

**INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS, directed by Philip Kaufman.**

**SUPERMAN, directed by Richard Donner.**

## Star spores

STEPHEN HARVEY

**I**N THE MOVIES, AS WITH ALL the arts, what separates the masterpiece from the minor classic is that the former transcends its own time, while the latter sums it up in a particularly vivid and compelling way. A movie that falls into this second category frequently ends up by defining for later generations the era that spawned it—in fact, the perspective of time often grants such a film a significance it never had for its original audience.

Don Siegel's revered 1956 grade B chiller, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, is a special case in point. In its own time, most people saw it as no more than an unusually creepy entry in the parade of sleazy thrillers that battered the screens of drive-ins and neighborhood theaters two decades ago. Now Siegel's film is recognized as a nightmarish distillation of the whole queasy *Zeitgeist* of the decade in which it was made. Horror films have usually proliferated in those times and places (Germany in the early twenties, America during the Depression) when people have felt most threatened by forces they perceived to be outside their control; so, in the fifties, sci-fi flicks multiplied like radioactive bacteria, their various perils implicitly or overtly representing either the shadow cast by the bomb or the encroachment of the red menace.

What distinguished *Body Snatchers*

from its competition, quite apart from the unusual skill of its director, was the fact that the threat it explored was both more subtle and more immediate: namely, the uninflected conformity that many saw as our national malaise in the immediate post-McCarthy years. It was all to the point that the film's action took place in a small town that could have been Anywhere, U.S.A.; that it was indeed hard to tell the pod people from the bland, untainted humans they sought to replace; and that unlike the *modus operandi* of most movie monsters, the pods took over while their prey slept painlessly—the victims lost their humanity almost without realizing what had happened.

This fable seemed so indelibly the product of a specific era that it should have been folly to attempt a remake twenty-odd years later. Whether its theme is as pertinent to the seventies is a moot point. In any case, Philip Kaufman's new version is an exceptionally intriguing little movie, and one of the few pleasant surprises of 1978, a par-

ticularly barren year for films. Kaufman and his screenwriter W. D. Richter have paid the original the exceedingly rare honor of retaining the elements that made the first film so haunting, without ever imitating it too closely. As a result, this *Body Snatchers* is so different from its predecessor that, as it unfolds, the first version recedes from memory. The new one is engrossing enough to stand on its own.

Kaufman's film keeps the basic narrative line largely intact, with a few inside references to the Siegel version tossed in as an added fillip for the cognoscenti: Kevin McCarthy, the leading man in the original, appears briefly to pick up more or less where he left off in 1956, frantically hurling himself at the windshields of passing cars to warn them of their impending doom; and Don Siegel himself has a cameo as a podified cab driver.

The changes that have been made have more to do with locale and the film's dominant tone, both visual and verbal. This time around, the story takes place entirely in San Francisco—a wicked inspiration since, after all, for a lot of people San Francisco is one place where even the most bizarre events happen every day of the week. (In fact, the recent real-life horror in Guyana gives this tale about a popu-



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ace abandoning their individual identities for an eternity of zombiehood a grim undertone the filmmakers, with all their knowingness, could never have anticipated.) Cinematographer Michael Chapman is, after *Taxi Driver*, an old hand at capturing the ominous shadings of the urban landscape, and he subtly transforms even a milieu as post-card picturesque as San Francisco into an unsettling and alien place—all chill blue night, and vivid greenery masking slumbering dangers. The deadpan black-and-white cheesiness of Siegel's version gave it a pseudo-documentary veracity, like something you might see on a news broadcast switched on in the middle of a bad dream. Kaufman's *Body Snatchers*, on the other hand, is exuberantly larger than life, its camerawork kinetically matching the escalating desperation of its protagonists.

As with any really effective horror film, *Body Snatchers* amplifies its effects by hinting at disturbing events happening just beyond its range of vision: As the camera snakes through the heroine's carpenter-Gothic house or up and down the hilly city streets, the uneasy sense of what's occurring just outside the frame weighs just as heavily on the viewer as what he's allowed to see. At the same time, Kaufman depicts the "invasion" with grisly relish. The title-credits sequence follows the trek of the predatory spores: from a distant planet, through space and the earth's cloud cover, coming to rest on the leaves in a San Francisco park arbor where they stretch their tentacles, leaving innocuous red blossoms in their wake. The pod people themselves are both outlandish and revolting in the best monster movie tradition, resembling life-sized human pastries taken out of some infernal oven before their time; a climactic sequence of the birth of a pod out of its green, extraterrestrial mother must be the most gruesome bit of would-be obstetrical humor the movies have ever seen.

Both Kaufman and Richter are canny enough to realize the crackpot comedy implications of the plot as well as its intended horror, and the script and the casting of the main characters combine to deliver a perfect balance of the two. In the first lines heard over the soundtrack, a schoolteacher leading an excursion through the park blithely instructs her wee charges to pick all the pretty flowers. The pod's first victim is the dentist boyfriend of heroine Brooke Adams, and it's clear that he wasn't

much of a prize to begin with: a tv-hypnotized lout who really wouldn't care what he turned into as long as nobody changed the channels on him. Hero Donald Sutherland, of the watery eyes and hangdog mien, is a health inspector for the city; before bedlam sets in, he spends his time picking rat excreta out of the cassoulet in haute-cuisine clip joints. The only person he can trust for his mission to save mankind is a spacey poet (Jeff Goldblum) who makes a tenuous living by operating a dingy, if legit bathhouse—a droll turn by Goldblum, the latest in his series of egomaniacal artistes *manqués* after *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* and *Between the Lines*.

Their female accomplices are just as appealingly eccentric. As the Bohemian's spouse, Veronica Cartwright glows with dizzy sincerity, while Brooke Adams, physically and temperamentally a kind of Americanized Geneviève Bujold, is disarmingly matter-of-fact. She imbues the part with just the right mixture of humor, warmth, and spunk, so that her threatened podification is a doubly awful prospect for the viewer.

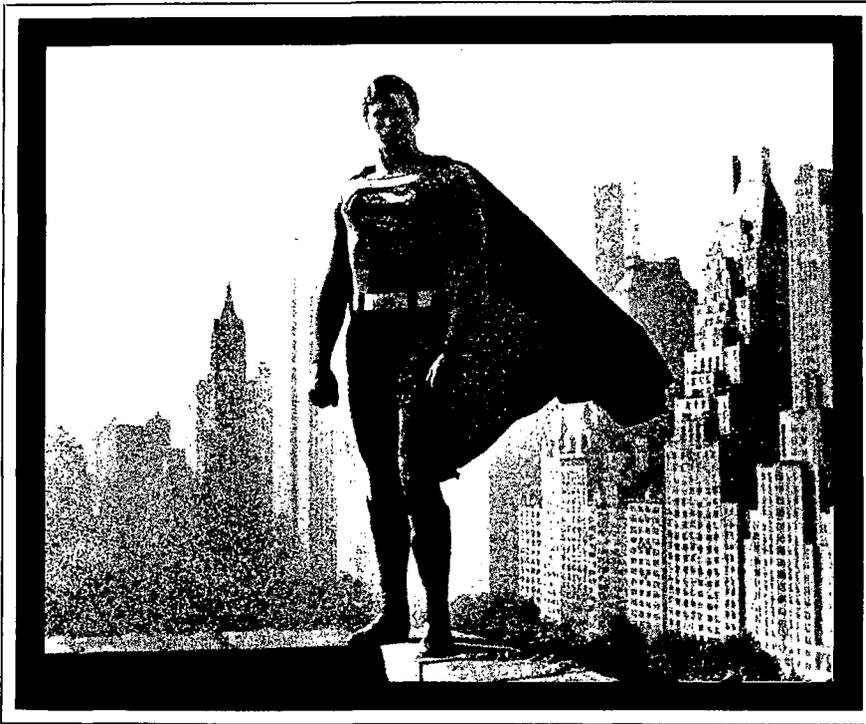
Kaufman's sure instinct with actors fails only once: To be the psychiatrist who attempts to pacify this gaggle of "paranoids" seeking his counsel, Kaufman's drafted no less than Leonard Nimoy, who certainly has had more than his share of practice playing humanoids before. Even divested of his pointy ears, Nimoy, with the opaque glint in his teensy eyes, and other inevitable traces of his television persona, lets the audience know far too early that he must be one of Them. This makes the protagonists seem rather more dense than was absolutely necessary, and makes the story peak a little too soon in this version, its last half cluttered with too many nocturnal chases and close calls. Nevertheless, Kaufman's affection for the material and the vigor of his approach are as infectious as all those spores from the beyond; only the churlish or exceedingly squeamish could fail to have a good time with this movie.

**W**HERE INVASION OF THE *Body Snatchers* is about pod people, *Superman* apparently was made by them. While the creators of *Body Snatchers* seem to have been motivated by their passion for the story, the moguls responsible for this gargantuan appear to have just shopped around coldbloodedly for a property that would reward them as richly as *Star*

*Wars* did Twentieth Century-Fox. The fruit of their labors is a triumph of packaging; it comprises a constellation of stars both major (Marlon Brando) and mini (Maria Schell, Trevor Howard, Terence Stamp, et al., some of whom are on and off quicker than you can say Mr. Mxyzptlk); a passel of screenwriters combining a touch of the grandiose (Mario Puzo) and the satirical (Robert Benton and David and Leslie Newman); a director with a proven facility for cinematic hocus-pocus (Richard Donner of *The Omen*); plus the musical trumpery of John Williams to goose the audience in anticipation of each new explosion of special effects. For box-office insurance, practically every surefire blockbuster gimmick of the last decade has been tossed in, and the final product is really four separate movies spliced together into one disjointed epic.

Part One is a *Star Wars* homage with a dash of Christian allegory added for good measure; the crystal-grotto planet Krypton is threatened with solar holocaust, and celestial father-figure Brando, all elocutionary grandeur, dispatches his infant son in a space crèche bound for earth. In Part Two, the child Superman is delivered to Glenn Ford and Phyllis Thaxter standing in for Joseph and Mary, and quite touchingly too—wind-eroded Norman Rockwell archetypes dwarfed in endless vistas of the American heartland. Part Three is campy screwball comedy: Grown-up Superman Christopher Reeve lands in New York to match wits with evil mortal Gene Hackman and be vamped by newsperson Margot Kidder, a Lois Lane according to the gospel of *Playgirl*, with jaded eyes that brighten at the vision of this unearthly hunk in cape and tights. Part Four is the disaster movie to end (one hopes) all disaster movies, as Superman prevents a well-timed missile from exploding the San Andreas fault and sinking the West Coast into the Pacific. (Which, come to think of it, would have been a handy way of disposing of all those pod people from *Body Snatchers*.)

Although every moment in the film has the gleam of calculation to it, under the circumstances it's all been surpassingly well executed. As opposed to, say, *The Wiz*, *Superman's* art direction is not only opulent but witty; a particular highlight is Hackman's iniquitous lair, a subterranean Grand Central Station, with a murky swimming pool where the information booth ought to be. The airborne special ef-



fects are awesome, for the most part, and Williams's music adroitly mines and recycles those strains from Erich Korngold's *King's Row* theme that he hadn't already purloined for *Star Wars*. It was a stroke of inspiration on someone's part to hire the Benton-Newman team to toil on the screenplay, since Benton and David Newman's witty Broadway musical version of the comic strip was the first attempt ever to make this legend palatable for adults—even if the camp sensibility hadn't yet penetrated the theater-party crowd sufficiently in the mid-sixties to make it a real hit.

Times have changed, of course, and the movie gracefully walks the tightrope between childlike ingenuousness and good-natured lampoon; the audience can root for Superman in his battle for "truth, justice and the American way" and still chuckle at the inanity of it all. The chaste romance between Superman and Lois is really engaging, thanks to some sly writing and the clever notion of using our hero's powers as a kind of tongue-in-cheek sexual Freudianism. When Superman takes his heartthrob on a tour of the heavens, their flight turns into a dreamy substitute for orgasm, titillating the grown-ups in the crowd while innocently captivating the kiddies.

But the wisest choice of all was the decision to create a superstar for the title role rather than hiring one. The minute he puts on that silly get-up, Christopher Reeve faces hurdles far

more daunting than the skyscrapers of Metropolis, but he never makes a wrong move, in the stratosphere or on terra firma. As Clark Kent, he even creates a face that looks woven out of charcoal grey worsted, while as the Man of Steel his sweet, bashful rectitude makes it abundantly clear what Lois Lane really sees in him. Against my better judgment, *Superman* finally won me over too, though I felt vaguely guilty about it for hours afterward. Like *Star Wars*, *Superman* tries to turn you back into a credulous eight year old, but after the final fade-out, what you really feel like is Pavlov's dog. □

#### OUT AND AROUND

*Every Which Way But Loose*—The annual Christmas goodie from Clint Eastwood is without a doubt the year's most aggressively yahoo movie. An alleged comedy whose plot is interrupted every five minutes so that Eastwood can show off his pecs and punch people out (principally a group of Hell's Angels baddies, who make their forebears from the *Beach Party* series seem like figures out of *cinéma vérité*), it should have been titled *All About Ego*. Eastwood is supported by a cast including Ruth Gordon, the inevitable Sondra Locke, and an orangutan (a real one) named Clyde, who must have had a hand in the script.

*Same Time Next Year*—An extremely literal transcription of the long-running stage play that only serves to underscore the material's cutesy con-

trivances. For all his facility, Alan Alda can't quite compensate for the fact that his ferretlike features don't translate well to the big screen, but Ellen Burstyn manages to wring some poignance and charm from a role that takes advantage of her ingratiating if limited talents. If only you could see her—this movie has been photographed through so much gauze that your eyes start watering halfway into the first reel. □

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