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Source: *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Nov., 1993), pp. 619-637

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4121371>

Accessed: 17-10-2017 20:03 UTC

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THE STORIES TOLD IN SCIENCE FICTION AND SOCIAL SCIENCE: Reading *The Thing* and Other Remakes From Two Eras

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We re-examine science fiction films of the 1950s (made during the cold war), and their remakes in the 1970s and 1980s (made in the post-sixties, after Vietnam and Watergate) in conjunction with stories told by social scientists during the same eras. In this light, we provide a subversive reading of social scientific data sets and science fiction films, and pay special attention to both versions of *The Thing* (1951, 1982) as relevant examples of cold war and post-sixties statements. Social scientific and film productions of the 1950s correlate with optimistic public sentiments of the cold war era in regard to the abilities of the military, government, and medicine to solve social problems. The more recent reproductions conjure images of a much more pessimistic view of institutions. We suggest by way of a conclusion that readings of social scientific products, science fiction films, and their remakes can inform social theories in general and postmodern social theories in particular.

When the filmmakers of the 1970s and 1980s began to remake 1950's science fiction stories, they imagined a new America and inspired a "renaissance" of science fiction films with "historically specific . . . visions" of a "national mythology" (Torry 1991, pp. 7, 9). Especially pertinent to "America's [recent] history of failure and guilt" (Sobchack 1987, p. 228), science fiction filmmakers' specific visions of historical eras employed the discourse of "cold war" films that "shaped and expressed . . . political consciousness" (Rogin 1984, pp. 2–3). As central to such discourse, these films "emerged as a [distinct] genre" with an equally distinct agenda—to juxtapose and associate film images with concerns and anxieties felt by American audiences in regard to perceptions of repressive systems (Sobchack 1988, p.6).

The implied significance of "science fiction" suggests a "real science" or a non fictional mode of discourse. However, just as films situate particular visions of life rather than

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The Sociological Quarterly, Volume 34, Number 4, pages 619-651.

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ISSN: 0038-0253.

merely reflecting it (Bakhtin 1986; Denzin 1988; 1989; 1991a; Lucanio 1987; Sobchack 1976; 1987) so does science provide situated stories concerning how human beings perceive and act toward physical things and objects (Mead 1934). In specific regard to the science fiction *genre*, Rogin (1984, pp. 29–32) and Torry (1991, p. 9) suggest that anxieties and concerns over the American “historical narrative” are recuperated by filmmakers and social scientists for the purpose of creating dramatic and provocative texts that can be read and interpreted by audiences.

Beyond reflecting any particular reality, social scientific and science fictional texts address events that resonate to audience sensibilities concerning all that is possible within a given historical context. For example, the threat of nuclear warfare and the faith in institutions to solve emergent and life threatening problems are relevant to both science fiction filmmakers and scientific researchers. As with other artistic texts (e.g., novels), science fiction films and scientific accounts provide “narrative[s] which dramatically . . . provoke the reader to think, observe, and to draw his own abstract conclusions” (Sobchack 1988, p. 25). Through the use of systematic methodologies (typically in the form of surveys), artistic devices (see Shohat 1991), ideological narratives (cf. Comolli 1985; Jameson 1979; Nichols 1981; Stam 1991), and boundary maintenance (e.g., segregation of subversives from non-subversives—see Marchetti’s 1991, pp. 278–280 and Wood’s 1985, pp. 202–206 analogous discussions of ethnic and horror films respectively), filmmakers and scientists imagine metaphorical stories that serve as “mediated version[s] of . . . already textualized and discursivized socio-ideological world[s]” (Stam 1991, p. 252).

In light of themes imagined by science fiction filmmakers and scientists, a “subversive reading” (Denzin 1987) of film and scientific documents can provide an interpretive perspective involving: 1) the military; 2) research science; 3) medical science; and 4) the individual’s sense of community and security. Through this process, interpreters can read messages into artistic and scientific texts to create critical subtexts, neither necessarily intended by the producers/directors or researchers nor appreciated by the mass audience (Denzin 1990a; 1991b; Musolf 1992, pp. 182–183).¹ It requires, in part, appreciation of the historical contexts in which the texts were produced, and a “reading into” the texts’ symbols, metaphors, archetypes, and signifiers as related to these historical contexts. In particular, we focus on differences in how the mediated symbols, archetypes, and signifiers in science fiction films and non fictional scientific documents represent two contrasting historical eras associated with the post-World War II 1950s; the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate 1970s; and the post-AIDS 1980s. A subversive reading of such films and documents as historically informed narratives can allow us to place these differences in sharper sociological focus.

The production of several remakes of 1950’s science fiction “classics” during the 1970s and 1980s created opportunities to not only investigate how critical readings of these remakes correlated with scientific readings of social perceptions in the context of particular historical circumstances, but to view how these circumstances are associated with perceptions of reality. These films include: *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956; 1978), *The Blob* (1958; 1988), *Invaders from Mars* (1953; 1986), *The Fly* (1958; 1986), and *The Thing* (1951; 1982). As Higashi (1981, p. 3) suggests, “remakes testify to the fact that film production does not occur in a vacuum but in a specific historical [and scientific] context,” and can be read as dramatizing changes from one historical era to the next. In

this vein, we compare and contrast different versions of the aforementioned films, paying particular attention to *The Thing*, in order to assess how the stories told by filmmakers relate to the stories told by scientists.

STORIES OF THE COLD WAR

Although critics and scholars have struggled to define what a “science fiction” film is (see e.g., Baxter 1970; Dervin 1980; Desser 1985), most would agree with Sobchack’s (1987, p. 21) contention that the self-conscious production of and critical acceptance of this *genre* emerged from the ashes of World War II (Warren 1982). Specifically, their stories emerged within the context of the cold war ideology which crystallized during the 1950s. Comparing and contrasting the mediated realities and fantasies displayed in science fiction films of the 1950s with realities and fantasies emerging in science fiction films of later decades has inspired discourse on the subject of how the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, and post-AIDS eras differ in their image-making from such image-making in the 1950s (cf. Bennett and Woollacott 1987, pp. 76–90 in regard to comparing and contrasting popular heroes of the 1950s with those of latter eras). Attention to how such fantasies became associated with particular cold war ideologies of the 1950s, and contributed to not only present day policy making, but to the making of an entire presidential image (see Rogin’s 1987 treatment of *Ronald Reagan* as a composite of his own and other films), served as a basis for critical comparisons between films made in the 1950s and in the 1960s through the 1980s (see e.g., Corliss 1986; Gordon 1987; Nagl 1983; Payne 1989).

Cold war threats became grist for filmmakers in the 1950s who were struggling with, among other things, the problem of attracting viewers. The advent of television and its subsequent popularity challenged them to create reasons to go to the movies. One tried and true strategy for this is to tap into peoples’ fears. This was specifically true of the fear of losing what had been won in hard fought struggles (i.e., the freedom from the threat from outside oppression won with the demise of Nazism at the end of World War II). Because the major economic and social disruptions caused by the depression and world war were over, those in the middle class who had lived through these anxious times could finally look forward to a promising and secure future. Yet, celebrating this security became a form of anxiety itself. The supposedly secure American of the 1950s was also an anxious American who could be convinced that all previous gains were endangered.

The fears of the late 1970s and early 1980s were on the other hand, not nearly as clearly delineated. Filmed stories in this era have a decidedly darker message than earlier productions. Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* perhaps best represents films that addressed the American post-Vietnam perception of the military. The insanity of the conflict and of the institutions supporting it became the dominant themes in film as opposed to American prowess in combat and its heroic ideological trappings.² In turn, “cult films” made in the late 1960s and early 1970s also provoked images of conventional arrangements, as supported by traditional institutions, as either ineffective or altogether irrelevant (see Grant 1991, pp. 128–129). In this vein, perceived threats were no longer only on the outside, but also from within. Institutional trust had been shattered with Watergate and Vietnam and paranoia as a national *zeitgeist* had taken hold. The fear of “gains lost” was transformed into a feeling that gains were never made, and only duplicity by the power elite had made such perceptions possible. Yet filmmakers were not the only ones who keyed on

such perceptions. Social scientists also created artifacts that would presumably represent a systematic overview of how the people regarded the signifiers and symbols associated with their institutions.

STORIES TOLD BY SCIENTISTS: PUBLIC OPINION IN THE COLD WAR AND POST COLD WAR ERAS

The prevailing stereotype of scientific inquiry poses scientists and their acts as objective, impartial, and straightforward; seeking to simplify that which is complex. Advocates of such a view in the social sciences have attempted to portray sociological theorizing and discourse as applied to specific concepts and variables that pertain to explicit and shareable rules of inquiry and theorizing. Resolute conformity to these rules, and mature utilization of concepts and variables results in a distinct and "voiceless" narrative, wherein facts and data prevail over images and speculation. In the social sciences, several have provided skeptical critiques of this stereotype (see e.g., Couch 1987; Denzin 1992; Gouldner 1967; Lemert 1991; Mills 1959; Seidman 1991), maintaining that, in general, every text has a particular voice announcing a particular narrative from a particular point of view. Even in the course of playing strictly by the rules, scientific discourse still advances a story line that is replete with values, biases, and judgments.

Although such stories are associated with a method of inquiry and purpose that are altogether different from artistic and literary productions, they nevertheless utilize similar aesthetic devices (e.g., irony, metaphor, point of view, images of protagonists and antagonists, and dramatic pathos) to portray situationally specific and socially constructed realities (cf. Gusfield's 1976, pp. 17–18 discussion of the "literary rhetoric of science," and Brown's 1977, pp. 50–53 description of the "aesthetic point of view" in the social sciences). Nevertheless, stories told by scientists are often grounded in an implicitly objective past, or against a background that an audience or readership recognizes as having a valid existence (see Maines, et al. 1983). In regard to scientific stories pertaining to the cold war, the post-World War II 1950s are often centered in the context of solving problems external to the country, and the subsequent decades of the 1970s and 1980s are cast in a context associated with pessimism about solving a country's internal malaise (see e.g., Rogin 1984; Skolnick and Currie 1991). In 1951, amid the afterglow of the American triumph after World War II and unease about the conflict in Korea, U. S. film and television producers were interested in representing conflicts within science fiction as moral and ideological struggles (see Biskind 1983; Dowdy 1975; Sayre 1982), especially as pertinent to destructive capabilities and possibilities. As Torrey (1991, p. 10) notes, "the years 1950–51 saw widespread discussion in the popular press of the scientific, strategic, and moral aspects of President Truman's decision . . . to mandate the development of the hydrogen bomb." The pessimism that gripped a 1930s America in an economic and social depression was now transformed into a paradoxical paranoia. On the one hand, American democracy and capitalism seemed invincible. On the other hand, these foundations were seen as endangered by antithetical ideologies. Thus, subversives and subversions that could topple even "the invincible" needed to be exposed and defeated. Such threats were represented by "enemies within" and embodied in the form of Communists, who were seen as altogether more resourceful, duplicitous, subversive, and treacherous than America's previous antagonists, the Nazis (Bennett and Woollacott 1987; Rogin 1984).

America's emergence from the second World War created vivid impressions in its populous about institutions most specifically involved in celebrating a triumphant military. National confidence in the military at this point in history was extremely high in relation to subsequent years. The military returned from the war in Europe to celebrations and ticker-tape parades; a great victory had been achieved. Lipset and Schneider (1983) point out that Americans emerged from the great depression in the 1930s with new found optimism about the major social institutions that continued into the mid-1960s. Indeed, the mood of the country, as expressed in film and scientific texts alike, suggested that "America's armed forces can turn back any invasion" (Peary 1988, p. 254).

Scientists clearly demonstrated this sentiment about the military in their production of public opinion polls. In 1948, Gallup (1972, p. 726) asked a respondent group to identify "America's most important problem". "Military preparedness" ranked last among the eleven alternatives being identified by only 1% of the respondents as a concern. This measured attitude takes on special meaning when it is contextualized in regard to other surveyed opinion and historical occurrences. In particular, pollsters dramatized a tension associated with American confidence in the readiness of the military on the one hand, and concern for a clear and present danger associated with a perceived threat on the other hand. Indeed, in the years just prior to the release of *The Thing*, Gallup measured that at least 50 percent of Americans felt that another war was "likely" in the near future (in 1948, 54 percent agreed with this statement; in 1949, 50 percent agreed with this statement—(pp. 714, 839). Furthermore, six months before the film's release date, the United Nations commenced military action in Korea. In 1950, Gallup asked Americans whether they felt that the action in Korea would evolve into World War III. Fifty-seven percent of those surveyed felt that it would (p. 933). Further, 33 percent of those surveyed believed that the Soviet Union wanted war with the United States (p. 952). Confidence in the military became portrayed as faith in this institution's strength rather than in the relative stability of the world at large.

Public perception of the research sciences are more difficult to imagine for this time period. However, using the advent of the atomic bomb as a signifier for the research sciences, national opinion of scientists and expectations regarding their activities resonate to the portrayal of scientists such as the admirable but threatening Carrington in *The Thing*. In regard to the symbolic efforts of science, citizens were supportive of the American effort to create a nuclear arsenal but wary of its consequences. In 1949, Gallup (1972, p. 797) asked Americans if they felt that the development of atomic capabilities was a good thing. Fifty-nine percent suggested they felt it was. Subsequent questions, however, asked whether the "bomb" was viewed as a threat. In 1950, 53 percent of Americans believed that there was at least a fair chance of being attacked with nuclear weapons (p. 950) and 73 percent felt that civilian bombing in America was an inevitability in the next war (1978, p. 916). Further, in 1950 Gallup began asking questions about arms control (1972, pp. 839, 907) and whether the world would survive the next war at all (1972, p. 919). Although minorities of Americans expressed support or concern for these topics (less than 20 percent for either), the fact the pollsters asked these questions at this time suggests a growing perception of "the bomb" as a national and personal threat despite the support of its existence.

Among scientific texts that dealt specifically with the American perceptions of science, the Survey Research Center's (University of Michigan) national survey (1958) dramatized three significant perceptions. First, the public in general viewed science as positive. A

vast majority (83 percent) regarded "net impact of science on society" as making "the world . . . better off". Second, however, a sizeable majority (81 percent) recognized negative consequences associated with the specific effects of science. Specifically, some (23 percent) suggested that scientific research "breaks down people's ideas of right and wrong," and others (22 percent) viewed scientists as "prying into things they really ought to stay out of (sic)". Third, the largest percentage of respondents (12 percent) regarded "scientists themselves" as responsible for "the bad effects of science." In these texts, Americans perceived the research sciences as virtuous but also as representing a real threat, one that can result from a blurring of "right and wrong" or as Peary (1988) might suggest, "a purity of purpose" within the scientist himself.

The Survey Research Center also portrayed a schism existing between the research sciences and the medical sciences. Survey respondents, when asked to specify "the good effects of science on the world," identified the advancements in medical treatment (49 percent - the most reported of 11 options). When asked to specifically identify "the bad effects of science on the world," the respondents predominantly identified the creation of atomic capability (52 percent - the most reported of 10 options).

The United States emerging from the 1970s was clearly a different nation than the one which had survived the forties. America had again just ended a war, but the impressions left as a legacy of this military encounter were far different than those of World War II. The television brought the war in Vietnam into the living room. Body counts became part of nightly dinner conversation and the confidence in the American military greatly diminished. Botched military operations such as the "Massacre at Mai Lai," and duplicitous decisions such as the bombing of Cambodia were more at the forefront of the American consciences than the might of the U.S. military industrial complex. This "recession of confidence" in the military reached a low with the evacuation of Saigon. The American military had done the unthinkable; it had lost a war. In this light, Slater (1970), Toffler (1970), Sennett (1977), and Lasch (1979) identified common issues pertaining to loneliness, anomie, isolation, alienation, self obsession, and self hatred as not simply part of, but central to the decade; and as different in form and content from their appearance in the nineteenth century. To these thinkers, as well as to some sociologists (Dahrendorf 1979; Gouldner 1967), individuals in society were becoming decentered—or unconnected to history (Mills 1959).³

Scientific representations of American sciences were not faring much better than the military. The triumphs of the early part of the century were being overshadowed by the consequences of unbridled science. The incident at Three Mile Island in 1979, for example, has been mentioned as "the beginning of the end for the nuclear industry" (Curran and Renzotti 1990, p. 553). Toffler, Lasch, Sennett, and Slater suggested that the fates of common individuals and the institutions supporting them were at cross purposes. Coupled with this concern was the depressing thought that the fate of the common person was inescapably tied to the fate of these institutions. In this light, it is not only that humanity is stripped of its ability to survive without technology and therefore subservient to it (Wiesner 1973), but it is also that humanity cannot survive amid technology either. Indeed, science is truly seen as a two edged sword. The industrial efficiency brought about by the advent of the micro-chip and robotics also brought about the automation that displaced millions of workers. The development of plastics and modern chemical processing brought with it the "Love Canal" and other environmental catastrophes. Science, in the

Table 1
Public Confidence in Institutions

Survey Question: As far people running (Medicine, Science, Military) are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them? (Percentages of people suggesting they have a “great deal of confidence” in these institutions)*

	1966–1971	1972–1982	1983–1987
Medicine	67	45	36
Science	44	35	30
Military	47	29	23

Notes: *Date provided by Davis and Smith (1991) and Harris Survey (1972).
Numbers expressed as a percent.

minds of Americans, had lost sight of the individual human in the attempt to better humanity.

Unlike the earlier measures of public attitudes about these institutions (those assessed in the 1950s), researchers measured specific attitudes beginning in the 1960s. Table one details the declining public confidence in each of these institutions, moving from a extrapolated high during the 1950s (coinciding with the releases of *The Thing* and the other science fiction films of interest) to a low during the late 1970s and early 1980s (coinciding with the releases of the remakes of the above films).

STORIES TOLD BY SCIENCE FICTION FILMMAKERS: *THE THING*
IN THE COLD WAR AND POST-COLD WAR ERAS

Writing as Don A. Stuart, John W. Campbell’s (1948) *Who Goes There* described “a thing” from another planet “with a bluer sun” who sought human flesh it could convert into atomic energy. It lands accidentally at an American South Pole research station populated by a mix of twelve scientists, naval officers, and NCOs. Three survive the encounter and manage to kill the monster. While the story ends triumphantly from the point of view of these survivors, they cast an ominous look into the future. Issues such as scientific progress, once thought to be beyond reproach are discussed among the three with caution and fear as the story ends. Campbell reserved the Don A. Stuart name for stories that were more intellectual, philosophical, and contemplative than the ones he wrote as Campbell. Stuart’s stories displayed a more somber alternative to the optimism of other technology and science fiction stories of the time (see Erisman [1992] for a discussion of more sanguine stories of the day)—especially those he wrote as Campbell for *Astounding Science Fiction*, a magazine he edited during the 1930s, which were directed at younger audiences (Fred Erisman made this point in a personal correspondence).⁴

Campbell’s/Stuart’s story suggests a loss of innocence about and faith in scientific and bureaucratic projects. However, as recontextualized, the 1951 film release of *The Thing* did not resonate to this suggestion, and actually celebrated the merging of science and the military to solve a pressing problem. As with the printed story, this film’s monster is hostile to other living organisms—two scientists and numerous sled dogs are killed and

drained of their blood. It is also a form of vegetation that can reproduce asexually. Hendry, the military representative, perceives "the thing" as a threat and seeks the help of the crew to destroy it. The scientist Carrington, on the other hand, perceives "the thing" as a research opportunity and desires to communicate with it. He begins breeding clones of it from "seeds" taken from it at an earlier encounter. Hendry finds this out and destroys the work that Carrington has started.

Critical analysis of the 1951 release evaluated the image of the scientist as irrational in his drive for the acquisition of knowledge and willing to risk life toward that end (see Biskind 1983, p. 126; Peary 1988, p. 251; Sobchack 1987). Carrington's belief that the alien is superior to man because of its lack of emotion or "heart" inspires his attempt to breed the alien and to foil its destruction in the final confrontation. Such extremism is stopped only by the rational pragmatism of the military. This schism between the military and science is further developed to recognize the differences in relationships between the military and the research sciences and the military and the medical sciences. Whereas Carrington clearly poses a threat to national security with what Peary (1988, p. 253) defines as a "purity of purpose" (Carrington insists that "knowledge is more important than life"), the medical sciences (as embodied by Dr. Stern) are clearly in line with the military. While Carrington speaks over those around him, Stern patiently explains and helps to educate. The physical attributes of the two characters further accentuate the differences in the two sciences. Carrington is regarded as a subversive (Peary 1988, p. 253 notes "an insidious goatee and a Russian fur hat"; Biskind 1983, p. 127 calls him "a thinking man's David Niven, out of place among the rough and tumble soldiers"). Stern is simply an older man dressed in sweaters and comfortable pants, reminiscent of Hollywood's television image of a father home after work.

The contrast between inscrutable scientist and accessible medical researcher can be extended beyond this particular film depiction. As evident from the Los Alamos project, the standpoint of military personnel towards the scientific community resembled the gruff authoritarianism of managers attempting to control and discipline their gifted and (from the point of view of authority) erratic subordinates. Medical researchers have appeared to avoid such conflict, perhaps because of the differing purposes involved. For instance, at the same time that J.R. Oppenheimer designed the atomic bomb and said, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds," (as quoted by Dyer 1985, p. 96) William Kolff designed the artificial kidney and became the savior of millions. Both advances changed the world forever and each added to the evolving perceptions of the American view of the research and medical sciences.

Peary (1988), however, insists that *The Thing* is far from being "antiscience" as some commentators would suggest. He points out that "Carrington and his extremists are balanced by reasonable men of science;" and further notes that when Scotty (a newsman stationed at arctic base) "reports Carrington was one of the heroes in the battle with the alien" the rest of the collected company show approval (Peary 1988, p. 253). Carrington's "purity of purpose" is admirable in an idyllic sense; it simply must be tempered with pragmatism. The fundamental concern of science should be the protection and betterment of mankind not the quest for absolute knowledge.

In contrast, the 1982 remake of *The Thing* emphasized the alien object as a metaphor for the pathological integration of science, medicine, and the military. As a force that "imitates other life forms . . . perfectly," and "wants to hide in an imitation," it symbolizes the ongoing blurring between that which is strange and familiar; and that which is ally

and foe. Instead of depicting a crew victorious over an external menace, the film dramatized the transformation of a peaceful collective to a collection of paranoid individuals terrorized by each other. The men begin to show signs of panic by yelling, accusing, and arguing with each other. As the leader of the fight against the monster, MacReady laments that, "Nobody trusts anybody now." Confronting the survivors at the base MacReady warns prophetically that "we are not getting out . . . alive, but neither is [the] thing."

The remake of *The Thing* has an even darker view of progress than that which appears in *Who Goes There?* Prior to the thing's emergence, the alienated crew are bored with their surroundings and functions. While the men do not exist in conflictual tension, they have abandoned discourse in favor of isolated interactions with computers (e.g. computer chess), isolated viewing of videos (especially video reruns like "Let's Make a Deal"), and routinized games (e.g., ping pong, cards). Medical, military, and scientific technologies not only fail to facilitate the crew's objectives, but also contribute to frustration and isolation. After the thing's emergence, the medical scientist Blair uses his sophisticated technology to recognize its immense threat, but cannot use this knowledge to overcome it. Eventually, Blair is treated by the crew as if he is paranoid. His "madness" is founded on information that fails to empower and disables him. In light of postmodernism, Blair's madness is a form of realism which cannot be placed properly in a rational/bureaucratic framework (cf. Foucault 1965). There is no pragmatic intellectual community (Habermas 1981), only a world of alcohol, drugs, boredom, and machines. Whereas the crew in the original did exhibit conflict, it was resolvable (in favor of a right winged ideology). In the remake, conflict only exists among the crew after a complete breakdown in trust.

As an insidious life form that infects others swiftly and unpredictably, the menace of the thing in the remake is linked to fear of "sudden death" or "sudden death sentences." One major contradiction in the contemporary scientific age is that in "conquering" the nineteenth century (including its diseases), science has made itself more vulnerable because it contributed to and failed to conquer fatal possibilities of the late 20th century. Thus, the post-World War II recognition of atomic annihilation and the current dread of AIDS keys attention to science as either an intentional instigator or an unintentional perpetrator of such foreboding. In doing so science becomes associated with two established terrors: one that suggests legitimate representatives of institutions are in actuality the perpetrators and perpetuators of evil; and another portraying evil in its contemporary image as much more powerful than the images of good.

The military in the form of the erratic and barely competent Garry is ineffective from the onset. Science is not only impractical in the remake, but neither does it have a pragmatic contrast. Thus, science is not too theoretical nor esoteric in that it has no center to make any designation meaningful. In the context of the late 1970s and amid the declining lack of faith in supposedly enlightened institutions, science is non-representative (cf. Lyotard's 1984 discussion of postmodernism). Rather it becomes associated with themes of doom, terror, loss of agency, ineffectual resistance to threats, information without practical application, and failure to distinguish nature from copy (which, in current form, are associated postmodern themes—see e.g., Farberman 1991; Harvey 1989; Denzin 1991b; Rosenau 1992; Seidman 1991).

In light of postmodernism, both releases of *The Thing* can be compared and contrasted in reference to ongoing distrust and pessimism that has found expression in social scientific and artistic statements since the 1960s (Bernstein 1986). On the one hand, "the thing" as creature is a blatant metaphor for particular social problems afflicting an era. On

the other hand, attempts to deal with this creature involve more subtle metaphorical constructions of social groups' faith (or lack thereof) in humanity and its destructive devices (cf. Richardson 1991, pp.174–175).

FURTHER STORIES: SCIENCE FICTION MAKES AND REMAKES

Science fiction films which depict the social perception of science “run amok” are common. Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (setting the precedent for such films) details the conflict between a lone astronaut searching for humanity's place in the cosmos and a super computer, Hal. It is only by overcoming the computer, a technology of his own creation, that the astronaut (and metaphorically humankind) can evolve and fulfill its unique destiny. This theme, centering on alienation from science, was further developed in *Bladerunner*, *Hardware*, *Colossus: The Forbin Project*, and both films in *The Terminator* series.

At this time a new image of American medicine was also developing. The popular images of the medical doctor created in the sixties and late seventies were rapidly receding. Television shows such as *Marcus Welby M.D.*, *Dr. Kildare*, and *Ben Casey* depicted the medical professional as efficient and paternally protective. The image for the late seventies and early eighties, on the other hand, underwent a radical metamorphosis. Doctors not only became detached, but hazardous to health (e.g., *Hospital*); not only impersonal, but insidious (e.g., *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*); not only more wealthy, but self serving (e.g., the Frank Burns character in *MASH*). At the same time, fear of a “doctor glut” causing unnecessary medical treatment and increased medical costs prompted the federal government to suggest that medical schools drop their enrollment by seventeen percent (Sullivan 1983). The medical system as a whole became recognized as inconsistent and inadequate. Discontinuous planning and massive bureaucracy meant that for most of the American populous, health care became an obstacle to well-being (see Starr 1982 for a discussion of evolving perceptions of and justifications for the American medical “system”).

Also, the conceptions of disease and especially life threatening disease represented in these versions of *The Thing* differ. The 1951 release suggests disease as is an external threat to the body. It is an observable and tangible entity. The 1982 sequel evokes a different image of disease as invading and transforming the body (and the self). It is not readily observable and appears as part of a normal body. As Foucault (1973) mentioned, societal transformation of eras is associated with transformations in manipulating, controlling, and managing the body. As reflected in both versions of *The Thing*, the creature transforms from an entity distinguished, to one ultimately indistinguishable from the human body. In a postmodern era, identifying and destroying the disease entails the literal destruction of the body.

Additional horror and science fiction films of the 1950s relocated secure people with comfortable routines into contexts of immediate threat and danger. The threats were in the form of monsters, aberrations, gigantic insects, and strangers to the community who had no regard for its integrity (see Kuhn 1990 for a critical review). Although the routines and daily rounds of the community were greatly disrupted, threats were conquered and equilibrium was restored (Warren 1982). Remakes of such films in the 1970s were not so sanguine. Still in the grips of “fear and loathing” over political assassinations, conspiracies, and warmongering, science fiction remakes depicted the disruption of social routine and popular security without restoration of these patterns.

As a remake, *The Thing* emerged in the post 1970s renewal of the science fiction film genre. The advances in special effect technology allowed the studios to create fantastic images which were impossible to film in the 1950s. Also, a coming of age of filmmakers influenced by cinema of the 1950s (including George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Tobe Hooper, and Ridley Scott), gave impetus to these “second generation” science fiction films. In this light, Higashi (1981) compared the two versions of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, each within its place in America’s cultural history. The original 1958 version metaphorically depicts a perceived threat to the traditional American family unit. Technologicalization, intense urbanization, and the post-World War II entrance of the woman into the work place created a sense of impending loss in this country. The film’s action, accordingly, centers on the horror of losing family members to “space pods” which cause their victims to become beings without love or caring. Higashi (1981) notes that in the film’s climax, Miles Bennell (Kevin McCarthy) stands screaming, “You’re in danger . . . ! They’re after all of us! Our wives, our children, everyone!” The threat to the family, in other words, is identified explicitly. In the remake, McCarthy, in a cameo appearance, recreates this scene but his screamed warning does not concern the family (he plays an unidentified man running through the streets of San Francisco yelling, “Help! . . . Help! They’re coming! You’re next!”). ⁵ The meaning of the warning is changed to dramatize concern over the fate of individuals rather than the fate of family units.

This loss of self to a larger collective was a major concern of both the eras of the 1950s and 1970s-1980s (Anson 1978). However, the source of the concern differed between eras. Rogin (1984, p. 29) notes that the first *Body Snatchers* was as much of a protest against McCarthyism as against Communism. At issue was the overtaking of the individual by a “malignancy” external to the self. In contrast, Higashi (1981, p. 3) suggests that the remake is more a “comment about the changing and uncertain nature of contemporary sex roles” and how a rigid male centered social system poses threats to the individuality of females. Accordingly, the asexual reproduction allowed for by the pods metaphorically depicts the changes in men/women relationships brought about by advances in technology. Feminist thinkers, argues Higashi, see such “artificial reproduction as heralding promise” (1981, p. 3) allowing women to be conceptualized without recourse to the childbearer role. This theme is perhaps most dramatically portrayed during the film’s end sequence in which Elizabeth, the female lead, is transformed. After she has been converted to her alien-self, she appears nude to Matthew, the male lead and her love interest. This situation which should have been provocative to both Matthew and the audience, however, is devoid of sexuality. The shift in Elizabeth’s emotional state and presentation leaves her asexual despite her nudity. As her alien-self, she is undifferentiated on the basis of gender so her equality among the other “invaders” can be assured.

Other interpreters of the original *Invasion* have called it “an indictment of conformity” (Anson 1978, p. 85; Biskind 1983; Peary 1988). The invaders in the 1956 film represent purveyors of totalitarianism. During this time there was a general fear of a national takeover though the use of much publicized communist “brain washing” techniques. The characteristics of the “pod people” were those applied to the communists: asexual, cold, and devoid of human emotion. To some, the alien takeover in the movie is a metaphor for a Communist takeover. In line with the same general theme, Kael (1978, p. 48) suggests that the 1978 version indicts the “various outcropping of the human potential movement” as one cause for the loss of individualism in the 1970s. Indeed, Schickel (1978) notes that the leader of the invaders in the remake is, “a piously trendy shrink.” The conspiracy of

the 1970s then, was not perpetrated by communists but rather by psychologists—representatives of the new narcissistic and therapeutic society (see Lasch 1979)—who promoted self indulgence and self absorption in their adherents. Anson (1978, p. 858) extends this comparison by suggesting that “in the aftermath of Guyana . . . the story . . . becomes a parable . . . for the invasion of will by cult leaders.” The author notes that shift in the film’s locate from Santa Mira, a clear exemplar of small town America, to San Francisco, a center of alternative lifestyles, depicts this change in themes. The change in the physical nature of the pods gives additional credence to this idea specifically. In the 1956 version, the pods are large, cumbersome, and ugly. In the remake the pods are small and flowering, very reminiscent of the “gifts” given to potential recruits for the Hare Krishnas and Reverend Sung Yung Moon’s Unification Church, two cult-like religious sects which prospered in San Francisco in the 1970s. The birth process in the remake is also dramatically presented, as the “born again” body emerges from the pod against the sound effect of a fetal heartbeat.

Another cultural context which can be read into the remake of the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* concerns the advent of environmental activism in the 1970s. Farley (1987) notes that the roots of America’s current environmental problems far predate the 1970s, but it was only in this decade that the collective perception of pollution as a social problem fully emerged. Love Canal, ozone depletion, Times Beach, DDT, and PCB became “buzz words” at this time and the fear of environmental contamination became widespread. Accordingly in the remake of the *Bodysnatchers*, the male lead becomes an environmental health inspector (as opposed to a medical doctor) who initially believes the aberrant behavior of the “pod victims” is the result of some type of man-made contamination. The film’s opening scenes, moreover, depict a pristine garden fostering the pods juxtaposed to the built environment of the city where humankind lives and prospers. The comparison is stark and reveals the damning effect that man has on nature.

Two themes which can be identified in *The Fly* as being historically and culturally embedded center on: 1) the perception of the importance of the nuclear family (see Warren 1986, p 78 for a discussion of “the family” in the original version of *The Fly*); and 2) the perception of the disease and medical threat. In the original version Helene, the female lead, confesses to having killed her husband, Andre, but will not explain why she did it. The murder is perplexing in that by all accounts, she and her husband were completely dedicated to each other. Through a series of flashbacks viewers learn that Helene killed Andre because of her love for him. Andre’s experimentation had left him horribly deformed and to save him from his circumstance, Helene ended his life. The film’s conclusion then is a warning of the dangers inherent in the denial of one’s home life. Andre, although completely dedicated to his wife and child, was also obsessed with his work. He would often ignore both his wife and child, Philippe, because of it. He, in fact, kills the beloved family pet cat, Dandelo, in a rash decision to test his matter transmission machine on a living thing. Such neglect, the film suggests, leads to the loss of the family structure which is so fundamentally tied to life’s happiness.

In a cinematic afterward, the makers of the original *Fly* re-establish the nuclear family using a surrogate father and husband. Francois, Andre’s brother, had long loved Helene and had been an adoring uncle to Philippe. At the film’s end, the audience sees him stepping into the void left by Andre’s death, restoring the family. This is especially significant with regard to Helene as a mother. At the time, mediated images of a single mother suggested that she would be ill prepared to assume the sole responsibilities of

rearing a young boy. Mediated images of single mothers have only been accepted by the viewing populace since the late 1960s. Furthermore, the film's depiction of women lacks the feminist vision that became refined during the 1960s and 1970s. Helene clearly is a woman of exceptional strength; she after all purposefully destroys "the fly" and with it any chance for reconciliation with her beloved Andre. Yet, despite her obvious inner strength, she remains dependent on men throughout the remainder of the film. Male detectives, male doctors, and finally her brother-in-law guide and protect her. She is made to seem a whole person only in relation to a "stronger" male other and her family.

In the wake of an articulate feminist ideology the remake of *The Fly* presents a different view of women and their relation to the nuclear family. The importance of a traditional familial arrangement is not affirmed as was so fervently done in the original. In the remake, women are depicted as capable and autonomous even in face of single parenthood. The love interests are not played by a married couple. While they are deeply involved, each has his/her own career and life course. Seth Brundle (the male lead) is a reclusive and remarkable genius working on a matter transmission device and Veronica (the female lead) is a newsperson on the verge of stardom reporting for a national magazine. They sleep together and she is eventually impregnated. The idea of marriage is, however, not discussed except in jest (comment is made of them acting like "an old married couple" on a vacation they had planned). In the film's most poignant scene regarding this issue, Seth Brundle, half-mad after his transformation, attempts to integrate Veronica and their unborn child into himself, and remarks desperately that, "We'll be the ultimate family." The thought was preposterous and the result would have been an abomination. Veronica could not accept this subordination, even if it could save the man she loves. At the end of the film, Veronica, showing the resolve of her 1950s predecessor, destroys the fly. Unlike the earlier character, Veronica's strength is seen by her coping with the resultant circumstances alone as she accepts her identity of single mother with conviction.

The medical models that are implicitly presented in each version of the film further signify the historical embeddedness of their texts and perspectives. In 1981 the Centers for Disease Control in the United States received the first accounts of the AIDS virus (Altman 1984). By 1984, these first few cases had grown into the thousands and the scope of the problem had changed social perception about the nature of disease. The original version of *The Fly* predates the phenomena of AIDS and so the nature of the malady which affected Andre was significantly different than that which killed Brundle. The change in the transformation process affecting the two respective victims reflect this shift in medical reality. Andre's transformation was sudden and complete. When affected he became an immediate social isolate, hiding himself in his lab and under a hood. In an era when cancer was the greatest medical fear you were either a victim or you were not. There were no intermediate ambiguous stages and there was no fear of generational or interpersonal transmission. Andre, although horribly afflicted, still can have and receives the comfort of human touch. In the 1980s, the luxury of these certainties are not afforded. Brundle moves among those who are not aware of his affliction. He has sexual relations with two women, impregnating one before he is certain he is ill. When he knows of his problem, he is not certain if he is contagious. The isolation of his malady goes beyond Andre's in that people loath his touch as much as he fears to touch and spread his affliction. The change, moreover, is slowly degenerative. Brundle, in fact, creates a "museum" to store the pieces of his body that are falling away. He faces his fate slowly and alone. Those whom he has

contacted, moreover, must contend with the potential of their own infections. Veronica, most specifically, realizes her yet unborn child might face the same cruel fate as Brundle, her lover. In the 1980s, the AIDS generation, the identities separating the sick and healthy are more ambiguous, and the uncertainties surrounding disease vector and victim imposes a social risk which on the individual level transforms into distrust and paranoia.

The original and the remakes of *The Blob* and *Invaders from Mars* also can be viewed as earmarked from their era of production. In the 1950's *Blob*, the creature arrives in a meteorite, is truly an invader from outer space, and is eventually disposed of by the government. In the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam remake of *The Blob*, big government is the "real monster." In this version, the blob comes to earth in a satellite and is a creation of a bureaucracy "gone wild." U. S. Government officials, moreover, attempt to protect the creature and cover-up the problem by sacrificing average citizenry to horrible deaths. In this way, the filmmakers recall Stalin's (the prototypical Soviet monster of the cold war) oft quoted remark that "one death is a tragedy and one million deaths is a statistic." The U.S. officials have become like this monster while radically blurring the cold war ideological boundaries separating conceptions of good and evil.

While the remake of *The Blob* countered the original's hopeful view of U.S. government, the remake of *Invaders From Mars* contrasts with its original version most specifically with regard to the place of women and children in the context of the family. The 1953 version centers on a young boy, (David, who believes the earth is being invaded by Martians and his attempt to make "the authorities" believe him. He suspects that his parents have been taken in ("sucked" into the underground of a sandy beach) by these invaders and replaced with zombie-like impostors with tell tale cuts on the backs of their necks. Dr. Pat Blake, the female lead and public health physician, initially saves David from his transformed parents. She and David turn to Dr. Stuart Kelston, the male lead and astronomer, for help and guidance. Through a telescope, Drs. Kelston and Blake immediately verify the existence of the Martian's underground base as two military men are pulled into the sand. David's point of view is consequently validated by institutional authorities, especially represented by the male astronomer and his "instruments."

In the remake, Dr. Blake is replaced by Nurse Magnussen, who neither needs or seeks a stronger male other to legitimize her belief in David. Her competence allows her the self assurance needed to side-step those that would thwart her plans and involve those who would help. At variance with the original, David and Nurse Magnussen are "outlaws" throughout most of the remake, on the run without a stable "sense of place" (see Meyrowitz's 1985, pp. 210-211 comparison between the place of women and children since the 1970s). However, Nurse Magnussen is able to care for David and to finally convince the authorities of the Martian invasion. Her proactive identity in this film represented a new female hero, perhaps most profoundly dramatized during the late 1970s in *Alien* and in the 1980s and 1990s in *Aliens*, *Alien 3*, and both of the *Terminator* films. This identity also represents a subtle change in the identification of females in science fiction films. Warren (1986, p. xii) suggests that females in science fiction films of the 1950s had masculine names (e.g., Dr. Pat Blake) to mask their gender. The female as "masculine like" demonstrated competence before becoming sexually attracted to and dependent on the male lead (and thus, "feminized"). As "the school nurse," Magnussen's identity is more clearly feminine, but she becomes more "masculine like" through her actions.

CONCLUSION: IMAGES OF SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION IN FILM

Societal transformation structured by and through human action from one point of time to another, remains a central focus of the sociological imagination (Mills 1959). Every sociologist and social historian of note has theorized about such transformations, either in the imagery of linear or cyclical metaphors. Variations of earlier themes advanced by such diverse thinkers as Simmel, Toynbee, Sorokin, Teggart, Marx, and Mead—all of whom posited active and reflective human agents as producers of significant changes and transformations (see especially Simmel 1950; Mead 1934)—remain influential. However, a subversive reading of our selected science fiction films keys on transformation as associated with paradoxical images, contradictory juxtapositions, and oxymorons that stand in coterminous relation to each other, and that emphasize the loss of innocence and the crisis of faith in traditional and institutionalized authority—issues relevant to postmodern readings of texts (see Baudrillard 1983; Bauman 1988; Derrida 1972; Rosenau 1992; Toulmin 1985). While it is misleading to assert that such images in the science fiction remakes directly reflect everyday and mundane human life, they can be understood in contrast to the images and themes presented in the original, and thus can be read as representing changes in the way particular metaphors are mediated and appreciated in different historical eras and contexts (see Denzin 1989). In this vein, remakes are specimens that enable viewers to assess the extent to and manner in which mediated images and collective understandings of these images have changed over time.

In regard to productions and reproductions of select science fiction stories in light of surveyed public sentiments, intellectual concerns, and other media produced images, it appears that each of the versions are at least embedded in the ethos of its era, and that each era is characterized by decidedly different sentiments in regard to faith in institutions. The 1950s' releases center their imagery on political and social concerns by apologizing for military control. The images of practical, rational, strongarmed, and benevolent authority are cast as more than probabilities—they are necessities. During this time, social scientists provided artifacts based on public perceptions that bolstered such sentiments.

On the other hand, the remakes of the late 1970s and early 1980s subverts such optimism. They instead key on what current thinkers are describing as a postmodern terror—the irretrievable move to self destruction. This terror emerges from the practices and policies of human agency but eventually transcends it. As a result, agency, history, and progress are rendered meaningless, irrelevant, and ominous respectively. Once the terror of existence takes on a life of its own, purpose and reflection of past purposes can do nothing to overcome it. Such pessimism found a voice in the artifacts of this era's survey research to the extent that the symbols of military and science appeared as failed icons.

Films and surveys can be read to provoke ideas associated with societal transformation in that they examine the signifiers, symbols, and transactions that tie people together or wedge them apart. They also examine the key myths that promote a society's collectivization. Myths of group solidarity, ingenuity, and invincibility, were central to telling America's story on film for most of this century. Since the late 1960s, however, these myths have been subverted in various contexts. Such was the case with the remakes of various science fiction films which embodied some of the sentiments felt by people removed from their victorious pasts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This is a substantially revised paper that was presented at the Annual Midwest Sociological Society Meetings in Kansas City, Missouri, April, 1992. It has benefitted greatly from the comments made by Maudie W. Katovich, Norman K. Denzin and four anonymous reviewers. We also wish to thank Margot Haller for her comments and research assistance.

NOTES

1. While *The Wizard of Oz* and *It's A Wonderful Life* are readily appreciated by many viewers as affirming the American home, hearth, and small town values, they can also be read as celebrating extremism against corrupt, unjust, and arbitrary authority figures.

2. As a film based on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz is transported metaphorically from Africa to Vietnam. His struggle is more associated with late nineteenth and early twentieth century terrors. It is not so much that films in the 1970s and 1980s reflected any particular malaise of an era as much as they iterated past terrors in the context of contemporary images, archetypes, and icons (failed and tarnished as they were).

3. Such themes were also central to issues pertaining to reading texts (e.g., Sontag's 1969 critique of forms of interpretation), philosophies of science (e.g., Feyerabend's [1975] rail against methods), and history (e.g., Skinner's 1969 critique of linear analysis). All of the above speak in some way to the issues later raised by Fukuyama (1989), and specifically his view of the end of agency, and history.

4. Thus, the 1982 film is much closer to Stuart's emphasis, while the 1951 film is more reminiscent of the stories that Campbell wrote.

5. In this remake, McCarthy's character is killed after being struck by an automobile. As he is killed offscreen by an anonymous driver, it is difficult to conclude that he was assassinated. However, the mere presence of McCarthy the actor as a failed "Paul Revere" in the remake stands in marked contrast to his character's (Dr. Bennell) vindication at the conclusion of the original. It is McCarthy the actor and not Dr. Bennell the character who is killed in the remake. This image of McCarthy as linked to audience awareness of the past is testimony to the contention that films take into account audience's stock of knowledge and sense of history when mediating images of themes, metaphors, and characters.

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