

Invasion of the Body Snatchers

By Robert Sklar

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Among its distinguished companions in this volume, Doe Siegel's 1956 science-fiction thriller "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" stands alone in representing the significance and occasional splendor of the Hollywood B-picture.

Glorified in recent years for their legendary cheap, off-the-cuff style of filmmaking, B-pictures were first designated in the 1930s when the studios set up separate units to produce inexpensive films to run as the second half of double features (a two-for-the-price-of-one exhibition practice of that era. Although the B-units closed down in the 1940s, the name stuck for later low-budget genre flicks like "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." Lacking stars and first-run theater distribution, the film barely got reviewed outside the Hollywood trade papers. But it soon took on a second life on television and within a few years achieved secure status as a cult classic.

Considering its lowly status and budgetary constraint (the distributor and financial backer, Allied Artists, formerly the Poverty Row studio Monogram, set a \$300,000 ceiling). *Body Snatchers* had a first-class pedigree. The producer was the distinguished independent Walter Wanger, struggling to restore his name serving a prison sentence for shooting and wounding the lover of his wife, actress Joan Bennett. Siegel was building a reputation as an action director and had teamed with Wanger on a moneymaking and critically acclaimed prison drama, "Riot in Cell Block 11" (1954). The source was a serialized novel by Jack Finney in "Collier's" magazine, with Daniel Manwaring, scriptwriter on the quintessential film noir "Out of the Past" (1947) among many other works, writing the screenplay.

"Invasion of the Body Snatchers" arrived as part of an explosion of science fantasy and science horror in mainstream popular culture, fueled by the atomic age, advent of space rocketry, and Cold War anxieties. "So much has been discovered these past few years that anything is



Lobby card from the film's original release. Courtesy Library of Congress

possible," say Dr. Miles Bennell (Kevin McCarthy) after he discovers that mysterious seed pods grow into human forms and take over actual persons, retaining their former physical characteristics but completely transforming their personalities. "It may be the results of atomic radiation on plant life, or animal life ... some weird, alien organism ... a mutation of some kind." Once a pod is ready to become you, the moment you fall asleep you're a goner.

The pods launch their silent revolution in the fictional Southern California town of Santa Mira (location shooting took place in the town of Sierra Madre). The basic story begins with the doctor returning to town by train, having been called back from a medical convention because his appointment schedule has unexpectedly become crowded. People want to talk about their loved ones who suddenly don't seem like their old selves any more, but the problem is solved when they too succumb to the pods. It ends with Miles Bennell as the town's last remaining human and the pod people growing more pods in huge greenhouses and shipping them by truck to take over Earth. Escaping to a highway, Miles stands in the middle of traffic and cries, "You're next! You're next."

This is a considerably darker scenario than the source novel, which ended with the pods flying off to find a more propitious planet and the remaining pod people surrendering to federal agents. In postproduction, the filmmakers mulled adding more explanatory structure – for example, a prominent journalist introducing the story

– as a way of tempering its disquieting implications, turning a horror fantasy into a metafiction. They postponed release for nearly half a year while developing an opening and closing frame that, as in films like “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,” asks spectators to consider whether what they’re watching is a madman’s tale. At the beginning Miles is delivered to a hospital by a police care where he begins to narrate what happened in Santa Mira. At the end, “You’re next!” dissolves back to the hospital, where doctors are convinced he’s insane, until a report of a crashed truck filled with seed pods sends them to the telephone to alert authorities.

Like many genre films in Hollywood’s blacklist era, “Invasion of the Body Snatchers” functions as an allegory, raising questions about contemporary society that could not be confronted as directly in a realist manner. But the question is, an allegory of what? Such works scatter clues as much as they take stands, and within the film’s fundamental opposition between endangered individuality and insidious conformism lies considerable room for multiple interpretation.

Was it a warning, in familiar Cold War style, against communistic ideology that turns friends and neighbors into squadrons of malevolent drones? No doubt. Yet was it not also, more subtly, critical of postwar America and the strains of acquisitive, competitive society from which individuals might welcome relief? Miles remarks that humanity had already slowly been draining away through human indifference rather than extraterrestrial intervention. And even as the heroic holdout he’s not immune from the film’s implied critique. He refers to a failed marriage that he attributes to the demands of a doctor’s life. A liberal dispenser of pills for any and all conditions, he’s also quick to refer his patients for psychiatric consultation (“you don’t have to be losing your mind to need psychiatric help”).

Under its bucolic surface Santa Mira seems to have had a simmering mental health crisis. Once the psychiatrist becomes a pod person, he explains to Miles, “Santa Mira was like any other town. People with nothing but problems.” But pods drifted down from outer and offered solutions. “Love. Desire. Ambition. Faith. Without them, life’s so simple, believe me.” Miles’s woman friend Becky (Dana Wynter) protests, “I don’t want a world without love or grief or beauty.” Of course the film unequivocally sides with the party of humanity. It gives the spectator little room for ambiguity as the pod peoples’ calmly voiced rationales turn toward anger, violence, and aggressive expansion. Yet the sense of a troubled community even in the best of times, sustaining itself through medication and psychotherapy.

“Invasion of the Body Snatchers” was originally released in a SuperScope widescreen format. Cinematographer Ellsworth Fredericks and art director Edward “Ted” Harworth designed a dark, claustrophobic noir ambiance for the film, breaking up the wide image with partitions, walls, doors, corridors, and enclosed spaces. It was remade under the same title in 1978 by director Philip Kaufman and again in 1993 by Abel Ferrara, with the title “Body Snatchers.”

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

The late Robert Sklar was a film scholar whose 1975 book “Movie-Made America” was one of the first histories to place Hollywood films in a social and political context. He served on the National Film Preservation Board from 1997 until his death in 2011. A professor of cinema studies at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts for more than 30 years, Mr. Sklar also wrote “F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Last Laocoön,” “City Boys: Cagney, Bogart, Garfield” and “Film: An International History of the Medium.”