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**It Used to Be a Man's World:
Manhood and Masculinity in Don Siegel's
*Invasion of the Body Snatchers***

*And so I ran. I ran, I ran, I ran! I ran as
little Jimmy Grimaldi ran the other day.*

– Dr. Miles J. Bennell, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956)

Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* features a rather peculiar ending. We witness a grown man running away in panic from an unseen young woman, eerily mirroring a young boy running away from his mother in an earlier scene. The movie offers a multitude of possible interpretations and several have been put forward by different scholars over time. The predominant one, of course, has always been to see the movie as an allegory for the communist threat prevalent in the United States at the time the movie was released (Sanders 59). Fredric Jameson even sees all Science Fiction films produced in the 1950s as influenced by the Cold War:

Arguably, the golden age of the fifties Science Fiction film, with its pod people and brain-eating monsters, testified to a genuine collective paranoia, that of the fantasies of the Cold War period. ... The enemy within is then paradoxically marked by non-difference: “communists” are people just like us save for the emptiness of the eyes and a certain automatism which betrays the appropriation of their bodies by alien forces. (96)

But since the release of the movie more than 50 years have passed and since then the focus of research has shifted dramatically and with it the possible interpretations of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Cut off from outside help, a young doctor and his childhood sweetheart try to save their home town Santa Mira on their own. The absence of external influence – with the focus of the plot on only one small town – enables the viewer to learn about Santa Mira, its social structures and the self-concept of its inhabitants. This paper will deal with the depiction of gender within the movie, focusing especially on Dr. Miles Bennell’s rank in the social hierarchy. It will either underline or deconstruct common stereotypes concerning “typical” male behavior, but also take into consideration the depiction of Becky Driscoll as the lead female character. In my analysis, I will focus on how the relationship between Miles Bennell and Becky Driscoll develops in the course of the movie, and on how the interaction between the two characters influences Bennell. More generally, I want to suggest that the alien invasion depicted in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* can be seen as an allegory of the post-war decline of small-town patriarchy and male social and political dominance in the United States. The movie is critical of this development and warns of a possibly terrible outcome. The analysis will take into consideration the historical background in which the movie was produced and how changes in society have also brought about changes in perception: the reaction of a contemporary audience to certain aspects of the movie will most probably be quite different from that of a 1950s audience. Since the movie was created in a society that was heavily influenced by the Cold War and other aspects unique to the 1950s United States, it is likely that the aspects of plot and production a contemporary observer regards as the most important ones differ from the ones an observer from another time would choose and the ones that the creators originally intended.

Santa Mira: An All-American Town?

In order to fully grasp the context in which the story takes place, one has to take into consideration *where* it is set. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* takes place almost completely within the fictional town of Santa Mira, California. From what we can see on screen, it does not seem to be a suburb, but rather an independent small town, with a town center, stores and its own train station. It seems to be surrounded by hills and thus appears geographically isolated, which adds to the idea

of autonomy. In his article “Picturing Paranoia: Interpreting *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*,” Steven M. Sanders refers to this as “small-town insularity” (55). And Santa Mira seems like an island, indeed, with almost the entire plot taking place there. Additionally, Bennell’s attempts to call for outside help fail, adding to the feeling of insularity.

The audience does not see what Santa Mira is like before the invasion starts because at the time Bennell arrives, an unknown number of people have already been replaced by the alien life forms. As the aliens are mimicking normal human behavior, however, the viewer might still get a good impression of what the town used to be like. According to Katrina Mann, the town’s population is characterized by “stable patriarchal management, a Protestant work ethic, and courtly love” (50).

The way that both Dr. Bennell and Dr. Kauffman act, implies that this town is firmly in the hand of men. There is a clear social hierarchy, which subordinates women like Wilma and privileges men like Bennell and Kauffman. All the main characters and most of the other people seen on screen are white. The streets are clean, most people are friendly and seem content with their lives – or, this is at least the impression the audience gets. Santa Mira appears to be almost too good to be true – reminiscent of the fictional town of Seahaven in Peter Weir’s *The Truman Show*. While Seahaven turns out to be a film set in a gigantic television studio, Santa Mira is supposed to be real, although it is almost exactly as unrealistic. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* glorifies the all-American small town, prosperous, clean, and evoking a feeling of general happiness. The absence of poverty and racial tensions as well as the traditional gender relations between the characters paint the picture of a perfect community, not burdened by the real life problems the United States faced in the 1950s.

This of course changes during the alien invasion: The town is still clean and the population is still white; yet the people are unable to feel any emotions. Now the general cleanliness appears to be as sterile as the alien life forms who do not reproduce physically. The way Santa Mira is portrayed before the alien invasion can be seen as an idealized small version of the United States itself. Thus, I would argue that what happens in Santa Mira can and should be read as a comment on issues which were contemporary at the time the movie was released.

The Gender Issue

In *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* we witness an alien invasion – not a military one, but one relying on deception. The enemy has infiltrated the town of Santa Mira and now lives among the town’s population, slowly taking power from within. The prevalent interpretations have been linking the movie to either the Communist threat or McCarthyism. What is more interesting, I would suggest, is how the reaction to this threat is reflected in the depiction of gender.

Although the movie ends in a slightly more optimistic way than it was originally intended, it is not a typical happy ending, more of an ambiguous one, in fact, – and in any case the population of Santa Mira is lost for good. This is partly caused by Bennell's inability to cope with the situation in Santa Mira. In fact, the situation gets out of control because Bennell lacks character traits that are generally considered as masculine, namely anger, determination, and aggression. Instead he is hesitant, fearful and full of self-doubt. If we go back now to the historical context in which the movie was made we can clearly see what message is conveyed here: The real United States, just like the fictional town of Santa Mira, is threatened by an invasion from within. The formerly independent and strong-willed Becky – representing the new type of emancipated woman – is unable to do anything against it and falters easily under the pressure of this threat. This is only one aspect of the generally rather negative portrayal of women in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. There are only very few instances in this movie in which women are portrayed positively. Becky Driscoll, as the main female character, relies heavily on Dr. Bennell to save her – and in the end is too weak to stay awake, enabling the Pod People to replace her. Becky Driscoll, who at the beginning of the movie is portrayed as confident and self-reliant, first becomes the damsel in distress and then betrays the protagonist, Miles Bennell. As a result, in case of the Red Scare, women can not be trusted to help in the defense against a communist *Fifth Column*. And even men may not be helpful, if they do not show stereotypically masculine behavior. The answer to this and indeed any threat to the United States must thus be a masculine one. In order to defeat the enemy, one must be determined, unyielding, strong and calm. The audience might remember from the last scene that the doctors and police officers who find out about the invasion first from Bennell himself and then via the truck accident are all men; men who then try to rally men from the army and the FBI in order to fight the enemy. Thus, the slightly more optimistic ending is a more optimistic one just because now the defense lies in the hands of able men.

Miles Bennell: A Strong and Able Man?

In order to analyze how Miles Bennell is portrayed in the movie, one has to take a closer look at his relationship with other people and their reactions to him. There are several characters in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* that show us quite clearly what Bennell's rank in the social hierarchy of Santa Mira is. In one of the very first scenes of the film, Sally Withers, Bennell's nurse, drives a car to the train station to pick up the doctor. But as soon as they meet – and without even saying a word about it – Bennell takes the driver's seat. It may strike the contemporary viewer as odd that a person who is picked up somewhere almost naturally takes the driver's seat from the person who has driven the car to the pick-up point. Driving here appears to be some kind of a male prerogative. Another interesting factor in this

scene is that the camera is placed on Bennell's side of the car, which puts him in the foreground of the shot. Sally is turned towards him and looks at him almost adoringly while he jokingly talks about being able to break up her marriage if he wanted to. His right to drive the car and thereby his control of the situation is underlined, when in the next scene he jumps out of the car to run after a boy who has run into the street in obvious distress. Sally slides over onto the driver's seat, moves the car a few feet forwards and then Bennell gets back in and drives on. Thus, every time Sally is alone in the car she drives, but as soon as Bennell gets in, he takes the wheel. This repeated procedure of exchanging control of the car quite clearly shows what relationship the two have. Although Sally Withers and Bennell have an employer-employee relationship, they are comfortable enough around each other to engage in some banter. Nonetheless, it is always clear that Bennell is the dominant one in their relationship.

The next and probably most important relationship that is portrayed is the one between Bennell and Becky Driscoll. When they meet, they too engage in some flirtatious banter. During the course of their conversation, it is revealed that they have a history together and that Becky has recently been divorced. After Becky's divorce, she and Bennell had planned to meet in Reno for reasons unknown. However, this meeting did not take place – ostensibly due to schedule difficulties – and it is left unclear whether there is interest in a renewal of their relationship. Apart from their spoken dialog, their body language gives us quite a good insight into their relationship, for example, when they cross the street after leaving Bennell's office. It seems like whenever the two of them are walking beside each other, Bennell does not hold her hand, but places his own on her elbow, gently steering her, thereby controlling the direction in which she walks. Even though Becky Driscoll's clothing, demeanor, and flirtatious manner clearly set her apart from Sally Withers (as does her past relationship with Bennell and the fact that she is not one of his employees) he, once more, represents the dominant part in the relationship.

It should be noted that nearly all the women Bennell encounters throughout the movie are portrayed as assuming the inferior role: Sally Withers is his employee, Becky Driscoll is his former girlfriend who, recently divorced, has moved back in with her father, and some other women are his patients. Towards many he acts paternally, fulfilling his role as a small-town doctor, to some – as one would expect from a handsome single doctor – he acts in a flirtatious manner. In several scenes, this is also reinforced by the way in which the characters are positioned during a conversation. In the doctor's office and in the garden of the Lentz family (Bennell makes a house call because Wilma Lentz is convinced that an impostor has replaced her uncle), the women are seated while Bennell is standing. As a gentleman he leaves the seats to the women, of course, but this also enables him to tower over them, which is why they have to look up to him while he, at certain times almost condescendingly, talks down to them. One might argue that all these

relationships are common for the 1950s, but the degree to which the gender disparity is exaggerated and later turned around still make them important for this analysis.

The clear division along traditional gender lines can also be seen in the clothes the characters wear. Bennell is mostly shown wearing a suit, which he is not afraid to dirty, which can be seen when he gets out of the car on a dusty road and kneels down beside the boy in the beginning of the movie. Becky Driscoll on the other hand is usually wearing dresses and carrying fashion accessories like handbags or shawls which hinder her movement. While Bennell's hands are free to take action, Becky Driscoll's are clutching a purse.

When Bennell is called to a patient and takes Becky along with him, the way she is dressed is contrasted with the way the female patient is. Wilma Lentz, Becky's cousin, has become suspicious of a close family member, who seems to be acting strangely around her. Wilma's clothes are quite plain and she does not sport a particularly elaborate hairstyle either. Becky on the other hand appears almost overdressed. Her styling very much underlines her femininity, making her even more attractive than other women, which in turn reinforces Bennell's masculinity. The two of them therefore fulfill the stereotypical roles their respective genders are generally associated with.

When the plot reaches its climax in the scenes where there is open hostility between the alien invaders and Bennell, the gender roles are still firmly traditional. Bennell fears for Becky's safety, and drives to her house to pick her up. Because he is unable to awaken her, he simply carries her outside and to his car and takes her to his house. The next morning, Bennell is again in the foreground of the shot sitting on a table while in the background Becky is preparing his breakfast. Once more, a very traditional, almost archaic gender relation is depicted in this scene. Becky dutifully fulfilling her domestic role stands in stark contrast to Bennell's role as protector, having used his physical strength to carry her to safety the night before. When the two of them have to hide in Bennell's office for a night, it is heavily implied that they engage in sexual intercourse (Mann 60). The ability to seduce an attractive woman might serve as another reminder of how masculine, confident and successful Miles is. The fact that Becky later tells Bennell that she wants to be the mother of his children further strengthens the traditional gender relationship. When the alien invaders abandon secrecy and start taking ever more aggressive measures against the protagonists, Bennell and Becky have no choice but to try to escape Santa Mira. In their escape, it is Bennell who keeps both of them going. When Becky is physically exhausted from the strains of their flight, the doctor first has to drag her along, and later even carries her away from the town. Where he earlier was the dominant part of their relationship, he now is the only active one. Their survival depends solely on him, while Becky, physically and mentally exhausted, becomes utterly impassive.

The Small-Town Doctor

Wilma Lentz is not the only character who is introduced as one of Bennell's patients. In fact, the reason why he has returned early from his conference is that his nurse, Sally Withers, has called him back in order to attend to the great number of people who have come to seek his advice. We later learn that these people had noticed strange behavior in their family members or peers. Yet at the time Bennell returns to Santa Mira, most of them have either been convinced that nothing is wrong or have been replaced by pod people. The few patients we see in Bennell's office seem to trust his opinion. It is also interesting to note that the change in behavior many of the film's characters seem to have noticed in others is not necessarily a medical problem – yet they still want to see Dr. Bennell about it, which demonstrates that his authority and the trust the townspeople have in him are not merely based on his status as medical doctor. It seems more like he is the one person people may come to for advice in an unusual situation, which clearly distinguishes him as a authority figure within the small-town society of Santa Mira.

However, there are also other characters Bennell interacts with, for example the psychologist Dr. Kauffman, whom he encounters when he is on a date with Becky. They talk in an informal manner about the patients Bennell has seen and to whom he refers to as a “mixed-up kid and a woman,” making clear that he does not take their fears seriously. Kauffman reacts in the same indifferent manner, blaming psychological difficulties for the strange behavior of Bennell's patients. This scene also marks an instance of male bonding: Bennell and Kauffman seem to be old friends or at least old colleagues and talk about what to do about their patients' treatment out on the street in a very informal way. This symbolizes how they are in control and how they can execute power without any sort of accountability. Katrina Mann points out that Dr. Kauffman represents the “dubious postwar technocrat,” a member of the “white patriarchal collective” (59). His friendship hints at Bennell's status in the social hierarchy of Santa Mira. This social hierarchy seems to be based on patriarchal structures, with men like Bennell and Kauffman exercising power not only through their work but also through their positions as well-respected members of the Santa Mira society.

Combining the observations concerning behavior, relationships and social hierarchy in Santa Mira, Bennell's status in town becomes quite clear: He is portrayed as being very confident, especially around women. This can be seen in his demeanor when talking to Becky, Wilma or Sally. The townspeople trust him and come to him for medical and non-medical advice. Up until the very end of the movie, he plays the active part when together with Becky. This reaches its climax when he has to carry her into the tunnel in one of the last scenes. He sometimes seems to be quite condescending, especially towards women, on one occasion dismissing a woman's (justified) fears the same way he dismissed the ramblings of a hysterical child earlier in the movie.

The Deconstruction of Masculinity

As I have shown so far, the picture of Dr. Miles Bennell as strong, confident and in control of both his life and most of the situations he gets into is strengthened. In the following section, I will explore to what extent this picture is deconstructed during the course of the alien invasion and how this in turn affects possible interpretations of the movie.

This changing portrayal of Dr. Bennell does not come about suddenly but in several steps. Some of them are rather subtle, some more obvious. One of the first signs can be observed when Miles finds out that Sally has been replaced by an alien. He watches from a window, then runs away in panic and jumps into his car. Becky, who is in control of the car, then speeds away. This is the first instance in the movie in which Bennell is in a car that he is not driving himself – thus, the first situation in which a woman is in control while he is merely a passive passenger. A few scenes later, he and Becky are hiding in a closet in Bennell's office, while a policeman – already turned into a pod person – searches the place.

The fact that Bennell hides here and does not fight the policeman serves to deconstruct the almost archaic former depiction of his masculinity. Later, he actually fights back – but he is subdued by the policeman and has to be saved by Becky, who manages to tranquilize the alien policeman with an injection. Here, Becky saves him, and the situation in which Miles saved Becky by carrying her out of her house is in fact reversed. The fight with the policeman is also interesting on the level of visual symbolism. The policeman, who has one of the most stereotypically male professions, of course carries a gun and a baton. Both are phallic symbols, underlining his masculinity. He manages to overpower Bennell because of his greater physical strength or determination, both attributes usually associated with masculinity. Thus in order to lose the fight, Bennell must be less masculine than the policeman, who in turn is defeated by a woman. This not only deconstructs traditional gender stereotypes, but also shows how Bennell is losing power *vis-à-vis* the alien invaders and also *vis-à-vis* Becky Driscoll.

But in the end, it is Becky who delivers the *coup de grâce*. When Bennell leaves her alone at their hiding place for a few minutes, she becomes a pod person. Bennell comes back, kisses her and realizes from her lack of reaction, probably caused by a lack of emotions, that she has been replaced: “I didn't know the real meaning of fear,” Bennell can be heard in the voice-over, “until ... until I kissed Becky.” Michael Hardin here notes the image of the womb that the tunnel in which they are hiding conveys (1). This imagery serves to put the already decreasingly masculine Miles in an environment strongly associated with the female.

Additionally, Miles notices Becky's replacement only when she does not respond to his kiss. Here he fails to seduce her, which again stands in contrast to his former success in doing so. In one of the earlier scenes we can also witness how the former Sally, Bennell's nurse, advises one of her fellow aliens where to place a pod to replace her small child. This behavior shows how all the motherly instincts

Sally might have had are gone. The inability or unwillingness to mate and the loss of normal, protective behavior towards children further deconstructs the idea of biological sex and traditional, sex-based gender roles.

After Bennell has realized that his companion has become a pod person, he flees – and while he is running away we hear in a voice-over that he now is in exactly the same situation the young boy Jimmy was in at the very beginning of the movie. He now has become like the frightened child he refused to take serious before. Hence there is a parallel where before there was a contrast. Earlier on, Bennell was the one who calmed down those who panicked, mostly women, but now he himself is extremely fearful and has basically suffered a nervous breakdown.

It should also be noted that, due to the pod people replacing more and more people, he becomes increasingly isolated. In the beginning, he is an important part of the town. He is friends with many of the film's characters and many people come to seek his advice. In the end however, has become an outcast. For someone who is used to be as involved in the community as Bennell, this must be quite a difficult situation, one that adds to the pressure he faces and contributes to his breakdown. Before, the traditional gender-specific attributes of both Bennell and Becky had been strengthened. Now, however, they do not apply any more.

The depiction of Miles Bennell at the end of the movie differs greatly from the way he is depicted in the beginning. While at first he is successful in his endeavors, confident and in control, he later fails to save Becky as well as the population of Santa Mira. Bennell panics and eventually has to leave it to others to notify the authorities and fight the invasion. The fact that the movie systematically deconstructs the picture of a masculine Miles Bennell, together with its ambivalent ending, which does not clarify whether the humans will be able to fend off the invasion, will be the base for further interpretation.

Conclusion

At the end of the film, the once confident doctor becomes a scared child. The idyllic small town in California becomes the base from which a hostile alien race tries to invade the United States. What was once a romantic relationship turns into horror and fear. What was once a loving mother now is a cold and calculating alien who even plans to replace her own child. Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* succeeds in portraying an unrealistically perfect world just to systematically destroy it afterwards. To achieve this, the movie works on several levels: The deconstruction of traditional gender roles leaves the protagonist a nervous wreck and the town of Santa Mira populated by basically genderless individuals hostile to the outside world. The destruction of the nearly perfect small town community of Santa Mira transforms a once happy and presumably prosperous place into a bridgehead of an alien invasion.

I have already mentioned that the most prevalent interpretations of the movie see the alien invasion as representative of either the danger of infiltration of the United States by communist ideas or as criticism of McCarthyism. But we can go one step further and look at how the doom of Santa Mira came about. We clearly see a decline of male dominance in Santa Mira, since the Body Snatchers do not seem to have any gender-based hierarchy (as can be seen, for example, in the scene where Bennell's nurse, Sally, orders several male aliens to place a pod near her child). This can be seen as an analogy of the decline of patriarchy in the United States as a whole, especially when taking into consideration the picture of women as equal to men that was prevalent in communism. We can also see how Bennell becomes a less and less masculine character as the story progresses. A confident man in the beginning, he has now become childlike. In this context, the movie is also critical of the empowerment of women, since as soon as there is an emergency, women – here represented by Becky – have to rely on men to ensure their safety. The movie thus serves as political and social commentary. While the real United States are under threat from communist infiltration, measures were to be taken to ensure that the traditional American social roles prevailed to ensure that the American way of life survives. The fate that the population of the fictional town of Santa Mira suffers must not be the fate of American society as a whole. In order to ensure the safety of the American people, they have to behave differently than the people in Santa Mira. Men must take the initiative, because the movie clearly shows that women are unable to do so. And these men must act in a stereotypically masculine way, because if they do not, they will fail just as Miles Bennell does.

The movie seems to call upon the male population of the United States to repeat their effort and to defeat the communist threat. And this, as the movie shows, has to be done by making use of male virtues. The people of Santa Mira did not do so, and were defeated and destroyed as a result. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* thus stands as a warning of a society that is not ruled by able men.

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