

THEY LIVE

Libertarian cult classic or just not so good? __ 6/10

Short Story Ray Nelson

Screenplay by John Carpenter

Directed by John Carpenter

Roddy Piper ... Nada

Keith David ... Frank

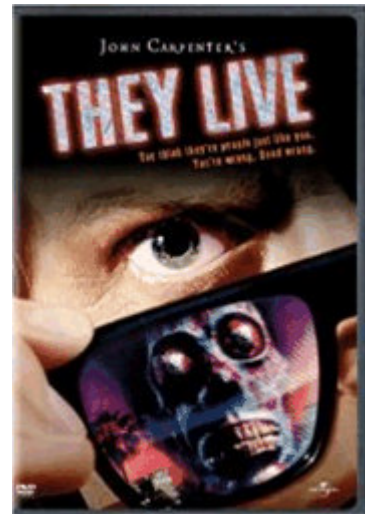
Meg Foster ... Holly

George 'Buck' Flower ... Drifter

Peter Jason ... Gilbert

Raymond St. Jacques ... Street Preacher

Jason Robards III ... Family Man



Frank: I've walked a white line my entire life, I'm not about to screw that up.

Nada: White line's in the middle of the road, that's the worst place to drive.

Nada: Brother, life's a bitch... and she's back in heat.

Nada: I have come here to chew bubblegum and kick ass... and I'm all out of bubblegum.

Nada: Woo. It's like a drug. Wearing these glasses gets you high, but you come down hard.

Nada: [seeing politician on TV for the first time (with his special sunglasses)] Ha, figures it'd be something like this.

Bearded Man: The poor and the underclass are growing. Racial justice and human rights are non-existent. They have created a repressive society and we are their unwitting accomplices.

Bearded Man: They are dismantling the sleeping middle class. More and more people are becoming poor. We are their cattle. We are being bred for slavery.

Street Preacher: Outside the limit of our sight, feeding off us, perched on top of us, from birth to death, are our owners! Our owners! They have us. They control us! They are our masters! Wake up! They're all about you! All around you!

All right, so you can see from the lines above three things: a) the dialog writers just graduated from grade school, b) when a person wears special sunglasses he sees which people—usually the politically powerful and socially influential—are actually aliens, and c) a social context for the aliens' motives and methods. They Live is a 1988 John Carpenter—director of mainly schmaltzy or fright films, the more notable starring Kurt Russell (Escape from New York, Starman, Escape from LA)—movie, in which Carpenter uncharacteristically tries for a "sorta maybe big political idea."

I say "tries" loosely because—judging from the screenplay, the casting, the acting, and the directing—no one associated with this movie seems to have any deep intellectual contact with the shred of a political theme conveyed in the plot. That theme, sketchily, is collectivism vs. individualism... where the collectivism serves alien masters and is maintained by driving more and more individual humans to a) either become aliens

themselves, or to b) follow orders, accept their impoverishment, and not make any trouble. Mainly b).

The parallels between our own world and this cheesy imagined one are striking, and that's what appealed to me... that and the fact that I have likened the ruling elites to alien space lizards who use mind control via tiers of "pod people" to deceive individual humans as to the fundamental truths of the social system. The truth in our case, I feel, is expressed in several of my columns—but primarily in my book, *The Sacred Nonaggression Principle*:

1. humans in general believe in the nonaggression principle (NaP), but
2. large numbers of humans are limited in the practice of the NaP by their limbic system (psycho-biology), and hence succumb to
3. a small number of humans with defective psychology who have no biological affinity for the NaP and seek to exist parasitically by dominating (deceptively) creative, productive humans

I even refer to the defective psychological condition of the dominators as the Alien Space Lizard (ASL) Syndrome.

But back to the movie. I suppose that any collectivism vs. individualism movie—from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* to 1984 or *The Matrix*—manifests similar qualities. The sad thing is that in reality, when collectivism rules, we have only (defective) humans to blame. Our collectivist rulers are aliens only symbolically; though I would not be surprised if the defect that afflicts them were biological and those who are addicted to power may someday be shown to have been a distinct subspecies of homo sapien.

In the movies, for dramatic impact no doubt, the writers seem to need to posit alien creatures at some location in the "collectivist-ruler" political metaphor. So *They Live* comes along and shows the rulers to be ape-like humanoids who can only be seen in their true appearance by humans with a cheap pair of nerdy wraparound sunglasses. But what's interesting is the rulers otherwise look normal and are universally members of the conventional ruling class in our human society: judges, politicians, cops, corporate climbers, society women, and so on.

Real people who work for a living (and minorities) don't seem to get the invitation.

As I recall, the process for turning a high-level human ruler into his corresponding high-level camouflaged ape person is not well described, but it probably occurs via proximity to some alien-supplied zapping equipment. However, unlike *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, only certain kinds of people are destined to become aliens... and this is interesting: the sorts of people who already enjoy controlling the rest of us. For them—as one might expect for our all-too-real Goldman Sachs/Federal Reserve/Rothschild Bank-and-derivative humanoids—the transformation must be positively delightful.

So in the movie, the pseudohumanoids have been at it a while, and the economy sucks, real people like Nada[1] (Roddy Piper) can't get work, but there is a resistance movement forming. It just so happens the movement is centered in a poor-person church—I think we're supposed to be in East LA—directly adjacent to the tent city where Nada, a drifter from Denver lands. How convenient. So many characteristics of the movie strain credulity; I particularly get a kick out of Nada, who's supposed to be a starving drifter, taking off his flannel shirt, in one of the early scenes, for no apparent reason, to reveal a 20-hour-per-week, Charles Atlas physique. Yeah, right.

The writers try to furnish Nada with the platitude level of a Billy Jack, but fall short. The overall effect is Nada is sentimentally inclined, in a surly way, toward working people, minorities, priests, and dames. In order to get work, Nada plays nice to Frank (Keith David)[2], who is married and has kids living right there in tent city. But Frank would rather this strange single guy, Nada, just stay away. Exit to one of many scenes where Nada is strolling by himself with his body-builder physique, his long surfer-boy wannabe hair, and his Denver flannel shirt (here in LA) ... not going anywhere special—like the soup kitchen or the unemployment office—just ambling about. Then, "Whoa, what's that?" This is a recurring theme.

Nada is always stumbling onto things. Like the sunglasses. He picks them up, then a few aimless strolling scenes later, he says to himself, "Hey, let's see what they look like on me." The plot is as taut as warm taffy. So he puts on the shades, and notices, "Hey, that guy over there looks like a bug-eyed ape-skeleton person...." The guy he sees is usually a real dipwad, too, either berating someone or pontificating about himself, more often than not a dumb cop with poor hand-to-hand combat skills.

After another strolling scene or two, Nada begins also to notice that TV commercials, billboards, and printed material one sees around town are delivering subliminal messages... which he can see with the glasses. For example, the ads may say (in a black-and-white world with big black-and-white letters) OBEY, CONFORM, MARRY AND REPRODUCE, CONSUME, WATCH TELEVISION, and SLEEP. Candidly, these messages are the best part of the movie for me, because they primitively mimic the media reality I'm so familiar with, especially TV.

Just think about all the sports broadcasts, the zillions of ads for beer and starchy fillers, automobiles, petroleum products, boner pills, with half-naked babes, men and women in separate bathtubs holding hands, perfect golf shots, and so on, forever. We're constantly swamped by a sea of images with unrelenting musical accompaniment that associate a perception with a pleasant emotion and a firm purchase recommendation... the overall effect of which is DON'T WORRY, BE HAPPY, BUY STUFF, WE'RE "PEOPLE" CORPORATIONS, WE'RE FROM THE GOVERNMENT AND WE'RE HERE TO HELP, EVERYTHING IS OKAY, SUPPORT THE TROOPS WHO WE SEND TO INVADE COUNTRIES WITHOUT REASON AND KILL AND MAIM THOUSANDS OF INNOCENT PEOPLE FOR JESUS, BE A MAN AND TRUST US. Send money.

In enlightening the mind-control process, *They Live* has a lot of unrealized potential. Unfortunately, no one in any leading capacity knew how to develop that potential. Mainly because very few modern movie writers or directors are comfortable dealing with "big political ideas." It's like asking a Valley Girl how the Federal Reserve works. We don't know because we don't really care.

Even so, and with all the unintentionally comic elements, I find *They Live* refreshingly unique. When they legalize weed, I plan to rent the movie again, take a couple of hits, lean back and roll on the floor laughing my ass off. It puts *Monster a-Go-Go* to shame.

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[1] How's that for a canted name, Nada (which means "nothing" in Spanish)? It might also stand for Roddy Piper's acting... at least in this movie. To be fair, 50% of his lines have not gone through puberty.

[2] Keith David has been in, like, 200 parts, many of them on TV, playing the second-or-third-string "black man," though some have been memorable roles. And he, unlike our friend Roddy Piper, is obviously a good actor. I hope the agent who stuck him in this turkey had to go back to washing cars.

2009 November 05

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