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Human Monsters: The Function of the Horror Motif in Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and Its Remakes

*In retrospect, it's usually pretty easy to look
at horror movies and see the influences of the time.*

– Wes Craven, director

As director Wes Craven states, films – and horror movies in particular – reflect contemporary socio-cultural events by commenting on the political climate of certain decades. Quite often, the horror story relies on gloomy atmospheres, underlined by distracting images of fear and terror, and features the confrontation of the hero with the ultimate evil that takes shape in devilish figures such as Michael Myers, Freddy Krueger or the Alien. In any case, the evil force embodies a dangerous threat to human life as it wants to mercilessly eliminate those who are good at heart.

It is exactly that aspect of menace which draws a connection between the horror and the science fiction genre. The representation of a threatened society in a – most often – dystopian world is a classical aspect of twentieth-century science fiction literature and can be found in Jack Finney's *The Body Snatchers* (1954) and

Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* (1954) as well as in their cinematic adaptations and remakes. Thus, the question arises whether there exists something like a meta-genre of both Horror and science fiction, and if that is the case: How can it be identified and what are its key aspects?

In this chapter, I will discuss these questions by focusing on the cinematic construction of the alien-invaded human body in two film versions of Jack Finney's novel *The Body Snatchers*. Therefore, I will give a definition of the horror genre before I make a distinction between horrific elements and elements of terror. Following, I will briefly summarize the plot and give some basic information about the first *Body Snatcher* film by Don Siegel and its three remakes. Thereafter, I will elaborate on the different socio-cultural backgrounds of each film and place the horrifying corporal construction of snatched bodies in context to the contemporary influences of their time. To conclude, I will briefly summarize the crucial points of my research and point out the overall function of SciFi-horror films as medium that is critical of society.

Playing with Fears: The SciFi-Horror Genre

In order to argue that the genre boundaries of films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* are fairly ambiguous and that Science Fiction movies can under certain circumstances be regarded as horror films as well, I will briefly outline some genre specifications: The term "horror" is derived from the Latin "horreo," which means "shudder at" or "bristle" ("Horror"). In order to create a frightening effect, horror fiction communicates the emotion of fear by making use of horrific and terrifying elements. As Georg Seeßlen and Fernand Jung write in *Horror: Geschichte und Mythologie des Horrorfilms*, the Gothic Novel originated the horror movie:

Das moderne Horror-Genre im Film und in der Literatur verdankt seine Thematik und seine Ornamentik vor allem drei Quellen: Das ist der klassische Schauerroman als spezielle Form der *Gothic Novels*, das ist der Vampirroman mit den Verarbeitungen seines Motivs in Vers-Epen und in der Lyrik, und das sind die Gespenstergeschichten und ihre Vorformen im Drama. (49-50)

Thus, horror fiction plays with shudder and thrill and takes up myths of horrific as well as of scientific character which can be presented in either horrid or terrifying ways – and it is useful to make a distinction between horror and terror at this point because, according to Devendra Varma, the difference lies within the recipient's "awful apprehension and sickening realization" (Varma qtd. in Cavallaro 3) – with the term horror implying an instantaneous shock and the term terror meaning the process of building up emotional anticipation for what is seen. Thereby, the "awful" is most often fantasized as a monster. But what exactly is a monster?

Primarily, there are six types of monsters: the artificial human, the creature, the undead, the animal, the doppelgänger and the witch (Seeßlen and Jung 46-48). All *Body Snatcher* movies contain such images of monsters – in the 1993 version for example, the snatched mother is not only the creature but also becomes the witch (Brenez 94-96). Despite the fact that these implementations might be mistaken for typical characteristics of horror films, Fred Botting manifests that “[t]he conjunction of two hybrid genres composed from diverse literary and mythical precursors breeds monstrosities: strange beings and disturbing other” (111). In *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, the “alien” is of course the strange being as it resembles an unknown species that wants to invade humans. Thus we can say it is a monstrosity, a creature threatening human life.

With regard to the *Body Snatchers* and its remakes, Botting’s definition is just as easily applicable as Sobchack’s: In all remakes, the alien liquid snatching human bodies comes from outer space. Sobchack even defines the Sci-Fi-Horror genre as a “Monster or Creature film” in her book *Screening Space*. According to Sobchack,

the horror film is primarily concerned with the individual in conflict with society or with some extension of himself, the SF film with society and its institutions in conflict with each other or with some alien other. ... There are ... frequent cases of congruence between the SF and the horror film; there are films in which it is not so easy to distinguish whether the chaos is moral or civil. ... The films ... are what we commonly call the Monster or Creature film. (29-30)

Sobchack then continues that those science fiction monsters either fell from outer space to threaten the planet, or they invaded or destroyed it (29).

The Corporeality of the Alien

Just like horror, the term *corporeality* is also of Latin origin (Lat. *corporalis*) and means “relating to or being characteristic of a person’s body” (Hawker, Soanes and Spooner 191). Thus it is used in a physical rather than spiritual way. Hence, I will observe the physical appearance, the corpus of the alien, and, moreover, the alien-invaded human body according to features that can be interpreted as metaphors for contemporary societal issues. It is important to accomplish this analysis in two parts, since the alien semen or alien liquid and the alien-invaded body are different from each other in their function. From now on, I will use the terms alien, monster or creature interchangeably to describe the bodily version of a snatched human. On the other hand, the term alien source will stand for the shape of the outer-space alien.

Aliens demonstrate what is not human, the better to exemplify that which is human. Difference and otherness are the essence of aliens ... for only

then can they stiffen the sense of self and self-defence that completes the chain of science fiction as a normative genre. (Sardar 6)

Ziauddin Sardar's definition of the alien's otherness comes close to psychological theory about the categorization process of the human mind. Therein it is said that humans categorize everything they fear as "strange" and "unknown." Thus it is interesting to observe the alien in *Body Snatchers* on two levels: the corporeal construction according to applied features of societal fear and the reception of the creature as "the other" (Zimbardo 137).

The Body Snatchers

Perhaps we can say that the title of the first *Body Snatcher* film called *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) exactly mirrors what had happened ever since the story based on Jack Finney's novel was first turned into a movie: it has prepared the ground for a worldwide invasion of *Body Snatcher* films. These primarily tell the story of an alien invasion on earth and the simultaneous equalization of humans.

Whereas the 1956 version (directed by Don Siegel) is still a black and white movie set in an idyllic small town, an anti-communist area underlining the danger brought to society in shape of colossal outer space semen, the cinematographic composition of the 1978 version appears much darker. Director Philip Kaufman not only gave a blunt and merciless portrayal of post-Vietnam War society, he also hit the ravages of time.¹ With its gloomy atmosphere and the permanent presence of a terrifying yet elusive alien power, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* follows the typical sort of late 1970s mystery thrillers.² Especially the unexpected ending contains one overall message: don't trust any BODY. Another 15 years later, right after the Gulf War, Abel Ferrara directed another version of the story set in a military base. The movie seems to be a combination of both previous movies, as it takes up numerous elements (such as familiar lines or characters) from its predecessors. Moreover, we notice a certain similarity in the scene structure, which is a typical characteristic for a *Body Snatcher* film; one that can also be found in the 2007 adaptation by Oliver Hirschbiegel. His *The Invasion* is the latest remake of Siegel's film. Although certain scenes³ recall earlier versions, the theme of "sleeping" has a

¹ The film, for example, stars Donald Sutherland, Jeff Goldblum and Leonard Nimoy – all of them famous actors in the 1970s.

² Another example is Peter Weir's *The Last Wave* (1977), which is set in Australia and takes up Indigenous Australian themes. It is quite interesting to compare the audio-visual storytelling techniques used in both films as there are similar motifs such as a pulse beating that only the viewer is able to hear.

³ See, for example, the scene in which Tucker Kaufman tries to convince his former wife Carol Bennell of the beauty that lies within being snatched.

whole different meaning after the events of September 11.⁴ Also, the atmosphere conveyed in this movie has changed into a terrifying one: whereas Kaufman and Ferrara both strongly implemented uncanny elements in their works, Hirschbiegel almost went back to the roots of the 1956 *Body Snatchers*, as his movie focuses on terrifying components rather than horrific ones.

Thus we can say that when considering the film's release years it seems as if almost each decade has its own *Snatcher* movie that reviews contemporary socio-cultural issues and comments on the fears of society by encoding them into metaphors of communism (1950s), war (1970s) and terrorism (2000s). These metaphors, as I will argue, are not only psychologically manifested in the characters of the films but also in their outer appearance. The corporeality of the snatched body is the visualization of a whole generation's fear projected on *the other*, the alien. Furthermore, the altered bodies also hint at a popular feature of the science fiction genre, which is the implementation of horrific elements such as the monster or the alien. If these films include horrific elements, to what extent, then, is it possible to strictly distinguish between horror and science fiction movie? Looking at different examples such as Stuart Gordon's *Re-Animator* (1985) or David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986), we clearly see that there is something like a meta-genre to be called SciFi-Horror.⁵

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)

When the first *Body Snatcher* movie, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, was released in 1956, the United States was facing a problem that had occurred after the end of World War II: the Cold War. During this period, the Soviet Union opposed the United States (and their Western allies). The tension between them was expressed through a high level of espionage, invasions, technological competition and above all the space race. The intensity of the conflict and its medial representation can be interpreted as making a boogeyman out of the Communist, who became the fear of a whole generation.

Regarding Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, the alien serves as a stand-in for this fear. It presents the perfect boogeyman of the Communist, already in its outer appearance. The first time we see the snatched creature in Siegel's film, it is lying motionless on a pool table. The leading characters Miles Bennell and Betty Driscoll have been called to the Belicec's house where Jack and Teddy are already waiting outside. They invite them in and Jack talks to Miles and Betty in a secre-

⁴ In all of the *Body Snatcher* versions, humans are snatched while they are asleep, thus the "sleeping" becomes one of the films' key motifs. On the other hand, after the events of September 11, 2001, terrorists leading their everyday life in the United States society became known as "sleepers" – they invade society from within without being recognized.

⁵ A definition hereof has previously been given according to Vivian Sobchak, author of *Screening Space*.

tive manner, not revealing what the point of their invitation is. Inside the house, Jack tells Miles to walk over to the pool table. The atmosphere is gloomy, as only parts of the bar room are lighted. The pool table in the foreground is completely shady. Miles walks over and switches on the ceiling light. His body is silhouetted against the wall. Something indefinable is lying on the table, covered with a blanket that makes it look like a body bag. Miles is shocked when he discovers a body below. Being a doctor, he examines it, and then asks Jack who the man was. The cuckoo clock counts down scaring Betty, who moves over to Miles quickly. She glances at the supposedly dead body and remarks that its facial expression is “vague.” Jack adds that it looks like “the first impressions of a stamp on a coin” – it is not finished. Miles, taking a closer look at the body, finds out that even though facial features are given, the details and lines characteristic for a human face are missing. The group discusses whether the body might be a human corpse or not. Then Miles asks for an ink-pad to take the body’s fingerprints. Just like the unfinished face, they are characterless, blank. Teddy wonders whose body replica it might be. The four of them go to the bar and discuss it. Teddy remarks that it has Jack’s height and weight, which surprises her husband so much that he injures himself in this moment of shock. Miles wonders whether there might be some connection between Jack and the body. A short time later, he and Becky leave. Teddy and Jack stay at their place. When Jack falls asleep for a moment, Teddy examines the corpse again and recognizes that it has a wound at the same spot where Jack hurt himself. She wakes her husband in fright and both of them hurry to Miles’s place.

In this sequence, both characters and audience are confronted with the alien during its growth. We neither know where it came from nor have we seen the alien source before. However, the corpse is presented to us through the descriptions the characters give. Even though we barely get a glimpse of it, an exact idea of what it must look like is manifested on our mind: the creature under the blanket looks like a dead man. It is motionless, has vague facial expressions, and lacks details and lines. It appears to be unfinished and characterless. Later in that sequence, when we briefly see the creature’s face in a close up shot, we clearly notice the lack of detail: the emotionless facial features strengthen the impression that it must be dead. This image of death and its hiding under the body bag-like blanket which indicates the deadness triggers the reception of the alien as a monstrous being: Not only is it an unknown creature and thereby according to Sardar identifiable as alien (because it is different from the other characters who are alive, have mimics, features and emotions which are recognizable through the lines on their faces), but it can also be regarded as the monster since we are presented with Jack’s doppelgänger, his motionless replica which disturbs the characters because of its strange otherness. And at this point it must be mentioned that the dead body is not the frightening aspect but rather its features which remind the characters of Jack.

Moreover, the discourse on the Cold War conflict and the fear of Communist invasion contemporaneous to the film's release is metaphorically manifested in the alien's outer appearance. It is described as characterless and blank yet as still looking human. This picture conveys the idea of the perfect spy as a neutral figure, a blunt instrument and anonymous person who simply functions for the state. The spy's task was to gain information from the opponent in order to foster the Communist regime. Thus, he worked undercover and apparently became friends with the political "enemy" to transmit secret information (cf. Quiring).

In Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, this picture of the undercover spy is deployed several times. It is most explicitly used in the medical office scene when Jack's doppelgänger takes advantage of the friendship with Miles in order to convert him to the league of aliens. To quote a famous line from the movie, Jack "looks the same but he has changed – his emotions have changed," as Miles and Betty agree. Jack's alien-invaded body tries to invade Miles's thoughts in preparation for a bodily invasion. Thereby the doppelgänger wants to prepare the ground for a societal change, since the aliens distinguish themselves from humans by their lack of emotions.

This idea of a hierarchical system in which the participants work as they have been ordered – the famous Saturday morning street scene viewed from Miles's office in which the snatched people unpack new pods from trucks to further the snatching in town – very much reminds viewers of the principles of Communism: Individuality is lost due to the fact that all people are forcibly equated. Thus, the missing fingerprints of the alien body in the encounter sequence at the Belicec's house are a beautifully encoded example of this contemporary US American fear: The fear of losing what makes people unique, being invaded and becoming a Communist by force. Regarding the socio-cultural background of the United States during the Cold War, this image of Communist invasion is the horrifying part of Siegel's film, as it becomes obvious in the above mentioned scenes in Miles's office and Jack's house.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1978)

Twenty-two years later, the Cold War was still continuing and the United States was still facing a Communist opponent. But times had changed: The United States had won the space race with Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin being the first men on the moon. On the other hand the shadow of the Vietnam War, which was fought between 1959 and 1975, laid heavy on people's minds. US American society tried to find its way back to normality and to get on with everyday life. Only now they knew that technology had turned another direction: The chemical war-

fare had reached a new dimension in the battles of Vietnam (Simkin). Defoliants, also known as the Rainbow Herbicides (including Agent Orange, an herbicide that had dioxin as a by-product in it) were used to fight the enemy. However, the use of such chemicals had not just caused changes in the ecological system but also the people residing in these areas – along the Ho-Chi-Minh trail – had been affected. The American society was now confronted with consequential issues of guilt and fear and the return to daily routine was not as easy as expected (*Monsterland*).

In 1978, Philip Kaufman's remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was released. The film depicts exactly the situation of people trying to re-integrate into society. The fear factor deployed in the movie, however, went through an alteration: Whereas in Siegel's film the horror motif basically rests on the idea of a Communist invasion, Kaufman establishes a more complex fear which functions on three additional levels. Firstly, the power of the other: After the effects of the Vietnam War, people were well aware that if their country was able to use chemical warfare, other nations could do so, too, and the effects would probably be unpredictable. Secondly, the ethic pitfalls of scientific progress: In 1971, surgeon Robert J. White had been the first scientist to transplant the head of a monkey to another monkey's body (cf. White et al.). There is a direct reference to that in the *Body Snatchers* movie when a man-headed dog crosses the street. Thirdly, the ecological effects: They had triggered a change in climate and poisoned food chains for example.

In order to point out how Kaufman produced two types of creatures in his remake, the alien source and the alien corpus, which embody the disturbing other in an even more horrifying way, I will now focus on the cocoon scene in the 1978 *Body Snatcher* movie. In this scene, the alien source tries to snatch Matthew Bennell and his friends Elizabeth Driscoll, Jack and Nancy Bellicec. It produces their doppelgängers and feeds from their bodies while they are asleep.

Matthew, Elizabeth, Jack and Nancy are at Matthew's place. It is late at night; Elizabeth and Jack have fallen asleep. Nancy is still awake, whereas Matthew tries to resist fatigue. While sitting outside in the front yard, however, he gets tired and finally falls asleep. Now the alien source starts the snatching process by spreading its roots across the yard towards Matthew. The string-like looking roots softly entangle his hand and a giant seed pod, which is in the garden, starts moving. The sound of a heartbeat can be heard. The pod opens up and pops out its fleshy-colored petals. The deeper Matthew dreams, the faster it grows. The heartbeat turns louder as the pod fully opens, revealing in its center a reddish, muscle-like, slimy receptacle. The petals decay and eventually fall off. Disturbing sonar sounds underline the growing of Matthew's doppelgänger: the pod pops out a degenerated alien embryo covered in slime. The disproportioned body of the embryo is gasping for air. It expels bird-like sounds as if it was calling for its mother. Two

more pods grow their embryos. Matthew's doppelgänger grows to his size: it now appears to be the almost perfect replica since its hair and facial features are a copy of the human original. The gasping for air gets heavier and the body starts twitching, trying to break free from the pod. The other embryos develop the features of Elizabeth and Jack. Suddenly, Nancy stands on the porch calling for Matthew. He wakes up and hurries inside. The twitching of his alien doppelgänger gets heavier as if it was dying.

This sequence is a key moment in the movie as it shows the growing process of the replica. At first, there is only the seed pod which later develops into a plant and then literally gives birth to the alien. The alien and its source are therefore connected not only with each other but also with their human host. However, the growing process takes place on two levels, which differ in their depiction of the horrific: the evolution of the alien source and the growth of the alien itself.

Whereas the alien source appears almost peacefully in the beginning, softly spreading its tentacle-like roots to invade Matthew, the alien embryo is introduced to the story at a point of unbearable tension. At first the pod seems to develop only into a plant. There is nothing frightening about it, nothing scary, just the connotation of "nature's beauty." However, the image of an ordinary growing process taking place is an illusion. As soon as we then notice the disturbing core of the plant, an unpleasant feeling of terror sets in: we are unaware of what is going to happen next. Following, the heart-like pistil and fleshy petals instigate a feeling of disgust. Terror changes into horror after the embryo has popped out. The process reminds the viewer of a delivery and thereby causes confusion and repulsion when the plant disturbingly grows human look-alikes. Even worse than that, evolution has taken another direction, a horrifying, disgusting one that even foreshadows a dystopian world. The question now is which metaphors does the sequence contain and how can they be interpreted?

On the one hand, we are presented with the horrifying image of the other again: just as in the original version, the alien in Kaufman's remake embodies the dystopian vision of the Communist enemy, but the film's focus is changed in so far that the idea of a Communist invasion is not the most frightening point anymore. Rather, the vision of dystopia is intensified by the awareness of the Communist military power that became evident during the Vietnam War. Thus, the corporeal construction of the alien in Kaufman's remake is slightly different: whereas the creature in Siegel's film is monstrous because of its blank and motionless facial features, Kaufman's alien is horrifying because it becomes a nearly perfect replica of Matthew within short time, which indicates the opponent's ability to strike back mercilessly.

The transformation process of Kaufman's alien is quite fast and thereby also hints at the rapidly changing society and its moral values. If the alien in the film is able to quickly turn from a slimy, degenerated embryo into a human look-alike while the humans are sleeping, changes might be happening in real-life without anyone noticing them. In this case, the transformation resembles the process of

changing directions in everyday life, whereas the sleeping character stands for the ignorance of society – quite often we don't see what is right in front of us because we don't question much. The fear of being ignorant is most of all illustrated in this sequence by the use of extraordinary special effects such as the slimy surface of the alien, its twitching moves and the bird-like cry.

On the other hand we must observe which meaning is conveyed by the idea of a plant giving birth to an embryo. The use of defoliants in the Vietnam War had left its marks: a functioning ecologic system had been widely damaged and in the aftermath people were confronted with poisoned food chains, changed landscapes and birth defects. Thus, the idea of the plant delivering an embryo signifies the unpredictability of the effects caused by chemical warfare. The wide use of newly developed scientifically enhanced products obfuscated the inexperience with long-term damages. Consequently, the deformed alien embryo metaphorically reflects popular discourses on birth defects that occurred after the Vietnam War. Thus, we can say the film warns against the careless use of new scientific products. Not only the unpredictability of effects but also the possibility of the opponent using chemicals in war, too, was a fear society had to deal with. Therefore, Kaufman's mise-en-scène in *Body Snatchers* is a remake which thoughtfully adjusted contemporary societal issues by reflecting a wider range of frightening aspects. However, the message of Siegel's film is still recognizable. Only the fear of the enemy invasion has switched to a fear of the enemy's powerful influence.

The Alien as a Mirror of Our Contemporary Time

This chapter has sought to discuss Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and its remakes as a hybrid genre that mixes with certain Horror elements. Drawing on Seeßlen, Sobchack and Varma, I argued that the corporeal construction of the alien in the 1956 and 1978 versions reflects contemporary socio-cultural issues. More precisely, the horrifying aspects could be identified as societal fears that are metaphorically manifested in the outer appearance of the alien in the *Body Snatcher* films. Yet in Kaufman's version, the alien neither only mirrors the enemy stereotype nor simply resembles the fear of "the other" as it does in Don Siegel's version. It functions as a socio-critical metaphor revealing similarities between the self (in that case the civilian) and the other (the Communist enemy) who can adapt to American culture, operate as a spy and make use of Western technologies which, in turn, can be of inhuman impact.

The commentary function of the SciFi-Horror meta-genre hence plays a crucial part. If the cinematic enemy is a natural product – the plant delivering the replica – and nature has been damaged by Western powers using new technologies and chemicals, the conclusion would be that the enemy is a self-generated problem, similar to the proverb, "What goes around, comes around." The Western powers had started chemical warfare and by now the Communist enemy was able

to make use of it, too. When comparing Kaufman's film to Ferrara's remake, we see that the tendency of portraying the enemy as a danger that strikes back from within society has become more and more popular. In the 1993 version (*Body Snatchers*, Dir. Abel Ferrara), the U.S. military falls victim to its own chemical inventions, whereas the 2007 version (*The Invasion*, Dir. Oliver Hirschbiegel) conveys the image of terrorist sleepers (an ex-husband trying to persuade his wife to be invaded). Thus, the critical aspect of the alien body in these movies lies in its reflection of society and the contemporaneous questions it raises, which are whether or not the enemy – to a certain extent – was brought on by one's own fault.

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