

folklore. A physician, Miles Bennell (Kevin McCarthy) is seeing a rash of patients who think that people close to them are just imposters. At first it seems like mass hysteria, but eventually it turns out to be perfectly true. The town, indeed perhaps the whole world, is being taken over by seed pods from outer space that have

THE MT VOID

Page 2

the ability to take the shape and even the memories of humans in their vicinity. And as they do, the human bodies seem to disappear. The seed pods quietly replace the humans, and only close acquaintances can tell the difference. The story might be called VEGETABLE DOPPLEGANGERS FROM OUTER SPACE.

INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS has been interpreted and co-opted by both the right and the left political wings. It is either an allegory of creeping Communism or creeping McCarthyism. It is not surprising that it can be either since it is really just an allegory of "creeping" in general and could be applied to any creeping ideology or point of view. Apparently people from all political backgrounds respond to the idea that they might be subverted from within by friendly-appearing people with a different agenda or different loyalties. It is not so much the case that the horror story is moving into the realm of political thinking, as this film is often interpreted. but that political thinking has an unfortunate tendency to move into the realm of the horror story.

What is somewhat more original about this film is that the humans have to fight for their humanity and their emotions. In THE WOLF MAN, Lawrence Talbot has to fight the emotions within himself trying to take possession of him. INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS presents the opposite threat: that we will be turned into emotionless vegetables, that every drop of humanity will be drained from us. Of course that is not really the threat. A similar idea was in INVADERS FROM MARS, but there the people taken over just had changed loyalties. As woodenly as they acted, they still seemed to have emotions and we saw the father getting angry and hitting at his son for opposing the Martians.

One of the problems of the film is that the writers cannot make up their minds if the humans become pod-people or are replaced by them. Pod-people tell humans that once the takeover takes place,

they become happy and serene. It is surprising that no human points out that when you are taken over you are NOT happy and serene--you are dead. Somehow if you know you will be dead it is very little comfort that there is a vegetable someplace that is exactly in your image, has your memories, and that vegetable is not unhappy. Most people couldn't care less how happy a vegetable is, regardless of who it looks like. And this assumes that the vegetable even has the capacity to be happy, which seems unlikely. Of course, the brightest vegetable we have on earth just fight for a little bit of sunlight and then end up on our plates or are cut down to make houses.

The issue of whether people are replaced or become the new thing themselves applies equally to the transporter in STAR TREK. When you go through the transporter there, the tacit assumption is that you really have been transported. If they called it "the replacer," people might have a very different attitude about

THE MT VOID

Page 3

getting into it, even though it was the same device.

It is no secret that director Don Siegel wanted the film to be just the flashback and that the studio thought that the film needed a happy ending. Anybody who says this film has a happy ending doesn't know what he is talking about. A happy ending is where the male and female leads end up going off into the sunset together, presumably to raise a family of little leads. That patently is not the ending the studio imposed. The studio thought that the ending needed a little bit of hope. The studio was still wrong and reduced the quality of this film, but they were probably right that they had increased the box office potential of the film.

Obviously this is a film that resonated with audiences at the time and still does. It has been remade twice (and each version has its advocates). And it also has penetrated into the popular media. An episode of the popular THE DICK VAN DYKE SHOW called "It May Look Like a Walnut" as was an homage to INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS. Now if I were remaking the film, I would really like to see it done from the point of view that people were altered rather than replaced and that if it was not a good thing, at least it was well-intentioned. Make the pod-people sincere that they really are

better off for the changes that have taken place. It would not take much of a twist to show that the rhetoric of the pop-people really was true and they really were trying to spread their condition through idealism. That makes this a much more interesting and powerful story.

This was obviously a film that resonated and continues to resonate with audiences. INVADERS FROM MARS was in many ways similar and somehow its downbeat tone seemed all right, ironically because it was aimed at children so it was not taken seriously. It was also because in the end virtue paid off and the Martians were defeated. The studio was not sure you could do something like that with adults. History has proven them wrong, of course. [-mrl]

2. SPECIES (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: Why throw so much acting and expensive special effects at a project with such a weak and poorly thought-out screenplay? A shape-changing were-alien stalks singles clubs for mating stock while a team of drafted civilians tries to track her down. It has violence, a lot of sex, nudity, and little to think about afterwards. Rating: -1 (-4 to +4)

Two years ago Ben Kingsley played in what is arguably one of the best films ever made. It is hard to imagine the same actor now taking a role as an amoral scientist who helps to create what turns out to be a shape-changing were-alien who cruises singles bars in Los Angeles. And he is not the only good actor in the film, SPECIES also features Forest Whitaker and Alfred Molina. That is a lot of acting talent marshalled to film a really disappointing script from Dennis Feldman which borrows from a lot of other sources but more than a little from the TV play and book A FOR ANDROMEDA by Fred Hoyle. Feldman's screenplays--notably GOLDEN

CHILD--usually start with good concepts, but he does not know what to do with them.

Since the 1970s we have been broadcasting into space signals about ourselves including some rudimentary information about our biological makeup. That much is based on fact, though the information we give about DNA is as true of a garden slug as it is of a human, so it is not a lot of information about ourselves. This film says that we have been sending a biological blueprint of humans and have been receiving similar messages back for two years including a biological blueprint for an alien race. (That limits the source to the Centauri system, Barnard's Star, Wolf 359, HD95735, Sirius, UV Ceti, and Ross 154, incidentally.) The government has had Dr. Xavier Fitch (played by Kingsley) build the DNA specified in the message and combine it with human DNA. The scientific absurdities then come thick and fast. The resulting creature is neither non-viable nor even a crossbreed, but rather a shape-shifter that can appear to be either a beautiful woman or one of several ugly alien forms. The timing is not right for the twenty-ish were-alien to have matured so we are told that she developed in a mere six months (reminiscent of the film EMBRYO). The six months were enough to bring her to the apparent age of a teenager. Then she goes on an eating binge and spins a cocoon only to emerge an adult. (Incidentally, even the binge does not seem sufficient to provide the mass needed to build the cocoon.) The resulting adult (former model Natasha Henstridge) seems to be both beautiful and an incredibly quick study at learning how to fit into our society. It is never clear how Sil, as she is called--first as "the Sil" and then just as "Sil"--knows all she does about our society, but she seems to have absorbed the knowledge someplace. Meanwhile a task force of private citizens is drafted by the government to track down the were-alien. The team includes some sort of exterminator (Michael Madsen) whom the government has used before for top secret missions. And also included is a psychic empath--as if the government has a ready stock on call. So much is left unexplained that while some films call for a sequel or a prequel, this one could handily use an inquel.

Director Roger Donaldson has spiced up the film with more than its share of action and thrills, but all too often the action takes the form of a chase like any film with a more human quarry. Or the

action might be someone being skewered through the walls of a restroom. Then to add a thrill or two there are false jump scenes thrown in. I will not spoil even the false jumps, but one involves a ridiculously unrealistic piece of animal behavior.

Kingsley and Whitaker are each too professional to turn in performances that are not good, but Donaldson must not have been a very demanding director and nobody else is particularly noticeable. Oddly this includes Alfredo Molina who probably would have done more with his role had it been possible. The script fails to develop the characters much at all beyond throwing in a little romance among a lot of sex and nudity.

While the design of the alien creature is by H. R. Giger, the surreal artist who is best known as the designer of the creature in ALIEN, most looks at the alien creature take place in dreamlike sequences. Toward the end we actually see it, but it is a disappointment.

While this film could have been an effective exploration of two species in conflict, too often the script takes an easy and familiar path rather than explore new science fictional territory. The absurdities might have been acceptable with more originality, but what this film offers is just not what I am looking for in a science fiction film. I give this one -1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

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3. THE HIGH QUEEN by Nancy McKenzie (Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38245-5, 1995, 430pp, US\$5.99) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

When Nancy McKenzie's CHILD QUEEN came out, I read it and was favorably impressed. Even the fact that at the end of the book there was a blurb announcing a sequel didn't dent my enthusiasm too much, because THE CHILD QUEEN stood well on its own. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about its sequel, THE HIGH QUEEN.

THE HIGH QUEEN picks up shortly after Guinevere has been rescued from King Melwas. If you don't know the story up to this point, you will not understand much of what is going on in this book. But even if you are familiar with the Arthur legend, it won't help: MacKenzie has written her books from a different perspective than the version I learned as a child. Mordred is not the villain. Galahad is not the hero. Merlin is off-stage most of the time. None of the characters act according to their popular characterizations. They do, however, act in accordance with what was related in the first book. What this means is that you must read THE CHILD QUEEN before reading this.

And even then, some of the characterizations don't work. Characters change motivation and character rather abruptly when necessary for the plot (or the legend), and this weakens the story. I like the way that McKenzie takes the bare "facts" of the Arthur legend (or perhaps more accurately, the aspects of it that most versions have in common) and gives them a new interpretation. Of course, she is not the first, and suffers by the obvious comparison to Marion Zimmer Bradley's MISTS OF AVALON. Bradley's telling has a darker, more mythic feel to it, while McKenzie's is a more modern version, with Guinevere a more "liberated" queen and characters who mouth more present-day sentiments than one would probably have heard at the time.

If you've read the first book, then I can recommend this conclusion. If you haven't, though, this book will not work for you. I don't know why Del Rey didn't release the two pieces as a single volume. Yes, it would have been long, but if they had enough faith in THE CHILD QUEEN to label it their "Del Rey Discovery of the Year," this shouldn't have been a problem. [-ecl]

4. JOHNNY MNEMONIC by William Gibson (Ace, ISBN 0-441-00234-X, 1995, 164pp, US\$12) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

I guess this is really JOHNNY MNEMONIC: THE MOVIE: THE BOOK, though thankfully not titled thus. It includes the screenplay of the film, stills from the film, and the original story, both by Gibson. Since I have not seen the movie (any movie that gets no positive reviews, nineteen negative reviews, and two mixed reviews from the New York critics starts out with a bit of a handicap), I can't tell if the screenplay is an early draft or the final version. (I can say, however, that though directions indicate that some dialogue is in Mandarin or Japanese, only the English subtitles for this dialogue are given. I hope the movie actually used accurate Mandarin and Japanese, unlike films such as HER ALIBI, which used nonsense words and claimed it was Romanian.)

From the screenplay, however, I can conclude that this was probably

a very visual film, since the dialogue alone, even with stage directions and stills, doesn't do much for me. Gibson's original story, written to be read rather than filmed, works much better, but no one is going to buy this book just for that. I'm not sure who the market for this book is. I suppose that screenwriters and film critics might find it interesting to compare with original written story with the screenplay by the same author, but is that really a big enough market? In any case, unless that aspect appeals to you, I can't recommend this book. If the video of JOHNNY MNEMONIC is priced to sell, it won't cost much more than this book and will be a much more complete artifact of the film.

THE MT VOID

Page 7

If what you want is the story, it would make more sense to buy Gibson's collection BURNING CHROME for the story and get all the other stories in that as well. [-ecl]

5. The Greatwinter Saga: VOICES IN THE LIGHT by Sean McMullen (Aphelion, ISBN 1-875346-10-4, 1994, 306pp, A\$12.95); MIRRORSUN RISING by Sean McMullen (Aphelion, ISBN 1-875346-14-7, 1995, 332pp, A\$14.95) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Up-front declaration: This is a single story told in two volumes. The first volume ends with the infamous phrase "to be continued," and cannot be read on its own. The covers do indicate that these are books one and two, but I want to make sure that's clear.

The story begins at 9:45 PM on the 26th day of September in the Year of Greatwinter's Waning 1684, and takes place in a much changed and clearly post-apocalyptic Australia. (In fact, the extent of the changes make one wonder why they still use a 12-hour clock and our current month names, when hardly anything else is the same.) Our main character, Frelle Darien, finds herself catapulted up the ranks of librarians as the Libris in Rochester needs more and more mathematicians to run the Calculor, and for the lower ranks is even resorting to kidnapping people and blaming the Call. Sorry, this book doesn't come with a glossary, but it's fairly easy to pick up what all this means. But it takes a while, and in fact

it is not until most of the way through the first volume that we get any information about what the Call is, or what causes it, or what Greatwinter was, or why some people think it may return.

As if this weren't enough, there is also political intrigue, and various deceptions, and a lot of explanation of various Rube-Goldbergian mechanical devices. Eventually it all fits together--even the machines make sense--and it's a bit like putting together a jigsaw puzzle which makes no sense until the last key pieces are put in, revealing everything. (Foolishly, perhaps, the blurb on the back of the second volume reveals a lot of what is only gradually disclosed in the first volume, so don't read the blurb first!)

The second book starts out with more politics and military engagements, but eventually returns to the technology and to the Call and its implications. For me these were the more interesting aspects--the military sequences may be necessary for the plot, but they are not what makes this series interesting.

There are several pages of maps in the front of each book, but the non-Australian reader will need a current map of Australia as well to get the full benefit of them. For example, I knew that

THE MT VOID

Page 8

"Alsprings" must be "Alice Springs," but most of the other names didn't ring any bells. It's sort of like having a post-holocaust novel set on the west coast of North America: "Sanfran" would be recognizable to most, but only someone who knew the area well would know that "Petloon" is probably "Petaluma" and "Napson" is likely "Napa-Sonoma."

Maybe all this is part of why this book "feels" Australian, but it does to me. (In some indefinable way it also reminds me of some of the sort of thing LeGuin writes.) I'm developing a definite fondness for Australian science fiction, and look forward to going to a Worldcon there (1999, I hope). Until then, I'll have to stick to what I can get here. Luckily, McMullen's books are in that set.

(People in the United States can order these books from the United States agent for Aphelion: Mark V. Zeising, P. O. Box 76,

Shingletown CA 96088. Add US\$3.50 for shipping and handling, but I'm guessing on the prices in the first place--what I list is based strictly on the current exchange rate.)

(A portion of VOICES IN THE LIGHT appeared as "Souls in the Great Machine" in UNIVERSE 2, edited by Robert Silverberg and Karen Haber.) [-ecl]

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We should all be obliged to appear before a board every five years and justify our existence ... on pain of liquidation.

-- George Bernard Shaw