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# Monsters: Earthly and Unearthly

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)  
Allied Artists  
Directed by Don Siegel  
1956, 75 min.

Cast  
Dr. Miles Bennell  
Becky  
Jack  
Theodora  
Sherriff  
Also with...

Kevin McCarthy  
Dana Wynter  
King Donovan  
Carolyn Jones  
Ralph Dumke  
Larry Gates  
Jean Willes  
Whit Bissell  
Pat O'Malley  
Dabbs Greer

Credits  
Producer  
Director  
Screenplay  
Based on story  
Written by  
Photography  
Art Direction  
Musical Score

Walter Wanger  
Don Siegel  
Daniel Mainwaring  
"The Body Snatchers"  
Jack Finney  
Ellsworth Fredericks  
Edward Hayworth  
Carmen Dragon

## Notes

Although science fiction and horror films are relegated to a minor and unimportant level, they have nevertheless touched upon many of our basic fears and concerns. While death and destruction have run rampant in the majority of the more mindless entries, there has been one kind of horror imaginatively and intelligently explored in the best of this genre. That ultimate horror is dehumanization, the state in which life is suspended and the individual is deprived of emotions, free will and moral judgement. This type of story hits the most exposed nerve of contemporary society. Our modern collective anxiety includes loss of identity, subliminal mind-bending and brainwashing. These stories are not concerned with the encroachment of machines, because man himself has become the machine. The first films to deal with the subject were those about zombies, the living dead who were usually possessed by devil worshippers. The setting was often Africa or Haiti, and the best of these was Val Lewton's remarkable I Walked With A Zombie in 1943. But the exotic locations and the strangeness of the malady kept these films at an emotional distance. This is not true of Invasion of the Body Snatchers. The locale, a small town in California, is instantly recognizable, and the monsters are those we love. When the story opens with a hysterical child screaming to the returning physician hero that he does not know his own mother, we realize that we are in a world of terrifying and nightmarish reality.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers is a passionately involved film, with such fiery relevance that it is still durable today -- perhaps even more relevant today than in 1956. The style is energetic and virile, with a consistent use of low wide-angle camera shots that open up the frames with cloudscapes, landscapes and all-enclosing buildings that crowd in on wide dark streets. There is a clever use of natural locations, and the town sequences are alarmingly real. There is so much convincing detail that we are totally involved in the fate of the town of Santa Mira. The violent energy that is associated with director Don Siegel, creator of the masterful detective thrillers Madigan and Dirty Harry, comes through in the well-staged injection scene and the horribly graphic sequence of the destruction with pitchforks of the obscene emerging pods in the greenhouse. But the most effective and terrifying scenes are the quiet ones: the search for Dr. Bennell in his office, the disquieting songstress in the California hills, the quiet demeanor of the citizens unloading the trucks in the town square. There is even an artistic touch in the moody sequence of the discovery of the first pod on the billiard table at the house of Jack and Theodora, a tension-filled scene well broken off at its height when a cuckoo clock goes off.

Usually, sci-fi and horror operas make their reputations with eye-popping special effects, but are populated by dull individuals up front doing nothing. Invasion of the Body Snatchers makes an important reversal. There are almost no special effects. The concentration is totally on the inhabitants of an endangered species. Most important to the story is Dr. Miles Bennell, well played by the underrated and little noticed but excellent performer Kevin McCarthy. He is properly heroic and compassionate, a perfect spokesman and representative of humanity, but who is also recognizable by his ordinariness. This is also true of King Donovan and Carolyn Jones as the friendly neighbors, but unfortunately Dana Wynter expresses so little emotion that we are never certain whether she is person or pod.

Though this fine film masquerades under a ridiculous title imposed upon it by the releasing studio (Siegel wanted to call it Sleep No More), it has gained a well-deserved reputation and popularity through the years that now place it near the top films in this genre. But at the time of its first preview, the studio was so unsure of its product that Siegel was forced to add a de-meaning prologue and epilogue of Dr. Bennell relating the story while confined to a hospital. This framed the film in a meaningless flashback and compromised the shattering conclusion with a happy ending. Fortunately, the Wadsworth Atheneum print does not contain the hated inclusions. But the audience should not miss them. The film now properly opens with Dr. Bennell's return to Santa Mira,



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and the low-angle camera and windswept station establishes an immediate mood of vague disquiet prior to Bennell's encounter with the terrified child. Even more properly, the tale concludes on the congested highway and leaves the viewer with the disturbing ending that the director intended.

Siegel and his cast and crew deeply believed in the film, and it remains his personal favorite. The concerns of the 1950's that led to making the film (brainwashing during the Korean War, McCarthyism, the Cold War, creeping Socialism and the threat of Communism, the memories of Fascism) have been replaced by Vietnam, wiretapping, Watergate, and continual concern about the loss of individual identity that keep the picture fresh and meaningful. The director related a story of just how much it was believed by the cast. As a gag, he slipped one of the menacing pods into Dana Wynter's bungalow bedroom after a day's shooting. Her terrified response indicated that the story struck home -- and still does.

Notes by Christopher J. Warren  
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