

BODY SNATCHERS [1994]

by

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It's an old story: space pods arrive on Earth, multiply, and replace normal people with emotion-less simulacra. "It looks like Uncle Ira, it acts like Uncle Ira, but it's not Uncle Ira," said the 1956 *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Some ascribe the many films that treat identity solely to the Communist paranoia and the McCarthyism heritage of the 1950s. This can't be the whole story, for the most popular film of the previous decade pushes lost identity to the extreme of personal non-existence – Frank Capra's 1946 classic Christmas film, *It's a Wonderful Life!* Here are a few more: *Spellbound* [1945], *Invaders from Mars* [1953, 1986], *It Came from Outer Space* [1953], *I Married A Monster From Outer Space* [1958] (a movie that is far better than the title implies), *Vertigo* [1958] (a film, that, in typical Hitchcockian fashion reverses the *Body Snatcher's* premise to read, "It doesn't act like Uncle Ira, it doesn't look like Uncle Ira, but it is Uncle Ira"), *Psycho* [1960], *The Manchurian Candidate* [1962], *The Stepford Wives* [1975], *Zelig* [1983], *RoboCop* [1987], and, most recently *Total Recall* [1990]. With paranoia about our external social and physical environment and a constant self-doubt as to who we "really are" a seeming staple in our culture, I see no reason not to expect more films dealing with this subject in the future.

In the 1956 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, a California town is invaded by the pods who do not threaten merely the normal world, but normalcy itself. Human nature with all its flaws – vulnerability, emotionality, and irrationality – is pitted against the pod replacements – cold, calculating and totally conforming to the good of the mass. Because of the political climate of the day, some saw the clones as signifying the ultimate goal of McCarthyism – total conformity, total commitment to the greater good. Others, on the other hand, saw the pods as Communist invaders, subverting our American culture into one of Red Menace conformity and obedience. The film works well both ways, which is, I believe, less a reflection of film's ambiguity, than a demonstration that the goals of any extremist group are pretty much identical.

The current *Body Snatchers* is the third remake and definitely the scariest of the three. Though there is practically no blood or gore, an atmosphere of fear pervades even the most ordinary of things. Our willingness, no, our eagerness to suspect the ordinary is perhaps the most frightening aspect of the film.

The site of the invasion is a military installation. As we read newspaper headlines about military testing of LSD on unsuspecting victims and plutonium on mentally handicapped children, the military seems a good focus for contemporary paranoia. In the film, back-lit soldiers loom ominously; their shadows fall across the innocents with more threat than all their weaponry. The pods now become just another amplification of the military's threat to the populace it was intended to protect.

In the first version of the film, the hero is a doctor; in the second a health inspector. Here is a progression from personal contact with people toward an emotional distancing. Now, the hero is even more detached – a helicopter pilot who is above it all. But it is not only the hero who is emotionally alienated. The army doctor (in a beautiful cameo by Forest Whitaker) sees paranoia among his troops, but rather than dealing with it, succumbs to it himself. *Body Snatchers* is clearly telling us that since the 1956 original, we have all become much closer to turning into pods – the leap from person to pod is now considerably shorter.

This *Body Snatchers* centers around a sixteen-year-old girl. This change allows the film to locate the origins of the invaders from an existential “out there” to a psychological “in here.” She despises her younger brother, hates her stepmother, and has mixed feelings about the father, who she claims never listens. She feels isolated, ignored and unloved – out of place in her own family. She wants stability, yet she wants to escape.

As in many horror films, *Body Snatchers'* monsters are at least in part a materialization of the repressed wishes of one of the characters. During the film, all the heroine's secret (and not so secret) wishes for revenge on both her family and on the military are played out quite literally – they all die. In one of the most frighteningly Oedipal scenarios ever put on film, she even shoots her own father to death at point blank range. He has, of course, been replaced by a pod person, but nevertheless the symbology of the act is quite explicit.

In *Body Snatchers*, we clearly see the power of the feminine and its consequences symbolized throughout the film. For instance, early on, as the family drives toward the military base, we see an eclipse. The first interpretation is that during daylight, darkness will come. Thus, evil is afoot. While this certainly applies to the film, a deeper meaning emerges when we realize that an eclipse involves the temporary extinguishing of the male solar principle, the Sun, by the female lunar principle, the Moon. Thus, the normal balance between the two sexual energies has been disturbed. This creates monsters. To further emphasize the relation between the pods from outer space and the inner feminine, we see pods being harvested from the very water which the heroine's father found so polluted – being born from a perverted amniotic fluid.

In this *Body Snatchers*, the psychic powers unleashed by a disgruntled (and perfectly normal) teenager are not subsumed to some greater social good. The pods take over the world. If we see the pods as a manifestation, at least in part, of her adolescent psyche, this film may be the ultimate, though very frightening, celebration of women's

power, “If you make me mad, I’ll undo what your patriarchal God did – I’ll destroy the world.” In Greek mythology, Pandora, whose name means “all gifts,” brought with her as dowry a jar filled with a variety of evils which she released on earth, keeping only hope inside. Times have changed. In *Body Snatchers* there is little hope left and what remains inside the jar (pod) bodes for an ominous future.

Body Snatchers. Directed by Abel Ferrara. Screenplay by Stuart Gordon, Dennis Paoli, and Nicholas St. John. Screen Story by Raymond Cistheri and Larry Cohen. Based on the novel by Jack Finney. Production Designed by Peter Jamison. Distributed by Warner Bros. 1994.