Accept No Substitutes:  
THE BODY SNATCHERS

BRAD PRAGER looks at the successive screen versions of a much reworked sci-fi narrative: alien invaders taking over human bodies.

Isn't a remake an act of substitution? Do new versions of old films have as much feeling as the originals? Do they speak to the spirit or strike us as pale imitations? Where there once was emotion is there now merely a shell?

The history of the 'body snatchers' films, starting with Don Siegel in 1956, is a string of substitute versions. The most recent embodiment, which goes by the shortened name The Invasion (2007), and is still based more or less on Jack Finney's 1955 novel, takes place in Washington DC. It is directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel, a German filmmaker best known for substituting the Swiss actor Bruno Ganz for Hitler in 2005's Downfall (Ganz was, for better or worse, widely acclaimed for having - à la body snatchers - completely inhabited the role). Hirschbiegel's film stars Nicole Kidman as Dr Carol Bennell, a psychiatrist whose son is strangely immune to the body snatchers' scheme. In contrast to earlier incarnations, body snatching here takes place through contagion, and the aliens now vomit their invasion all over town. As one might expect, Dr Bennell has no desire to be transformed - to be replaced by an identical self - despite the creepy invitation extended by her ex-husband (Jeremy Northam): 'When you wake up, you'll feel exactly the same.' Dr Bennell doubts it, probably because at the film's onset, even before he became 'one of them', her ex-husband had already replaced her with a younger model.

The paradoxical formulation, that everything is the same but is also different, is the calling card of the body snatcher films. Veronica Cartwright, who starred in Philip Kaufman's 1978 version, gets to deliver the big line in Hirschbiegel's update. As Wendy Lenk, she tells Dr
Bennell, 'my husband is not my husband'. This defies logic. Is he or is he not her husband? And why exactly don't we like these substitutes? One after the next, characters in these films are told that the alien creatures bring a world without war, poverty, or suffering, yet still they refuse to cooperate. The screenplay for Hirschbiegel's version gets it right when it puts this issue out on the table. A Russian diplomat confronts Kidman's Dr Bennell with the fact that humans, as they are, are no better than animals. She responds: 'Our consciousness is changing. Five hundred years ago, postmodern feminists didn't exist, yet one sits right beside you today. And while that fact may not undo all of the terrible things that have been done in this world, at least it gives me reason to believe that one day, things may be different.' We may be wretched, but at least there's hope - and that hope, by the way, is her.

How would we know if we've been replaced? What are the signs of substitute people? In The Invasion, domesticated dogs best recognise humans that they are not who they say they are, and for their uncanny detective skills they are quickly disposed of. Aliens, it turns out, don't love puppies. Dr Bennell and her son Oliver (Jackson Bond) are capable of recognising one another, not because they are like dogs, but because they share a language game. Checking to see if her son is her son, Dr Bennell makes the first move. She says, 'It's a pickle, isn't it?' Oliver's eyes widen; his mother is his mother. Their habitual wordplay is the sure sign of their humaneness. They enjoy substituting one word for the next – either that or the aliens haven't read Shakespeare's The Tempest ('How can't I thou in this pickle?'). In the sphere of the body snatchers, it's a doubly meaningful metaphor. Alien pods, in the older films, tend to resemble pickles, so getting into one is surely a thing to avoid.

Whether in earlier or later incarnations, the body snatchers have a number of easily identifiable traits. They provide unconvincing reassurances such as 'you'll be exactly the same, you'll still be you'. If that's so, you might ask, then why go to the trouble of vomiting spores on me? Alien beings don't sweat, as Dr Bennell discovers when trying to pass among them. They enunciate their words more clearly than we do. They blame almost everything on the flu. They can be found surreptitiously disposing of human remains. And finally, they really like running in mobs.

Akin to Nicole Kidman's Dr Bennell, the original one, played by Kevin McCarthy, tries to pass as his own replacement in Don Siegel's Invasion of the Body Snatchers. The film is frequently interpreted as an allegory for Cold War paranoia. History would have been more interesting had even a part of Nikita Krushchev's plan involved replacing US citizens with identical, sweat-less counterparts. Political agendas aside, one already finds all the key formulations in the first version, including 'my uncle is not my uncle'. The main characters are filled with despair at the possibility of being replaced. Becky Driscoll (Dana Wynter) tells Dr Bennell, 'I don't want to live in a world without love or grief or beauty, I'd rather die.' Presumably much of this love, grief and beauty takes place off-screen insofar as life in Santa Mira, California, as it appears in the film, looks pretty dull. The level-headed doctor shares his mostly rational insights – and a few mildly romantic moments – with Becky. He clues into the fact that they can pass for substitute people as long as they don't show any emotion. But Becky blows it: she yells to stop a passing puppy from being run over.

In episodes of the 1960s TV series Star Trek, Captain Kirk (William Shatner) was always explaining to his alien sidekick Mr Spock (Leonard Nimoy) that humans had it better than cold-blooded Vulcans. Sure, we're temperamental and we get jealous, but we're getting better all the time, and that's the point. As a gift to science fiction fans Leonard Nimoy plays a role in the 1978 Invasion of the Body Snatchers. As San Francisco pop psychologist Dr David Kibner, he explains in plain language how contemporary culture refuses to acknowledge emotions, a speech he makes before he's substituted. After his body is taken over – and, as WD Richter's screenplay puts it, he has now become a man like Dr Kibner – he is given latitude for a serious space-man oratory: 'We came here from a dying world. We drift through the universe, from planet to planet, pushed on by the solar winds. We adapt and we survive. The function of life is survival. Here again, the perennial paradoxes abound: Elizabeth Driscoll (Brooke Adams) sees a change in her boyfriend, noting, 'Geoffrey is not Geoffrey'. She adds, 'he was weird, not the way he usually is'. After the invasion nothing is identical with itself. Even the city of San Francisco is an impostor ("today everything seemed the same but it wasn't") and, despite the fact that he played Mr Spock on TV, Dr Kibner's reassurances hardly convince the film's remaining humans.

Playing the part of Jack Bellicec, a figure drawn from the pages of Finney's novel, Jeff Goldblum holds Kibner's new race in contempt. Bellicec's last words as a human are fighting ones: 'Here I am, you pod bastards! Hey, pods! Come and get me, you scum!' But how do we recognise the aliens in Kaufman's film, and why is Jeff Goldblum resisting them? Perhaps it is because they carry seedpods that resemble pickles, they run in mobs and, most memorably, they point and scream with a strange high-pitched whine. But that's the rub, and it's perhaps what gives them away: as was the case in the 1956 version, these body snatchers seem paradoxically more emotional and more violent than the humans they are trying to replace. One might imagine that a race promising peace would act less like a lynch mob. The sight of anyone who is not like them – anyone not acting like vegetation with legs – starts them screaming.
Abel Ferrara’s Body Snatchers (1993) is not without its charms, though it can hardly be said to substitute for the earlier films. It’s more of a supplement than a replacement. His version takes place on a military base, concretising the warlike aims of the invading race. For a peaceful people, it certainly looks like they are picking a fight. Here Meg Tilly as Carol Malone is given the task of providing the dubious reassurances. With a Bronx-inflected accent – a sign perhaps of Abel Ferrara’s influence – a menacing substitute Carol asks her husband Steve (Terry Kinney): ‘Where you gonna go? Where you gonna run? Where you gonna hide? Nowhere. Because there’s no one like you left.’ Then, before she screams and summons her fellow substitutes, she encourages him: ‘All that anger, all that fear, all that confusion is gonna melt away... You’ll feel wonderful.’ Somehow Steve remains unconvinced, which may be because people who scream and point are themselves generally taken to be angry and frightened.

In this respect, the many versions are more or less consistent. It’s hard to buy what the aliens are selling. They are no better than we are, especially because we love pets and perspire. It’s a shame we make wars, but they do too, despite their protestations to the contrary. These films are made and remade, one is substituted for the next, but the point is always the same: we look for originals. Accept no substitutes.
Substitute
Black for white, stranger for lover, master for servant, robot for human, cross-dresser for femme fatale

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