

THE MANY ADAPTATIONS OF THE BODY SNATCHERS

The Association of Adaptation Studies 12th Annual Conference, Leicester, 18th – 19th September, 2017

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Jack Finney's novel *The Body Snatchers* was first published in serial form in Collier's magazine in 1954. It has been adapted four times and been attributed allegorical status for everything from McCarthyism to the state of modern marriage.

For those of you not familiar with the story it concerns an extra-terrestrial invasion of plant spores that grow into large seed pods, each one capable of producing a duplicate of a human as they sleep. It assimilates memories and personalities but these duplicates are devoid of all human emotion.

Kathleen Loock noted that the 'narrative of alien induced dehumanization has lent itself to reinterpretations and reimaginations like few others, always shifting with the zeitgeist.' While preparing an Adaptation module or a screenwriting course I first noticed that these films weren't just straight remakes nor were they sequels. One idea that had traction for me, suggested by Loock, Barry Grant and Robert Shelton, is one of **continuation**. Each film builds conceptually on ideas founded in the preceding version.

Thomas Leitch noted that the 'audience for sequels wants to find out more about the characters and what happened to them after the story was over. The audience for remakes however does not expect to find out anything new, they want the same story again, though not exactly the same.' I hope I'll show that *The Body Snatchers* quadrilogy has elements of both.

To gain a clearer impression of the stages of development I decided to look at the screenplays as well as the finished films.

Three areas immediately stood out as points of interest, the main characters, elements of the duplication and finally the thematic core. What I haven't done is discuss any metaphorical meaning to the texts. Partly because that has been done many times before and by better analysts than I.

The most striking observation is that all five texts basically tell the same story. As Loock and Higashi have noted the 'central metaphor, linear plot, and basic character constellation remain the same.' There is reimagining, change of setting and the resolutions are achieved through different means, but the premise of being taken over while we sleep by emotionless drones is constant.

Within that changes to the protagonist provides an interesting juxtaposition. Finney's protagonist, Miles Bennell, is a doctor who has lived and worked his whole life in a small town. He is also, as Al La Valley has pointed out a man of his time, trusting of institutions, beholden to science and rationality. 'he is always looking for ways to combine individual and collective action appropriately.'

Daniel Mainwaring's screenplay is as close to a faithful adaptation as one can get with much of the plot and dialogue lifted directly. In an interview with Arthur LeGacy Finney attributes this to having written the novel with 'the potential for adaptation in mind.'

The first time we see Miles on film he is declaring his sanity to a psychiatrist. Desperately trying to be heard. Because as he later states '*My business is people in trouble.*' He is heroic

in stature, a man who Christopher Vogler would say is prepared "to protect and to serve." Also he is no quack, he was at a convention delivering a paper when he got the call that something was amiss in Santa Mira. This is a man who keeps himself ahead of current medical thinking. Mainwaring emphasised the pessimistic elements in the novel. The end of every draft of the screenplay is despairing. Miles is sending us all a warning. Whereas the studio insisted on a more hopeful bookends where Miles is the hero that elicits change.

The 1978 incarnation produced by Robert H. Solo, directed by Philip Kaufman and written by W.D. Richter is in contrast the bleakest of the four filmed versions. Its main character Matthew Bennell is a health inspector. Note the use of the same surname, a tradition that in some form continues through the series, with reuse of Bennell, Belicec, Driscoll, Kaufman and recurring M Christian names.

Though Matthew is only on the periphery of the medical profession his job still involves well-being. As Brett Stifflemire has observed he is not a romantic hero like Miles but he is one driven to root out violations of laws by means of investigation and science. He does so with his partner Elizabeth Driscoll who is the first to be suspicious of strange flowers. Matthew is a cynic and a sceptic but it is these traits that make him, like Miles, a man of his time. The times being Watergate which were part of what Richter describes as reflexive thinking. 'We were just so convinced that everything was happening behind our backs that unconsciously you approach the creative process with that in the air.'

This version intriguingly plays with the question of it being a remake or sequel with a cameo appearance by Kevin McCarthy, who played Miles in the original film. Kaufman suggested that 'it's as if he's run twenty years...to try and warn us'

In 1989 Solo approached the material again with the intention of starting a trilogy but *Body Snatchers* had a troubled development, going through at least twenty drafts with six script writers. Larry Cohen was the first writer, he devised a youth orientated story. Stuart Gordon was then hired and had the idea that it would be more chilling if a family was involved. Gordon was actively encouraged to use anything developed in the previous version as Solo was very clear that this was a sequel. So Gordon retained the protagonist as a young girl, Marti Malone, but one whose father works for the Environmental Protection Agency. Again an occupation concerned with health, this time pollution of the local water supply at a military base.

Though Marti's casting is responding to the demographic of cinema goers at that time; she is also a non-conformist who is among the first to realise all is not well. However her guiding focus is protecting her younger brother Andy.

An occupation with motherly instincts that David Kajganich developed in 2007's *Invasion*. The protagonist here is Dr Carol Bennell, a psychiatrist, and like Miles Bennell a divorcee. She is locked into a custody battle with her ex-husband, Tucker Kaufman for their son Oliver who has a natural immunity to a disease that is the replacement for the pods in this version. Tucker is a representative of the Centre for Disease Control, the authority who should protect people but here is actually the spreader of contagion.

Like Miles, Carol is a medical professional with pastoral concerns upper mind in her care for her patients. Like Marti much of her focus is finding and protecting her son Oliver. However she is also the first to bring attention to the virus and speculate on a cure.

Intriguingly there is again a cameo; this time Veronica Cartwright, who played Nancy Belicec, the last survivor, in the 78 version, is here Wendy Lenk, the first to be recognised as immune against the virus. An innovation Thomas Leitch suggests adds 'retrospective causality' to her story.

Carolyn Jess-Cooke and Constantine Verevis believe the remake 'prioritises repetition of the original' whereas the sequel advances an 'exploration of alternatives.' It's clear these films are doing both. As can be seen each of the *Bodysnatcher's* films builds on information and developments in the preceding one. There is no attempt to overlook or ignore the fact that these texts exist.

However Umberto Eco recognised that 'remakes cannot rely on repetition alone, they also require novelty.' And the area that this is most clear is in the actual process of assimilation with both subtle and extreme changes.

In Finney's original and Mainwaring's script for the 56 version the assimilation can be at some remove from the sleeping victim. The pods Finney describes are 'round and maybe three feet in diameter.' Special effects technician Milt Rice essentially devised a giant corn cob for Siegel that burst with compressed air revealing a latex body cast of the characters inside doused with soapy foam. A practical effect that still holds up today. What Katrina Mann described as 'an intense sight of primal horror.' We are literally stolen as we sleep.

By 1978 animatronic technology had moved on considerably. Tom Burman and Dell Rheaume brilliantly realised Richter's vision of a flower that grows string like roots that attach themselves to a victim. Literally feeding off a sleeping host. It exemplifies what Philip Kaufman stated that he *approached the project not as a remake but as a 'variation on a*

theme. 'The pod rapidly develops, fizzing and cracking, then, As Ulonska describes 'pops out a degenerated alien embryo covered in slime.' The hosts body then crumbles in on itself, drained to grey fluff that is picked up by refuse lorries. One of the significant developments in this version is a blood curdling scream that is used to alert other pods of a non-infected individual. It gave modern cinema one of its most chilling climaxes.

More advancements by 93 allowed Burman again and Abel Ferrara to create something more gelatinous and womb like. Though restricted by budget they used animatronics and reverse motion to create what Ferrara called '*another interpretation.*' When asked if there was any attempt to apply continuity with the other films he commented that they '*stole everything that wasn't nailed down.*' This includes the retention of the scream, the body collapsing into dust and the mysterious refuse lorries.

Invasion completely upgrades the assimilation for the 21st century with practical effects, CGI and an intelligent virus brought to earth by a space shuttle crash. This contagion is passed on by transference of bodily fluids with the assimilation more like a possession as the virus takes over a victims DNA during a night sweat that 'solidifies.' This can be cured in the film but in the March 24th 2005 draft by David Kajganich it could not. Like 1993's version it was another troubled production, the film was heavily reworked by the Wachowskis and director James McTeigue to make it more action orientated.

Which is a shame as Kajganich introduced some further variations on the theme. Firstly the virus creates a cocoon inside which the bodies of the infected change. The skin is then sloughed off like a snake. The fluids produced can, confusingly, later be used to dissolve those that have already turned. An idea that Stuart Gordon played with in his drafts of *Body Snatchers* where weed killer would dissolve the pod people. This did not make the transition

to the finished film, nor did the scream which in this draft was changed to a subsonic cry that made walls and floors vibrate.

As you see the process has developed far from the urtext and built on each incarnation. From a pod to a flower, probing tentacles to a virus. The same but different. As Albrecht-Crane and Cutchins noted 'infidelities enable the adaptation to articulate aspects of a text better than strict fidelity would.' These changes not only update the story but drive home the overriding concept that binds these films together, their thematic core. The subjugation of individuality and dreadful emotionless conformity.

In a forward to the 1976 reprint of the novel Richard Gid Powers described Finney's characters as 'representative of the despair felt over insidious modernization and cultural dehumanization. Finney uses an invasion from outer space to symbolise the annihilation of the free personality.'

The 1956 original is one of the most multi-faceted films of its era and as Richard Scheib said perhaps 'the most paranoid film ever made'. LaValley pointed out that 'how to read the film continues to be a problem.' However looking at those involved in its creation reveals much. Stephen King notes that Jack Finney 'has written a great deal of fiction about the idea that individuality is a good thing and that conformity can start to get pretty scary after it passes a certain point.'

Independent producer Walter Wanger was outspoken in favour of individualism and free speech. LaValley believed he saw himself as 'Hollywood's conscience and seer.' He and Don Siegel immediately saw in the material the chance to make an important picture. Siegel commenting that 'I think the world is populated by pods and I wanted to show them. I think

so many people have no feeling about cultural things, no feeling of pain, of sorrow.' Mainwaring was a firm believer in the importance of writing in the fight for social justice and highlighted this central idea with a key speech. So as John Whitehead commented, it is not communists who are the villains, it is us.

In 1978 Kaufman stated that 'We were all asleep in a lot of ways in the Fifties, living conforming, other-directed types of lives. Maybe we woke up a little in the Sixties, but now we've gone back to sleep again. Modern life is turning people into unfeeling, conforming pods who resist getting involved with each other on any level—and we've put them directly into the script. Our characters talk openly and directly about the social reality of 'podiness.' The character of Geoffrey is an example of this, he is already isolated in his sports and doesn't change that much once he turns. Indicative Brett Stifflemire suggests that mankind has 'already dehumanised itself.'

In Solo's second visit Stuart Gordon was clear that one of the main issues the film wrestles with is '*What is so terrible about being taken. You're still you? But what's missing is those things about you that make you an individual.*' As in the other films being changed is not necessarily posited as bad. As General Platt, the assimilated base commander says. Abel Ferrara commented that the story is basically 'the Martians came to earth to bring everybody the good news.'

As Keith Grant noted, screenwriter David Kajganich puts the spread of the disease on a global scale and showed us exactly what General Platt meant. J.P. Telotte has written how this 'suggests an elemental desire in man for the security and tranquillity which the sameness of duplication promises and to abdicate from the many problems of modern life.'

To bring us up to date, in July the Hollywood Reporter confirmed that Warner Bros. are developing a fifth visit to the material with screenwriter David Leslie Johnson. We have got used to films occurring in a cinematic universe. Star Wars, Star Trek, Marvel, DC, Dark Universe or the soon to come John Wickverse.

But I think the Body Snatcher films offer something unique, thematic concerns shared across reimaginings. They blur the boundaries between remake and sequel into what Kathleen Looke has called 'continuing a tradition.' Most startling is how that fear and paranoia has found resonance in so many audiences for so many decades. As Dean Koontz said it's down to the 'persistent feeling that we are losing our humanity. We are increasingly alienated from community, family and friends. '

Sadly now is a perfect time for revisiting this material. When more than ever we should be fearful of conformity, we should guard against falling asleep.

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