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Kristin Pedersen

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Siegel, Nyby, and Lovecraft

Of Humanity, Sanity, and Their Opposites

Kristin Pedersen

Don Siegel's 1956 film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* brings up some questions about the human condition: What does it mean to be human? What makes humans human, and how can humans tell when something is wrong? The pod people within the film are without emotion, the most notable being remorse, fear, and even pain. This causes some disturbance in the mind of Miles Bennell, and, as a result, the audience watches him slowly drift into the gray area between true sanity and its opposite. He creates a paranoia in his mind so intense that psychologists in the film declare him certifiably insane before he can even tell his story. The paranoia exhibited by *Invasion's* protagonist and the transition of Santa Mira into an inhuman mass of pod people is reminiscent of the feelings created in other works of fiction before the film's conception. These "other works" are two stories written by H. P. Lovecraft and Christian Nyby's film *The Thing from Another World* (1951).

Invasion is an adaptation of these three works, which can be seen by the way each similarly answers the question "What does it mean to be human?" Each story gives a different aspect to *Invasion*, all contributing to the shared message that these works provide on the connection between emotions and humanity. The first Lovecraft story, "The Statement of Randolph Carter,"

connects the protagonists of both works via feelings of hopeless desperation and motivation. The second story, "The Transition of Juan Romero," explores what makes humanity what it is, as well as what happens when that humanity fades away by supernatural means, much like what happens with the pod people of Siegel's film. "Transition" also establishes paranoia in a way that stretches into *Invasion's* protagonists. *Invasion's* adaptation points from *The Thing* include the paranoia of the military personnel at the base as well as the descent of Dr. Carrington from being human to someone overtaken by his own selfish motivations to the point of unfeeling and remorselessness, much like the transition of Santa Mira as a whole being populated slowly by pod people.

"The Statement of Randolph Carter"

At the surface, "The Statement of Randolph Carter" and *Invasion* have very little in common; however, after a close reading of "Statement," it becomes apparent that Randolph and Miles are similar in a few ways, including their situations and motivations. Miles has been taken to a psychiatric hospital, where it can be inferred that he will be treated for some mental condition like paranoid schizophrenia or a manic disorder. He fights his "captors," the nurses who have taken him to the psychiatrist's office to have him evaluated. Randolph, on the other hand, is in what seems to be an interrogation room. Having been there for a while, Randolph fights back for, according to Fifer in his podcast, the *n*th time while his interrogators refuse to believe him ("The Statement of Randolph Carter," 00:00:36–00:00:42). His friend and colleague, Harley Warren, is dead, and Randolph allegedly killed him. But Randolph insists that it wasn't *he* who killed his friend—it was an unknown creature, rather, capable of terrible power and commanding "legions" of other creatures (Lovecraft, "Statement" 47), hidden away in the bottom of a deep hole in a graveyard that likely leads straight down to Hell.

The settings of these stories are very different, but the motivations behind the two men telling their stories are eerily similar. Something has happened. Something happened that no one will ever believe, no matter how often they tell the tale or what they say to convey its true feeling. The fact that no one believes their stories makes the plot of each tale feel more desperate, and that desperation builds into a feeling that the audience associates with insanity, fear, and paranoia. The hope that someone will believe them turns into futility and eventually fades into hopeless anxiety, a common theme

shared between many works of science fiction and horror (Schoblin 34). Just like *Invasion* ends with Miles screaming, “You’re next!” on the freeway, Randolph’s story climaxes with his description of the hellish pit Warren descended into and the voice growling from the depths, “YOU FOOL, WARREN IS DEAD!” (Lovecraft, “Statement” 47). The fear and paranoia that Lovecraft builds throughout Randolph’s tale is comparable to the fear and paranoia that Siegel uses to increase the intensity of Miles’s inevitable journey to the mental hospital.

Fear and paranoia are both powerful tools. Fear is concern and worry. Paranoia is the overarching suspicion and worry that come from fear itself. Thus, the more powerful of the two—the thing from which paranoia stems—is fear. Its “demand for its audience’s emotional involvement is great, and when it strikes, it does so deeply” (Schlobin 27). It has increasingly been used in film and literature to evoke an emotional response from the target audience. Miles and Randolph’s intensity makes a strong connection between *Invasion* and “Statement.” It shows that Miles and Randolph are the more emotionally charged characters of their respective stories. Compared to the pod people of *Invasion* and Warren of “Statement,” Miles and Randolph are more connected to themselves and their feelings. Feelings are what makes humans what they are, and by using fear as a catalyst for other emotions, both Siegel and Lovecraft succeed in creating desperation, intensity, and, in *Invasion*’s case, other emotions like the attachment between Miles and Becky Driscoll.

Miles is hesitant at first to believe Wilma’s claim that her uncle Ira is, in fact, not her uncle Ira. Miles watches Ira for a moment, even interviews the older man, before going back to Wilma. She insists that he is not her uncle, mainly because the emotion—the “twinkle,” as she calls it—is gone. Thus, this inhumanity that Wilma sees in the shell of her uncle is invisible. The difference between the pod people and Miles (as well as the other characters before their own transitions) “cannot be seen. . . . The essential distinction between the human and the inhuman moves from the physical to the metaphysical: humans have feelings; aliens do not” (Badmington 7). Thus, Miles’s emotion and development of what can be considered a paranoia throughout *Invasion* marks him as human. Even his outburst of “You’re next!” at the end of the film marks him as “not-a-pod-person,” seeing that he is having an emotional eruption bordering on mental breakdown. This

outburst can then, since he is showing his emotional state, lead Miles to be considered human instead of one of the unfeeling pod people.

The same connection happens between Randolph Carter and Harley Warren, specifically at the beginning of "Statement." Randolph seems to be troubled by how infatuated Warren is with "rare books on forbidden subjects" and a theory claiming that "*certain corpses never decay, but rest firm and fat in their tombs for a thousand years*" (Lovecraft, "Statement" 44). Warren doesn't seem to care that this might be the end of him, or that it could potentially be the end of Randolph should he come with Warren to the tomb. Warren shows no particular emotion until he and Randolph reach the tomb and remove the slab that rests atop it, even becoming frustrated when Randolph shows a desire to "accompany [Warren] into those sepulchral depths" (45). His desire to see what lies within the crypt overcomes his desire for his own safety and that of his friend. This dark desire overtakes him, showing the audience what is considered to be the "Lovecraftian paradox," which is described by Johnson as "indifferent and (for that very reason) menacing" (109). Warren lets this indifference override all other emotion until he realizes his mistake in the midst of the crypt, as he whisper-shrieks into the phone connected to Randolph, "*Carter, it's terrible—monstrous—unbelievable!*" (Lovecraft, "Statement" 46).

"The Transition of Juan Romero"

Looking at emotion and its role in humanity brings up points present in another Lovecraftian story, "The Transition of Juan Romero." Through the course of his story, the narrator watches Juan transform from a friendly—or at least quiet—man into a man who runs into a mineshaft, leaving the narrator alone in the dark with only a glowing ring to keep him company (Lovecraft, "Transition" 33). Where Miles becomes more frantic and attached to his friends before they transition to pod people, Juan becomes more erratic and runs into the darkness, regardless of any danger ahead and regardless of the unnamed narrator's position in the mines. Juan loses everything that makes him human and then dies in an unknown way, similar to Warren's implied death in "Statement" (Lovecraft, "Transition" 34; "Statement" 47). In "Transition," Juan's loss of humanity is not as subtle as the transition of Siegel's pod people or as focused on emotion as Warren's lack of humanity at the beginning of "Statement." However, the theme is still present, showing

that emotion as a characteristic of humanity is a commonality between many science-fiction stories and films.

In Juan's case, his lack of emotion is sudden. This is something that Siegel does not take from the story to incorporate into *Invasion*. Rather, it is the paranoia that Juan feels, the intense fear of the sound deep in the ground, that Siegel manages to translate so well into his own story. Siegel translates this fear of an unknown sound into a fear of an unknown entity that takes over Miles's home through the course of *Invasion*. He puts this fear in Miles most prominently, as well as in Becky before her own transition into a pod person. Fear of the unknown and emotional trauma are both themes that easily transfer from one story to another.

For example, in "Transition," Juan's loss makes the superintendent look into the area where Juan died. Nothing can be found, and no one really wants to continue the investigation, so he drops the whole thing. But the narrator says that "a perplexed look occasionally steals over his countenance as he sits thinking at his desk," hinting that they still wonder what could have happened to the man (Lovecraft, "Transition" 34). The death of Juan Romero shakes everyone to the core, to the point where everyone's a little wary about the whole thing. No one knows what happened to Juan, so they try to explain it away, only to find that they can't, and now they're afraid of what could happen to them. The trauma causes these miners to shift from going about their business to being afraid for their own well-being.

Miles feels this way as well. He fears falling asleep because he is unsure what will happen to him. Will he die? Will he ever be able to take control of his own body again? What will happen to his mind and soul? He never finds answers to these questions, so he refuses to fall asleep. And when Becky finally succumbs to sleep and becomes a pod person, the trauma of losing his love turns Miles into an emotional wreck that runs to the freeway, screaming at the people driving by. These feelings and experiences transfer well from "Transition" into *Invasion*.

The Thing from Another World

The Thing from Another World also shares common elements with *Invasion* and its pod people. Even from the beginning of the film, Dr. Arthur Carrington does not seem to have the same level of emotion as the others at the North Pole base—characters including Captain Patrick Hendry and Nikki Nicholson—and proves it throughout the adventure with "the Thing."

His most notable contribution to this fact is found at the point in the film where, in his fight with Captain Hendry, he says, “Knowledge is more important than life, Captain. We’ve only one excuse for existence: to think, to find out, to learn! It doesn’t matter what happens to us. Nothing matters except our thinking” (*The Thing*). This thought lines up with the pod people’s lack of emotion exactly: “Love, desire, ambition, faith—without them, life’s so simple” (Deutsch 307). Without something like emotion to distract pod people or Dr. Carrington, more can get done.

This idea draws parallels between *Invasion* and *The Thing*, making characters who look human seem less than human. Badmington claims that the “complete absence of ‘bug-eyed monsters’” makes it necessary for Siegel specifically to use something like a lack of emotion to describe the pod people’s alienness (7). Before Siegel used this tool in *Invasion*, however, Nyby used it in *The Thing*.

Nyby uses a lack of emotion in *The Thing* in a different way than Siegel uses it. Dr. Carrington is, in all aspects save emotional connection, human. However, he is more interested in knowledge and power than he is in connecting with other humans. He admires “the Thing,” saying at one point, “Its development was not handicapped by emotional or sexual factors” (*The Thing*, 00:46:15–00:46:19). Clearly, Dr. Carrington does not hold emotion in the highest regard, and that makes him a little frightening to the others at the base. When he begins to propagate “the Thing,” planting pieces of it in his laboratory and feeding them blood, the rest of the crew begins to fight him. He claims, in his own defense and in the defense of the monster, that “we owe it to the brain of our species to stand here and die without destroying a source of wisdom” (Trushell 81).

The pod people, on the other hand, are strictly alien. They are not human, though they look so on the outside. However, an interesting parallel is that they are plant-based, growing in literal seed pods. This is similar to the alien of *The Thing*. However, they are working together to take over this world and show the humans what it’s like to be without emotion and how much they could accomplish without petty feelings getting in the way. They “work as they have been ordered,” and that, in turn, is reminiscent of Dr. Carrington’s view of how “civilization has given us orders” (Ulonska 167; Trushell 81). This idea of hierarchy implies that there is nothing to be done except to follow orders and to do what is best for the “greater good,” or the whole population. However, the idea still feels detached, leading the audience to believe that

perhaps it is not for the “greater good.” Instead, Dr. Carrington seems to go about his business for the sake of perpetuating knowledge, power, and logic, ignoring emotion and feeling altogether. Dr. Carrington and the pod people share this goal between them.

Emotions and Humanity

Invasion combines aspects of all three stories and claims that logic and instinct are what makes a creature less human, while emotion and attachment make it more human. Miles accuses the pod people of being inhuman. That is true enough, given that the pod people grow out of literal seed pods and take over people’s minds as those people fall asleep. Bliss makes the claim that the pod people are “hardly different from those . . . who haven’t been changed yet” (“His Little Town” 21). They may look human, both physically and physiologically, but mentally and emotionally, they are completely different. This can be seen as a turn from humanity in the fact that they possess “qualities that suggest innocence’s opposite: corruption” (“His Little Town” 26). The corruption of emotion does not necessarily make someone inhuman; in fact, Miles eventually becomes corrupted by his paranoia toward the invasion of the pod people, thereby bordering on being insane. Randolph also becomes corrupted, consumed with thoughts of what was in that grave that could have killed Warren. However, the complete lack of emotional connection that the pod people show is something that humans do not generally experience. This marks the callousness of the pod people, of Warren, and of other characters such as Dr. Carrington and the transitioned Juan Romero as inhuman. They are not necessarily “monsters” in the traditional sense, but they lack the qualities that most make a person human. As Schelde puts it so well, “The essence of what it is to be human . . . is love, the kind of love that makes a man and a woman feel as if they are all alone in the world, the kind of love that isolates, that stresses individuality and free will” (101). An example of this love is that of Miles and Becky, as their romantic love is the only thing that keeps them separate from the body snatchers. Randolph and Warren also share this feeling, as their platonic love keeps them close and leaves Randolph feeling helpless and confused when Warren dies in the crypt.

Going back to the observation that an alien can look like a human without being human, an audience can see this idea strongly in Dr. Carrington. The doctor looks to be human, physically. However, he seems to have “fled from

emotion" altogether, hiding behind professionalism and logic (Bliss, "Two Aliens" 81). This lack of emotional connection Dr. Carrington has with others at the North Pole base prompts the rest of the crew to become more on edge, perhaps even more so than "the Thing" causes them to be. Carrington is not afraid of "the Thing" as it ravages the base; rather, he has detached himself from all feeling, letting his obsession with knowledge and the safety of "the Thing" itself overtake every emotion he could have had before that point. He even mocks Captain Hendry and the others, saying, "You're acting like frightened children" (The Thing 01:06:45–01:06:46). This complete lack of interest in the crew's emotional difficulties makes the pod people of *Invasion* look like a copy straight from Dr. Carrington's characteristics.

Logic does not necessarily connote evil. However, the pod people's "failing to behave in a certain way" led to their being noticed in the first place (Badmington 7). It also became obvious that they have no connections beyond what is absolutely necessary for survival. In doing this, they show their nature as "fancy parasites," taking what they need from their human hosts and removing whatever they do not need, in order to emerge "as 'itself,' a monstrous, unconscious animal guided only by almighty instinct" (Schelde 96).

This "instinct" that Schelde describes is also present within "Transition," observed specifically when the narrator sees Juan sprint deeper into the mines, and later when he sees "shapes, all infinitely distant, [beginning] to detach themselves from the confusion" that was a blinding light with Juan inside of it (34). Juan leaves the narrator alone in the mines to follow the strange sound, and in doing so follows the instinct of whatever is living inside him and rushes to his death. This is similar to the way the pod people rush at Miles and Becky in Miles's work office, failing to realize that Miles has a syringe full of sleeping medicine prepared for them. Just like Juan rushes into the darkness, the pod people sent to take care of the two heroes of *Invasion* rush to their own incapacitation at the hands of what was previously an unknown enemy.

The instinct is also present in Dr. Carrington. His instinct is a little different, however, as there is no alien in him. His instinct comes from protecting the single thing that he thinks is worth saving, which is "the Thing" itself. In a way, that makes "the Thing" an anti-emotional parasite, prompting Dr. Carrington to detach himself from the rest of the base's population and move his intentions toward protecting "the Thing" and its offspring. He

decides that the life of this unknown creature that he hasn't studied is more important than the lives of his colleagues, and this becomes the basis for his being considered inhuman and uncaring. He, like the pod people, becomes consumed with erroneous ideas about what emotion's role should be in his life, and that makes him appear inhuman, or at least less human than the others with him at the base.

If these everyday, natural emotions and emotional responses are what define the human condition, what do more extreme emotions and their respective responses mean when it comes to humanity? In *Invasion*, Miles turns from being a mostly logical (while also emotion-prone) human to one consumed with a deep, almost manic paranoia who runs across the highway screaming, "You're next! You're next!" (*The Thing* 01:18:06–01:18:11). Randolph's story also reaches a point where it feels hysterical when he describes the voice rising from the crypt that Warren had descended into and never returned from (Lovecraft, "Statement" 47). Even Juan shows emotion when he whispers to his narrator friend, "*Señor*, THAT SOUND! . . . THAT THROB DOWN IN THE GROUND!" (Lovecraft, "Transition" 32–33). Each of these characters shows such intense emotion that it is difficult to compare them to their respective opposites: the pod people, Harley Warren, and post-transition Juan. Does there come a point, however, when all these characters lose their humanity *because* of their intensity?

For example, Miles is taken into the mental hospital screaming and fighting against the men who hold him. He insists that he is telling the truth and that anyone who does not believe him is in serious danger. This paranoia that has built up over the course of his story has drawn him into a place so deep and dark that it can be considered "overstepping" into the realm of too much emotion, compared with the little-to-no emotion that the pod people show. His symptoms are comparable to apophenia, which Punter defines as "the perception of patterns in data otherwise regarded as without meaning" (185). In other words, he sees what he wants to see. For example, he sees the patterns of the pod people and starts to compare the hospital staff to the aliens, and that causes some problems when it comes to the medical professionals that take him into custody. These professionals become the "natural" humans, with emotions that stay level as they make sure Miles doesn't harm anyone with his supposed craziness.

One can picture Randolph in about the same situation. In the beginning, it seems that he has been with his interrogators for a while and has told this

story repeatedly. This becomes apparent because of the annoyed, tired tone he takes when he offers this introduction to his story:

I repeat to you, gentlemen, that your inquisition is fruitless. Detain me here forever if you will; confine or execute me if you must have a victim to propitiate the illusion you call justice; but I can say no more than I have said already. Everything that I can remember, I have told with perfect candour. Nothing has been distorted or concealed, and if anything remains vague, it is only because of the dark cloud which has come over my mind—that cloud and the nebulous nature of the horrors which brought it upon me. (Lovecraft, "Statement" 44)

Here, he shows that he is calm and perhaps tired of explaining this to the men who detain him still. However, as the story reaches its climax, and especially at the end, Randolph takes on a new tone: a tone full of horror, worry, and panic as he recalls the voice coming from the depths, saying, "Shall I say that the voice was deep; hollow; gelatinous; remote; unearthly; inhuman; disembodied? What shall I say? It was the end of my experience, and is the end of my story. I heard it, and knew no more" (Lovecraft, "Statement" 47). His continuous use of adjectives to describe the voice implies terror and awful recollection, as does the repetition of the word "heard" in the next few sentences. As he recalls more details about the voice and what happened before he blacked out, he becomes more terrified and, in the mind of the reader, less emotionally stable. It could be said that, like Miles, he becomes erratic, repeating words with more intensity marked by repeated pauses and using more adjectives to describe the event. This can also be seen in Miles's story, as his voice speeds up and gets increasingly louder as he tells his own story. It is impossible to tell exactly how Randolph conveys his experience, but it can be read the same way Miles tells his: the loud voice; the quick, desperate words; and the overuse of adjectives all paint a picture of stress and paranoia, even to the brink of insanity, because of what they have experienced.

Juan also shows signs of going insane by the time his end comes. He leaps from bed in the middle of the night and stares wordlessly at the ring on the narrator's hand. They go together, in silence, into the abandoned mine, and then, as the narrator's ring begins to glow, Juan bolts into the mineshaft "with a wild outcry" and continues to shriek in "harsh but impressive syllables" (Lovecraft, "Transition" 33). Juan's descent into insanity here is more obvious than Randolph's, since Randolph steers clear of unintelligible

words. Miles also mostly stays away from noises and words that no one else can understand, though by the end he starts trailing off as he gets more and more frustrated. Juan's insanity is more monster-based than it is emotion-based; however, the end result—minus his death—is about the same in effect. He loses his mind due to an outside force, which, to an extent, is comparable to Miles's "insanity" in the mental hospital.

While exaggerated emotion obviously contributes to a character's outward insanity, it doesn't necessarily take from their humanity. Instead, the more extreme outbursts shown by Miles, Randolph, Warren, and Juan make the audience ask, "What would I do in this situation?" This question prompts the audience to feel empathy instead of detachment toward the character's emotional response, which is the opposite of how most audiences would react to the emotionless logic of the inhuman portrayals. Siegel, Lovecraft, and Nyby use emotionlessness in ways that portray inhumanity much better than built-up emotion finally escaping. The descent into inhumanity is not always subtle—in Dr. Carrington's case, he is always emotionally detached from the rest of the group—but emotion playing an important role in the meaning and idea of humanity is a powerful message. Siegel's use of emotion (or lack thereof) in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* feels strongly based on the way Lovecraft uses emotion in "The Statement of Randolph Carter." "The Transition of Juan Romero," also has many of these elements, including a form of parasitism that the pod people seem to mimic in their invasion of Earth. Nyby's *The Thing from Another World* is different in many ways; however, the main theme of emotional connection and its role in making someone "human" is still present in the way Dr. Carrington is portrayed throughout the film, making him analogous to the pod people. These ties show that *Invasion* is a loose adaptation of these three earlier stories, making it another example of the differences that make humans what they are compared to other creatures on the planet. While this is a common theme among many science fiction films of the 1950s and onward, these stories come together as a clever way to create and convey emotional response, to make the audience ask what it is that makes each person human, and to combine old ideas with new ways to show them through film, fear, and personal reflection.

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