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Complacency and the Push to Conformity in 1950s Media and Entertainment

The 1950s were a time of questioning; a period of controversy- spoken and fundamental; a major chapter of the American sociocultural evolution. Across the media’s there was a prominent sense of society-wide introspection/reflection, in addition to the manic-hysteria associated with the Red Scare— the mass anti-communist hysteria that was invoked by Joseph McCarthy in the early 1950s, as well as the progression in nuclear technology. Featured most frequently, but less perceptibly, was the obvious mass shift of culture and accepted standards occurring within society during this time period. Frequently pictured were groups of people, towns, or societies within several entertainment outlets such as films, shows, or books, represented as being asleep, robotic, emotionless, or unhappy— all conforming to a single norm, usually in hopes to create a “peaceful” or “perfect” society. The depiction of this sort of mindlessness, or *complacency,* for characters and plotlines within 1950s media and entertainment was an extension, or more generally, a symbol, for the urge, and sometimes even fear, to conform within the changing and unstable society that was the 1950s. The need to be uniform in thought and action was and is a coping mechanism for groups of humans within a society experiencing unease. Those who are depicted going against these efforts of mass conformity represented the coming, and inevitable confrontation of those disruptions of the norm.

As noted, the socio-political and cultural climate during the 1950s was uneasy, to say the least. Andrew Huebner, in his article “Lost in Space – Technology and the Turbulence in Futuristic Cinema of the 1950s,” addresses the changes occurring within American society at the time. He, for one, discusses the population boom in some of its effects, “During World War II the planet’s population had grown by 15 million people each year.” (Huebner 17) In addition to those statistics, according to the US Census Bureau, between the years of 1950 and 1960 the planets population increased a total of 485,361,617 people (www.census.gov). This huge influx of people, ideas, perspectives, and beliefs disrupted the norms and caused newfound challenges within society.

With the accumulation of these new and different values and standards, unity and conformity in the 1950s were uncertain, and contradictory themes. On one hand, you had some people grasping onto the dwindling conservatism and pre-modern/traditional values. Contrasting that, you had others attempting everything to diverge from the accepted norms and redefine such societally-enforced rules. All aspects of pop culture, entertainment, and social situations for Americans, male and female, were impacted by this dichotomy.

Among the tensions of conformity vs dissent societally were the concerns of peace and unification on a larger, worldly scale. The magnitude of the possible consequences of a nuclear attack or the war with Russia, if it were to radicalize, would be the end to the world as we know it. The risks are as high as they could possibly be. In this respect, people saw the need to unify just as crucial. This felt need to unify, or conform, was counteracted by the paranoia of complete societal homogeneity, as represented in several dystopian entertainment novelties such as the renowned 1956 sci-fi film, *Invasion of The Body Snatchers*, which will be latterly discussed. People represented in these shows, films, and expositions felt the need to stand together as one but feared it all the same and more; this was synonymous with the citizens in 1950s reality.

Building upon that, within entertainment the dilemmas with unification were represented several ways. A common question arose, what part of our humanity/lives/rights we, as a society and as humans, will have to give up in order to unify. In other words, what will be the cost of our mutual existence? In Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, society was forced to be without books in order to become submissive under the singular control— a singular mindset. However, it wasn’t just books stolen from the people. “Books were only one type of receptacle where we stored a lot of the things we were afraid we might forget. There is nothing magical in them at all. The magic is only in what books say, how they stitched the patches of the universe together into one garment for us” (Bradbury 82). Those represented in Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* dystopia were stolen of how to truly connect with each other and the world itself. Ray Bradbury envisioned a world where we all can be unified in happiness and security if we become numb to the importance of our individual, diverse, personalities as well as the value of the intellectual pursuit. This conforming concept of ‘shaping to fit the masses rather than the individual’ was reinforced several times throughout the novel. “Once, books appealed to a few people, here, there, everywhere. They could afford to be different. The world was roomy. But then the world got full of eyes and elbows and mouths. Double, triple, quadruple population. Films and radios, magazines, books levelled down to a sort of paste pudding norm” (Bradbury 51). Essentially, he composed a society of people who let everything happen around them, complacent non-questioners; those wanting the truncated version of human experience. This negative view of the push to conformity showed just a few of the negative ramifications of a failing “uniform” society. It echoed the fears of communism and of repression that so commonly took forefront of the anxiety-ridden societal mindset.

This trend also extends to *Invasion of The Body Snatchers*, as earlier referenced. Miles Bennell late in the movie states, “I’ve seen how people have allowed their humanity to drain away. Only it happened slowly instead of all at once. They didn’t seem to mind… All of us – a little bit- we harden our hearts. Grow callous.” (Invasion of the Body Snatchers 1956) The piece of mortality lost for unification represented, rather than intellectual pursuit and personality as represented in *Fahrenheit 451*, was emotions and love. Subsequently, to our understanding of mortality as a whole, they were losing the true essence of their humanity, as Miles had noted. *“*I want to love and be loved…I don't want a world without love or grief or beauty. I'd rather die.” (Invasion of The Body Snatchers 1956).The giving up one’s beliefs, attitudes, and values is often correlated to the loss of one’s self; this fear drove the hysteria related to the Red Scare as well as the conflict of conformity.

This concept was also addressed in an online article posted by film professor, scholar, and critic, Emanuel Levy. In his article focusing on the political allegory within *Invasion of the Body Snatchers,* he first references how mass complacency and conformity was symbolized metaphorically with sleep. “The pods take over human beings when they are not alert, when they are (literally or figuratively) asleep, thus passive.” (Emanuel Levy) The perceived immanency of sleep and moreover, conformity, drove the film and its component of thrill. However, it also correlates to the thoughts of the time. The fear that the spread of communism, or the threat of nuclear attack, or the approach of some politico-cultural movement was all very imminent and very scary to the American citizens of the time. The thrill depicted in the film was relatable and omnipresent— on and off the screen.

He then continues to discuss the primary issues addressed in the film which, in short, can be summarized as the dichotomy of what can be considered as abnormal vs normal, who can defined such, as well as the possible ramifications of “conformity, apathy, and complacency” within a society (Emanuel Levy). His claims on the films paranoid theme and it’s relation to the uncertainty and repression are unmistakably similar to the analysis of Fahrenheit 451 and therefore is a solid representation of the consistency of thought and unease throughout the height of the time period, from the publishing of Fahrenheit 451 in 1953 to the release of Invasion of the Body Snatchers in 1956.

There was a common theme of fear and mistrust for people in authority. Exemplified within 1950s literature and entertainment were those in government positions or those with specifically dignified or widely-popular/communicative careers shown. For example, in the episode *Eye of the Beholder* from the well-known series *The Twilight Zone*, the main character, Janet, dissents against the authority and moreover, the conformity. In the case of this segment, this was represented by the Doctors and the *State*. “Who are you people anyway?! What is this state?! Who makes all these rules and traditions and statutes that people who are different have to stay away from people who are normal?” (Eye of the Beholder). Questions like these were echoes across not only television screens, but also verbalized by normal citizens across the country. People feared what and how much the government had the power to enforce and manipulate within everyday society and this was depicted clearly within entertainment. “The State isn’t God, doctor” (Eye of the Beholder).

Nevertheless, with tensions high with jumbles of conflicting ideologies, booming populations, advancements in technology, and shifts in social norms, the 1950s is overall regarded as “an era of political and cultural uniformity, regarded either as a nightmare of repression or a paradise lost” (Biskind 3). However looking back, it is also reflected as a time period of immense change though it was never seen as particularly confrontational. The conflicts were primarily underlying and hysterics were only being multiplied by the misguidance of severe lack of information in the public sphere. Commonalities within entertainment were the themes of conformity, complacency, and hysteria.

Nonetheless, the takeaways don’t apply singularly to 1950’s evolutionary climate, but also to human nature as a whole. As populations aggregate, we tend to fear we will sink into the crowd therefore we rebel to make ourselves our own, or we inevitably end up disappearing into the ocean of people surrounding us. A quote by Don Siegel, the director of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, discusses this concept of eventual conformity and desensitization, “There are pods–not vegetables from outer space as in my movie–but real people. Many of my associates are pods, people who have no feeling of love or emotion, who simply exist, breathe, and sleep” (Emanuel Levy). From this interpretation, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* can be seen not only as a reaction to the multitude of changes occurring, but also a warning not to run from them, but to address them and analyze them. This can be expanded to most sci-fi or otherwise entertainment of the 1950s time period. To become desensitized and complacent is to conform and give up your opportunity to live a full, mortal life. As Clarisse McClellan from *Fahrenheit 451* asked, “Are you happy?” (Bradbury 10)

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