

## THE INVASION 6.5/10

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### Keeping the "Body Snatchers" franchise going

Novel by Jack Finney

Screenplay by Dave Kajganich

Directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel

Nicole Kidman ... Carol Bennell

Daniel Craig ... Ben Driscoll

Jeremy Northam ... Tucker Kaufman

Jackson Bond ... Oliver

Jeffrey Wright ... Dr. Stephen Galeano

Veronica Cartwright ... Wendy Lenk

*Yorish: All I am saying is that civilization crumbles whenever we need it most. In the right situation, we are all capable of the most terrible crimes. To imagine a world where this was not so, where every crisis did not result in new atrocities, where every newspaper is not full of war and violence. Well, this is to imagine a world where human beings cease to be human.*

*Carol: While I'll give you that we still retain some basic animal instincts, you have to admit we're not the same animal we were a few thousand years ago.*

*Yorish: True.*

*Carol: Read Piaget, Kohlberg or Maslow, Graves, Wilber, and you'll see that we're still evolving. Our consciousness is changing. Five hundred years ago, postmodern feminists didn't exist yet one sits right beside you today. And while that fact may not undo all of the terrible things that have been done in this world, at least it gives me reason to believe that one day, things may be different.*

Touché to the Russian ambassador (Roger Rees). American audiences may not respond well to conceptual dialog such as the above—even discounting the gratuitous 'postmodern feminist' reference—but Dr. Carol Bennell (Nicole Kidman) delivers the positive note on human nature with a flourish. And it's pertinent to the question of what it means to be human and whether, in fact, it's all that wonderful. Kudos to the German director Oliver Hirschbiegel (it appears this is his first English-speaking movie) who presents a taut psychological thriller with enough conversation to elicit hours of discussion of the fundamental issues.

Using first-rate actors, too. In particular, Daniel Craig—you know, the Brit stud tapped for the latest James Bond incarnations—as Carol's love interest and go-to medical-research doctor Ben Driscoll, shows some elevated word skills, especially in a confrontational scene we'll discuss in a minute. He handles his subordinate character with enthusiasm and the exact-right amount of thespian cool. Other supporting actors are equally convincing in their (mostly Washington D.C. professional-class) roles. And the setting, on location in DC, provides a realistic, propelling framework for the story.

But let's back up and discuss the Invasion of the Body Snatchers tradition, which began with the iconic 1956 Kevin McCarthy/Dana Wynter movie that has always been difficult for critics to classify. Is it a horror movie or is it a science-fiction movie?[1] (The confusion continues, with most movie promoters opting for the former packaging; the DVD for this 2007 Invasion film includes three previews of wretched ghoulish slasher fare.) It is basically good science fiction, i.e. a 'what if' of the unknown that causes one to consider universals—ideas that affect all humankind.

The second flick in the Body Snatchers legacy was made in 1978, starring Leonard Nimoy and Donald Sutherland, with the same title as the original... but nowhere near the impact. (And I think I remember something in the 1990s that had a Body Snatchers' theme, set in San Francisco—if anyone knows, please contact me via the CC forum.) As we learn from the Special Features on The Invasion: the 1956 movie cast the invaders in the mold of the "world communist menace," the 1978 film was more toward the view that the menacing aliens were cultists (like the Jonestown people), and one can look at this 2007 incarnation as revealing our fears of bioterrorism.

The action in *The Invasion* begins immediately with the breakup of a reentering Space Shuttle spreading a 200-mile wide path of debris from Texas to the Mid-Atlantic states. The people are warned not to touch or move any of this space trash, and the authorities attempt to quarantine it all. But obviously it's too big an area to lock down, so all the redneck hillbillies who don't know any better gather up souvenirs right and left. Carol's husband Tucker Kaufman (Jeremy Northam) is a higher-level muckety muck at either NASA or Center for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta—I forget which—and in the course of his duties comes into contact with a hell-on-wheels space microbe. Sorry to give that little part of the plot away, but virtually everyone has seen or knows how the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* transpires, and this movie conforms to the general outline of the original.

So Tucker becomes infected, as do a large number of ordinary folks in parallel. Tucker is the divorced father of Carol's precious child Oliver (Jackson Bond), and through a series of events Tucker comes to DC to make nice with Carol and the boy, whom he has only sent birthday and Christmas cards for four years. In the meantime, Carol is seeing her clients, and beginning to witness strange behavior, etc. Everything is fairly predictable for this kind of mass infection movie. Carol and Ben have access to some special diagnostic facilities, in particular, their colleague with all the laboratory diagnostic widgets, Dr. Galeano—this dude, Jeffrey Wright, is turning into quite the character actor, and IMHO carries off quite convincingly the stretch his role ultimately requires.

Well, that's about it, really. The technology and effects are sophisticated, the etiology of the disease believable. The story moves quickly; that's one thing about the original *Body Snatchers* movie, you get to the point fast. The most philosophically meaningful scene is where Carol, as she's trying to round up her precious boy and get the flock outa there, horrifyingly learns that Ben has been turned. She's pointing a Glock at him and some other newbie zombies, and he says:

"Carol, look at yourself. Is this who you are? Is this who you want to be? We were wrong to fight them. Remember our trip to Colorado? Remember the Aspen grove? Recall how peaceful it was. Remember what you said to me? You wondered how it would be if people could live like these trees... completely connected with each other, in harmony, as one."

"You're not Ben!"

"I'm not Ben, I'm more than Ben. Have you read the newspapers, have you watched the television? Do you know what is happening here, a world without war, without poverty, without murder, without rape, a world without suffering? Because in our world no one can hurt each other or exploit each other or try to destroy each other. Because in our world there is no other. You know it's right, Carol, that deep down you know that fighting us is fighting for all the wrong things."

Well, sure I just gave away that Ben turns, but remember in the original where the beautiful damsel (Dana Wynter, hubba hubba) falls asleep.... Scary stuff. What's interesting in my reaction to *The Invasion*, however, is after reading Eckhart Tolle and turning into a bit of a Buddhist here in my old age, the notion of being at one with Nature is appealing. I do draw the line, however, at melding my mind with people, particularly hillbillies and evil Republicans... hence the horror. But seriously, the movie is better than okay, and actually quite exciting, but mostly thought provoking.

[1] Science fiction has always flustered conventional-idea people, because conventional-idea people have by-and-large diminished themes of the individual vs. the collective, man against the state—i.e. they've tended to side with the collective. The best sci-fi has an ideology that is alien to collectivism, it's almost universally individualistic and libertarian, with a healthy dose of can-do heroism, and man over a hostile Nature. Bad sci-fi on the other hand treats man as a helpless plaything of nature: consider how many films smite the character who dares to diddle with the Big Mama.

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