

# Thought Experiment

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## DEHUMANIZATION, UN-AMERICANS, AND POD PEOPLE IN *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS*

*“No one could possibly impersonate your Uncle Ira for more than a moment, without you, Becky, or even me, seeing a million differences. Realize that, Wilma, think about it and get it into your head, and you’ll know the trouble is inside you.”*

—Dr. Miles Bennell,  
*The Body Snatchers* (1955)

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When *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was released in theaters in 1956 it was largely ignored by major critics. In the film, the people of a fictional California small town are being replaced, one by one, with alien seedpod-derived copies, nearly indistinguishable from the original, yet lacking in essential humanity. It wasn’t seen as a potentially important drama. Instead, it was just another Poverty Row science fiction B movie, with hardly any special effects, as was standard at the time in B-movies. Its lackluster reception was largely due to the ad campaign by the studio, Allied Artists, which played up the science fiction thriller elements, and released it as a science fiction double feature with the British B movie *The Atomic Man*.

Regardless, the picture did good business, and what reviews it garnered in local papers and film trades praised its premise and direction. Later on critics became divided over interpretations of the film as either a McCarthyist, anti-Communist allegory, or a leftwing, anti-conformist allegory. But the continued conversation about it, as well as its effective performances and taut direction, made *Body Snatchers* into one of the most demanded B-movies on television, eventually making it one of the most successful B-movies of all time.

So, what was it about “pod-people” that caused so much debate over the film’s intended message?

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*“Why do you breathe, eat, sleep, make love, and reproduce your kind? Because it’s your function, your reason for being. There’s no other reason, and none needed.”*

—Dr. Budlong,  
*The Body Snatchers*

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*Body Snatchers* is so highly interpretable because, at its heart, it’s about dehumanization. In *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (2011), philosophy professor David Livingstone Smith explains, “Dehumanization is the belief that some beings only *appear* human, but beneath the surface, where it really counts, they aren’t human at all.” The reasons for this, he argues, are due to the convergence of cultural beliefs, biology, and the human mind.

Aristotle was among the first to describe the concept of dehumanization. At the time, the Ancient Greeks considered themselves to be the paragons of civilization, and all foreigners were subhuman “barbarians.” This belief, later dubbed *ethnocentrism* by nineteenth century sociologists, was found, in time, to be ubiquitous in cultures all over the world, with many primitive cultures, including those of the ancient Egyptians and

Mesopotamians, fostering beliefs that only they were true human beings, and any outsiders were animals.

Aristotle was also an early essentialist thinker. He argued the essence of a thing makes it what it is. Birds are birds because they fly with wings, just as humans are humans because we reason with our minds. If barbarians possessed inferior reasoning skills, he argued, that made them subhuman, but they might achieve human status by submitting as slaves to human masters. This concept of “natural slavery” had a huge impact on medieval thought in both the Islamic world and in Christian Europe. It was invoked to justify the trans-Saharan slave trade, as well as by Spanish *conquistadors* and English colonists to justify the conquest and enslavement of indigenous peoples.

Another factor in humanity's tendency to dehumanize others comes from the long-standing cultural belief in the “great chain of being.” This conceptual framework assumes that the universe is unchanging and complete, with gods sitting on top of the hierarchy of creation, followed by their divine servants, then humans, animals, insects, and plants. This idea is as old as human thought and can be traced back to before the medieval Christian church, before the Ancient Greeks, even before the ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations, into pre-history.

During the Enlightenment, philosophers began to grapple with why dehumanization occurs. The Scottish philosopher David Hume, in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740), was among the first to describe outgroup bias, or the tendency to favor members of one's own community and discriminate against others. “When our own nation is at war with any other,” Hume said, “we detest them under the character of cruel, perfidious, unjust and violent: but always esteem ourselves and allies equitable, moderate and merciful.” Hume also argued our ideas of good and bad, right and wrong, are due to our ability to imagine that other people have the same rich inner lives as ourselves. We, however, apply that sympathy unequally—we care for some more than others, particularly those who look like us, are related to us, or are nearby us. The philosopher Immanuel Kant furthered this idea in his delineation of “ends” and “means,” saying people are prone to using others as means, without acknowledging their worth as humans, thus excluding them from moral consideration.

This ability to dehumanize is a necessary pretext for violence, war, and genocide. The neurologist John T. MacCurdy, in *The Psychology of War* (1918), explained that while altruism and loyalty are necessary for war, the enemy also needs to be viewed as subhuman, otherwise the human aversion to taking human life could not be overcome. In 1966 the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson coined the concept of cultural pseudospeciation, which he argued was the basis for mass violence. “While man is obviously one species,” Erikson said, “he [splits] into groups . . . which provide their members with a firm sense of unique and superior human identity—and some sense of immortality.”

Aldous Huxley believed dehumanization to be the primary function of all propaganda. “Most people would hesitate to torture or kill a human being like themselves,” Huxley said. “But when that human being is spoken of as though he were not a human being, but as the representative of some wicked principle, we lose our scruples . . . all political and nationalist propaganda aims at only one thing; to persuade one set of people that another set of people are not really human and that it is therefore legitimate to rob, swindle, bully, and even murder them.”

This kind of dehumanization was rampant during World War II. The Nazis labeled Jewish people as *Untermenschen* (subhumans), due to the Nazi belief that Jewish people were subhuman parasites, lacking in essential humanity, and thus it was the Nazis' moral obligation to exterminate them. This kind of language wasn't restricted to the Axis powers, either. American propaganda also used dehumanizing language

against the Japanese, referring to them as monkeys, apes, rodents, or insects. Communism would also start being referred to as a disease that needed to be cured.

Biological explanations of dehumanization arose in the 1960s and 1970s. Biologists like E.O. Wilson described how social mammals were fiercely xenophobic, with little aggression within communities, but much directed at outsiders. Wilson said in his 1978 book, *On Human Nature*, “pseudospeciation [reduces] alien societies to the stature of inferior species, not fully human, who can be degraded without conscience.” Dehumanizing the enemy is thus a major way in which humans overcome our biological inhibitions against lethal aggression toward other humans.

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*“The dark secret behind human nature used to be the upsurge of the animal. . . . The threat to man, his availability to dehumanization, lay in his own animality. Now the danger is understood as residing in man’s ability to be turned into a machine.”*

—Susan Sontag,

“The Imagination of Disaster” (1965)

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Science fiction has always been uniquely positioned to examine the theme of dehumanization. In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), her portrayal of the monster’s inner life and his perceived subhuman status by others reflected both her own rejection from polite society for being a nonconformist, and how Enlightenment values were an emergent property of human reason.

The Future War genre that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century was rife with dehumanizing portrayals of German political figures, particularly of Kaiser Wilhelm. The “yellow peril” oeuvre of invasion fiction also became popular during this time, spurred by paranoia over the expansion of China and other Asian nations. A notorious example of this is the racist villain caricature, Doctor Fu Manchu, who appeared in multiple Sax Rohmer novels between 1913 and 1959, and who inspired countless racist imitations, including Ming the Merciless, the villain in Philip Francis Nowlan’s *Buck Rogers* stories.

Anxieties about losing one’s humanity and becoming a soulless cog, thanks to the industrial revolution, led to the creation of one of science fiction’s foundational allegories: the robot. The term was coined in the play *R.U.R.* (1920) by Czech writer Carel Capek, which depicted the labor struggles of artificial people who bring about the extinction of humanity. Robots, and other manufactured beings, soon became genre staples, with other notable early examples being Robot Maria in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), and later in the Golden Age robot stories by Isaac Asimov.

Of course, the ultimate non-human other is the alien. Since H.G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds* (1897), aliens have been a perfect canvas onto which we paint our contemporary anxieties. After World War II, saucer mania was in full swing, and science fiction cinema exploded, brimming with alien invasions of all kinds, including those of the body and mind. An important precursor to this sub-genre was John W. Campbell’s 1938 novella *Who Goes There?*, in which a shapeshifting alien recovered from the ice overtakes a small Antarctic research station by impersonating its personnel. It would be adapted for film in 1951 as *The Thing From Another World*. Robert Heinlein’s novel, *The Puppet Masters* (1951), is another example, which involved the invasion of Earth by aliens that used people as their puppets.

The writer and critic Susan Sontag was the first to imply that the monsters of 1950s science fiction films symbolize the threat of dehumanization. In her influential 1965 essay “The Imagination of Disaster,” she considered dehumanization to be the ultimate horror. Alien invaders were always portrayed as cold and zombie-like, with no personal characteristics. If they were successful they threatened to impose the same traits onto humanity. Being “taken over,” she argued, was a

new kind of morally simplified allegory about the depersonalization of modern life. It wasn't enough to be afraid of your own eventual death, but you also had to worry about the collective extinction of humanity as well.

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*Miles: No emotion? Then you have no feelings, only the instinct to survive. You can't love or be loved! Am I right?*

*Dr. Kaufmann: You say it as if it were terrible. Believe me, it isn't. You've been in love before. It didn't last. It never does. Love. Desire. Ambition. Faith. Without them, life is so simple, believe me."*

—*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*

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Before Walter Braden "Jack" Finney died, he had the distinction of having five of his seven novels and a slew of his short fiction adapted for the screen, both big and small. He also won a lifetime achievement award from the World Fantasy Convention in 1987. Yet, in large part because of his lifelong hatred of publicity, he never became a household name.

Finney got his start writing while working as a copywriter in a New York City ad agency, before he moved his family to the small Bay Area community of Mill Valley, California. In 1946, at age thirty-five, his short story, "The Widow's Walk," won an *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* contest, and a few years later he was selling fiction regularly. His stories were mostly science fiction to start, filled with characters escaping into idyllic pasts via time travel.

In 1954 Finney published a serialized novel in *Collier's Magazine* called *The Body Snatchers*, which followed Dr. Miles Bennell as he and his friends uncover the pod plot. The aliens arrive on Earth as interstellar seeds carried on solar winds. They use their power of biomimicry to make copies of any object they come across, converting the original to ash in the process. With humans, the duplication happens during sleep, but the copies aren't quite right, with a noticeable lack of emotion. The strategy of the pod people is survival above all, with the takeover of all life on Earth as their goal. Finney changed the ending when it was collected as a novel in 1955. In the serial, Miles is saved by the FBI, while the novel sees the invading force leave thanks to the resistance offered by Miles and his friends, who live happily ever after.

A plant invasion from outer space wasn't a new idea. Plant-based aliens blend the chain of being belief that plants are a lower form of life with the characterization of alien invaders as cold and emotionless. Plants, after all, lack the capacity to reason or feel in a comprehensible fashion. P. Schuyler Miller's 1931 short story "The Arrhenius Horror" concerned the invasion of Earth by spores from outer space, a plot he recycled in "Spawn" in 1939. Perhaps the most famous plant invasion tale was John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids* (1951), in which most of the population of Britain goes blind after a meteor shower, only to become fodder for carnivorous triffid plants, which are speculated to be the product of Russian scientists. *The Thing from Another World* even saw Campbell's alien reimaged as terrifying plant-based monster.

In the end, Finney's novel took a centrist stance, with Finney denying that there was any allegorical meaning in the story. "It was just an idea," he said of it in a rare 1995 interview with *The New York Times Magazine* shortly before his death. "[It wasn't a] Cold War novel, or a metaphor for anything. I wrote it to entertain its readers, nothing more." Despite this assertion, he created, with its paranoia and themes of infiltration and subversion, a perfect canvas for Americans to hang their anxieties on, and in 1951 there was a lot to be anxious about.

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*"In my practice I see how people have allowed their humanity to drain away . . . only it happens slowly instead of all at once. They didn't seem to mind. All of us,*

*a little bit. We harden our hearts . . . grow callous . . . only when we have to fight to stay human do we realize how precious it is."*

—Miles Bennell,  
*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*

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The 1950s were an exceedingly paranoid time in United States history. Both the USSR and Communist China were seen as the biggest threats to the country's security. After the Soviets got the bomb in 1949, the war would enter its hottest phase, and the threat of nuclear annihilation felt like it could come at any moment. At the same time, there was a rise in both prosperity and a fearful kind of conformity, especially among the growing suburban enclaves around the United States. These were based on the belief that we'd better pull together and overcome our differences if we were going to survive—except the scope of this consensus was narrow, and anyone outside of it was labeled as a dangerous extremist.

The "Red Scare" during this time was meant to drum up the fear that Communism was infiltrating all walks of life, including Hollywood, which would soon find itself in one of the most damaging periods of its history. Hollywood's troubles stemmed from the work of Communist labor activists in the 1930s. Prior to World War II, Communism in the United States had grown in popularity thanks to the labor woes exacerbated by the Great Depression, discriminatory Jim Crow laws, and the rise of the Nazis and fascism abroad. Communism was anti-fascist, and pro labor, equality, justice, and civil rights. The creation of labor unions, with the help of Communist activists, for screenwriters, actors, directors, and crew immediately created tension between the workers and the studio heads, who faced higher operating costs and more accountability. Support for Communism plummeted, however, after the Soviets signed a non-aggression pact with the Nazis in 1939.

The House Committee on Un-American Activities was established in 1938, with the goal of investigating all anti-Americanism, but focused on left-wing extremism. The Dies Report was released in 1939 by the HUAC chairman, Representative Martin Dies., Jr., stating that Communism was pervasive in Hollywood, and hearings by the Committee started on the Communist influence in Hollywood in 1940. That same year, the Smith Act was passed, which made it illegal to advocate overthrowing any level of government, thus criminalizing being a member of any organization that espoused revolutionary ideas.

The HUAC started investigating Communists in Hollywood in October of 1947, with the subpoenaing of the "Hollywood Ten," a group of producers, directors, and screenwriters, who were questioned about the planting of Communist propaganda in American films. After the ten refused to answer questions, they were convicted of contempt of Congress, and were fired by their studios, who soon after began demanding loyalty oaths from their employees. The hearings turned up no evidence of Communist propaganda, but the damage was done. The head of RKO Pictures left the industry in disgust, selling the studio to Howard Hughes, who fired most of the employees, and settled an anti-trust suit that led to the collapse of the studio system that had governed Hollywood since its beginnings.

In 1950 Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy became the face of the Red Scare after he claimed to have the names of 205 Communists within the State Department. That same year saw the publication of *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Film and Television*, which named 151 entertainment professionals with suspected ties to Communism. Soon after, all named, and a host of others, were blacklisted by the studios. The renewal of HUAC's investigations in 1951 saw hundreds more blacklisted. It established the precedent that individuals could only clear themselves by "naming names" of other Communist party members known to them.

The chill from the blacklist in Hollywood, thankfully, began to thaw in 1960, as studios and directors ignored the blacklist and hired the people who'd formerly been blacklisted with full credit. The damage, however, would reverberate for decades more in the destruction of careers and grudges born.

Many of the films made between 1948 and 1960 are, in some way, about the blacklist. Films were either explicit anti-communist propaganda made to comply with an HUAC directive, or allegories offering disguised commentary on the evils of political repression and the abrogation of civil liberties. *High Noon* (1952), about a marshal who must choose to face a band of killers alone, or leave town, was direct commentary. Early in its production, its screenwriter, Carl Foreman, was called as an unfriendly witness who refused to name names. He was stripped of his producer credit, and abandoned by his associates. Foreman then wrote the scene where the marshal pleaded for help from the townspeople he'd served for years, only to be met with silence, was about his own experience having his friends turn their backs on him. "[It was] about Hollywood and no other place but Hollywood," Foreman said.

In science fiction, at least, the freedom to nakedly allegorize remained, in part because the genre wasn't taken seriously by critics. *It Came From Outer Space* (1953) was a direct response to contemporary Red-baiting practices, said its director Jack Arnold. "We could . . . get away with it because it was fantasy. On the face of it, they wouldn't relate it to the problems of the day—those who weren't keen enough intellectually and especially those who were running the studio."

It also helped that Communists, robots, and aliens all shared the same language of dehumanization, making it a genre ready-made for allegorization, whether anti-communist or otherwise. Many believed that Communist governments turned their citizens into robots, while the ability to feel emotion became a uniquely human trait within the genre. The film critic Danny Perry explains. "American schoolchildren of the fifties were taught that Communists had no feelings—especially concerning life and death—which is why, we were told, the Russians/Red Chinese would feel no qualms about going to war and losing much of their population. More than anything else I believe we kids were frightened of Communists because we were told they did not cry when people died."

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*"Look you fools, you're in danger! Can't you see?! They're after you! They're after all of us! Our wives, our children, everyone! They're here already! You're next!"*

—Miles Bunnell,

*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*

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The director Don Siegel, known best for his Clint Eastwood pictures like *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979), only made one science fiction film during his forty-five year career. His big break came after the collapse of the studios, when independent producer Walter Wagner tapped him to direct the liberally minded prison riot movie, *Riot in Cell Block 11* (1954), which proved to be a commercial and critical success.

Siegel was then approached by Wagner in January 1955, after Wagner had excitedly read the first installment of Finney's novel in *Collier's*, the rights to which he bought for seventy-five hundred dollars. Siegel approached the crime journalist and screenwriter Daniel Mainwaring, whom he'd collaborated with before, to write the script. A former hard-boiled mystery novelist, and someone with strong left-wing leanings, Mainwaring was no friend of the HUAC. They had a finished script soon after, one that instead focused on the darker aspects of Finney's story. Filming was done by April, but the release would be delayed until 1956, as squabbles between Wagner, Siegel, and the studio about the final cut ensued.

Siegel shot the movie with an eye for noir, with its stark lighting, long shadows, and existentialist themes. Siegel focused on the tone and performances to make it feel more like a significant drama picture, rather than relying on special effects, which was more common of the science fiction B-movies of the era. The project gave Siegel an opportunity to explore his own interest in the tension between an anti-hero's individuality and the pressure to conform.

While the movie is a largely faithful adaptation, there are notable differences between it and Finney's original story. The first is the frame, in which Miles convinces the doctors holding him to call in the military, cleaving closer to the centrist ending of Finney's serial, in which the FBI saves the day. The frame device, however, was the idea of the studio. Siegel and Mainwaring intended the movie to end after Miles discovers that his love, Becky, has been taken by the pods, and when he escapes the town to find help, he realizes the pods are spreading unchecked, and he offers his chilling warning that "You're next!" Siegel was deeply resentful of the studio interference, as the frame ruined his careful building of suspense and undercut the message that there was no hope against the rising tide of dangerous conformity.

The studio also pushed for the film's title, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Siegel, inspired by his own chronic insomnia, had pushed for it to be called *Sleep No More*, a callback to Hamlet's soliloquy on suicide, both to call attention to the fact that sleep was a human inevitability, but also that it was dangerous to turn a blind eye to the dangers of conformist thought. Siegel always maintained that *Body Snatchers* was meant to be anti-Conformist, not anti-communist "[Invasion] was about something and that's rare," he said in a 1976 interview. "People are pods. Many of my associates are certainly pods. They have no feelings. They exist, breathe, sleep. To be a pod means that you have no passion, no anger, the spark has left you."

It was because *Body Snatchers* used the already established language of dehumanization that was shared between anti-Communist propaganda and the portrayal of alien invaders in SF that many assumed the film was intended as a portrayal of the insidious spread of Communism within the United States. *Body Snatchers*, however, was about how the United States was in danger of becoming the exact thing it feared—a soulless nation of emotionless, lockstep robots—if we didn't force ourselves to stay awake and resist our tendency to become pods.