

~~economic, political and cultural factors, of which suburbia was a significant component, helped create the perfect environment in which fictions of everyday unease and depersonalisation could flourish in American popular culture. As we shall see, Keats's John and Mary Drone are but a step away from Finney's ultra-conformist Pod People and Romero's mindlessly insatiable zombies.~~

The inconceivable alien: body-replacement narratives and 1950s science fiction

Alongside the so-called 'Creature-Features' of the 1950s and early 1960s, the body-replacement narrative – in which loved ones, friends and neighbours are invisibly 'taken over' or 'replaced' by threatening, usually alien forces who seek to overthrow everything that God-fearing, freedom-loving Americans hold dear – became one of the most obvious tropes in American horror and science fiction. As a result, 'more than any other aspect of the science fiction film, the plot device of "take over" has commanded the serious attention of critics of both film and popular culture'.²⁰ Prior to the War, American horror and science fiction had generally focused upon terrifying *external* threats, generally personified by overtly alien or supernatural menaces. In its terrible aftermath, a significant strand of genre-writing and movie-making began to focus instead on dangers that were much closer to home.

The body-replacement narrative derives its visual and emotive effectiveness from the unnerving contrast between a commonplace, ordinary setting and the quietly aberrant behaviour of those who wish to subvert normality.²¹ After all, what could be more terrifying than suddenly realising that those around you have gradually been 'replaced' by someone, or *something* else? In films such as *Invaders from Mars* (1953), *It Came From Outer Space* (1953), *The Brain Eaters* (1958), *The Brain From the Planet Arous* (1957), and *I Married A Monster From Outer Space* (1958), it is always small towns, the very heartland of the American psyche, which get invaded first. In William Cameron Menzies' *Invaders from Mars*, a little boy sees a flying saucer land in his backyard. His parents, unsurprisingly, try to convince him that it has all been a nightmare, but when his father finally goes outside to investigate, he returns a very different man, oddly cold and emotionless. Soon, virtually every local figure of authority known to the child has been taken over by the invading Martians.

In *The Brain Eaters*, furry alien parasites from inside the earth latch on to human hosts and control their every move, and in *I Married a Monster*

From *Outer Space*, a young man is replaced by an alien replicant desperate to mate with a human woman in order to save his dying race. Robert Heinlein's novel *The Puppet Masters* (1951) opens with the discovery that an alien spacecraft has landed in a field in rural Iowa. Written five years before Jack Finney's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* exploited a similar premise, *The Puppet Masters* makes clear the parallels between the alien slugs, which attach themselves to their human hosts, and the threat of Soviet invasion.²² Heinlein's novel features an overtly futuristic setting, a plethora of fancy gadgets, and a protagonist who works as a secret agent, effectively diffusing much of the unease that might otherwise have been aroused by the disturbing premise. By contrast, Finney's text and the films based upon it (four to date) come much closer to evoking genuine dread because they are so obviously set in the real world.²³

Like so many of the other 1950s 'invisible invasion' films, Finney's novel (originally a story serialised in *Collier's Magazine*) is set in an idealised small town, the Californian town of Mill Valley (renamed 'Santa Mira' in the 1956 film.) Although, most obviously, it is a tale of insidious alien invasion, it is also a commentary on the death of an old way of life, and of the ways in which the apparently unstoppable forces of modernity and technology are changing an idyllic little town into something strange and unfamiliar. Ostensibly set in the then-future (1976), from the outset, the tone is one of barely disguised nostalgia for an idealised, particularly American way of life that has now gone forever. At the time that Finney wrote *Body Snatchers*, thousands of small towns all over the United States were being gradually infiltrated by ruthlessly modern outside forces: but the threat did not come from alien pods. Rather, it came in the form of the relentless expansion of the suburbs, which many feared would replace small-town charm and character with soulless conformity and 'sameness'.

Finney's narrator, Miles Bennell, begins by warning us that this will be anything but a straightforward tale: 'What you're starting to read is full of loose ends and unanswered questions. It will not be neatly tied up at the end, everything resolved and satisfactorily explained'.²⁴ Miles is 28 years old, born and raised in Mill Valley, and recently returned home to practise medicine following the break-up of his marriage (itself an indication that the old ways of life are already changing). Miles cannot help but compare the Mill Valley he knew as a child with the place to which he has returned as an adult, which is quickly shedding the humane, comfortable way of life familiar to his parents, and in particular his father, who was the town doctor before him. Miles conforms quite closely to William H. Whyte's discussion of 'the new breed of

American citizen, the “transient”, as outlined in his chapter on ‘The New Suburbia’ in *The Organisation Man*. Whyte begins by discussing the fact that, nowadays:

the man who leaves home is not the exception in American society, but the key to it. Almost by definition, the organisation man is a man who has left home, and, as it was said of the man who went from the Midwest to Harvard, kept on going. There have always been people who left home, and the number of them is not decreasing, but increasing – and so greatly that those who stay put in the hometown are often as affected by the emigration as those who leave.²⁵

Soon after his return home, Miles receives a visit from Becky Driscoll, an old girlfriend who has herself just been through a divorce. According to Becky, her otherwise perfectly rational cousin Wilma (still unmarried at the age of 35, which Miles notes is ‘too bad’), has suddenly got it into her head that her beloved Uncle Ira isn’t actually her uncle anymore. Though sceptical, Miles pays a house call anyway, and drives to Wilma’s home in an ‘unincorporated suburb’ just outside the city limits.²⁶ There, he finds Wilma outwardly normal, save for her unshakable belief that her uncle has been ‘replaced’. In a famous exchange which perfectly captures the paranoid certainty that helps make the body-replacement narrative so unnerving, Wilma explains herself:

‘I’ve been waiting for today,’ she whispered. ‘Waiting till he’d get a haircut; and he finally did.’

Again she leaned towards me, eyes big, her voice a hissing whisper. ‘There’s a little scar of the back of Ira’s neck; he had a boil there once, and your father lanced it. You can’t see the scar,’ she whispered, ‘when he needs a haircut. But when his neck is shaved, you can. Well, today – I’ve been *waiting* for this! – today he got a haircut –’

I sat forward, suddenly excited. ‘And the scar’s *gone*? You mean –’

‘No!’ she said, almost indignantly, eyes flashing. ‘It’s there – the scar – exactly like Uncle Ira’s!’²⁷

Miles tries to talk some sense into Wilma. It just isn’t possible for two people to look identically alike, he points out: ‘Even identical twins can always be told apart by their intimates. No one could possibly impersonate your Uncle Ira for more than a moment without you, Becky, or even me seeing a million little differences’. But Wilma cannot be dissuaded, mostly because of the fact that while the ‘impostor’ looks, sounds and

acts just like Uncle Ira, ““inside he’s different. His responses” – she stopped, hunting for the word – “aren’t *emotionally* right””.²⁸

Of course, Wilma’s proves not to be an isolated case. Within a week, Miles has seen five more patients reporting exactly the same symptoms, and, significantly, it seems to be women and children who seem most susceptible to what his psychiatrist friend Manny Kaufmann calls a ‘contagious neurosis’. In his hours off duty, Miles is otherwise busy re-establishing a decidedly passionless relationship with Becky. Miles’ reluctance to become emotionally entangled so soon after his divorce and his insistence upon rational thinking may help explain why it takes him so long to realise that this is no case of simple mass hysteria. It is only when his friend, writer Jack Belicec, calls him up and insists that he come over to view a mysterious ‘something’ that he’s just found, that Miles’ eminently reasonable, blinkered worldview begins to tilt off its axis. For here at last is solid, tangible proof that something very strange is happening in Mill Valley, in the form of a naked, lifeless and curiously unfinished-looking body lying on Belicec’s pool table. The body is alien in its very perfection, with no nicks or scars or any of the countless little imperfections which indicate a normal life. Miles is forced to conclude that ‘There is no cause of death because it never died. And it never died because it’s never been alive’.²⁹ The mood of escalating unease is only heightened a few pages later, when Becky announces ‘My father isn’t my father at all!’ From this point on Miles views his hometown and its residents in a terrifying new light. As Mark Jancovich has noted ‘even if the novel lacks any overt and self-conscious subtext, it clearly works in relation to fears of conformity and standardisation, and as is the case with the film [Don Siegel’s 1956 adaptation], these threats are not solely identified as the products of alien invasion . . . these texts do not suggest that the threat is purely external, but that it is only the inevitable outcome of developments within American society and culture’.³⁰

Miles ‘is the precursor of all the other traditionalist heroes of Jack Finney’s later books, but in *The Body Snatchers*, Miles’s town of Santa Mira, Marin County, California still is the unspoiled mythical *gemeinschaft* community that later heroes have had to travel through time to recapture’.³¹ As Miles angrily thinks to himself when he receives a hastily aborted phone call, in his father’s day, things would have been very different:

a night operator, whose name he’d have known, could have told him who’d called. It would have probably been the only light on

the board at that time of night, and she'd have remembered which one it was, because they were calling the doctor. But now we have dial phones, marvellously efficient, saving you a full second or more every time you call, inhumanly perfect, and utterly brainless: and none of them will remember where the doctor is at night, when a child is sick and needs him. Sometimes I think we're refining all the humanity out of our lives.³²

Even before the pods have arrived, therefore (pushed to earth over millions and millions of years by light), Finney establishes that the world, and in particular, Miles Bennell's corner of it, has gradually become a little less compassionate, a little less humane than it had been before. Again, this brings to mind Whyte's observations regarding the fate of the 'organisation man' who returns home. Of course, Miles is not an organisation man in the strictest sense of the word: he is a doctor, not a corporate employee, and he works alone, not as part of the machinery of business and industry. But his path in life – that of the white-collar, middle-class and college-educated male – does resemble that of Whyte's subjects, particularly those who eventually return home to find that it has changed almost as much as they have:

But perhaps the most important reason the transients can't go home is that they won't find it there if they do. It's not just the physical changes – the new sub-developments on the old golf course, the shopping-centre strip just outside town, the new factory. As the young transients have left town, their opposite numbers from other towns have come in, and in many American communities there has been wholesale displacement from positions of power of the names that once 'meant' something. Even in towns relatively untouched by urbanisation the exodus of youth has left a vacuum the community itself cannot replenish.³³

In Finney's novel, of course, this vacuum is filled not by white-collar workers, but by alien life forms which, if left unchecked, will take over the entire world. Indeed, one of the most terrifying things about the pods is the fact that their aim is *not* an understandable, if dangerous one, such as the desire to seize control of American institutions, to replace one form of dominant political and cultural hegemony with another. Instead, the pods only seek only to survive and to reproduce; an accidental invasion force that could just as easily have fallen anywhere.

In a way, the invaders are no more than a more sinister version of the kudzu vine, silently, rapidly spreading all over the United States. As Jack Belicec asks: 'How many of those things is down there in town right now? Hidden away in secret places'.³⁴ Indeed, it soon becomes clear to Miles and his small band of allies that the warm, cosy little town they all know and love has been transformed into a place that is alien, sinister, and above all, *unkempt* – and that this process has taken place right under their noses. Early in the novel, Miles had casually noted that the busy little restaurant where he usually ate his evening meal was strangely uncrowded. As the novel progresses, this early hint of *wrongness*, of urban malaise, gradually becomes one of Finney's most obvious preoccupations:

Worry, doubt and fear were twisting through my mind as I walked the block and a half to the office, and the look of Throckmorton Street depressed me. It seemed littered and shabby in the morning sun, a city trash basket stood heaped and unemptied from the day before, the globe of an overhead street light was broken, and a few doors from the building where my office was a shop stood empty.³⁵

It is shortly after this scene that Miles' unease blossoms into full-blown paranoia. One by one, his frightened patients recant their stories. The common denominator is the fact that each of them claims to have been 'brought round' by Mannie Kaufman, the local psychiatrist. The discovery of four more seed pods – or 'blanks' – in Jack's coal-bin brings home the final chilling revelation: that the pods model themselves on the people closest to them. As the last barriers to acceptance are eroded by fearful fact, Miles gazes at the town he thought he knew so well, and finds that what was once eminently familiar has now become terrifyingly alien:

I'd grown up here; from boyhood I'd known every street, house and path, most of the back yards, and every hill, field and road for miles around. And now I didn't know it anymore. Unchanged to the eye, what I was seeing out there now was beyond that in my mind – was something new. The lighted circle of the pavement below me, the familiar front porches, and the dark mass of houses and town beyond charm – were fearful. Now they were menacing, all these familiar things and faces; the town had changed or was changing into something very terrible, and it was after me.³⁶

During the course of a panicked conversation with a college pal who now works in the Pentagon, Miles and the others realise that even their only line of communication to the outside world – the telephone exchange – is in the hands of the enemy. They decide to leave, but discover that the highway has deteriorated too badly to escape. So they have no choice but to return home, and silently wander eerily deserted streets, on which even the houses look ‘withdrawn, resentful and evil’. Businesses are boarded up, windows are dirty, and the little restaurant offers only three entrees, when ‘for years they’d always had six or eight’. As Becky remarks: “‘Miles, when did all this *happen?*” Becky gestured to indicate the length of the semi-deserted street behind and ahead of us. “A little at a time,” I said, and shrugged. “We’re just realising it now; the town’s dying”’.³⁷ It is a scene reminiscent of countless other moments in horror and science fiction, in which the survivors of some terrible nuclear holocaust or natural disaster make their way through the deserted city streets, much as Robert Neville does in *I Am Legend*. The difference here is that, although familiar buildings and people are still present, they have been irrevocably transformed. There can be no escape.

As has been noted by Vivien Sobchack, what is so fascinating about films and novels of this nature ‘is the way in which the secure and the familiar are twisted into something subtly dangerous and slyly perverted... those aliens in these films who have “taken over” human bodies behave so nearly correctly that the primarily quiet distortions of human behaviour are like a slap in the face’. Indeed, it is ‘the absence of response, a non action we are told to watch for’.³⁸ So while the ‘replaced’ residents of Mill Valley continue to live in the same homes, look the same, dress the same and appear to conform to the same routine, the fact is they just don’t care anymore, and it shows. Apathy and the absolute lack of any human emotion is their most terrifying characteristic. The small-town values of home, family and nation are meaningless. No one bothers to wash their windows or pick up trash or serve a decent cup of coffee in the local diner because they are simply going through the motions. As Stephen King puts it *Danse Macabre* (1981), ‘this is not an invasion of roses from outer space, but of ragweed. The pod people are going to mow their lawns for a while and then give up. They don’t give a shit about the crabgrass’.³⁹

Perhaps most horrific of all is the revelation that the alien duplicates will live, at most, five years. Like many of the suburbs popping up all over the countryside (or rather, as their critics often claimed), the replicants are not built to last. And when they have mindlessly cloned

copies of every human being, plant and animal in their path, they will just expire, leaving behind a vast and uninhabitable 'desert of nothingness'. By fooling the pods into replicating a fake copy of themselves, Miles and Becky are able to escape, and manage to set fire to a field of pods about to be shipped off to other parts of the country. At first, their heroic gesture seems fruitless: the fire burns itself out, and there are just too many of the things for only two people to destroy. But, in a fairly unconvincing reversal, it seems that this and other desperate acts of human resistance have convinced the pods that it is just too much trouble to conquer, and they suddenly rise into space and fly off, presumably in the hopes of finding another, less spirited planet to infiltrate.⁴⁰

However, even though the pods ultimately leave, things will never be the same again, for the replicants have been left behind. If you make your way to Mill Valley, 'You'll simply see a town, in a few places a little shabbier and run down than it quite ought to be, but – not startlingly so', but the status quo has definitely not been restored. There's the small matter of the strangely listless, apathetic people who hang around the bus station (presumably still with the urge to spread the invasion, but without the means to do so), the higher-than-average death rate, the strangely high number of empty houses, and the odd patches of dead vegetation. Yet the vacancies, we are told, are being filled up by 'new people, most of them young and with children', and 'in a year or two, or three, Mill Valley will seem no different to the eye from any other small town'.⁴¹

As Jancovich has observed, 'even the defeat of the pods does not end the gradual depersonalisation of the town. The continual migration of the American population soon fills up the homes of those who have died so that many of the people in town are no longer long-term neighbours whom Miles has known all his life, but rather strangers who come from elsewhere and whose names he does not even know'.⁴² Indeed, 'it hints at a creeping conformity and a lack of identity in which Santa Mira [Mill Valley] is becoming indistinguishable from any other small town, in which American communities lose their identity and become mere replicas of one another'.⁴³ In other words, as in thousands of other small communities all over the United States, Mill Valley has been irrevocably changed by the unstoppable tide of progress and technological advancements, invaded by legions of 'newcomers' or 'transients'. Downtown is gradually dying, and a whole new way of life has come into existence. It's a conclusion surprisingly similar – although much bleaker – to that arrived at by Henry James in *The American Scene*, when he visits Ellis

Island and finds himself profoundly affected by the sight of so many newcomers:

I think indeed that the simplest account of the action of Ellis Island on the spirit of any sensitive citizen who may have happened to 'look in' is that he comes back from his visit not at all the same person that he went. He has eaten of the tree of knowledge and the taste will forever be in his mouth. He had thought he knew before, thought he had the sense of the degree in which it is to share the sanctity of his American consciousness, the intimacy of his American home with the inconceivable alien; but the truth has never come home to him with such force. . . . I like to think of him, I positively have to think of him, as going about ever afterwards with a new look, for those who can see it, in his face, the outward signs of the new chill in his heart. So is stamped, for detection, the questionably privileged person who has had an apparition, seen a ghost in his supposedly safe house. Let not the unwary, therefore, visit Ellis Island.⁴⁴

In Finney's Mill Valley, the 'inconceivable alien' has changed forever the rhythms of small-town life, although here, of course, 'alien' is not merely a metaphor but a reality. Whereas James comes to an acceptance of the changes which will be wrought upon his home by the ceaseless tide of European emigration to the United States, stating that 'we must meet them more than half way', one suspects that Miles Bennell will never come to such an accommodation, even if the aliens in his midst are no longer much of a threat anymore. However, both James's sketch and Finney's novel dramatise (albeit to very different effect) the anxieties aroused by the immensely rapid changes which were taking place in American culture and society at the time at which each text was written. The pod people who quietly and efficiently take over Bennell's home town may ultimately be defeated by good old American moxie, but the cosy, insulated place that he grew up in will, like nineteenth-century New York, never be the same again.

Like thousands of other small communities all over the United States during the post-war era, Mill Valley has been irrevocably encroached upon by the outside world. To suburbia's most vociferous critics, the rapidly erected, identikit housing developments spreading across the country like wildfire, were, like the aliens in Finney's novel, a very real threat to the core values of American culture and society. For some, the upwardly mobile young families which populated them were frighteningly homogenous invaders who cared nothing about the cities they

left behind to unruly minorities or the once-pristine countryside which was bulldozed in order to make way for affordable, modern homes. Given the frequency with which Finney's hero rails against the unfeeling, overtly technological focus of modern society, it seems clear that the novel's critique of conformity has at least as much to do with anxieties such as this as with fears aroused by Cold War tensions. It is no coincidence, then, that Becky's cousin Wilma (the first patient to suggest to Miles that something is very wrong in Mill Valley) lives in 'an unincorporated suburb just outside the city limits'.⁴⁵ As we shall see, there could be no more appropriate starting point for a narrative in which individualism comes under such powerful threat.

~~Welcome to zombieville~~

~~Such preoccupations find further expression in one of twentieth-century horror's most iconic representatives: the zombie. The late 1960s saw the release of a groundbreaking horror movie, which completely reimagined the concept of the zombie and in doing so presented a horrifically compelling vision of the American masses as mindless, emotionless consumers. George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) took a supernatural threat which had previously been located in the Caribbean and associated with black magic and instead depicted zombies roaming around the American countryside, shambling parodies of their former selves. Romero's masterpiece owes a great deal to *I Am Legend*, whose suburban protagonist, as we have seen, is also besieged by hordes of undead ghouls infected by a mysterious plague. Indeed, Sidney Salkow and Ubaldo Ragona's 1964 film adaptation *The Last Man on Earth*, is visually quite similar to Romero's much superior film. The post 1968 zombie – no longer uniformly black or otherwise 'foreign', the product of voodoo or black magic, but instead distinctively white, American, and above all, *hungry* – is actually the unacknowledged missing link between the paranoid alien invasion films of the 1950s and the loaded sexual and cultural mores of films such as *The Stepford Wives*. As Jamie Russell noted in *Book of the Dead* (2005):~~

~~'as the small town American setting and doppelganger scenario of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* suggested, the monsters might not be readily identifiable as bug-eyed aliens. Much worse – they might look like our friends and neighbours. In some ways, the Zombie was perfectly suited to this paranoid fear as the living dead looked so ordinary: they looked like us; heck, they once *were* us.' In other words,~~