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“Impersonation, Dissimulation, and the Impact of Martin Guerre”

During the post-World War II period, Nazis were quickly replaced by Communists in the popular cinema. Postwar cynicism in America was fueled by the perception that the long years of fighting Nazis had accomplished nothing. Prior to America’s entry into the war, Charles Chaplin had written and directed the anti-Fascist film, *The Great Dictator* (1940), and the war years saw films such as Fritz Lang’s *Ministry of Fear* (1944), about a man who stumbles upon a Nazi spy ring, and William Cameron Menzies’ anti-Nazi film *Address Unknown* (1944). The popular cinema of the postwar period has been characterized as being preoccupied with paranoid fantasies of Communist infiltration, frequently expressed in quasi-allegorical figurations of alien invasion, and yet the fear of enemy infiltration existed long before the Cold War. The House Committee on Un-American Activities was established as a special committee in 1938 to investigate alleged subversive activities against the United States government, only later to become a standing committee in 1945 (and was not abolished until 1975).

The notion that a totalitarian regime could replace democracy in the United States had been so disquieting that movies on the theme took at face value the (ironic) title of Sinclair Lewis’s novel about Fascist takeover, *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935). [fn - T. F. Tweed Rinehard/*Gabriel Over the White House*] In addition to Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940), there was Frank Capra’s anti-Fascist fable, *Meet John Doe* (1941; re-released 1945), about Ann Mitchell (Barbara Stanwyck), a cynical young newspaper columnist who writes a fraudulent column after being threatened with being fired. In order to save her job, she writes a letter to the

newspaper using the name John Doe, “a disgruntled American citizen,” who is threatening to commit suicide as a form of political protest. As a result of public interest—and increased newspaper sales—she needs someone to impersonate John Doe. A minor league baseball player and hobo named Long John Willoughby (Gary Cooper) agrees to play the role of the impostor, agreeing to impersonate the figurative Everyman who purportedly writes the daily column, actually ghost written by Ann. As it turns out, Ann’s publisher, D. B. Norton (Edward Arnold) is an American Fascist. While the film is concerned with public complacency as well as with the fear of take-over by Fascist fifth columnists such as D. B. Norton, it is equally concerned with fakery. As Norton tells Willoughby, “*You’re the fake. We believe in what we’re doing.*” Insisting that his cause is greater than he is, Willoughby asserts, “*This thing’s bigger than whether I’m a fake.*”

Fakes, impostors, and tricksters abounded. In 1941, the year *Meet John Doe* was released, Janet Lewis published *The Wife of Martin Guerre*, the story of an impostor. The story is famous because it is so compelling: an impostor named Arnaud du Tilh posed as Martin Guerre, the husband who had abandoned his wife Bertrande eight years earlier. For over three years Arnaud du Tilh maintained the masquerade, and in doing so gained a wife and property and fathered a child. Arnaud du Tilh was eventually exposed as an imposter just as he was on the verge of refuting those accusing him of deception—and by the apparent return of Martin Guerre. (fn if it was indeed martin guerre) For historian Natalie Zemon Davis, in *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983), the story of Martin Guerre invokes the spirit of trickery, a compelling instance of imposture that is ultimately an exploration of the problem of truth and doubt. The catalog of themes associated with the Martin Guerre story include trickery and masquerade, duplicity, impersonation, verisimilitude, simulation, and dissimulation, all of which are all general

expressions of *subversion*, a fear that resonated deeply during in the years before the war, during the war, and in the years after.

At least one SF writer of the period, Philip K. Dick, was aware of the Martin Guerre story, using it for the inspiration for the short story he completed in February 1953, “Human Is.” (Dick also wrote the short story, “Impostor,” the same month.) We know that he knew *The Wife of Martin Guerre* because “Human Is” hinges on the same moral problem facing Bertrande as it does in Lewis’s novel: should she reveal her husband’s true identity, or not? Martin Guerre’s impostor is a kind, solicitous, and generous husband to Bertrande, while the actual Martin Guerre, the one who abandoned her, was cold and distant. Dick tells the story from Bertrande’s point of view, just as Janet Lewis does in her novel. Dick’s story hinges on Bertrande’s dilemma when the actual Martin Guerre returns. Should she denounce her present husband is an impostor, and return to her previous life in an unhappy marriage? Or should she lie, affirm her present husband’s identity, and denounce the actual Martin Guerre as an impostor? Interestingly, Dick resolves the dilemma differently than Janet Lewis. In Lewis’s novel, Bertrande tells the truth, admitting that her present husband is an impostor. In contrast, the wife in Dick’s story, xxxx, lies to the authorities, averring that her husband is not possessed by an alien lifeform.

Deployed through narrative, subversion takes the form of oxymoronic substitution. [fn] In the tales by Lewis and Dick, a kind husband is substituted for an unkind one. Of course, this substitution is vulnerable to reversal (chiasmus), unkind for kind, as happens at the conclusion of *The Wife of Martin Guerre*, during which Bertrande acknowledges to the authorities that her present, kind husband is actually an impostor. Oxymoronic substitution animates certain dystopian fantasies of the period as well. Arch Oboler’s *Strange Holiday* (shot 1942, revised and distributed 1946, and re-released in the 1950s) is an example of how the narrative device can be

deployed. [fn - Arch Oboler's radio play, "This Precious Freedom" (aired 30 December 1939), starring Raymond Massey, was the source text for the film adaptation.] The film is about a middle-class American (Claude Rains) who returns from a fishing trip to discover a Nazi regime has taken power in his home town. In the end, though, it turns out to be a bad dream, but inspires the formerly complacent everyman to value his freedoms more and vow to fight to preserve them. The persistent themes of such cautionary fables is the fight against complacency and continual vigilance: "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." [fn - This quotation, well-known in the nineteenth century, and known to be used by figures such as Frederick Douglass, James Buchanan, and William Henry Harrison, can be traced back to John Philpot Curran's statement, "The condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance; which condition if he break, servitude is at once the consequence of his crime and the punishment of his guilt."]

By 1951, Nazis had been replaced by Communists as the powerful enemy. William Cameron Menzies film, *The Whip Hand*, a sort loose remake of Fritz Lang's *Ministry of Fear*, shows just how easily Nazis could be substituted by a different kind of menace. The original story of *The Whip Hand*, featured a plot to hide the still-alive Adolf Hitler. [fn - RKO production files, contained at the UCLA Arts—Special Collections Library add the following information about the production: RKO purchased Roy Hamilton's original screen story in July 1949. In Jan 1950, Stanley Rubin was assigned to write and produce the picture. Rubin was replaced by Lewis J. Rachmil after Hughes ordered retakes.] In late 1950, after viewing a rough cut of the completed film, RKO studio head Howard Hughes demanded retakes, ordering the Hitler plot line to be replaced with a Communist germ warfare story. [fn - The following actors were cut from the final film: Jamesson Shade, Brick Sullivan, Bill Yetter, Jr., Bill Yetter, Sr. and Bobby Watson, an actor who frequently played Hitler] Menzies' film borrows story elements from

Oboler's *Strange Holiday*. Seeking medical help for an accidental injury to his forehead, a journalist on a fishing trip in Wisconsin comes across a small town where the locals are suspicious and hostile. Puzzled by his strange reception, the journalist begins an investigation into the town, and discovers that the Soviets are plotting to poison America's water supply.

Alfred E. Green's *Invasion U.S.A.* (1952) likewise uses the oxymoronic substitution device, creating a dystopian fantasy. In Green's film, a group of complacent Americans sit around a New York bar, ignoring the headlines about a possible international crisis. The strange Mr. Ohman (Dan O'Herlihy) swirls a huge glass of brandy and eavesdrops on the grumblings of the group. After listening to their various complaints, Mr. Ohmann, a hypnotist, swirls his brandy and puts the group members under his spell. A foreign invader, although never explicitly identified as the Soviet Union, mounts a nuclear attack on the United States. In the resulting attack, all of the members of the group die or commit suicide, after which Mr. Ohman awakens them from their delusional nightmare and lectures them on their complacency. As in *Strange Holiday*, the citizens awaken with a newfound sense of urgency and patriotism.

The didactic effectiveness of such cautionary fables is a consequence of the protagonist's *anagnorisis* and subsequent *dianoia*: as in a vision, the protagonist is shown some deep truth through a dream or a trance, and undergoes a conversion. George Bailey's (James Stewart's) dystopian vision is utterly essential to Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946): he is given the chance to see what Bedford Falls would have been like if he had never been born. The oxymoronic substitution animating the simulation is that of a dark, urban landscape (Pottersville) displacing small town Bedford Falls. As Robert B. Ray points out, a typical feature in movies of the postwar period is "the interpenetration of the *noir* and Andy Hardy worlds (Pottersville versus Bedford Falls)," which intimated an unsettling sense of the worlds' proximity. Ray goes

on to point out that “the remarkable similarities between all of *It’s a Wonderful Life*’s street sequences . . . made formally explicit how easily an Andy Hardy setting could be converted to the *noir* world through slightly tilted cameras, more rapid (and thus dizzying) tracking shots, and the addition of neon signs and a jazz soundtrack.” (Ray 203)

The lesson of George’s vision is that he is the individual on whom Bedford Falls’ very existence depended. He learns that if he had not been born, he was therefore unable to prevent his brother Harry’s death (and all the men on the troop transport as well, since Harry wasn’t there to save them), the pharmacist Mr. Gower had gone to prison, Uncle Billy went mad, Ernie the taxi driver was divorced, and his wife Mary had become an “old maid.” Only George Bailey had prevented these things from happening. If complacency can be understood as an unawareness of a real and present danger, then George Bailey is no different than the similarly complacent protagonists of *Strange Holiday* and *Invasion U.S.A.* While Bedford Falls has not been taken over by Nazis or Soviets, the narrative strategy of oxymoronic substitution is the same.

The interpenetration of *noir* (Pottersville) and Andy Hardy worlds is an essential feature to *Invaders From Mars* (1953), an SF dystopian fantasy of the postwar period. This is perhaps not surprising given that its director, William Cameron Menzies, worked extensively on, and was the uncredited co-director of, *It’s a Wonderful Life*. [fn] In some ways, *Invaders From Mars* is a forerunner of Jack Finney’s *The Body Snatchers* in that it features “atomic age zombies” whose origins are extraterrestrial—those captured by the Martians are fitted with an implant the the base of the skull that controls their behavior. Kevin Boon would classify them as “tech zombies,” people who have been “robbed of volition by technology.” (58). The arrival of the Martians transforms David MacLean’s (Jimmy Hunt’s) small town into a sinister, threatening world. His parents become cold, distant, and easily angered, and local institutions such as the police station

are infiltrated with tech zombies. As in the dystopian fantasies I've previously discussed, the Martian invasion is revealed to be a bad dream, although at the film's conclusion Jimmy is left with an unsettling sense of the fragility of his everyday world.

The idea of the invading pod in Jack Finney's *The Body Snatchers*, which reproduce their hosts asexually, seems to be taken, rather straightforwardly, from *The Thing From Another World* (1951). In *The Thing*, Dr. Carrington is quite favorably, even jealously, impressed that the Thing's evolutionary development "was not handicapped by emotional or sexual factors." He proudly exhibits to all present a "seed pod" he has removed from the Thing's detached forearm (torn off by one of the sled dogs), and announces that the seed pod is an example of the "neat and unconfused reproductive technique of vegetation. No pain or pleasure as we know it. No emotions, no heart. Far superior—far superior in every way." The asexual and unmarried scientist, who wants desperately to preserve this aggressive life-form that the others plot to destroy, ardently preaches to the others the virtues of being a nonsexual creature. The metallic shriek that concludes Philip Kaufman's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978) is also arguably derived from *The Thing*, an allusion to the moment when the doctor holds a stethoscope to an alien seed pod feeding on plasma: "Almost like the wail of a newborn child that's hungry."

1956 – (February 5) *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* movie adaptation. Test audiences 1955.

1978 – (Dec. 22) Remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, dir. Philip Kaufman #17 boffo

1994 – Remake, *Body Snatchers*, directed by Abel Ferrara

2007 – Remake of *Body Snatchers*, as *The Invasion*, directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel

NOTES

Kevin Boon, "The Zombie as Other: Mortality and the Monstrous in the Post-Nuclear Age." In *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro, Eds. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011. (58)

Steven Zani and Kevin Meaux, "Lucio Fulci and the Decaying Definition of Zombie Narratives." In *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, Deborah Christie and Sarah

Juliet Lauro, Eds. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011. “Unlike previous zombies, with their origins based in voodoo and folklore, atomic age zombies had pseudoscientific as well as extraterrestrial origins.” (98)