

Village of the Damned (dir. Wolf Rilla, 1960)

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English/History,
Key Stages 3-4

This lesson uses *Village of the Damned* along with Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) to analyse, compare and contrast the reflection of historical context in mid-century film.

Both films could be seen to address anxiety that the solidity of British and American post-war life might be overturned, using the metaphor of alien invasion. While *Body Snatchers* is well-known as an analogy (for some) of perceived communist threat, or, conversely, of blithe trust in McCarthyist conformity, the British-made *Damned* uses the bedrock of the nuclear family as its starting point; the emerging cultural prominence of the teenager could also be incorporated here.

This project is suitable for English lessons incorporating media to teach analysis of social and historical context, and may also be useful for History schemes of work on the Cold War, as a starting point for how culture responds to international threat.

Lesson Objectives

- To understand and analyse how metaphor has been used to represent a political concern
- To place a narrative within its social and historical context
- To compare and contrast two depictions of a social and historical context

Curriculum Links

English

- Relate texts to their social, cultural and historical contexts; explain how texts have been influential and significant to self and other readers in different contexts at different times.

You will need...

Trailer

Bonus feature hand out on Cold War in US and UK.

Main Attraction

DVD of *Village of the Damned* (1960) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956)

- Explain and evaluate how writers use linguistic, grammatical, structural and presentational features to achieve effects and engage and influence the reader.

History

- Understand, analyse and make valid historical claims from a range of representations and interpretations of the past as part of an historical enquiry.

Activities

TRAILER: Cold War Paranoia in the USA and UK

Fertile Question: What does science fiction tell us about our own world?

This will depend on students' prior knowledge. They might:

- Create a mind-map of everything they already know about the Cold War.
- As a group, flow-chart how they might expect filmmakers to respond to concerns about maintaining the stability of family life after the Second World War. Class could be split in two to ensure some deal with the idea of assuaging fear, some with the idea of capitalising on it. Students would need to be familiar with the idea of post-war prosperity in America, and post-war rebuilding in Britain.
- Teacher could present class with news items that sensationalise public fears, and elicit what is being done, and why.
- Stills from both films could be used; students might sort them apart, attempt to place them in chronological order for each film, and predict what they think the two stories will be about. They can be looking for similarities/links at this stage.
- Different images of aliens; connotations and expectations discussed. Links with/threats to normal British or American life elicited.
- The word 'alien' defined and discussed.

MAIN ATTRACTION: *Invasion in Village of the Damned*

If students do not yet know about the context of the Cold War, they will need to be given information; this could be done as a 'human photocopier' activity, with students in teams collecting information, or as a promenade/knowledge quest activity with individuals or pairs seeking clues from around the room. Questions that can be posited before students begin watching each film include:

- What is the source of the threat?
- Are lives being threatened? How?
- What is the attitude of those posing the threat?
- What benefits of the invasion are being suggested to humans?
- Why are the humans afraid?
- What is the most disturbing aspect of the film?
- In what ways are the 'new group' different from 'normal' humans?

- What do we think will happen at the end?
- What does it mean to be human?

Keywords: Invasion (define different types); Apocalypse/apocalyptic; Analogy. Watch both films.

A4L Questioning after viewing may elicit that the threat in *Damned* lies in the idea that children controlling adults turns society on its head/is perverse; adults felt anxious about post-war security being threatened, and possibly how the new generation would use their opportunities and potential to shape the future. The important detail of Zellaby's age is useful here.

Questioning on *Body Snatchers* may elicit that the right to control one's choices is being depicted as equivalent with the right to live. Students will need to understand American protection of the right to free enterprise; news items on American working-class reactions to ideas perceived as socialist may be useful here (e.g. Obama's healthcare legislation). Questioning should elicit that both films depict an invasive force hiding within the security and comfort of domestic life (one's own children/ members of one's community including family and friends).

Discuss the **endings** of the two films. Are either of them positive or hopeful? Show the original ending of *Body Snatchers*, without the framing story in the hospital. Offer information on McCarthy and the HUAAC. Elicit the idea that the film can also be seen as warning of the dangers of conformity and of not asserting independence.

NB. To support questioning, fact sheets (see below) might be given to different groups who then link their new information with the film (effectively interpret the film through the lens of that contextual information). Findings might then be carouselled/ 'messengered' between groups.

END CREDITS: Invasion then and now

Return to the fertile question above.

- How can we summarise the message each film was communicating about the world?
- What have we learned since this historical point?
- Are there analogies with our world, or not?
- What are the modern invasive threats that filmmakers might use today?
- What might they be trying to say about our world?

Discuss. A 10 minute debate proposal might be: 'Modern audiences would not feel threatened while watching a film about invasion.'

Extras

Other Ideas

Activities to be completed once films have been viewed include:

- the creation of an original apocalyptic story;
- the creation of an apocalyptic analogy with 21st-century life
- PEEL/other analysis of one of the films
- Comparative analysis of both films
- Create a sequel to each story, thinking about the ambiguous images at the end of each film.

Read

Invasion of the Body Snatchers by Jack Finney (source novel)

Invasion of the Body Snatchers: BFI Film Classics by Prof. Barry Keith Grant

Invasion of the Body Snatchers: The Making of a Classic by Mark Thomas McGee

The Midwich Cuckoos by John Wyndham (source novel for *Village of the Damned*)

Watch

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Philip Kaufman, 1978). Acclaimed remake; interesting to compare the two endings.

Day of the Triffids (Steve Sekely, 1963), also from a source novel by John Wyndham and depicting invasion.

BONUS FEATURE: THE COLD WAR IN POST-WAR BRITAIN & AMERICA

- The Cold War is the name given to a series of international conflicts that happened between the end of World War II and the early 1990s. On one side was the USA and its **allies** (countries who had political agreements with the USA, and hence supported it), known as the **Western Bloc**. On the opposing side was Russia, which was then known as the USSR (which also included smaller countries neighbouring Russia which had been **annexed** by it). This was known as the **Eastern Bloc**.
- The Eastern Bloc countries were **communist**, a political system in which all of a community's (or country's) wealth and produce is supposed to be shared between every member of that community. The Western Bloc countries supported **capitalism**, the opposite of communism, in which free enterprise (the right to start a private business and make money) is encouraged. It is interesting to think about the positive and negative aspects of both of these ideas.
- Both of the Blocs fiercely protected their own political system, and saw their enemies as a threat to their way of life. However, it is remembered as a '**cold**' war because there was no large-scale fighting between the two Blocs directly. They would, however, sometimes involve themselves when their supporters, or smaller communist or capitalist states, went to war in other parts of the world, often in **civil war**.
- One reason why the sides did not attack each other directly was because each side thought the other to have nuclear weapons which, if launched, would destroy massive areas completely. The two sides were in a position of **stalemate**: neither could launch a nuclear missile as they knew the opposing side would immediately do the same in retaliation. This was known as **Mutually Assured Destruction** – or MAD.
- **Many films have dealt with the topic of the Cold War**. While some present the metaphor of **invasion**, normally by aliens who threaten the American way of life, lots of films from the 1950s and 1960s shocked audiences with hideous **monsters** and mutated creatures which, the plots explain, are the horrific result of **nuclear testing** at sea (this is sometimes the story behind **Godzilla**, who first appeared in film in 1954). The **James Bond** films, beginning in 1962, deal with **espionage** – or spying – which was a huge part of how the Cold War was fought.
- Later on, the two opposing Blocs became involved in **the Space Race**: a competition to prove one Bloc's supremacy as a world superpower by developing such incredible technology that they could launch an astronaut into space before the other side could do so. Both sides spent huge amounts of resources on this

effort. Although the USSR launched the first man into space – Yuri Gagarin, in 1961 – the USA succeeded in landing the first human being on the Moon – Neil Armstrong, in 1969. Many films from the 1970s and early 1980s feature space travel, with film studios knowing that audiences were caught up in the excitement of the Space Race.

Senator Joseph McCarthy and HUAC

- During the early years of the Cold War in the 1950s, many American films, TV shows, publications and news strongly supported capitalism, and depicted communism as inherently evil. After the turbulence of World War II, Americans were experiencing a surge of optimism and prosperity: the **Baby Boom**, starting immediately after the war in the late 1940s, saw a trend in Americans settling down, buying their own homes and having children, causing an increase in the population. People were encouraged to spend money to boost the economy, and **free enterprise** – people going into business and making a profit – was crucial to the American way of life. The encouragement to spend money to possess products is known as **consumerism**.
- Not all Americans were content with capitalism and consumerism. Their objections included the idea that capitalism prized the model of a business owner becoming exceptionally wealthy and powerful compared to his/her often low-paid workers. Some looked to the UK's example: Britain had more public services run by the government (rather than owned by private business), such as the **National Health Service (NHS)**, begun after the war to ensure that all British people could access care by doctors and hospitals. Some Americans today still disapprove of government-run healthcare, since they believe it is **socialist** or communist.
- The US government appointed **Senator Joseph McCarthy**, a **Republican** senator from Wisconsin, to investigate Americans believed to be promoting communism. Many of those investigated were simply not seen to be supporting capitalism and consumerism strongly enough. People known to be politically **left-wing**, or anti-conservative, were often accused of being communist, and groups targeted included local government workers, members of trade unions (which argue for workers' rights, including decent pay from employers), teachers, and entertainment industry workers, including actors, musicians, writers and directors. Those who refused to be questioned by McCarthy's committee were often dismissed from their jobs and **blacklisted**, their names well-publicised so that they were unlikely to be employed again. Some famous Hollywood and Broadway figures' trials were so sensationalised in the news that their careers were effectively over.
- This 'communist menace', as it was seen, was known as the '**Red Scare**'; the colour red is associated with the Russian flag.

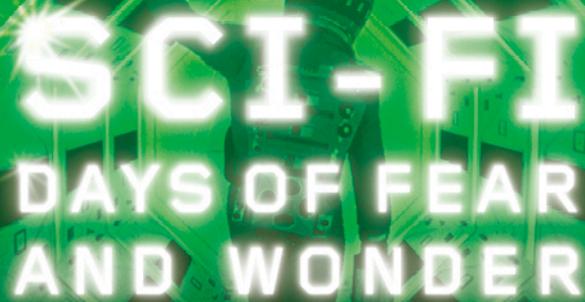
- People accused of not supporting capitalism were described as Un-American.
- McCarthy's organisation was known as the **House Un-American Activities Committee**, or HUAC.

Post-War Britain

- Immediately after World War II, living conditions in Britain were difficult. Some foodstuffs were still **rationed**, and shortages continued even though the war had ended.
- As Britain entered the 1950s, however, the country began to prosper again, with unemployment falling as low as 2% during that decade. There was much rebuilding to be done, and new housing required partly due to the **Baby Boom** – a surge in people settling down and starting families in a wave of post-war optimism.
- As in America, more money was spent on **consumer goods**, with many families owning a TV set, washing machine, car and refrigerator for the first time.
- The emphasis was on **family stability**, with consumer goods designed with a comfortable home and family environment in mind. People started to go on holiday more often, with holiday camps such as Butlins and Pontins becoming extremely popular with families. The television, still relatively new to most homes, replaced the fireplace as the focal point of a living room around which a family would gather.
- Television, film, magazines and advertising promoted the idea of home and family as being a safe haven, and the cornerstone of British society.

The Rise of the Teenager

- The 1950s also saw teenagers emerge for the first time as a separate social group, with particular music, fashion, film, food and consumer products all being marketed towards teenagers in Britain, and especially in America. Traditionally, children had been expected to be obedient to parents until they reached adulthood, at which point they were expected to be responsible, hardworking and mature.
- British teenagers in the 1950s sometimes organised themselves into gangs called mods, rockers or teddyboys, to show the kind of music and fashion they preferred. American teenagers might identify as greasers or beatniks.
- Many adults were shocked at the independence and energy of teenagers, disapproving of their new identities, and especially of gang activity. American

The title 'SCI-FI DAYS OF FEAR AND WONDER' is displayed in a large, glowing, white, sans-serif font. The text is centered and appears to be floating in a dark, green-tinted space that resembles the interior of a futuristic spacecraft or a complex, industrial structure with various panels and lights.

films were made in the 1950s that sensationalised 'wild' adolescent recklessness, often featuring biker gangs and joyriding, such as *The Pace That Thrills* (1952), *Teenage Devil Doll* (1955) and *Motorcycle Gang* (1957). They were often cautionary tales, playing on audiences' worst fears about the actions and fate of teenagers. Some films attempted to understand teenagers' feelings more sensitively, such as *The Wild One* (1953) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955).