
How Politics Affects Cinema

1950s alien invasion films played on fears of the time to create strong feelings of paranoia, with the ultimate goal of creating conformity in its audience. The movies I'll be looking at is Invasion of the body snatchers and The day the earth stood still. An Alien invasion movie is an aspect of science fiction movies where other lifeforms from different planet come to earth to enslave, harvest beings for food, steal the planet's resources or to destroy human life. They were popular in the 1950's due to the use of special effects and creative story. Many of the science fiction movies introduced indirect expressions of concern and anxiety about the Communist invasion of America and the possibility of a nuclear holocaust. These fears were expressed in various aspects, such as scientists trying to create a dangerous experiment often led to horrific mutant released, radiation's dreadful effects on a living being, aliens manipulating humans using mind control.

Although both government and private groups discouraged criticism of U.S. policies and expressions of fear about national security during the Cold War, the producers of science fiction films were generally left alone by government regulators and the private groups that tried to shape public opinion. Controversy over the development of atomic weapons and potential consequences had been repressed in public debates and in other film genres,² but it could be recast in stories about mutant ants and grasshoppers, pods that took over people's minds, space travel, and the nuclear destruction of civilizations on other planets. By dislocating the narratives to different times and/or different worlds, the science fiction genre catered to public anxiety about the bomb and communism. In most of the films, scientists and/or the military managed to vanquish the enemy, offering reassurance that these threats could be overcome. In films where destruction had already taken place, the endings offered hope and redemption. Thus the science fiction films of the Cold War era may be generally interpreted as advocating the idea that Americans would be able to cope with external threats to their security. If details in interpretations vary, most accept that the film is, at least in large part, an allegory for the loss of individual autonomy. What's perhaps most curious is that Body Snatchers' supposed allegorical message has been linked to both ends of the political spectrum: some have read the film as a reflection of right-wing paranoia about Communists taking over the American way of life, while others see it as symbolic of left-wing paranoia about McCarthyism. It is natural to read what we know of the 1950s into the film: national rhetoric at that time was steeped in anti-communist obsession, and many Americans feared being overtaken by an outside force intent on uniformity.

Body Snatchers is easily read as a call to fight back against the mindless conformity of mass society and the soulless aliens who have dialogue like, "Join us - life will be much simpler and

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better." The general small-town America setting of the film could easily be anyone's hometown within the country; thus its image feels distinctly American, rather than belonging to any specific region, and takes on a symbolic resonance for the country as a whole. But while the film is undeniably a portrait of individualism in the contest, challenging our national identity and humanity, the social target or political affiliation of the film, if it has any, is not finally clear. Don Siegel spoke of an existing allegorical subtext but didn't commit to it being the full purpose of the film. He said, "I felt that this was a very important story. I think that the world is populated by pods and I wanted to show them. I think so many people have no feeling about cultural things, no feeling of pain, of sorrow... The political reference to Senator McCarthy and totalitarianism was inescapable but I tried not to emphasize it because I feel that motion pictures are primarily to entertain and I did not want to preach." From the filmmakers' perspective, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was meant as good science fiction thriller first. The plot speaks to the themes of mindless conformity and individual autonomy on a conceptual level, but there is limited evidence to prove that the critique is narrowly aimed at communism, McCarthyism or any particular political philosophy. The story, simple yet haunting enough to support political interpretations from various points of view, arguably speaks to all these ideologies and more. Whatever the filmmakers' original intentions, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was not the first or last film to take on a retroactive social message, but it is undoubtedly one of history's most salient examples of the phenomenon.

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