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The Invasion of Conformity and the Snatching of Autonomy: *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*

Watch out! Your neighbor is emotionless, inhuman, and conforming to the norms of an anti-individualistic political ideology. And it's an alien invasion! *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), directed by Don Siegel, is a science fiction film embedded with ambiguous sociopolitical allegories. The film follows Miles, a single doctor, and his old friend-turned-lover, Becky, as an alien invasion sweeps through the small town of Santa Mira, California. The entire town becomes unrecognizable as emotion, empathy, and humanity suddenly vanish. The aliens replace humans, referred to as "pod people." *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* uses its narrative to critique the age of anti-communist paranoia generated by McCarthy, the fear of ideological infiltration, and the pressures developed by post-World War II conformity. The film startles the viewer into remaining alert, suggesting that at any moment, they could be the next victim of ideological warfare, or plainly, alien invasion.

Science fiction consists of aliens, spaceships, monsters, outlandish scenarios on Earth, futuristic events in outer space, and supremely advanced technology. This genre presents a story that is plausible, not necessarily possible at the time being. Sci-fi is rooted in reality and explores how humans respond to unthinkable situations. These chaotic, unpredictable scenarios across the galaxy and throughout time *always* center on humanity. However, the perspective reflected in the narrative is utterly dependent on the opinion of the filmmaker. This dependence creates a deep gash, separating the political left, center, and right clearly. It may lean toward the left, supporting

the advancement of science and technology, new discoveries, or promoting the intelligent scientist with the solution to every problem in the world. On the other hand, it may fall into the right, spotlighting the government or military as the protagonist or problem solver who is challenged by a 'mad scientist.' All science fiction media consist of these conventions.

Across the amassment of science-fiction content, the conventions represent the sociopolitical fears and anxieties of the time period in which it originates. The zombies in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) serve as a reflection of the tensions accruing in the United States during the Vietnam War: mindless people condoning America's immature and deadly intervention. It declares that the government has numbed the minds of citizens, disallowing the people from condemning the government's mistakes. *Frankenstein* (1931) emphasizes the fear that scientists or individuals may obtain the power of gods through the advancement of technology, a conservative approach in the film. Contrastingly, the book *Frankenstein* (1818), written by Mary Shelley, is focused on the catastrophic results when a child lacks nurture, and how society redirects the blame onto the child for society's own failures. *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) is also about the fear of advancing technology, to the extent that it finally gains a mind of its own.

While these political and social statements make up the foundation of science fiction, what ensures the success of these films is how relatable characters and stories are centered in the narrative. Human problems are inputted and exacerbated by the extraterrestrial situation. These stories transport the audience to an unknown terrain that presents a story that is nothing but familiar. Science fiction allows the audience to picture themselves in the suits of astronauts, the memory cards of A.I., and even in the bloodied and decaying minds of zombies. It is all about discovering who we are, why we do what we do, and examining the consequences of our actions.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers presents many conventions common to science-fiction cinema, the most immediate being aliens. Alien invasions have served as a representation of countless ideas: the fear of overwhelming political ideologies, the fear of the unknown or the “other,” colonialism, and so much more. However, this film twists the alien invasion together with a unique form of zombie apocalypse. The aliens of the film do not brutally kill, destroy, or rule over the humans, but morph into them and replace them. The ‘pod people’ supplant the humans, including Miles’ best friend and Becky’s father, numbing their minds into conformity. All of the aliens are ideologically uniform. Aliens are often depicted with extremely advanced technology, flying in from outer space and laser guns blazing, but the pod people come from seed pods. They are formed naturally. What was once natural is now unnatural; the humans are zombified by organic, naturally formed aliens. The threat has been redirected to humanity and the nature of reality.

The overwhelming political situation that accompanied the inspiration and creation of this film was the Second Red Scare, the tensions that arose from McCarthyism and communism. The book “Science Fiction Cinema: From Outerspace to Cyberspace,” written by Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, acknowledges this fear of communist infiltration. The film exudes the “air of paranoia created by McCarthyite America...” the period in which Senator McCarthy instilled fear into the American people, forcing them to conform to his ideology (King and Krzywinska 51).. Paradoxically, he influenced the American people to conform to his anti-communist opinions. His fear suppressed the American people's ability to think for themselves, fearing that ‘evil communism’ was knocking at their door. The pod people represent this notion that your enemy, communism, could be right next door. Miles is beyond paranoid throughout this picture, afraid of becoming a pod person. Yet, the end of the film makes one question whether Miles is

sane, and if anything he describes by the end of the film truly occurred. If he wasn't telling the truth, the film serves as a critique of an overly paranoid man influenced by McCarthyite ideals, conforming to American political stances. If he is telling the truth, he is justifiably afraid of the infiltration of communism and strives to preserve his autonomy.

This juxtaposing perspective positions the film as a warning to the American people: communism is the largest threat and may be leaking into America. In "Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties," written by Peter Biskind, the fear of conformity to an external political ideology is examined. Biskind notes how the pod people and their uniformity are reminiscent of a "mechanistic utopia," a society in which humans must fit to a specific mold to ensure the proper functioning of said society, which is commonly used as a "metaphor for Communism" (Biskind 133). This film displays an influx of conformity and a loss of individuality from institutional pressure. "Individuals must not only act for themselves [but] must think for themselves as well," disallowing political, social, or cultural institutions to influence their decision-making (Biskind 136). The text "Picturing Paranoia: Interpreting Invasion of the Body Snatchers," similarly posits that communism, or alien invasion, is a "threat to autonomy and personal identity" (Sanders 59). Action must be taken to prevent this ideological threat. Near the end of the film, Miles screams out to the world, "You're next! You're next!" telling the world that we are all at risk of conformity (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*). Communism, here, is a threat to the United States of America, and Americans must act and protect their autonomy.

On a different note, this film also recognizes post-war domestic tensions between women and men. When men returned from World War II, women were pushed out of the workplace. Women were expected to step back and serve domestically. Becky is the antithesis of this

prescribed mold, principally because of her status as a divorcee. A heavy stigma around divorce developed as divorce rates spiked after World War II. In the text “Lovelier the Second Time Around: Divorce, Desire, and Gothic Domesticity in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*,” author Jennifer L. Jenkins addresses these dynamics. She labels Miles and Becky as “the educated and divorced outsiders of their town (Jenkins 485). They are the only ‘loners’ in this town. Everyone around them turning into pods serves as an exaggerated way to show the audience how secluded and different Miles and Becky are. They aren’t following the norms: settle down, marry, start a family. In this period, there was no room for the “divorced, the never-married” or “the sexually independent” (Jenkins 479). The pressure was so intense to conform that one begins to feel their ability to think on their own is at risk. America sank into a “morass of suburban conformity and complacency;” all families were the same, people the same, ideas the same in this period (King and Kryzwinska 4). Miles and Becky were being punished for their breaking of norms and rejection of conformity, until the finale, when Becky gives in and is replaced by a pod.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers functions as a highly influential science fiction film today. It culminates the familiar sociopolitical anxieties of the period and projects them into an unfamiliar terrain. Utilizing science fiction conventions, the film critiques both the McCarthyite era against communism and communism itself, bolstering conformity as the antagonist. Both communism and McCarthyite ideals threaten autonomy and individuality. Further, it exhibits the difficulty in escaping conformity. While Becky was a divorcee with no kids, she still fell into the mold prepared for her from the beginning. Siegel inputs a human-centered, relatable narrative into the world of an alien invasion, allowing the stakes and message to be magnified.. This film will forever exist as a warning to the threat that conformity, groupthink, and institutions pose.

Work Cited

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