

**FILMS FOR OUR TIME:
USING "INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS"
TO TEACH RECENT AMERICAN HISTORY**

Neil Liss
and
Cameron White
University of Houston

Introduction

What if a teacher could demonstrate that one single motif ties the last fifty years of United States history together in a way that students would find enjoyable, contemplative, provocative, and accessible? Of the various ways to teach postwar America, many focus on the "organic" links among the dropping of the atomic bomb, the Cold War, Vietnam, 1960s cultural politicizations, 1970s recovery, 1980s Reaganism and contemporary multiculturalism, and 1990s globalization movements. This periodization works well, focusing students' minds on the exponential experiences that factor into history. Getting them to see links such as these helps them to see their own futures as exigent.¹ Perhaps they might then take some caution in their paths. But what if we could get students to see links between cause and effect, between past and present, even with respect to the march of time, without the need to move forward through history as the only way to study history? What better way to do this than by using the powerful medium of film?

Because many traditional educators abhor the intrusion of films into the classroom, teachers often use them reluctantly at best. When they do, often neither they nor the students understand the role this medium can play. Instead, they show films as a respite from "real" learning, as a vehicle for time maintenance (or passage), and/or for a gestalt effect: They hope that students will remember the subject simply because they saw a film about it. Thus, film plays little critical cognitive role in the classroom, and teachers who see their roles as progenitors of cognitive development rarely use the medium.

Yet students do respond to film as a teaching tool, even if only because of its rarity and its difference, its presence and its absence. Film possesses a magical power to naturalize events for students in a way that books or lectures cannot; if something is on film, in their minds it happened. Building on this, part of presenting history in film concerns how to use film critically, cognitively, and specifically as a resource devoted to fostering higher-level thinking. Teachers can encourage students to look at film as metaphor, as distortion, and as a resource. Taking students to the raw facts, leading them through a discussion on implications of events, and exposing them to the art of

¹Warren Hope, "It's Time to Transform Social Studies Teaching," *The Social Studies*, 87 (July/August 1996), 149-151.

criticism all pave the way for a lesson in film that does not simply become a "free day."²

Film can become the crux of learning, but not all of the learning. Just as educators have more than one method to revive students' minds, so too with film. Using it in conjunction with articles, essays, research, role-playing, and writing exercises expands the students' conception of learning (and keeps them from deadly stasis). The key is finding the balance of these discourses, while still making the film the centerpiece of the lesson. Shifting into context, the students begin to see links between thoughts and words, images and perceptions, even perhaps entertainment and news. The last fifty years of American history has seen a revelatory explosion in this last dialectic. While many films involve themes that are important in postwar America, others affirm the idea of history as separate events, no matter how successful those organic links are made and no matter how committed one might be to teaching history as a collection of disburals. But what if one film brought many of the distinct themes of this era together?

One film, or rather a series of films, achieves this objective. "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" premiered in 1958, was remade under the same title in 1978, and then was redone as "The Body Snatchers" in 1993. Each remake retains the central plot and underlying fear of the "pod people," but establishes its own distinct subtext, providing a nice reflection of its historical era. Because these films duplicate fears but imbue them with differing historical significance, students get both an historical imperative and an art history lesson. In a classroom setting we can offer students the opportunity to find the difference themselves, let them dissect the films, and maybe help make their knowledge more than stale facts. Maybe they can connect for themselves changes in American culture by analyzing a recurring theme. Students might need some prepping, however, to understand exactly what they should look for in the films.

The 1950s

For the 1950s, several books provide a comprehensive and engaging read. While some texts are bereft of the full extent of the "Red Scare," they often do cover the content enough to give students basic background. For better detail, add Eric Goldman's *The Crucial Decade and After: 1945-1960* (1971) or David Halberstam's opus, *The 50s* (1993). The History Channel has made Halberstam's book into a documentary. Asking students to compare these sources primes them for analysis, the very thing they will need when watching the film.

Start with excerpts from Goldman's *The Crucial Decade and After*. Telling the postwar history of America in narrative style, Goldman personalizes the actors and

²Wendy Wilson and Gerald Herman, *American History on the Screen* (Portland, ME: J. Weston Walch), 1994.

their actions. Select the sections of the book that best provide students information for understanding the era. The book links many of the important events from 1945 (V-J Day) to 1960 in a chronology, but filling in gaps might be necessary for better understanding. Goldman takes particular care to depict Joe McCarthy as an atavistic opportunist and his era itself as a moral struggle for the New Deal idealists and the free enterprise conservatives.

Since history teachers know their students' prior knowledge, rate, and capability of comprehension, and their retention and effort, teachers should select the sections most appropriate for their classes. In order to get students to access this information after their reading, ask them higher-level questions about events. The best questions such as "Why?" and "What would you do?" require students to get inside the psychology of the character or the event. These encourage students actually to act as historians by doing something with their learning besides just memorizing. Open-ended questions such as these also allow students to answer without fearing that they must come up with the "right" answer. This freedom to present their ideas or opinions involves them as learners and, implicitly, as historians. Discussing the readings, either in conjunction with these questions or in lieu of them, can also encourage students to use their knowledge and to defend their theories. Because the postwar panic inspired by communism derived from such a broad picture, using these question-and-answer sessions can help to gauge the knowledge base of the students. Including more sections from the texts might be necessary to develop better background knowledge.

A teacher might also judiciously use the Halberstam book and/or the History Channel rendition of *The '50s* to focus on McCarthy. The episode on "Tail Gunner Joe" is tailored specifically to show the brutality of McCarthy's methods. Interviews with analysts in the State Department whose careers he affected or with reporters who watched his rise to prominence give the era a distinctly personal "you are there" touch. Again, asking students to put themselves in each participant's head, including McCarthy's, can make this activity more meaningful. Sample questions might include: (1) Why do you think McCarthy did what he did? (2) Was he right to do what he did? Why or why not? (3) Was he a hero or a villain? Why? A teacher might also have students compare the Goldman book and the Halberstam video: (1) Which do you find more explicit? (2) Which do you find more believable? (3) Which do you find more persuasive? (4) Why? These questions start students to analyzing what is present but unsaid. They ask students to discern answers for themselves instead of repeating what someone has told them. Teachers can even get students to grade each others' analyses as a way of making them more responsible in defending their own views. Peer assessment, using student-negotiated criteria, rubrics, and small-group discussions, are powerful techniques.

Showing the 1950's version of "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" should be the next step. This probably should be done over two to three class periods depending on time. The film could also be made available outside of class as it is readily available

at video stores and libraries. Demonstrating students' ability to pick out the subtext should be central to this lesson. Exposing students to reviews of the film beforehand would encourage them to simply adapt these ideas without having to assemble them. A better strategy would be to ask them to prepare a critical analysis of the film "as a document of the history of the decade." Possible questions for the analysis might include: (1) What themes, from those we have studied recently, do you see in the film? Give examples. (2) What is the message of the film? (3) How does this message relate to the history we have studied? (4) How effective is the film in sending this message? (5) What group in society do the protagonists represent? Explain. (6) Who or what do the "pod people" represent? Explain. (7) Who or what do the "pods" represent? Explain. (8) Is there a difference between the two? Explain. (9) Who or what does the lead character Miles represent? Explain.

The idea is to get students to begin viewing film beyond its basic low-level escapist form. The first version of "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" can be viewed as a commentary on the Red Scare or perhaps even an allegory for the times and possibly even the future. Since teachers know their students best, they should personalize questioning. The only caveat is to not allow students to be too literal with the film. It is important for them to avoid using the overt narrative as the "message" in that it only reinforces their penchant for seeing things as depicted, and not searching for the engine or message behind the depiction. Get them to dig deeper into their interpretive skills to prove their points. After this assignment, a discussion of student ideas with the entire class should occur. Open up the dialogue to let others comment on and debate the merits of various interpretations. It is also vital to remind students that every theory is valid as long as it is accompanied by persuasive reasoning. The 1950s component of this project could easily take a week depending on connections and extensions.

The 1970s

The 1970s are more diffuse to cover, perhaps because the country is still relatively close to and possibly still recovering from this decade. Although, if the recent rage in retro clothes means anything, our facility for deconstructing the decade is growing sharper—first the clothes, then the culture, then the politics, then deconstructing the deconstruction. To start, take on cultural politics instead of governmental intrusion; focus on the 1970s version of "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" as a critique of creeping conformity (also a mainstay of McCarthyism) that the "me-decade" thrust at the American people and its ambient lure of self-help, self-interest, self-improvement, and self-selfism.

A teacher could start with Michael Lewis's account of the mad world of Wall Street, *Liar's Poker* (1989). Using a first-person style, Lewis chronicles the obliviousness of the decade from inside the culture that created a multibillion dollar breakdown in American financial institutions leading to the 1980s savings and loan scandal. *Liar's Poker* jumps into the heart of the decade's acculturation of greed and

reactionism. Produced by the same type of reactionary methods and ideals that made the 1950s a response to New Deal reforms of the 1930s, the 1970s perhaps created a generation so intent on denying their own causations that this generation sublimated the radicalization of the 1960s into a fixation on accumulation.

Michael Lewis gives as good a depiction of these times in *Liar's Poker*. His life as a Wall Street player shows the personalities of the decade evenhandedly; they are neither glamorized nor criticized. This style, like Goldman's, keeps the reading light, swift, and enjoyable, especially for students who have come to regard history as stale, dry, boring, lifeless, and needless. As with the Goldman book, use selections that capture student attention. The section on bond traders and one on Lewis's own socialization into this world are particularly demonstrative, precisely because each refuses to make apologies for the era or its participants. Lewis simply shows what it was like to live and work in that era. This is the kind of reading students need to see how history and learning are part of life itself.

A teacher might also focus student attention on the end of the Vietnam War, the end of the civil rights decade, the beginning of the environmental movement, and the start of globalization. For another text to develop some of this background knowledge, use *Cadillac Desert* by Marc Reisner (1986). This book shows President Jimmy Carter's attempts to reclaim the country's mind set on continuing 1960s neoliberalism. Much more specific than other sources cited so far, *Cadillac Desert* goes after the folly of America's water policy with its lack of planning and its contradictions regarding conservation and water quality. Reisner's chapter on Carter gives a great description of how liberalism got smashed in the person of the Democratic president. This rather lengthy chapter chronicles the idealism Carter had at the outset of his tenure. Readers can watch how the forces of reactionary conservatism bled the pragmatism out of him.

Add Tom Wolfe's *In Our Time* (1980), a witty and weighty attack on 1970s culturalism. The book comes overstuffed for many students, but choose the essay that best fulfills the class's goals. For a social view of the decade, Wolfe makes a terrific source. (In fact, his writings can be found throughout issues of *Rolling Stone* magazine, the leading source of cultural consciousness from the 1970s.) Use Wolfe's words to counterbalance Lewis's financial mind set or Reisner's political criticisms and to show how creeping conformity caused people to go to extremes to fit their own personalities in this era. Choose just those selections that show students the best examples of 1970s thinking and get them to compare the styles and messages of these three writers. Possible questions include: (1) How do the events in one book seem to represent the themes in the other? (2) Which source is more editorialized? Why? (3) How do you determine fact and opinion in reading secondary historical accounts? (4) How are fact and opinion important in historical interpretation?

In order to focus on understanding the people of this era, ask students to "create" a project such as a role play, debate, newscast, simulation, newspaper, or

poster. (Working in groups on this project tends to move students more efficiently to finish the task, with the teacher present as a guiding resource.) Encourage students to include economic, political, and social issues in their projects. Now that they have been exposed to the idea of subtext—from discussions of the 1958 version of the film—remind them to incorporate some message into their projects that shows what they themselves think about the era. This technique will not only give them a creative outlet, but it will also show them that entertainment should provide commentary on the subject it demonstrates. This should prepare them to pick out from the 1978 version what the filmmakers were trying to say about the decade.

Before showing the film, ask students to write a review from their two favorite movies. Have other students assess the reviews, including persuasiveness, writing (grammar, spelling, etc.), and creativity (e.g. How enjoyable did you find this review?). Then, require them to bring in at least three different reviews of these films from any sources. Have them compare these professional reviews with their own and critique themselves with questions such as: (1) What makes the reviews different? (2) Which is most persuasive? Why? (3) Which is the best (their definition)? Why? (4) How would they improve these reviews?

Now you can show students the 1978 version of "Invasion of the Body Snatchers," which can be used in two to three class periods, depending on time constraints or it could be viewed outside of class. Ask students to pick out the trends, issues, and fears they have just read about, but also ask them to compare and contrast this version of the film with the first. Some questions for them to consider: (1) How is the central character depicted? (2) How different are each central character's reactions to the "pod people?" (3) What do the "pod people" represent in each film? (4) How is each film evocative of the era? (5) Which version delivers its message most clearly? How? (6) Why did the second film change? (7) What effect did the changes have on its message? (8) How do these changes show changes in society? Be specific. The 1970s component of this project could easily take two weeks (especially with the group projects and film comparisons), depending on connections and extensions.

The 1990s

In preparing for the last film, titled "The Body Snatchers," prompt students to make lists of important historical events from their lifetimes. Take them to the library to research important dates and events that mark important stages in their life histories. Emphasizing cultural and social events might make the transition to this era more palpable if only because most students have a greater sense of trends than they do politics. But try to focus their minds on the major issues that they feel strongly about that emerged in the 1990s, such as environmentalism, multiculturalism, the soaring economy, or even education-based issues (standardized tests, social promotion, uniforms, violence).

Readings on contemporary society from *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, *Wired*, *Mondo*, or even *Time* and *Newsweek* would help place recent events into a quasi-historical context. This process could help students see even their own era as integral to shaping history and the world's ideological make-up. It at least enables students to make connections between the present and the past with issues that are relevant to them. While students engage in this research, hold a discussion with them about how they get their information, how they express their opinions, and how they would compare their era with the other two they have just studied. Possible discussion questions include: (1) What are the similarities? (2) What are the differences? (3) How would you show the differences? (4) What would you focus on to show how things have changed from one era to the next? (5) Have the changes been for the good or the bad? Give examples. (6) How would you show this?

Michael Foucault stressed the inability of one age to survey its own time (what he called its "archive").³ Call it the philosophical uncertainty principle. It is still necessary, however, to help students understand that they be critical thinking beings to develop into critical and active participants in society. They might be cynical, apathetic, and unmotivated, but they do interact with the forces of culture and society. Use this section of the course to engage students in a discussion about what it means to be a part of the world around them. As a short-term research project, suggest that students begin collecting readings about their culture, the era that they think best depicts who they are, what it means to them. Give them wide latitude to interpret their times as broadly, specifically, and personally as they need. Possible choices for student projects include a journal or portfolio with a collection of five to ten articles, images, readings, music/television/movie reviews, art, or whatever they believe adequately shows in the public sphere what it means to live in this age. Once these are due, create a museum-like display, with students as curators of their era. Invite other classes, parents, teachers, friends, and community members to come and view the students' projects. And invite the guests to respond to particular exhibits with notes, message, or letters. This could even be made into a history fair demonstration.

Afterward, get the students to share the responses they received. Hold a town hall role play among students about each other's work. Generate a general synopsis for what their views are on this era, reminding them that everyone who came to see their work, every classmate, everybody alive, is also part of their "archive" and has an interpretation of their world just as the students do, and create an ongoing list of adjectives, images, or notions. Instead of bringing in outside readings, ask students to choose several images or views from their classmates to write about. Possible questions include: (1) Why are there so many different views? (2) What are some

³Thomas Popkewitz and Marie Brennan, editors, *Foucault's Challenge: Discourse, Knowledge, and Power in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press), 1998.

similarities? (3) Do you agree with some views of one student but disagree with others of their views? (4) Why is that?

Once students are cognizant as to their generation's impact in and on history, show the most recent film version. This film can also be shown over two to three class periods or can be made available outside of class. Again, allow them to write about the film in empirical terms and then in comparison to the others. It is important to continue the writing exercises from earlier and to include questions that get the students to comment on the archives they have created. Also use questions the students might have brought to you about the three films and their meanings. Focus students on comparing the films' version of their lives with their own versions of their lives. Students might be tired of the image or they might be emboldened by the varying texts the film exposes. A final project might be for small groups to create a script for a new version of the film, complete with a subtext they think best exemplifies the tensions and fears of their contemporary society. Another possibility is to ask students to create a general popular culture project on film, including how and how accurately films comment on their era. Encourage students to be skeptical and critical. This can be used as closure or summation that analyzes the way society depicts history and how this depiction is consumed. This section of the unit can also take one to two weeks. Students might understand with a unit such as this—when forced to “play” historians—that history is simply myth, reconstituted from the personal opinions of the author to be accepted as truth by the readers (or viewers in this lesson).

Conclusion

The more the students write, the more they learn, because they are challenged to comprehend the material in a way that allows them to make their own connections and contextualizations. Writing about films helps them to see everything they experience in the world as potential for a critique. Once they make the connection to how their views on something as arbitrary as film are as applicable to their views on the world itself, then perhaps they will take a more critical, less knee-jerk and cynical approach to life.⁴ Films allow students to see art as more than a commercial exercise. They will be consumers all their lives; maybe with a little push, they will become circumspect consumers. And perhaps they will become more “tuned in” citizens.

Traditionalists focusing on information and facts as history knowledge might well question such a unit. The purpose of this unit is to give students a chance to analyze history not as a dry and dusty allotment of facts and dates, but as an ongoing analysis and critique of historical eras. Students' appreciation for this might not arrive until later, perhaps much later, and many might personally swear off movies again if they think you have to approach them reverently. But this lesson gives them a chance

⁴Henry Giroux, *Disturbing Pleasures* (New York: Routledge), 1994.

to see that everything around them is in some way a reaction to, and a dialogue with, the world. They too have that responsibility. Meanwhile, they get to watch a film for meaningful learning.

Film Synopses

“Invasion of the Body Snatchers” (1956)—directed by Don Siegel

Dr. Miles Bennel returns to his small town practice to find several of his patients suffering the paranoid delusion that friends or relatives are imposters. He is skeptical at first, especially when the alleged doppelgangers are able to answer detailed questions about their victim’s life. He is eventually persuaded that something odd has happened, and determines to find out what. He discovers that the town has been invaded by alien pods that replicate humans and take possession of their identities. It is up to the doctor to spread the word of the warning, battling the alien invasion at the risk of his own life.

“Invasion of the Body Snatchers” (1978)—directed by Philip Kaufman

This remake moves the setting for the invasion from a small town to San Francisco. The movie starts as Matthew Bennell notices that several of his friends complain that close relatives are in some way different. When questioned later, they themselves seem changed as they deny everything or make excuses. As the invaders increase in number, they become more open about their goals. Bennell, who by now has witnessed an attempted “replacement,” realizes that he and his friends must escape and warn the world or suffer the same fate.

“Body Snatchers” (1993)—directed by Abel Ferrara

A family moves for the summer to a military base where soldiers are behaving strangely. Many suggest it is a toxic spill that must be dealt with. Steve Malone doesn’t know what to make of this at first. As more and more unusual events occur, evidence mounts that more sinister things are really happening. Pods seem to take over people’s bodies as they sleep and emotionless copies are the result. Family strife and attempts to make sense of what truly is happening are the results, with human survival quickly becoming the goal.

For Further Reference:

Loewen, James. *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. New York: Touchstone. 1995.