

USING *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS* (1956)
TO TEACH COMMUNISM AND CONFORMITY IN 1950s AMERICA

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By

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ABSTRACT

Since its release in 1956, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* has played an important role in both popular culture and historians' study of the 1950s. The film was not meant to be a warning against a communist takeover of the United States, nor was it meant as a warning against Joseph McCarthy's communist hunts. Rather, director Don Siegel wanted the movie to be a warning against the conformity he saw spreading through the United States in the 1950s as a result of growing postwar materialism, and the fear of communism and atomic annihilation. However, almost immediately after the film's release, film critics and historians, following the lead of Italian film critic Ernesto G. Laura, seized the film's plot of alien takeover and claimed it was an anti-communist movie. Other critics took an opposing stance, declaring that the movie's message was one of anti-McCarthyism. Since McCarthyism was a virulently anti-communist phenomenon, the main question about this film is how can two completely opposite interpretations be drawn from the same movie? This question must be answered by examining the society in which the film was created.

This paper and lesson plan are designed to help high school students and teachers in a United States history class discover the connections and similarities between communism and McCarthyism, and why Americans in the 1950s feared both. By watching the original film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and writing a movie review and position paper, students interpret the movie for themselves and support their argument with specific examples from the movie. Students also experience how historians can reach opposite conclusions about one piece of evidence. This lesson plan is effective because by watching and interpreting the film, students are able to make and analyze connections between key aspects of American society and politics in the 1950s.

At first glance, the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956)¹ looks like a quintessential B-movie: the grainy black and white film portrays one man's fight against pods from outer space which take over human bodies, leaving behind emotionless shells. However, the movie's political implications have been the source of debate since the year after its release. Some critics and historians argue that the movie is an attack on McCarthyism; others contend it attacks communism; still others believe the movie attacks the lack of individualism during the 1950s. Whatever the interpretation, it is obvious that the movie attacks conformity, whether it is communist conformity or McCarthyist conformity. Interpretations of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* follow no discernible historiographic path, yet there are many standard political interpretations and even more novel social interpretations.

The 1950s is one of the most interesting eras for high school American history teachers to teach. It can also be one of the most engaging for students. Elvis Presley, hula-hoops, James Dean, suburbs, and cars with giant tailfins are just a few aspects of pop culture that represented major social changes and ideals. The 1950s were also a time of great political and social fear, mainly because of the perceived threat Americans felt from communism. Senator Joseph McCarthy was one of the most prominent men in America from 1950 to 1954 because he mirrored and fueled America's fear of communism with his attacks on thousands of Americans with supposedly communist leanings. That *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* can be interpreted as both an attack on McCarthyism and as an attack on communism makes it an excellent resource for teaching high school students about the ambiguities and contradictions of the 1950s. Before delving into interpretations of the movie's hidden themes, it is necessary first to understand the movie's plot and the era which begat the movie.

¹ *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, prod. Walter Wanger and dir. Don Siegel, 80 min., Republic Pictures Home Video, 1956, videocassette.

The storyline unfolds as a flashback seen through the eyes of Dr. Miles Bennell (Kevin McCarthy), who when the movie opens is suspected of being psychotic. Miles tells a hospital psychiatrist how, upon his return to his hometown of Santa Mira, California from a medical conference, some of his patients claim that their relatives are not really their relatives—but they cannot explain their claims. Deciding his patients are merely hysterical, he begins to rekindle his romantic interest for an old flame, divorcée Becky Driscoll (Dana Wynter). Miles takes Becky out to dinner, but before they are served, they are interrupted by a phone call from Miles' friend Jack (King Donovan), who asks them to come over to his house right away. Upon arriving, Miles and Becky discover a half-formed human body with no fingerprints (“It’s like the first impression that’s stamped on a coin. It isn’t finished,” Jack says), which they eventually figure out is becoming an exact replica of Jack himself, down to an open cut on his hand. Miles directs Jack and his wife Teddie (Carolyn Jones) to stay up with the body all night to see what happens; he then takes Becky home and heads to his own house for the night. When the body opens its eyes in the middle of the night, Jack and Teddie become hysterical and run to tell Miles. Concerned for Becky’s safety in light of this strange development, Miles races to her house and in her basement discovers another body, this one taking on Becky’s likeness. Unable to wake her, Miles carries Becky to his house and calls the police and a psychiatrist friend. Miles, Becky, Jack and Teddie believe the psychiatrist’s weak theory that they all hallucinated, and for a few days, everything seems to get back to normal. Miles’ patients recover from their hysteria, no more strange bodies appear, and the two couples decide to quit worrying.

Life rolls pleasantly along until a barbeque at which Miles, Becky, Jack and Theodora discover leaf-like pods inside Miles’ greenhouse that burst open to reveal unfinished duplicates of the four people. The four deduce that when a person is asleep, the bodies inside the pods take

on his or her features and eventually replace the real body, which is then somehow destroyed. The duplicates are exact copies of the person, down to memories and idiosyncrasies, but there is one main difference: the duplicates do not feel emotion. They completely lack love, ambition, joy, faith, and all other emotions. Since they are emotionless, the new bodies are not really human; but since they have every other aspect of being human, the change is barely perceptible. When Miles attempts to telephone the F.B.I., he discovers the lines are dead, and more and more inhabitants of Santa Mira, including Jack and Teddie, are becoming pod people. Eventually everyone in town, except Miles and Becky, becomes a pod—and they all want to make sure Miles and Becky do not get out of town to warn the rest of the country. While running from the town, Miles and Becky stop to rest in the nearby mountains. Becky falls asleep, and when Miles tries to kiss her, he realizes her kisses lack emotion: she has become a pod! “Becky” reveals their location to the townspeople, and Miles frantically runs away until he reaches a busy highway. The townspeople do not follow him, for they realize no one outside the town will believe his story. Standing on the highway screaming at the passing cars, “You’re next! You’re next!” Miles is picked up by the police, who assume he is psychotic and take him to the hospital. The end of the movie shows the psychiatrist about to conclude Miles is indeed insane when he hears of a wreck in which a cross-country supply truck has overturned, spilling hundreds of strange pods onto the road. The doctor realizes Miles is telling the truth and calls the F.B.I.

The opening prologue and epilogue that frame the story were added by a film studio (Allied Artist) nervous about what the originally proposed dismal ending would do to profits. Originally, the film was to end with Miles pointing at the camera and screaming, “You’re next!” This ending was thought to be too negative, hence the framing of the story by scenes in the hospital. Director Don Siegel’s original intentions were in fact to end the movie in a disturbing

and challenging light to make a point about the dangers of societal conformity. However, Siegel agreed to the studio's decision to frame the movie in order to see the movie released.²

The basic plot of *Body Snatchers* is only skin deep. Man and woman fall in love in the midst of chaos, run from menacing aliens, and try desperately to save themselves and the rest of the world. There is, however, one difference that sets this movie apart from typical science fiction films: in *Body Snatchers*, the aliens are menacing because they look and act exactly like humans. Lacking only emotion, it is easy for them to blend in and claim more human victims. Further, unlike many science fiction movies, historians and movie critics since the late 1950s have analyzed possible political and social messages imbedded in the basic plot. However, were it not for the Cold War's influence on American society in the 1950s—fear, conformity, anti-communist sentiment—it is questionable whether historians would suggest such interpretations. When analyzing social and political ideas in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, one must necessarily examine 1950s American culture.

The 1950s³ brought America millions of babies, television sets, teenage culture, suburbs, increasing technology, fear of atomic annihilation, and paranoia. Emerging victorious from the Second World War as the world's only superpower, America flourished economically, politically, and socially. The United States government was influential in every corner of the globe; the economy was booming; suburban living was available and affordable; and Americans had more money to spend on new technologies like televisions and washing machines, and more

² Arthur Le Gracy, "Invasion of the Body Snatchers: A Metaphor for the Fifties," *Literature Film Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (1978): 280; Tim Dirks, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)*, 1996-2000. Available [Online]: <<http://www.filmsite.org/inva.html>> [15 October 2001]; "Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956), 1999. Available [Online]: <<http://www.geocities.com/hollywood/Bungalow/1204/bodyssnat.htm>> [19 November 2001].

³ This paper agrees with the interpretation that the "1950s" were the era from 1952 and Dwight D. Eisenhower's election to the presidency to 1961 when John F. Kennedy was inaugurated. See Michael Schaller, Virginia Scharff, and Robert D. Schulzinger, *Present Tense: The United States Since 1945*, 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 92.

free time to enjoy these conveniences, than ever before. Life was good. At least, on the surface, life was good. In reality, an undercurrent of upheaval ran beneath the surface of the “Happy Days” of the 1950s.⁴

Americans in the fifties were concerned with what they perceived to be threats to American society, mainly communism from the Soviet Union and the dawning of massive social changes at home. Teenagers in the fifties listened to rock n’ roll and questioned their parents’ values, while African-Americans sparked the modern civil rights movement by challenging segregation and confronting white resistance to their efforts. Black activists achieved a major victory in 1954 when the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that separate but equal facilities for African-Americans were unconstitutional, which led to conflict between blacks and whites. White middle-class suburbanites who had experienced the helplessness of the Great Depression and the uncertainty of the Second World War succumbed to the pleasures of being financially comfortable by conforming to society’s norm.⁵ Returning veterans settled down with their wives in newly built suburbs. Suburban families were predictably similar: a father who provided and a mother who cooked, cleaned, and played chauffeur to two or more children. Middle-class Americans wanted security, stability, and comfort; it was easier not to be overly concerned with serious issues, as they had been forced to be during the Depression and the war.⁶ Americans wanted to blend in, to enjoy life, as they had not been able to do for so many years. Yet not all Americans were able to enjoy life. Almost one-fourth of the American

⁴ Michael Schaller, Virginia Scharff, and Robert D. Schulzinger, *Present Tense: The United States Since 1945*, 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 92.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 92-93.

⁶ Beth Bailey, “Rebels Without a Cause? Teenagers in the 1950s,” in *Major Problems in American History Since 1945*, ed. Robert Griffith and Paula Baker, 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 138. Originally published in *History Today* 40 (February 1990): 25-31.

population, especially minorities, the elderly, and those living in rural areas, lived at or below the poverty line. These Americans struggled to survive in a time of national prosperity.⁷ The myth of happy suburban life was marred by the struggle of the poor, minorities, and teenagers trying to break away from traditional family morals.

Americans not only feared challenges from within their society, but also from Soviet communist infiltration of their society. Peter McGrath calls fifties popular culture “profoundly paranoid,” with many Americans looking over their shoulders at “the most familiar faces,”⁸ fearing people they knew or looked up to were secretly communists. Through television, magazines, movies, and literature, Americans were inundated with the idea that communism was a threat to the lifestyle they had worked so hard to build. The news media and Senator Joseph McCarthy’s communist hunts suggested communists blended into the fabric of everyday American life, eager to achieve a communist takeover by betraying not only their friends and family, but also American life and ideals. Pointing to Alger Hiss, who was in 1950 convicted of lying about communist affiliations, and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed as Soviet spies in 1953, the media consistently reminded Americans that communists were everywhere and were seeking to subvert American life. According to David M. White and Richard Averson, the resulting suspicion compelled much of the American public to attempt to “prove his [or her] 100% Americanism,” which meant further conformity: supporting the government’s actions, accepting society in general and one’s life in particular, and maintaining strong patriotism and Christian morals.⁹ Staunch anti-communism was a necessary part of this complete Americanism,

⁷ Schaller, et al., *Present Tense*, 112.

⁸ Peter McGrath, “A Nuclear Timewarp,” *New Statesman & Society* 5 (13 November 1992): v.

⁹ McGrath, “A Nuclear Timewarp,” v; and David M. White and Richard Averson, *The Celluloid Weapon: Social Comment in the American Film* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 123.

for more than domestic social changes, Americans saw communism as the most imminent threat to the American dream.

Americans had been suspicious of communism since the 1917 Russian Revolution. Indeed, the Red Scare of the 1920s foreshadowed America's stringent anti-communism during the Cold War. Communism directly contradicted everything Americans believed in: individuality, competition, and private commerce. The Soviet Union was oppressive and brutal, silencing citizens who dared to speak out against government, while in America, freedom of speech was and is a highly prized constitutional right. Even during the Second World War, when the United States and the Soviet Union were joined together in a "shotgun marriage" to fight Nazi aggression, most Americans never fully trusted Russians.¹⁰ Americans viewed Soviet demands and communism in the same light they had viewed National Socialism and Adolf Hitler's demands for territory that eventually led to the Second World War.¹¹ By 1946, Winston Churchill said the iron curtain between the capitalist West and the communist East was firmly in place. Throughout the next forty years, the rift between the United States and the Soviet Union would only widen, over nuclear weapons, technology, and what Americans perceived as deliberate attempts to spread communism throughout the world. Americans grew to fear the "domino theory," which stated that if one country fell to communism, neighboring countries would follow until communism reached the shores of the United States. The result was widespread anti-communist sentiment in American politics and society.

One segment of popular culture that embraced anti-communism was the film industry. One of the most obvious catalysts for the dozens of anti-communist films Hollywood churned

¹⁰ Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1996*, 8th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 2, 6.

¹¹ Les Adler, "The Politics of Culture," in *The Specter: Original Essays on the Cold War and the Origins of McCarthyism*, ed. Robert Griffith and Athan Theoharis (New York: Franklin Watts, 1974), 244.

out in the 1950s was its reaction to the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), which charged that many films encouraged subversion of the U.S. government by inserting communist propaganda into dialogue, setting, or characters. While for the most part such accusations were untrue, Hollywood in the 1950s responded with new tactics, such as overtly anti-communist films, and new genres, including science fiction, to increase its profits, for the movie industry faced numerous challenges after World War II.¹²

The biggest threat to the film industry after World War II was the advent of television. For while weekly movie attendance jumped from five million to ninety million in 1946,¹³ new technology was calling to Americans who were itching to spend money they had saved during the war. Many Americans spent their money on televisions, and households with televisions jumped from one million in 1949 to over 46 million in 1960.¹⁴ In 1949, weekly movie attendance declined by twenty million viewers a week. Americans could stay at home and watch television for free, rather than taking the trouble to leave home and pay to see a film. Even Hollywood's attempts to woo audiences—with epics such as *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and new technology such as 3-D—failed to raise attendance to 1946 numbers.¹⁵ Thus, in the early 1950s, television replaced movies as the most popular form of mass media in America.

¹² Russell E. Shain, "Hollywood's Cold War," *Journal of Popular Film* 3 (1974): 337; Daniel J. Leab, "The Hollywood Feature Film as Cold Warrior," *OAH Newsletter* 13, no. 2 (1985): 13-15.

¹³ Shain, "Hollywood's Cold War," 334; Adler, "Politics of Culture," 249; Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-1960* (New York: Anchor Press, 1980), 340; and Shain, "Hollywood's Cold War," 334.

¹⁴ Roland Marchand, "Visions of Classlessness," in *Major Problems in American History Since 1945*, ed. Robert Griffith and Paula Baker, 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 145. Originally published as "Visions of Classlessness, Quests for Dominion: American Popular Culture," in *Reshaping America: Society and Institutions, 1945-1960*, ed. Robert H. Bremner and Gary W. Richard (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1982).

¹⁵ Shain, "Hollywood's Cold War," 337; and Terry Christensen, *Reel Politics: American Political Movies from "Birth of a Nation" to "Platoon"* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 85.

Hollywood executives had to deal with more than falling profits after World War II. In 1947, the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals invited the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) to investigate possible communist ideology present in Hollywood and its films. The Motion Picture Alliance pointed to three particularly pro-Russian movies made during the war, when the United States and the Soviet Union were allies. *Mission to Moscow* (1943), *The North Star* (1943), and *Song of Russia* (1944) all portrayed the Soviet Union and its citizens in a positive light, possibly with the intention of creating public support for an ally of whom many Americans remained suspicious. It did not matter to HUAC that these films were made while the Soviet Union was an American ally; their mere existence suggested communists had infiltrated Hollywood, which was completely unacceptable to Americans who loved their country. HUAC member John Rankin (D-Miss.) claimed Hollywood was the headquarters for communist conspirators, calling it “the greatest hotbed of subversive activities in the United States,” while California State Senator Jack Tenney charged that 1946 Hollywood labor disputes were communist-inspired. According to HUAC chairman J. Parnell Thomas, Hollywood acted as “a Red propaganda center,” seeking to infiltrate the minds and lives of the American public with communist ideas.¹⁶

The result of this suspicion was the first round of HUAC hearings in 1947. According to Terry Christensen, “Hollywood really was a center of liberal and even communist political activity,” albeit not a hugely successful one, for the communist party in Hollywood was dying out even before the 1947 hearings.¹⁷ As a result, the 1947 hearings were hardly successful. While the “unfriendly” witnesses—filmmakers who refused to discuss their political beliefs (the

¹⁶ Rankin and Thomas quoted in Nora Sayre, *Running Time: Films of the Cold War* (New York: Dial Press, 1982), 17; Tenney quoted in Adler, “Politics of Culture,” 245.

¹⁷ Christensen, *Reel Politics*, 86-87.

infamous “Hollywood Ten”)—were blacklisted from further work in Hollywood, none of the cooperative witnesses could give any specific evidence of communist film propaganda that posed a threat to American national security.¹⁸

In 1951, HUAC returned to Hollywood with the knowledge that Hollywood leftists had raised money for radical causes: for example, to help refugees who fled fascist countries. HUAC was now less concerned with propaganda, and more concerned with Hollywood witnesses who would expose their fellow-workers as communists or leftists. Historian Nora Sayre claims the committee was after publicity, for now many of the hearings were televised. The blacklist was expanded, and a “graylist” was created. Unlike those in Hollywood who were blacklisted, those on the graylist were not automatically fired from their jobs, though these individuals might have difficulty in gaining promotions or be given meaningless assignments.¹⁹ Thus, the 1951 hearings advanced the fervent anti-communist sentiment that began in Hollywood in 1947.

Immediately after the 1947 HUAC hearings, Hollywood began churning out anti-communist films. Throughout the hearings, several HUAC members had hinted that the movie industry, in order to redeem itself, should produce anti-communist films. Between 1948 and 1951, the industry had already produced twelve distinctly anti-communist films, including *The Iron Curtain* (1948) and *The Red Menace* (1949), both of which dealt with communist subversion of capitalist countries.²⁰ In 1948, *Variety* magazine reported that anti-communism “[has] become the hottest [theme] to hit the screen this year.” Between 1948 and 1962, 104

¹⁸ Andrew Dowdy, *The Films of the Fifties: The American State of Mind* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1973), 17; John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 243; and Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 129.

¹⁹ Sayre, *Running Time*, 21.

²⁰ Ceplair and Englund, *Inquisition in Hollywood*, 340; Dowdy, *Films of the Fifties*, 12.

anti-communist films were produced, not including science fiction movies such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, which Sayre claims would make the number closer to 200.²¹

Many fifties science fiction films contained subtle (and sometimes overt) anti-communist themes. At the beginning of the Cold War, the science fiction genre was just emerging. Nevertheless, science fiction films were some of the most successful anti-communist films of the fifties, perhaps because they entertained as they enlightened. Peter McGrath says there was often a subtext in science fiction films: messages, usually political, that were never articulated, but that the audience knew were intended for them to absorb. Film critic Terry Christensen agrees: “In an era when direct political commentary was dangerous, science fiction offered a rich source of allegory,” usually representing a communist takeover of America.²² Films such as *Them!* (1954), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), and *The Thing* (1951) support Nora Sayre’s idea that science fiction movies reinforced Americans’ notion that they must defend themselves and their country from invaders. And not just any invaders: communist invaders.²³

Initially, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) was meant to have no specific political implications, whether on communism or McCarthyism—these interpretations came about after the film’s release. In an interview with Peter Bogdanovich, Siegel commented, “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.”²⁴ Al LaValley says Siegel was referring mainly to the producers and studios against whom he had to struggle to show his creativity through films. The studio-mandated prologue and epilogue in *Body Snatchers* illustrates this

²¹ *Variety* quoted in Ceplair and Englund, *Inquisition in Hollywood*, 340; Shain, “Hollywood’s Cold War,” 334; Sayre, *Running Time*, 21.

²² Belton, *American Cinema*, 246; McGrath, “A Nuclear Timewarp,” v; Christensen, *Reel Politics*, 100.

²³ Sayre, *Running Time*, 191, 201.

²⁴ Peter Bogdanovich, *Who the Devil Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 741.

struggle.²⁵ In another interview, this one with Guy Braucourt, Siegel elaborated on his goal for the film: not as an allegory warning about the spread of totalitarian governments like the Soviet Union's, but as an attack on "a general state of mind found in everyday life...to show how a very ordinary state of mind could start out in a very quiet small town and spread to a whole country."²⁶ *Body Snatchers* producer Walter Wanger made similar comments about the film's meaning:

Most of us fear conformity. Wisdom and reason based on education will allow us to have individual judgment and character...I have just finished a picture based on this subject of conformity. The film shows how easy it is for people to be taken over and to lose their souls if they are not alert and determined in their character to be free, otherwise they will become mere vegetables—just pods.²⁷

Thus, the film, under the guise of science fiction, was originally meant as a warning against conformity.

As often happens, the original intent did not stop other interpretations from being drawn from the film. The most common interpretation of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is that it is an attack on communism. Historians and film critics, examining 1950s anti-communist sentiment, have concluded the film is a condemnation of communism's gospel of conformity, in which everyone is equal and social classes cease to exist. Stuart Samuels points out that by February 1956, when *Body Snatchers* was released, Joseph Stalin was dead, the Korean War was over, the Cold War had thawed somewhat, and Joseph McCarthy's hunts for communists had ended.

²⁵ Al LaValley, "Invasion of the Body Snatchers: Politics, Psychology, Sociology," in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, ed. Al LaValley, vol. 14 of Rutgers Films in Print Series (London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 9.

²⁶ Guy Braucourt, "Interview with Don Siegel," in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, ed. Al LaValley, vol. 14 of Rutgers Films in Print Series (London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 159. Originally published in *Image et Son* (April 1970): 80-84.

²⁷ Walter Wanger, "Excerpts from a Speech to the American Booksellers Convention," in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, ed. Al LaValley, vol. 14 of Rutgers Films in Print Series (London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 146.

Yet in spite of what would seem to be an ebbing of communist fear, Samuels claims that fear of communism was still active, for “the fact that the enemy [communists] appeared less threatening only meant that he was better at concealing his subversion,”²⁸ exactly like the pods in *Body Snatchers*. That the pod people in the film look normal from the outside, but are intent on spreading the pods across the city, suggests a conspiracy theory, much like Americans suspected communists of running in the United States.²⁹ In fact, about the anti-communist interpretation of the film, director Don Siegel, who all along claimed that *Body Snatchers* was *not* an anti-communist film, said, “I’ve no objection to it at all...I think it arises quite naturally.”³⁰ Indeed, read almost any review or commentary on the original movie written after 1957, and it is sure to mention communism.

Reviews are, however, just as likely to mention McCarthyism. Joseph McCarthy’s hunts for communists struck fear into the hearts of Americans in the 1950s, and also cost many people their jobs. The result was that everyone tried to blend in, be “100% American,” and never say anything to make anyone question their loyalty to the United States,³¹ just as the pod people in *Body Snatchers* all are the same emotionless, unquestioning figures. Just as McCarthy’s witch hunts for communists caused conformity, so the pods in the film are agents of conformity. One reviewer suggests that writers and directors, angry at McCarthy and the HUAC hearings, may have wanted to portray such conformists in a negative light, and he wonders if Siegel was such a

²⁸ Stuart Samuels, “The Age of Conspiracy and Conformity: *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956),” in *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image*, ed. John E. O’Connor and Martin A. Jackson (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1979), 208.

²⁹ Samuels, “The Age of Conspiracy and Conformity,” 209.

³⁰ Guy Braucourt, “Interview with Don Siegel,” 159. Originally published in *Image et Son* (April 1970): 80-84.

³¹ White and Averson, *The Celluloid Weapon*, 123.

director.³² Another reviewer asks, “[Are the pods] representative of the HUAC, attempting to regiment us all into mindless followers?”³³ While there is less specific commentary on the film as an attack on McCarthyism than there is on the film as an attack on communism, many reviews mention McCarthyism in passing.

There is no one correct interpretation of the film. Director Don Siegel purposefully left the movie open to interpretation. Even though Michael Rogin claims Siegel made the movie “in protest against McCarthyite pressure for conformity,”³⁴ David Seed makes the more accurate claim that the only message Siegel and Wanger wanted to portray was one of anti-conformity (resistance to established systems), regardless of other conclusions drawn from the film.³⁵ Seed’s interpretation is in fact the stated goal of both director and producer. Siegel once remarked that viewers and historians who see references to McCarthyism and communist totalitarianism were “inescapable” because of the nature of the film.³⁶ Yet his goal was not to prove a point about such political conformity. It was to warn Americans about the danger of conformity in general.

Aside from these two main interpretations, the film has been viewed in numerous other ways. Ron Rosenbaum condemns 1950s indistinguishable suburban life. According to

³² “It Came from the 1950’s: Brainwashing,” n.d. Available [Online]: <<http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Bungalow/1204/bodysnat.htm>> [19 November 2001].

³³ Jerry Holt, “It’s Halloween: How About Something Really Scary?” 2001. Available [Online]: <http://www.12gauge.com/film_10_scary.html> [2 December 2001].

³⁴ David Cohen, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, 4 October 1999. Available [Online]: <<http://archive.nandotimes.com/ourcentury/cnremember/story/body/0,3343,66102-104670-308087-0-nandotimes,00.html>> [2 December 2001]; quote in Michael Rogin, “Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies,” *Representations* 0, no. 6 (Spring 1984): 29.

³⁵ David Seed, “Alien Invasions by Body Snatchers and Related Creatures,” in *Modern Gothic*, ed. Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith (New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 166.

³⁶ Bogdanovich, *Who the Devil Made It*, 742.

Rosenbaum, the movie was mainly about “the horror of being in the ‘burbs. About neighbors whose lives had so lost their individual distinctiveness they could be taken over by alien vegetable pods—and *no one would know the difference* [emphasis Rosenbaum’s].” He goes on to compare the pods in *Body Snatchers* with suburbs like Levittown, which he claims suck the individuality out of their inhabitants just as the pods do.³⁷ In a review of the 1993 remake (*Body Snatchers*, directed by Abel Ferrara), Richard Sheib says the original film, set in typical small town America, was about the collapse of “America’s cosy [*sic*] family self-image.”³⁸ Tim Dirks mentions that the movie can be viewed as warning against “the spread of an unknown malignancy or virulent germ” (possibly caused by an atomic bomb).³⁹ Indeed, one popular Cold War metaphor claimed that communism was a virus and communist agents were the germs that spread the virus.⁴⁰

Several sources discuss the movie in terms of psychological, rather than political, effects: the loss of emotion after humans are taken over by the pods. Stuart M. Kaminsky says the loss of emotion is equal to emotional death, and suggests that the pods represent potential “creatures” lurking within people, but he does not specify what those creatures may be.⁴¹ Similarly, Chris Steinbrunner and Burt Goldblatt focus on the emotionless aspect of pod-takeover, never

³⁷ Ron Rosenbaum, “The House that Levitt Built,” *Esquire* 100 (December 1983); quoted in David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Fawcet Columbine, 1993), 140.

³⁸ Richard Sheib, “‘Body Snatchers’: the Invasion Continues,” 1994. Available [Online]: <<http://members.fortunecity.com/roogulator/sf/body snatchers93.htm>> [2 December 2001].

³⁹ Dirks, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)*, 1996-2000. Available [Online]: <<http://www.filmsite.org/inva.html>> [15 October 2001].

⁴⁰ Seed, “Alien Invasions,” 162.

⁴¹ Stuart M. Kaminsky, “Kaminsky on *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*,” in *Hal in the Classroom: Science Fiction Films*, ed. Ralph J. Amelio, 82-89 (Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum Publishing, 1974), 130.

addressing any political meaning the film may have.⁴² In doing so, they could be more accurate than they know, for Jack Finney, author of the original series story *The Body Snatchers* (1954)⁴³ never intended the book to be an allegory. In the 1990s, Finney wrote:

It is not true that my book, *The Bodysnatchers* [*sic*] was intended as an allegory of any kind. When I wrote this book I was not thinking of McCarthy, or communism...or of anything but writing pure entertainment...I don't write allegories.⁴⁴

Therefore, it was not the story itself, but the film's historical context that critics and historians have applied to the movie and analyzed in terms of political and social allegory.

In fact, when *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was released in February 1956, so few major magazines and newspapers reviewed it that finding an original review is a challenge. The main reason for this is that it was a B-movie with a low budget and informal distribution. Further, science fiction was a relatively new genre, and a disparaged genre at that. Many people believed that science fiction films were intended only for teenagers. The result of this lack of national attention was that the 1956-1957 *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* lists not a single review of the film in all of the media it indexes.⁴⁵

Yet the movie was reviewed in local newspapers and Hollywood journals. Based on these reviews, few of which mention subtle themes like conformity and communism, one wonders if viewers in the 1950s knew they were watching a movie meant to attack conformity, or whether they went to the theatre solely for entertainment. Did viewers think of the movie as a

⁴² Chris Steinbrunner and Burt Goldblatt, *Cinema of the Fantastic* (New York: Sunday Review Press, 1972).

⁴³ Jack Finney, "The Body Snatchers," *Collier's Magazine*, 10 December 1954; published by Dell Books in 1955 as a book by the same name.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Seed, "Alien Invasions," 161.

⁴⁵ Al LaValley, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, ed. Al LaValley, vol. 14 of Rutgers Films in Print Series (London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 161.

warning against communism, against McCarthyism, or against social conformity? Due to the lack of major reviews and reactions from the public, we must rely on the few available reviews for this information. Newspapers and journals such as the *Los Angeles Examiner*, *Weekly Variety*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, and *Boxoffice*, make no mention of any underlying themes, whether about conformity, communism, or McCarthyism.⁴⁶ One paper, the *London Daily Film Reviewer*, briefly mentioned the theme of conformity in a review on 23 August 1956: “Its [the film’s] explicit warning of the ever-present danger of losing our own humanity and turning into a passionless automation with the mere outward semblance of a human being.”⁴⁷ None of these reviews mention an underlying political or social theme.

The first recognized political interpretation of the film came in 1957 when Italian film critic Ernesto G. Laura claimed that *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was a parable about American fear of a Soviet invasion. Laura wrote:

Considering the state of public opinion in the United States today, from the recent wave of McCarthyism to the fear of a third World War, it is natural to see the pods as standing for the idea of communism which gradually takes possession of a normal person, leaving him outwardly unchanged but transformed within.⁴⁸

With this, Laura set off what Al LaValley calls the most prominent interpretation of the film,⁴⁹ as well as an avalanche of political and social interpretations that are still controversial with historians and film reviewers.

⁴⁶ All reviews found in Al LaValley, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, ed. Al LaValley, vol. 14 of Rutgers Films in Print Series (London: Rutgers University Press, 1989): Sara Hamilton, *Los Angeles Examiner*, 1 March 1956, section 2 page 6 [LaValley 164]; *Weekly Variety*, 29 February 1956, page 112 [LaValley 165]; Jack Moffitt, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 16 February 1956 [LaValley 166]; *Boxoffice*, 25 February 1956 [LaValley 167].

⁴⁷ Taken from Al LaValley, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, ed. Al LaValley, vol. 14 of Rutgers Films in Print Series (London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 168.

⁴⁸ Ernesto G. Laura, “*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*,” in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, ed. Al LaValley, vol. 14 of Rutgers Films in Print Series (London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 182. Originally published in *Bianco e Nero* 18, no. 12 (1957): 69-71.

⁴⁹ Al LaValley, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, 170.

There is no historiographic trend in interpretations of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. While the two main interpretations are that the movie attacks communism and that it attacks McCarthyism, there is no evidence that historians and film critics have leaned more toward one interpretation than the other in different eras. For the most part, historians critique both interpretations, and film reviewers are likely to mention both, at least in passing. Because of lack of evidence in movie reviews and audience reactions, it is nearly impossible to measure if ordinary Americans in the 1950s saw this movie as a political allegory. It is, however, possible to say that unlike later commentary, many newspapers and journals that reviewed the movie (which were few) rarely commented on the overt theme of conformity, much less other hidden political themes. One thing is certain: whatever other interpretations have come from it, the movie was never intended to be a political allegory of any kind, whether addressing the communist threat or the spread of McCarthyism. Rather, it was intended as a warning against conformity; as a plea for Americans to think for themselves; and as an attack on the passionless, complacent American society of the 1950s.

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Lesson Plan: Using *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) to Teach
Communism and Conformity in 1950s America

Time Frame:

This lesson plan is intended to take approximately four 50-minute class periods, depending on the amount of class questions and discussion. It could be included in a full-length unit on America in the 1950s in a high school American History class. It could also be used in a Sociology or Psychology class in a unit on mass hysteria.

Objectives:

1. Students will identify realistic characteristics of communism and/or McCarthyism by analyzing the 1956 movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.
2. Students will gain experience in film analysis, including that of characterization, plot, setting, and theme.
3. Students will practice basic writing skills and creativity by writing a movie review from the perspective of a 1950s movie reviewer.
4. Students will practice persuasive writing by writing a position paper based on their interpretation of the movie.
5. Students will verbally explain their interpretations of the movie through class discussion.
6. Students will explain how historians can reach different conclusions from the same source.

Anticipatory Set:

Students should have an understanding of the beginning of the Cold War, why the United States and the Soviet Union were enemies after World War II, and why the United States feared and hated communism. Students should particularly understand Americans' fear of the domino theory. Students should also know what conformity is, and should have a basic idea of American culture in the 1950s, especially in regards to conformity.

Ask the entire class to stand and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Then ask students the purpose of the Pledge. Has the Pledge always been as we now know it? If students say yes, say no they are incorrect, but leave the issue open. If they say no, ask them what has been changed. Few, if any, will answer correctly. Next ask a student to get out a piece of paper money and another to get out a coin. What words do these have in common? (Looking for "In God We Trust") Have these words always been on money? Thinking about this, what words do students think were most recently added to the Pledge of Allegiance?

Explain to students that the words "In God We Trust" were first printed on paper money in 1957 (have been on coins since the Civil War), and that the words "Under God" were added to the Pledge in 1954. What is it about the 1950s that could have inspired adding these phrases to American culture? (Examples include fear of atomic annihilation, religious fervor after World War II, and fear of godless communism)

Lesson Activities:

Day 1

1. Using a traditional direct instruction format, briefly review characteristics of communism that Americans feared and hated (for example, atheistic, lack of competition and free enterprise, classless society, government control of society, and few civil liberties), and how Americans countered these ideas (including “In God We Trust,” church attendance, supporting government, and civil liberties). Next explain the concept of McCarthyism, including history of Joseph McCarthy, why he was able to gain so much attention, the effects of McCarthyism, and McCarthy’s downfall.
2. Explain that both communism, which Americans after World War II feared, and McCarthyism, which many Americans believed was a valid claim, are both types of conformity. Students can help create a T-chart on the board comparing communism and McCarthyism (see example in Appendix A), taking turns coming up to the board. Students at their desks should copy down the chart. This is very important, as it will be where most students make the connection between contradictions and irony in 1950s America: fear of communism led to support for McCarthy, but McCarthyism had some of the same effects on America, such as conformity and fear of speaking one’s mind, that Americans thought communism had on the Soviet Union.
3. Hand out the paper assignment and scoring guide (Appendices B and C). Students should read it silently, and then the teacher should read and explain the assignment to the class as a whole. Take time to field questions about the paper (there are sure to be plenty) to ensure that all students understand the assignment. Be sure to emphasize the due date; for this project, students had four days (a weekend and two school days) in which to write their papers. More time can be allowed as the teacher sees fit (this step can also be done on day two if time on day one does not permit).

Day 2

1. Hand out the sheet on which students are to take notes about the movie (Appendix D). Explain the basic plot and characters of the movie (see Appendix E; the teacher may want to have students take brief notes on the sheet to which they can refer during the movie if they get confused). Explain that history is not static; rather, it changes as society changes and new documents and ideas are discovered and suggested. Since 1956, there have been two main interpretations of the movie: that the pods represent communists and that they represent McCarthyists. It is the students’ job to decide which interpretation they think is more convincing. Answer any questions students have.
2. Show part of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). The movie is 80 minutes long, so the class should be able to get about halfway through on this day.

Day 3

1. Show the rest of the movie in class. When it is over (there should be a few minutes left at the end of class), tell students to come to class tomorrow with their notes and be prepared to discuss the movie and their interpretations.

Day 4

1. Set up the class for discussion; a circle is best if classroom setup and number of students permits. If possible, sit in the circle to moderate the discussion. Start discussion by asking a student to give a brief explanation of the plot to make sure that all students can be sure they understand what happened.
2. Ask questions about each section of the movie review: did the students like the movie? Were the setting and plot effective? (see Appendix F for more discussion questions)
3. Next, take a poll to see how many students plan to write their position paper stating that the movie was an attack on communism, and how many plan to state that the movie was an attack on McCarthyism. Ask individual students for *specific examples* from the movie that support their interpretation, and make sure they can explain *why* these examples support their interpretation. This should be the bulk of the assignment, so push students to fully explain their reasoning and examples.
4. If time permits, review the requirements for the movie review and position paper and restate when the paper is due, answering any final questions (on this day, the discussion lasted approximately half an hour, so be prepared to have some extra time at the end of class).

Assessment/Individual Activity:

After learning about McCarthyism and watching and discussing the movie, each student should complete both a movie review and position paper to demonstrate their understanding of the topic. The assignment will be scored according to the accompanying scoring guide. See Appendices B and C for actual assignment sheet and scoring guide.

*Part 1: Movie Review

It is February 1956, and you are reviewing the new movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* [I chose this newspaper because of the school's location. This may be changed to any newspaper]. This is your first movie review, and you are anxious to impress your boss with a great review!

*Part 2: Position Paper

You decide to impress your boss at the *Post-Dispatch* and include a position paper along with your review. If he likes the paper, you could be promoted to assistant editor and given a huge raise. This paper is your OPINION backed up by SPECIFIC EVIDENCE from the film. You should decide whether YOU think the movie attacks communism OR McCarthyism. Then, using your notes from the film, write a paper defending your position.

*You will turn both parts in, and the notes you took while watching the movie, as one assignment. See attached scoring guide for points.

Closure:

To close this lesson on the day of the class discussion about the movie, ask students the following questions:

Why is it ironic that so many Americans who feared communism supported McCarthy?

How are communism and McCarthyism both types of conformity?

What are some ways you conform today? Clothes, music, activities? Do you think any ways that you or others conform is ridiculous?

Even though we think it is ridiculous today, can you see how scary communism would have been to Americans in the 1950s?

Appendix A: Sample T-Chart on Communism and McCarthyism

Communism	McCarthyism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Civil liberties not protected *No individuality (classless society) *People should work together for good of society *Fear of domino theory: country after country falls to communism *Government controls industry and society *Some fear government power and control *Fear of government means accept all gov't decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Fear of accusation suppresses free speech *Fear of accusation suppresses individuality *McCarthy wants people to turn in suspected communists (e.g., Hollywood Ten) *More and more people are accused of (not proven of) being communist *Fear of McCarthy means he (senator= government) controls much of society *Some fear McCarthy's power and control *Fear of McCarthy means keep to self; easier and less dangerous

Appendix B: Assignment Sheet

Movie Review and Position Paper: *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956)

They're after us! You're next! Dr. Miles Bennell screams these words of warning in the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*—but who are “they”? Are they the communists? Or are they the McCarthyists? This is the question you must answer!

Part 1: Movie Review

It is February 1956, and you are reviewing the new movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. This is your first movie review, and you are anxious to impress your boss with a great review so you'll get to write more!

Your review should have a distinct introduction, body, and conclusion and give *at least* the following information (in whatever order you wish):

- *A basic summary of the movie's plot and characters (but don't give away the ending!)
- *Your personal opinion of the movie: was it good, bad, or mediocre? Would you recommend that people go see it? Is it good entertainment?
- *An assessment of the characters, setting, and plot. Were these effective? Did the movie create suspense, as it was supposed to, or was it boring or comical?
- *A brief mention of the anti-communist and/or anti-McCarthyist themes running through the movie. What is the theme? Use specific examples to illustrate the theme(s).
- *A rating, from 0 stars (horrible) to 5 stars (wonderful).

The review should be *at least* 1 full typed, double-spaced page OR 1½ to 2 neatly handwritten pages.

Part 2: Position Paper

You decide to impress your boss at the *Post-Dispatch* and include a position paper along with your review. If he likes the paper, you could be promoted to assistant editor and given a huge raise.

This paper is your OPINION backed up by SPECIFIC EVIDENCE from the film. You should decide whether you think the movie attacks communism OR McCarthyism. You may NOT use both interpretations. Then, using your notes from the film, write a paper defending your position.

Your paper should have a distinct introduction, body and conclusion, and should include *at least* the following information:

- *A thesis statement: statement about which interpretation you support and WHY you support it.
- *At least *three* specific examples from the movie, in detail, that support your argument.

You must state HOW and WHY these examples support your interpretation.

The position paper should be *at least* 1-1 ½ typed, double-spaced pages OR 2 ½ to 3 neatly handwritten pages.

You will turn in both parts, and the notes you took while watching the movie, as one assignment. See attached scoring guide for points. Have fun with this!

DUE WEDNESDAY APRIL 10

Appendix C: Scoring Guide for Movie Review and Position Paper

Part 1: Movie Review

_____ 1. Summary (Multiply by 2)	2 points: Clear, concise, correct summary. 1 point: Somewhat confusing or missing vital points. 0 points: Summary confusing or non-existent.
_____ 2. Personal Opinion and Rating (Multiply by 3)	2 points: Clear, well-explained opinion and rating. 1 point: Unclear or unexplained opinion and rating. 0 point: Little or no explanation of opinion and/or rating.
_____ 3. Character, Setting, Plot Assessment (Multiply by 3)	2 points: Clear and valid assessment. 1 point: Assessment needs more explanation. 0 points: Little or no assessment.
_____ 4. Theme (Multiply by 3)	2 points: Clear explanation of theme and examples. 1 point: Explanation confusing, few or unclear examples. 0 points: Little effort at explanation and examples.
_____ 5. Format	2 points: Clear intro, body, conclusion; easy to follow. 1 points: Somewhat confusing format. 0 points: Format unclear and difficult to follow.
_____ 6. Typed or legibly written	1 point: Yes 0 points: No
_____ Total out of 25 points	

Part 2: Position Paper

_____ 1. Thesis statement (Multiply by 3.5)	2 points: Clear, concise, logical statement and explanation. 1 point: Statement unclear, could use more explanation. 0 points: No thesis statement OR no explanation.
_____ 2. Examples and Explanation (Multiply by 10)	2 points: Specific examples with excellent explanation. 1.5 points: Specific examples that need more explanation. 1 point: Non-specific examples with little explanation. .5 points: Unclear examples, little effort at explanation. 0 points: Confusing examples with no explanation.
_____ 3. Format	2 points: Clear intro, body, conclusion; easy to follow. 1 points: Somewhat confusing format. 0 points: Format unclear and difficult to follow.
_____ 4. Typed or legibly written	1 point: Yes 0 points: No

_____ Total out of 30

_____ **TOTAL OUT OF 55**

Appendix D: Student Movie Notes

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) Notes

Name _____

1. Notes on the plot, setting, and characters.

2. Notes on the movie's themes: anti-communist or anti-McCarthyist.

Quotes, events, thoughts, specific scenes, characters, etc. (Remember to list **all specific examples** you see and hear! This will make writing your paper easier.)

Appendix E: Character and Plot Overview

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)

- *McCarthyism died in 1954, McCarthy in 1957; during and after McCarthyism, Hollywood churned out anti-communist films.
- **IBS* originally serial in magazine by Jack Finney, then into novel.
- *1956, Don Siegel (director) released *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Siegel said he made the movie to attack/ protest mindless conformity, as a backlash to McCarthyism and the conformity of the 50s, but it is often interpreted as an anti-communist movie.
- *Siegel did not want flashback format. Wanted to end with Miles screaming at the camera, “You’re next!” but studio was afraid that such a negative ending would lead to poor profits.

- *Plot: The town of Santa Mira, California, is being taken over by pods that absorb and take over each person’s mind until the person no longer exists; to pod has taken his/her place. The new people look, talk, act, and have the same memories as the person they took over, but there is no emotion. No love, no anxiety, no cheerfulness, no sadness, no faith, no hope. No emotion. Everyone is exactly the same: emotionless.
Told through a flashback by Dr. Miles Bennell (Kevin McCarthy) who has been brought into a hospital raving about alien pods. He tells a psychiatrist his story.
Dr. Bennell returns from a conference to find people are saying that their family members are not their family members. While trying to unravel the mystery, he rekindles an old romance with the newly divorced Becky Driscoll (Dana Wynter). When Miles’ friends Jack and Teddy discover a body in their house that looks like Jack, the mystery deepens. The body is taking on more and more of Jack’s characteristics. Miles runs to get Becky and finds a Becky look-alike in her basement. Miles’ psychiatrist friend explains the fear as mass hysteria and the bodies as optical illusions. Miles continues to wonder, but is not seriously concerned.
Then, while barbequing with Becky, Jack and Teddy, Miles discovers pods in his greenhouse that burst open and take on his and Becky’s shapes. He stabs the forms, then calls the FBI, but to no avail. The four decide to flee, but are chased by everyone else in the town, who is already a pod. Eventually Miles and Becky end up cornered in his office, where they take drugs to remain awake, for the pods take over people while they sleep. Miles says his famous quote: “In my practice, I've seen how people have allowed their humanity to drain away. Only it happened 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 to us, how dear.”
The next morning they see the townspeople dividing up pods to distribute across the state and the country. Miles and Becky manage to escape and hide in the nearby hills. The pods pass them by, and Miles goes to investigate beautiful music, which turns out to be a radio. Returning to Becky, he discovers that she is now a pod. He runs away, and the pods stop chasing him because they realize no one will believe him. Miles ends up on the highway yelling at passing cars for help, but no one stops.
We return to the hospital where Miles was taken after being picked up. No one believes him until a wreck comes in having to be dug out from under strange pods, and finally they believe Miles.

Appendix F: Sample Discussion Questions

Discussion questions for *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*

Have them get out their notes.

1. Ask for basic summary
2. What did you think of the movie? Did you like it? Dislike it? Why?
Is it entertaining? Would you recommend that people go see it?
3. Was the acting any good? Were the characters realistic and believable, or pathetic?
What about the setting? Was the plot suspenseful like it was supposed to be?
Were you ever in suspense about what would happen next, or were you bored or uninterested? Did you laugh at parts that were not supposed to be funny?
4. What rating (0-5 stars) would you give this movie and WHY?
5. **THEMES: What anti-communist and/or anti-McCarthyist themes did you see running through this movie? Specific quotes, events, scenes, etc.

EXAMPLES:

Pods take over humans, but no noticeable physical difference (communists could be anywhere)

An epidemic mass hysteria, spreads throughout the town and country (attack on McCarthyism)

Miles says, "allow humanity to drain away...grow callous" (communist, McCarthyism)

Miles says, "a malignant disease spreading through the whole country" (communist, McCarthyism)

Psychiatrist says, "cell for cell, atom for atom" (communist) "There's no pain."

"reborn into an untroubled world." Miles: "where everyone's the same?"

"Yes" (communism [collective, same wages, gov't controlled] AND McCarthyism: forced conformity, conformity of 1950s)

Miles: No emotion, no feelings, only instinct to survive (communist, McCarthyism: point finger so won't be accused)

Shrink: "Love, ambition, desire, faith...without them, life is so simple" (emotionless communism)

Entire town chases Becky and Miles (McCarthyism)

Miles: "Inhuman enemy bent on my destruction" (communism, McCarthyism)

Take over every living thing (communism, McCarthyism)

Miles: "You're next!" (communism, McCarthyism)

Title: *Invasion* (communism)

Reflection: Publishable Lesson Plan on *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956)

Looking back on this lesson (which, like much of my internship, is a blur), I realize there was so much more I wanted to do with it! In spite of this, I did reach my main goals. First, I wanted it to be an effective lesson in which my students gained valuable knowledge, not just “movie time” for them to sleep through, and not just an assignment they could throw together the night before it was due. I wanted my students to understand the contradictions of the 1950s, when Americans feared the conformity of communism but nevertheless themselves conformed to societal and political pressures. I also wanted this lesson to be engaging. Students love movies, especially Hollywood movies, and most of my students were hugely entertained by *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. It is almost impossible to *not* be entertained by this movie, simply because some of the acting and special effects are so primitive compared to what we are used to. I wanted the students to think on their own, which is one reason why the movie review and position paper assignment was done individually and not in groups. The students had base knowledge, but they actually had to analyze the movie and synthesize their interpretation to create a coherent paper. Finally, I hoped to show my students that history changes as society does, and this is what makes history intriguing; that just as interpretations of this movie have changed over time, so will future historians’ interpretations of the clothes my students wear!

To begin, it is necessary to understand the demographic makeup of the school and the classes that participated in this lesson, for demographics unquestionably affect results. I presented this lesson to two freshman American History classes at a mostly suburban high school near a large midwestern city. While there are some rural students and many Voluntary Transfer students from the inner city who attend this school, the majority of students live in suburbs close to the school. The school has approximately 1,300 students in grades 9-12 and is has a fairly

diverse racial and ethnic population, even though the majority of students are Caucasian. There is also a broad socioeconomic range in this school. My two history classes were, compared to the entire school, rather homogenous in race and ethnicity, but followed the school trend in terms of a large range in socioeconomic status. One of my two classes had twenty-four students and the other had twenty-eight students. Students in both classes showed a wide range in academic ability and motivation levels. One class was a Class Within A Class, meaning that about 50% of the students had special learning needs as specified in Individual Education Plans. To help with these students, a resource teacher was in this class everyday. I found that students in both classes were very interested in America in the 1950s, and in this assignment, especially when compared with the previous unit on the origins of the Cold War.

The main principle I wanted students to understand through this lesson was that America in the 1950s was a bundle of contradictions. We had already discussed how mainstream Americans lived a happy suburban life but felt threatened by the growing civil rights movement, youth culture, and communism. Through this lesson, I wanted to focus one of the main, if not *the* main aspect of the 1950s, one that tied American society to foreign policy: fear of communism. The extreme irony between Americans' actions and beliefs about communism ("I'd rather be dead than Red") and their actions based on Joseph McCarthy's communist hunts have always fascinated me; therefore, I concluded they would also fascinate my students. Many Americans feared government as epitomized by McCarthy just as they pictured Soviet citizens fearing the communist government; therefore, to avoid being accused communist leanings, they followed society's rules, conforming the same way they pictured Soviet citizens conforming to the collectivism and equality of communist life.

I believe this lesson was effective in teaching this principle, although I must admit that in the days leading up to the lesson, I was skeptical about its success. Less than three months into my internship, I already knew the frustration of getting students to think abstractly, to analyze theories, to make connections. I believed, and still believe, they were perfectly capable of doing everything I asked them to do; but they were teenagers whose main concern was most definitely *not* school. Therefore, looking at the often-blank faces opposite me while I explained and discussed the movie and interpretations of the movie, I am ashamed to admit that I somewhat altered my expectations for the movie reviews and position papers. Yet when I began reading and grading my students' papers, I realized anew why I love teaching. I was surprised and delighted with my students' originality in their movie reviews and with their analysis in their position papers. Several brought up points I had not considered, and I handed the papers back with the conclusion that reading their papers had been one of the highlights of the semester to that point. The lesson was much more successful than I had hoped, even before I modified my expectations. I was very pleased with my students' effort and their achievement, and I can honestly say that this lesson is an effective way to teach communism and conformity in America in the 1950s.

Not only is it an effective lesson, but it also comes through a method that students appreciate. Watching any movie in class automatically makes students happy, partly because they are used to being entertained by television, and partly because they think they will have an easy class in which they have to do nothing. As one student wrote in her review, "*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is a wonderful disruption to the normal classroom atmosphere." The first generalization is true for *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*—it is an incredibly entertaining movie. The plot is bizarre (and somewhat spooky), the acting often contrived, and clothing and speech

appropriately laughable to our advanced twenty-first century taste. The second part, unfortunately for my students, was not true. While watching the movie, they had to pay attention and take notes. If they did not, their papers and grades showed it. In addition, my students enjoyed writing the movie review. The position paper was more questionable in terms of enjoyment, but so many of the movie reviews were creative and made me laugh out loud that I know my students enjoyed writing them.

For example, one student opened his movie review with, “For reasons unknown to me, the movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was actually funded. And for reasons out of my control my senior editor tied me to the chair at the theater. I have the rope burns to prove it.” When I read this opening, I laughed so hard I nearly fell off *my* chair—and I made sure to tell the student so when I handed back his paper. This student, obviously not a fan of the movie, later wrote in his review:

What really made the film worse was Becky’s [Dana Wynter’s] constant screaming: “Oh, help, help me, I’m helpless.” Excuse me, but I don’t care if it is the 50’s a housewife would still pick up a pitchfork and stab a brussel sprout if it was trying to steal her body.

Another student, also not fond of *Body Snatchers*, wrote, “Unfortunately [*sic*], his [Miles Bennell’s] bad pick up lines he uses on his ex flame Becky Driscoll are as bad as his expertise in medicine (and acting).” Another student agreed: “I would not recommend this movie to anyone who has a personality.” One student thought the movie needed more explanation: “Why did the pods even feel the need to take over people’s lives? What did they get out of controlling human bodies that was so important?” One student who thought the movie was in fact worth watching wrote, “I will not give away this very suspenseful ending, because I know that you are already on the edge of your seat, and any farther, you would fall off.” While the criticisms are somewhat

obvious coming from a generation who has grown up watching technologically advanced movies with sophisticated acting, the style in which these students wrote made their reviews stand out.

Other students made a point to set their reviews and papers in 1956, as if they really were a movie reviewer. One student surprised me with her introduction: “This is _____ (name) _____ for the 1956 Post-Dispatch. My editor Ms. McFarlin [*sic*] approached me to be a writer for the latest suspense movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.” I was very pleased with her effort, and with her creativity in calling me the editor! Another student, writing his position paper about how he believes the movie is anti-McCarthyist, wrote:

And right now everyone in the U.S. fears Communism, and hates it because the Soviet Union is communist, and they have more power now with the Atomic Bomb than ever before. America is on high alert, and everyone is asking himself or herself, maybe my neighbor could be Communist, or my best friend [*sic*].

Reading these papers set in 1956 gave me a thrill. Rather than simply write something to turn in, my students put thought into their papers and were creative!

Of the two papers, the position paper was the more difficult for the students to write, for they were analyzing theories, interpretations, and abstract ideas rather than the film’s more obvious plot, setting, and characters. Still, many of my students again surprised me with their insightful comments. For instance, one student made the connection between America’s fear of the domino theory and the spread of the pods in the movie. He wrote, “In the movie the 2 protagonists Dr. Bennel [*sic*] and Becky find out that the pods are going to be spread to surrounding communities. This sounds an awful lot like the domino theory.” Another student expanded on this idea in her paper when she wrote:

In a way, Miles Bennell represented the United States. The United States could see the big picture that Europe was falling to communism just as Miles could see that his community was being transformed into pod people. Miles resisted becoming one of them and the United States resisted becoming communist.

The domino theory, which we covered in a previous unit, played an active role in several students' papers. This illustrated that they were thinking about all possible aspects of the paper and using knowledge that many students would have forgotten after taking a test. Knowledge and information retention is often difficult for students, yet many of my students included previous knowledge in their papers.

One student made a point that had not yet occurred to me. Interpreting the movie as anti-communist, she wrote, "There is not supposed to be any type of religion in communism. They are all supposed to be atheists. The aliens [pods] also say that there is no faith after you are 'turned'." The specific meaning of faith as religious faith is an excellent example. When I read this paper, I got another thrill: my students were thinking of things I had not. A moment teachers live for!

Another interesting example is found in two papers, one arguing the movie is anti-communist and the other arguing the movie is anti-McCarthyist. The great thing about these two papers is they use the same example from the movie. In one, the student argued that the pods represented communism:

Miles says, 'It's like a contagious disease spreading through the whole country!'...The fact that, in the movie, the pods were spreading through the entire community trying to take over all the people's minds one by one and making them believe that being a pod was a good thing, shows how bad communism was.

She associated the disease metaphor with communism, while another student associated it with McCarthyism: "McCarthyism spread through the country like a disease, just like the spread of alien pod people through the town of Santa Mira." Yet another thrill for a history teacher—students using the same example to support opposing conclusions illustrates how historians using the same evidence can reach different conclusions because of their beliefs and backgrounds.

Several students who wrote that the movie was anti-McCarthyist exactly interpreted the message Director Don Siegel wished to portray: attacking all types of conformity. One of the students wrote succinctly, “In conclusion, Don Siegel [*sic*] was just trying to prove a point. He was trying to show our country’s immaturity and how crazy it [conformity] can be.” While the student is specifically referring to McCarthyism, she actually states Siegel’s main goal. In a 1970 interview, Siegel said he wanted to warn Americans about conformity: “People are pods. Many of my associates are 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.”⁵⁰ Some of my students managed to relate Siegel’s main point while still making an argument for the movie’s anti-McCarthyist themes.

While I did not keep an exact count, it seems that slightly more students interpreted the movie as an attack on communism than as an attack on McCarthyism. It could be some understood Americans’ fear of communism better than the phenomenon of McCarthyism; it could be this was their actual interpretation after careful viewing and analysis; it could be a combination of the two or of any number of other reasons. Whatever the reason, I was proud that there were a mix of the two interpretations; neither was over-done to the point that I wondered about too much student collaboration. These specific examples from actual student papers prove to me that the lesson achieved its goal. Students made connections between communism and McCarthyism, and enjoyed doing it.

However, the downside to this lesson was that several of my students struggled with writing the movie review and position paper. Of the fifty-two students, thirteen received an F. Granted, six of the thirteen did not turn in a paper at all, which I believe shows mere laziness.

⁵⁰ Stuart Kaminsky, interview with Don Siegel, in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, ed. Al LaValley, vol. 14 of Rutgers Films in Print Series (London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 154. Originally published in *Science Fiction Films*, ed. Thomas R. Atkins, Monarch Film Studies (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), 73-82.

Even the students with the most severe learning problems turned a paper in; these six did not turn one in simply because they did not want to do the assignment. Also, three of the thirteen turned their papers in late, which automatically dropped their grade at least one full letter grade (all three of these papers were also only half done). However, the remaining four who received an F merely did not meet all of the criteria. Two were almost unreadable for their incoherence. These students, if they had a learning disability, were not so severely disabled that writing a sentence should have been a problem; none of my students were that severely learning disabled. My belief is that these students, as well as the five who received a D, merely could not analyze and synthesize the information well enough to comprehend the assignment and produce an effective paper. In this way, another method, perhaps a group project, or an assignment in which they had a choice to create either a written or a visual product, would have been more effective for these students. Nevertheless, I believe that even though they may not have done as well as I hoped in terms of a grade, these students gained an interest in—and/or an understanding of—America in the 1950s. I also believe all of my students were challenged to think and write in a way that may not have been familiar to them.

On the whole, this lesson was successful in teaching my students about America in the 1950s. Now that I have calculated and examined the numbers, I am greatly pleased with the grade data that shows that most students received an A or a B on their papers (A=90-100%, superior; B=80-90%, good; C=70-80%, average; D=60-70%, poor; and F=0-60%, unacceptable). This data is based on all fifty-two students, even those six who did not turn in a paper, and who therefore received an F.

Table 1: Grade Data

Letter Grade	Class 1 Raw Data	Class 1 Percentage	Class 2 Raw Data	Class 2 Percentage	Total Raw Data	Total Percentage
A	5	20.8%	8	28.6%	13	25%
B	9	37.5%	7	25%	16	30.8%
C	2	8.3%	3	10.7%	5	9.6%
D	1	4.2%	4	14.3%	5	9.6%
F	7	29.2%	6	21.4%	13	25%
Total	24	100%	28	100%	52	100%

Based strictly on this grade information, this lesson can be viewed as successful, for this was not an easy assignment. It involved many aspects: taking notes, understanding, analysis, and synthesis, among others. Since out of both classes, over fifty percent (55.8%) of students received either an A or a B, it must be accepted that these students comprehended the concept and were skilled enough to synthesize their opinion into a convincing argument. Including those who received a C with this data, 65.4% of students in both classes received an average grade or higher. Very few students (5 out of 52, or 9.6%) received a grade of D. At first glance, the high number of students who received an F (13 out of 52, or 25%; the same as the number of As) is rather disconcerting. But when analyzed, this number seems about average, for of these thirteen, six failed to turn in a paper, and three turned in an unfinished paper late, which automatically lowered their grade. When subtracted from the original thirteen, this leaves only four who

actually did work at a failing level. Four out of fifty-two, or 7.6%, who failed, is a more accurate and reasonable number than is 25%. Whatever the percentage of students who failed this assignment, I did not expect perfection from everyone. I did believe I would get a paper from everyone, so I am disappointed that six chose not to do the assignment at all. I believe that those who did, however, proved that they grasped the concept; and if they did not, they certainly tried.

It is important to point out that I try to be an impartial grader; that is, I try to keep any biases I may have out of grading and be as fair as possible. While grading, I covered the name of the student whose paper I was reading just then, and did not look at the name until I had graded all of the papers. I also tried to create a thorough scoring guide to ensure that questions of bias would not later arise. However, even though I used a scoring guide, the fact that the paper called for a scoring guide shows that it was subjective. Therefore, there are flaws in this grade data, just as there are likely flaws in scoring, for regardless of the most effective scoring guide, no grader can be completely objective.

When I use this lesson again, I believe I will use primary sources to introduce McCarthy and McCarthyism. For example, I would like to have students examine a photo history of McCarthy's rise and fall to learn about McCarthyism. I would also like to use transcripts and pictures from the Army-McCarthy hearings, and possibly have students study McCarthy more in-depth to discover his personality and motives behind his communist hunts.

I would also like to introduce more film analysis into my classroom. I would very much like to use Hollywood films throughout my curriculum, teaching students at the beginning of the year how to analyze and critique films, not only for their merit as films (as in the *Body Snatchers* movie review), but more importantly for their merit as a tool to learn about the past. Obviously, science fiction by definition would not be a candidate for analysis of accurate portrayal of

history, but I believe teaching my students to analyze films in general and historical films in particular—whether they are historical in subject matter or historical for how that particular era portrayed certain ideas—will greatly improve their critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is a skill that will remain with my students long after they have forgotten names and dates.

Even though there are things I will do differently in the future with this lesson, I am very pleased with how this lesson plan went in my classroom. It is easy to think a lesson plan looks great on paper, only to have it fail miserably in an actual classroom. Using *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) to teach students about communism and conformity in the 1950s was more successful than I hoped. I try to make my lessons interesting and engaging for both the students and myself; I believe this is a vital part of successful teaching. I often borrow lesson ideas from more experienced teachers; and while I fully realize that I have much to learn, I sincerely hope this lesson helps other teachers, both beginning and experienced, in their classrooms.