

Forbidden Planet (1956)

Directed by Fred McLeod Wilcox, written by Cyril Hume)

The inherent, bestial nature of humanity is one of the social themes of the science fiction film, *Forbidden Planet* (1956).¹ The film was made prior to the successful Russian launch of the Sputnik satellite, when even travel to the moon seemed remote. In the film's brief historical retrospective, it wasn't until the final decade of the 21st century that the first human landed on the moon. By 2200, the other planets of the solar system had been explored. The discovery of hyper-drive, through which the speed of light was first attained and then surpassed, occurred in the twenty-third century.

A United Planet spacecraft is on a mission to discover the fate of a party of scientists who, twenty years previously, had reached the planet, Altair 4. The commander, John Adams (played by Leslie Nielson), ignores an enigmatic warning not to land on the planet, and discovers two survivors, Dr. Edward Morbius and his daughter, Altara. They control a remarkably sophisticated robot, Robbie, who is technologically far in advance of human robotics at the time. Morbius explains that the other members of his expedition had been mysteriously killed by an unseen but terrible force and that only he, and his wife and daughter had survived. His wife later died naturally.

Altair 4 had once been the home of a powerful and intelligent 'race' which called itself the Krell. They had disappeared, but had left behind a gigantic, fully-functioning and self-regulating underground complex driven by a nuclear power source of almost infinite capacity. Using his skills as a linguist, Morbius had deciphered some Krell writings and, from him, Commander Adams and ship physician (Doc Ostro) learn some of the history of this ancient people:

Morbius: Ethically as well as technologically they were a million years ahead of humankind. For in unlocking the mysteries of nature they had conquered even their baser selves. And, when in the course of eons they had abolished sickness and insanity and crime and all injustice, they turned still with high benevolence, outward towards space.... The heights they had reached!

The Krell had constructed a paradise on earth, a new world that resembled the Garden of Eden. Altara communes with her 'friends', the deer and the tigers, brought from earth years before by a Krell expedition. But, like Eden, this earth-like paradise was suddenly and mysteriously lost.

Morbius: But then, seemingly on the threshold of some supreme accomplishment, which was to have crowned their entire history, this all-but divine race perished in a single night.

Since that sudden moment of destruction, two thousand centuries passed undisturbed, until Morbius discovered their underground complex. Morbius demonstrates a mental machine he calls a Krell 'plastic educator' used 'to condition and test their young'. He had used this machine, soon after his arrival, to boost his brain power, though he was still no match for the Krell.

By linking the machine to the electromagnetic waves of his brain, which are multiplied by harnessing a small fraction of the Krell power source, Morbius demonstrates his ability to generate a three-dimensional figure of his daughter, having conjured from his brain ‘a familiar subject to start with to save time.’ The image appears to move and be alive. It persists, Morbius explains, ‘because my daughter is alive in my brain from microsecond to microsecond while I manipulate’ the machine.

In the ‘final days before their annihilation,’ Morbius explains, ‘the Krell had been applying their entire racial energies to a new project, one which they actually seemed to hope would somehow free them once and for all from any dependence on physical instrumentality.’ They had been experimenting with mental telepathy. By combining their minds with their infinite power source, they had been attempting to create physical matter through the actions of the mind alone. They were planning the ultimate demonstration of mind over matter.

It is obvious to Commander Adams that Krell knowledge should be made available to humanity, but Morbius is unwilling to share what he had learned with the world. ‘I have come to the unalterable conclusion’, he asserts, ‘that man is unfit, as yet, to receive such knowledge, such almost limitless power.’ For Adams, this claim to absolute control makes Morbius a potential tyrant. The new arrivals threaten his small, private world.

Soon, the space crew is being attacked by an invisible yet powerful and destructive monster, whose outline they can barely visualize in the electromagnetic field set up to protect the ship. ‘It’s started again’, cries Morbius, recognizing the return of the destructive force that had decimated his original party of scientists. He warns the commander, saying he has had a premonition and can visualize the crew’s destruction. But his nubile daughter has fallen in love. In rebellion against her father, she is now developing an emotional connection with Commander Adams. As the monster attacks the space ship, she experiences a nightmare vision of the monster and awakens, screaming. Her sudden terror startles her father, who had also been asleep, his head resting on a desk. The monster suddenly disappears.

Doc Ostro attempts to explain the invisible force that had attacked them. The creature appears to be physically impossible – a nightmare image. He surmises that the monster ‘must have been renewing its molecular structure from one microsecond to the next.’ Only a boost from the Krell ‘educator’ can help him understand the apparition, so he goes underground seeking to reveal the secret. The attempt kills him, but not before he reveals the truth to the Captain. Morbius was too close to the problem, he explains.

Doc Ostrow: The Krell completed the project, big machine, no instrumentalities, true creation.... But the Krell forgot one thing: Monsters, John. Monsters from the Id.

Adams: The Id, what’s that?

Morbius is unhelpful and unsympathetic: ‘The fool! Meddling idiot! As though his ape brain could contain the secrets of the Krell! ... Let him be buried with the other victims of human greed and folly.’

But Morbius’s world is beginning to self-destruct. Altara decides to leave the planet and return to earth, having chosen her lover over her controlling parent. She’ll be

terribly punished, Morbius threatens. But the solution to the mystery of Altira 4 is just beneath his conscious mind, if he can be brought to understand it.

What is this 'Id'? Adams asks Morbius, still forgetting elementary psychoanalysis.

Morbius: Id, Id, Id! It's an—It's an obsolete term, I'm afraid, one once used to describe the elementary basis of the subconscious mind.'

Now, even without the Krell mind-boost, the Commander has the explanation he needs to begin to prime the unsuspecting Morbius:

Adams: 'Monsters from the Id. ... The big machine ... enough power for a whole population of creative geniuses operated by remote control. Operated by the electromagnetic impulses of individual Krell brains.'

Morbius: 'To what purpose?'

Adams: In return, that ultimate machine would instantaneously project solid matter to any point on the planet in any shape or colour they might imagine for any purpose—creation by mere thought.'

Morbius: 'Why haven't I seen this all along?'

Adams: 'But like you, the Krell forgot one deadly danger: their own subconscious hate and lust for destruction.'

Morbius: 'The beast, the mindless primitive. Even the Krell must have evolved from that beginning.'

Adams: 'And so those mindless beasts of the subconscious had access to a machine that could never be shut down. The secret devil of every soul on the planet all set free at once to loot and main, and take revenge, and kill.'

Morbius: 'My poor Krell. After a million years of shining sanity, they could hardly have understood what power was destroying them.'

But Morbius's unconscious id is summoning the monster once again, following the instincts of self-preservation and revenge. It will kill those who threaten him and punish his daughter, who has rebelled against her father's authority.

The monster attacks, being created microsecond by microsecond by Morbius's Id, over which he has no conscious control. And it is multiplied in deadly intensity by the Krell's infinite power supply. Even the powerful Robbie can't kill the monster, not because, in line with Asimov's later laws of robotics, it can't kill a human being, but because the monster *is* Morbius. 'It's no use' ordering the robot to kill the monster, the Commander tells Morbius. Robbie 'knows it's your other self.'

The monster is 'You're secret id,' the Captain explains. But this evil is not Morbius's alone: 'We're all part monsters in our subconscious, so we have laws and religion.' Consciously, Morbius still lacked the power to operate the great machine, but his 'subconscious had been made strong enough.' This subconscious desire was the evil force that had attacked the original party of scientists, sparing only Morbius, whose

unconscious creation it was, and his wife and daughter. But now his disobedient daughter was the target of her father's destructive wish.

Adams: 'Now she's defying you, Morbius. Even in you, the loving father, there still exists the mindless primitive, more enraged and more inflamed with each new frustration. And now you're whistling up your monster again, to punish her for her disloyalty and disobedience.'

Only by recognizing the truth that he has conjured the monster out of his own brain, and only by sacrificing himself, could Morbius destroy the monster and save his daughter. But he doesn't die before he has pushed the destruct button that will destroy the entire planet, along with its advanced Krell technology, in one nuclear microsecond, although only after a sufficient interlude to allow an escape for the survivors.