no one is there. The radio in the kitchen picks up odd conversations. The horses in the stable are near panic. An oak table splits lengthwise.

Then the phone rings and Donna is horrified to hear the voice of her father, who died only a week before.

The lights flicker and burn green...

Arrival

As Betty returns home from her date, she spies twelve glowing lights passing in formation over the house. The party-goers crowd the patio to see one UFO suddenly careen to the ground, exploding in the woods out back.

The lights and phone go dead. Cars will not crank. The men gather flashlights and prepare to investigate.

Carl argues strongly against investigating, warning that no one can say what dangers may lurk at the crash site. His fear is that "they" may return to clean up the evidence...and any witnesses. But John overrules him, and Carl reluctantly joins the investigation, insisting that no one touch a thing.

Meanwhile, James is riding his motorcycle on a country road when the engine suddenly dies. As he attempts to start it, James becomes aware of three strangers very close to him on

the road, watching him...

The Investigation

The party consists of John and Edith, Carl and Rachel, Monty and Marcus. They tramp out to the crash site, but a cloud of smoke materializes and rolls over them. The cloud pulses with light. They are lost and separated. The landscape turns surreal and dreamlike.

Holding hands, Carl and Rachel try to find their way out, but come upon what appears to be a strange corpse. Rachel snaps a photograph.

Monty wanders alone. He discovers some scattered ceramic-like fragments of what appear to be "bamboo leaves." Ciphers are etched into their surface.

Marcus, also alone, stumbles upon bizarre dunes of white powder. He unwisely lets the powder sift through his hand...

John, alone, senses something in the brush... something alive... watching him...

His wife, Edith, stumbles lost through the smoke. At last, she comes upon John, standing fixedly in the woods...

As strangely as it had arrived, the cloud of smoke rolls back.

Carl and Rachel are surprised to find themselves a great distance from the house.

"Time is Rubber"

Back at the house, the others anxiously wait. When Carl and Rachel return, they are surprised to learn nearly an hour has passed. Their watches are all out of synch.

Just then Monty returns with Marcus, in agony. His hand is bleeding; the flesh is beginning to melt off the bone. They get Marcus into a bath to wash off the wound, but it is rapidly spreading. Jane, a former nurse, insists they not touch him--they have no idea what they are dealing with. They need a doctor.

John returns to the house at last, but he is strangely, nearly catatonic. No one in the party can tell the Major what they found in the woods. Monty is suffering from incredible headaches. Carl and Rachel have trouble remembering details. John has no idea know what happened to Edith.

"The Situation Must Be Contained"

Walter resolves to walk into town for a doctor and asks John to join him. But John refuses, warning, mysteriously, "Everyone must stay indoors. The situation must be contained." His words are strange; his thoughts fractured.

When Walter insists they go, John enters the library to get his coat. There, he grabs a rifle from the Major's gun rack, and returning to the living room shoots the Major point-blank in the head.

Confused and under some evil influence, John threatens the others with the gun. Carl manages to calm the man, whereupon John utters some inscrutable phrases and drops dead. They discover a large hole in the back of his head.

At the same time, Louisa enters, sobbing that Marcus has succumbed to the flesh-eating horror.

"They Have Re-Arrived"

All the lights flicker to life, to everyone's relief.

Is it over?

Not quite.

Suddenly, by the hundreds, stones rain down from the ceiling and bounce off the floor.

Speechless.

An eerie glowing portal opens up in the fields outside. Two or three figures fan out toward the house. As Carl predicted, they are returning.

Chaos. The rumble of an earth tremor. The lights go nova and burst. The furniture defies gravity. A chair glides across the floor.

When, suddenly, out behind the house--a great ship bursts from the earth.

It beams a blinding light into the house...through the ceiling and walls. The beam touches John's corpse and it grotesquely revives momentarily. It sends the piano flinging weightlessly across the room.

A shadowy alien is spied outside the windows--it flickers away like a tv set switched off.

Lock the doors! Carl rushes everyone into the kitchen...down into the cellar...

All except Donna and her daughter Betty. They dash upstairs, past a shadowy intruder hiding in the corner, up into the nursery where Donna picks up the infant. Their blood freezes at the clatter of footsteps on the roof... at the two shadowy beings already in the room...

"Hell of A Party"

The surviving party-goers (Carl and Rachel, Monty and Jane, Wolfgang and Louisa) huddle in the cellar, among the racks of wine, listening to the creak of the floorboards overhead.

Wolfgang is armed with John's rifle, pokes among the wine bottles for a good vintage. Carl scolds him for thinking a gun would do anything but make the situation worse. "Ghosts cannot be killed."

Monty notices a back door. Peeking out, he sees an escape route to the stables nearby and the road just beyond. A shadowy alien roves outside...

Monty speaks confidentially to Carl. He shows Carl one of the small "bamboo-leaf" fragments from the crash site. Monty believes the aliens may be looking for it, in order to erase all evidence. Weighted by guilt, Monty says he is going out the door; if he makes it to safety, he will signal the others.

Carl tells him to stay put, that they know absolutely nothing of the aliens' intentions.

Regardless, Monty slips out the door, to his wife's horror.

Outside, Monty evades the shadowy entities patrolling the

grounds. He makes a dash for the road and nearly makes it, but is vaporized at the last moment.

Back in the cellar, Wolfgang opens a bottle of wine and lifts a glass in a toast.

WOLFGANG

To mystery. To absurdity. To
Carl's ghosts. To anchors that
fall from heaven and spaceships
that burst from the earth. To
the unknown.

BUZZ!

A beam of light illuminates the cellar.

Probing.

Searching.

Two bioluminescent aliens appear. Their skins are transparent, their strange organs visible.

Wolfgang shoots one with the rifle.

Whereupon the room explodes.

Classified: Unknown

Dawn.

James awakes naked in a tree by the side of the road. He falls to the ground and is nearly crushed when his motorcycle falls out of the tree.

The Sheriff picks the youth up as he is walking homeward in a daze.

Police and firefighters have gathered at the Durell manor. Paco is also there.

The Fire Chief reports they have found no evidence of an explosion in the woods.

The Sheriff and James enter the house where officers examine the room.

Nothing is amiss anywhere in the house. There is no evidence of anything unusual.

Except, of course, that no one at the party is to be found. James dashes upstairs and when he returns, he has his baby sister in his arms. The only witness.

Back at the base, Paco, the one surviving member of the team, finishes his report on the incident. He files it away in a cabinet stuffed with many other documents.

All classified "Unknown."

MAJOR CHARACTERS

1st Lieutenant Montgomery (Monty) McCormick. 35. Texan. A pilot in WW2. Face destroyed by encounter with a UFO.

Jane McCormick. 30. Monty's wife. Frail, shy, socially awkward. Her marriage near ruins, she is near collapse.

Major Walter Durell. 50, commander of Project. Owner of the estate where the party takes place. Open-minded fatherly voice of authority. Walter Pidgeon.

Donna Durell. 40. Wealthy socialite. A caring wife and mother.

Betty Durrell. 18. Their daughter. Padded bra and tight sweaters. Molds herself on celebrity cheesecake.

James Durrell. 17. Their son. Troubled James Dean sullenness, dipping his toe into existentialism.

Captain John Wallace. 35. Big, loud, brutal realist. Gung-ho.

Edith Wallace. 30. John's wife. Best friends with Donna. An alcoholic flirt.

1nd Lieutenant Dr. Carl Mason. 40. Jungian psychologist. A thoughtful, meditative theorist of UFOs as parapsychological phenomena. Handsome, solid bachelor.

Staff Sergeant Francisco "Paco" Santos. 25. Junior member of the team. Adjutant to Major Durrell.

Professor Wolfgang Graf. 55, German astrophysics professor, consultant to the project--a die-hard skeptic.

Rachel Golding. 30. Female freelance journalist, researching an article on the project. A well-known author. Jewish. Algonquin smart set cynic. Communist. Free-love. Very brassy.

Louisa Jackson. 40. Black maid with five kids at home. Deeply religious.

Marcus Jones. 55. Aging black manservant.