DISRUPTIVE PROPAGANDA: THE AVAILABILITY, CENSORSHIP, AND DISTORTION OF VISUAL INFORMATION IN ROBERT WISE’S THE BODY SNATCHER

BY

JENNIFER ANN WARNER

THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011

Urbana, Illinois

Adviser:

Professor Jennifer Greenhill
ABSTRACT

Robert Wise’s *The Body Snatcher* (RKO, 1946) was filmed in a period of American history riddled with anxiety about the destruction and preservation of bodies. During this time of war, the film and its makers had to negotiate censorship regulations as well as popular attitudes concerning American medicine. The visual vocabulary of *The Body Snatcher* displays these intertwining concerns through props, setting, and the narrative itself. This is a study of how *The Body Snatcher* utilizes these methods to convey attitudes about war, medicine, and the body in 1940s America.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: ILLUSTRATING THE IMPORTANCE OF VISUAL INFORMATION</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: DARKNESS AND THE CENSORSHIP OF VISUAL INFORMATION</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4: MACFARLANE’S HALLUCINATION AND THE DISTORTION OF VISUAL INFORMATION</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5: THE BODY SNATCHER AS PROPAGANDA</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6: FIGURES</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 7: BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1940s America was plagued by anxieties of bodily destruction. Understandably so, on December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor was attacked, and the United States subsequently entered what would become the country’s most destructive battle to date. Eventually causing the death of over fifty million people, World War II was like the ugly monster of a horror film, always an obstacle with which to grapple.\(^1\) Despite its pervasiveness in the Home Front, the American government went to great lengths to cage the beast. In a climate already entrenched in censorship due to the Motion Picture Production Code\(^2\) and other regulations, almost no images from the front line ever made it to the eyes of the American public.\(^3\) Instead, images of the war deemed inappropriate for public view were kept in a file in the Pentagon known to insiders as the “Chamber of Horrors.”\(^4\) The “Chamber” contained pictures of servicemen whose bodies had been violated and desecrated in combat. The horrifying effects of war, namely, bloody, wounded and dead troops were kept out of sight, accessible only to those who had military clearance. These drastic methods of censorship allowed the government to not only “protect” the public

---


\(^3\) The images were kept under wraps until September of 1943, when it was thought that Americans were not investing enough money into the war effort. Hoping to shock the public into investment, some images were released. Even so, pictures displaying “bloody death” were still censored. Roeder, *The Censored War*, 1, 12.

\(^4\) Ibid.
from the obscene, but also to regulate knowledge about the war. More specifically, the American
government exercised near complete control over visual information.

Robert Wise’s *The Body Snatcher* (RKO, 1946) is a product of this anxious culture, and therefore displays apprehensions about the transmission of visual information, especially knowledge of the human body. Set in Edinburgh, Scotland, the narrative of the film focuses on the body and how it is understood visually, which makes its setting in a medical school all the more appropriate. Dr. MacFarlane (played by Henry Daniell) and his bright young pupil Donald Fettes (played by Russell Wade) must negotiate the ethics of medicine in order to teach the students and help their patients. This medical business is fueled by Cabman John Gray (played by Boris Karloff), the body snatcher who supplies the cadavers for dissection. The body is therefore a crucial aspect of the film’s narrative, which speaks to the significance of the body in 1940s American home front culture.

After the strict ban on wartime images was eased in September of 1943, the Home Front had greater (although still restricted) access to terrifying depictions of war. Therefore, the public was finally able to see certain images containing the destruction and violation of bodies of soldiers. As a result, the human body became a focus of American concerns, not only because of the fear of its desecration, but also due to burgeoning medical practices that afforded the military

---

5 The setting is itself significant to American concerns. In the nineteenth century, Edinburgh, Scotland was not only famous for being the setting of the famous Burke and Hare murders, but the city was also held in high esteem for its renown in the medical field. American physicians educated in Edinburgh were considered the best in their field. Suzanne M. Shultz, *Body Snatching: The Robbing of Graves for the Education of Physicians in Early Nineteenth Century America* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2005), 5, 17.

6 This was a conscious political maneuver enacted by the American government to oppose “public complacency.” Roeder, *The Censored War*, 1.
with a much higher survival rate than in past wars. In other words, the body became the location of fears of violation as well as hopes of medical salvation. The Body Snatcher fuses this apprehension of the transmission of visual knowledge with a specifically 40s-era concern with the body by using props and narrative devices which display, censor and distort visual information concerning the human body.

---

7 New advances in surgery and the resuscitative process led to a 97% survival rate for soldiers who made it to surgical teams. Albert E. Cowdrey, Fighting For Life: American Military Medicine In World War II (New York: Free Press, 1994), 175.
CHAPTER 2

Illustrating the Importance of Visual Information

The film diagrams a concern with visual information quite literally with two anatomical posters that hang in the medical school’s dissection room (fig. 1). These posters have a dynamic role in *The Body Snatcher*, and transform throughout the film, signaling various attitudes about the human body at different points in the narrative. The first time we see them, however, they are displayed openly and prominently.

Hanging in clear view on the wall of Dr. MacFarlane’s dissection room, the anatomical posters function foremost as indices of human anatomy. In particular, these posters display the composition of the muscular and skeletal systems (on the left and right, respectively). As such, they provide a certain type of visual access into the complicated makeup of the human body, one that is both secondhand and sterilized. The posters thus provide a surrogate for the actual human corpse, an image to be viewed without the grisly complications of dissection. Affixed to the wall, they invite visual interest; the viewer is inclined to look upon them as decoration. Indeed, they certainly contribute to the decor of the dissection room. Like paintings adorning a wall, the posters are aesthetic representations which decorate as well as define this clinical space. Also like paintings, the posters are compressed, representing three-dimensional forms upon a two-dimensional surface. Aestheticized and compressed, the body-as-diagram becomes easier to distance from sentiment, easier to objectify.

However compressed individually, the posters together allow the viewer access to different depths of the body. The muscular tissue (represented visually by the poster on the left) surrounds the skeletal system (on the right) on an actual human body. These diagrams, however,
separate these two layers so each can be seen on its own. Depending on which image is viewed, the eye oscillates from a more superficial view (musculature) to a deeper one (skeleton), an optical fluctuation which Michel Foucault argues is precisely how the medical gaze is supposed to function. In *The Birth of the Clinic* he writes,

> The medical gaze must therefore travel along a path that had not so far been opened to it; vertically from the symptomatic surface to the tissual surface; in depth, plunging from the manifest to the hidden; and in both directions, as it must continuously travel if one wishes to define, from one end to the other, the network of essential necessities. The medical gaze, as we have seen, was directed upon the two-dimensional areas of tissues and symptoms, must, in order to reconcile them, itself move along a third dimension.  

This analytical and objectifying gaze must penetrate the body, plunging into its depths, in order to diagnose and to understand it. The posters together are a surrogate for this three-dimensional vision; they allow different depths of the body to be understood visually.

These visual aids exhibit this alternating medical gaze and guide the gaze of students performing a dissection during which they view the components of the human body firsthand. Their gaze while dissecting an actual human body should echo the gaze with which they view the posters, constantly shifting from depth to surface. This creates a circular dependence for the posters and dissection; the posters explain how one is to view the human cadaver, the dissected cadaver reiterates the composition of the posters. That is to say, these diagrams are the product of previous dissections, which fuel further dissections.

Visual guides like these were considered necessary to completing a proper procedure, but before they were available on paper, the actual makeup of the human body needed to be seen. Indeed, the study of anatomy, claims Suzanne Shultz, was the primary reason for opening

---

medical schools.\textsuperscript{9} Similarly, Edward Atwater explains, “It is hard to overemphasize the importance of anatomical dissection in changing the medical curriculum, or opposition to it in retarding improvement. An attempt to offer better instruction in anatomy was the motivating force behind most, if not all, the early American medical schools.”\textsuperscript{10} The goal of these studies was to allow students to view the composition of the body, and therefore gain a better understanding of how it functions. The anatomical posters are a product of this superior comprehension of the human body, which convey this information visually.

In \textit{The Body Snatcher}, this need to understand how the body operates by seeing it firsthand is echoed by Dr. MacFarlane, who is faced with a difficult surgical decision concerning a young girl, Georgina Marsh (played by Sharyn Moffett) with an injured spine. Her mother brings her to the eminent doctor believing he can repair the damage that has confined Georgina to a wheelchair. Before he can operate on Georgina’s spine, however, MacFarlane asserts that he must first be able to physically see a spinal column. When a young girl’s life is at stake, the posters are inadequate as a visual aide. Instead, he must be able to see how the spine works firsthand, in a genuine three-dimensional context. MacFarlane’s need to \textit{see} emphasizes the importance of having access to visual information, an access to the body, which, as we will see, was entirely unavailable to the citizens of the American home front.

First, however, in order for Dr. MacFarlane to have the opportunity to see a spinal column, he must be able to procure a specimen to dissect. Enter Cabman John Gray, former colleague of MacFarlane and current “Resurrectionist”—a euphemistic term for body snatcher.

\textsuperscript{9} Shultz, \textit{Body Snatching}, 18.

Although the two were onetime friends during medical school, their current relationship is one of necessity despite MacFarlane’s animosity toward his supplier. Gray provides the tools necessary for MacFarlane to teach and practice medicine, a necessity that cannot be overstated. Not only did doctors like MacFarlane need to see cadavers to be able to operate, students were required to perform dissections and anatomical studies in order to complete a medical degree.\textsuperscript{11}

Summarizing Waite, Shultz explains that as medical schools in America advanced, more than 1,600 medical students attended medical school . . . Since all students were required to perform a dissection either as a group at a medical school or singly with a preceptor, at least 400 cadavers would have been necessary to meet the needs. During that time only one or two bodies per year were made available legally, a total of perhaps 40 at most. Some 360 of them must then have been obtained illegally.

These so-called Resurrectionists, therefore, become pivotal to the study of anatomy; they supplied the primary visual aids from which students acquired knowledge.

Partially because of its association with criminal activity, the stealing of bodies has been consistently feared by the American public. In the nineteenth century, citizens went to great lengths to keep their bodies secure after death.\textsuperscript{12} They did so primarily because the stealing of one’s body ultimately led to anatomical dissection, which itself had several negative implications, including punishment for the worst criminal offenses. Convicted murderers and the like who were sentenced to death could also be sentenced to public dissection, a punishment reserved for these violent offenders. Indeed, these two sentences often went hand in hand. It

\textsuperscript{11} Shultz, \textit{Body Snatching}, 14.

\textsuperscript{12} Some buried their dead in secured coffins that were more difficult to break open, whereas the wealthy built protective mausoleums to house the remains, and the lower-classes employed the cheaper method of alternately layering the grave with earth and straw in order to make it more difficult to exhume the body. Some even went as far as burying the body of a loved one close enough to keep an eye on it; in 1884, the father of the recently deceased Hannah Stout, buried her remains, “just under the window,” in order to keep her body from the dissection table. Sappol, \textit{A Traffic of Dead Bodies}, 13-14.
was thought that “dissection merely completed the work begun by the gallows.”13 The notorious body snatcher himself, William Burke, was hanged and publicly dissected.14 Thus, body snatching was ideologically tied to the lowest forms of human life.

Another fear that overcame many was the thought of one’s body or the bodies of loved ones becoming a part of this monetary exchange. Body snatching was at one time a lucrative means of making a living.15 Physicians and medical schools alike were desperate for specimens on which to experiment. A body snatched becomes a commodity, a mere “thing” to be bought and sold.16 Like the posters on the wall, the bodies are no longer individuals, they are objects to be used for monetary gain, which caused “horror at the appropriation and objectification of a loved physical body.”17

Ultimately, the fear of body snatching as well as dissection emerges from the fear of the violation of the body. As Sappol argues, it was thought that “dissection was a rape of the body, body snatching a rape of the grave.”18 I would argue, however, that this fear of violation is closely bound with the fear that bodies are being visually exploited. Since dissections were often public affairs (fig. 2), it seems that many were opposed to the availability of one’s viscera to many eyes. Indeed, if the strictest punishment was a public dissection, the primary fear is not

13 Shultz, Body Snatching, 8.
14 Ibid.
15 Burke and Hare made a profit of three pounds, ten shillings each, a hefty sum in that era which would lead them to continue their venture. Shultz, Body Snatching, 69-70.
16 Gillian Bennett, Bodies: Sex, Violence, and Death in Contemporary Legend (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 224.
17 Ibid., 237.
18 Sappol, A Traffic of Dead Bodies, 4-5.
necessarily that the body is lacerated or penetrated by medical utensils, but that the body can be
seen, penetrated by vision.
CHAPTER 3

Darkness and the Censorship of Visual Information

The anatomical posters in the film signal this concern, and change to reflect this apprehension of visual violation. During a typical exchange, the young Fettes, a student of Dr. MacFarlane given the task of collecting bodies from Gray, notices that the body lying upon the dissection table is that of the town street singer, a young woman he knew to be alive and well just hours before, and therefore must have been murdered by the nefarious body snatcher. The posters hang in the background of this scene, on the same wall of Dr. MacFarlane’s dissection room, but they have changed since their last appearance. Unlike their previous conspicuousness, in this scene the diagrams are almost completely rolled up; only the lower neck and upper shoulders of the surrogate bodies are available to view (fig. 3). This abstracted human form dissociates the object-ness of the diagrammed body on the posters from the emotionally recognizable human form. The posters therefore change to reflect attitudes about the human body, based on the particular body lying upon the dissection table. The body, generally speaking, can no longer be considered an object or a visual aid due to the appearance of a specific familiar body and the emotional connotations bound with it. To Fettes, and to the viewer, this body cannot be easily objectified because its known individuality and personality cannot be separated from its remains. Therefore, the information that was once readily available on the posters is hidden, making it increasingly difficult for the viewer to equate the sentimental body to an object.

The film emphasizes the changing status of the body on the table even more emphatically during Georgina’s operation, when the posters disappear altogether (fig. 4). Unlike the young
street singer, Georgina can not be equated with the object-ness of the posters because she is a living, breathing human being. The filmmakers acknowledge Georgina’s bodily status and make a conscious decision to remove the posters from the wall, completely eliminating any possibility of associating the live human form with an object like the posters.

The rolled up and absent posters suggest differing attitudes about the objectification of the human body, yet they also echo the 1940s home front climate of visual censorship, which itself often concerned the objectification of human bodies. During this time of war, the American government exerted rigid control over what was available to view, including entertainment. The Motion Picture Production Code of 1939, also known as the Hays Code, after the chief censor at the time, Will F. Hays, controlled the content of films from its introduction until the 1960s. These regulations, which were heavily influenced by Roman Catholic morals, stipulated that films were to uphold certain religious values. Therefore, wrongdoing was to be punished by the end of each film, and matters of sex and incidents depicting violent death were to be avoided altogether.

Under these regulations certain things could absolutely not be shown. In *The Body Snatcher*, for instance, dissections, as well as Dr. MacFarlane’s surgery on Georgina are evoked only abstractly. While Dr. MacFarlane operates, the camera is positioned at a low angle, allowing only his face and the faces of his students watching the event to be seen (fig. 5). Although he is not centered in this shot, he and Fettes are distinguished from the group by their

---

19 Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*,

20 In 1934, Catholic bishops threatened to boycott Hollywood films if the code was not enforced. William Hays agreed to these terms and placed Joseph Ignatius Breen, a conservative Catholic, at the head of the Production Code Administration, the agency responsible for code enforcement. Ibid., 14-15.

21 Ibid., 15.
position, closest to the frame and in profile, whereas the rest of the group, seen from the front, blend together in the background. This approach encourages the viewer to focus on the two men performing the surgery, without viewing the actual surgery. This scene censors content not only by omitting the surgical event, but also by focusing on a related action which suggests, yet also visually distracts from that event.

This censorship of gore predates films of the 1940s, its roots specifically evidenced in American painting with Thomas Eakins’ *The Gross Clinic*, which Wise’s film overtly references (fig. 6). Like Eakins’ heroic doctor, Dr. MacFarlane is highlighted, his furrowed brow illuminated by sunlight, alerting the viewer that he is the mentally active party in this scene. Additionally, despite the gory connotations of the action, this shot is purged of all blood. Similarly, Eakins’s painting was cleaned up, due to critical complaints that it was too bloody.\(^{22}\) Although this shot seems to explicitly refer to Eakins’s painting, and to a history of American of censorship, the implications of censoring the desecrated body are more poignant to 1940s home front culture and the censored injuries of American soldiers. The wartime ban on images kept bloody and violent depictions out of sight in the early years of the war, the only images that the public were able to see were the sterilized depictions of warfare approved by officials.\(^{23}\)

This tendency toward censorship is further portrayed in *The Body Snatcher* through certain aspects of plot which are hinted at only obliquely, or not visible at all. For instance, before Gray turns to murder, he maintains his business by robbing the graves of the recently deceased. The film presents this event indirectly; while he unearths the body of a young man,


\(\text{23}^\text{Wartime photographers even had specific rules about what subjects they could shoot, which were then checked again by the OWI and American censors. Roeder, *The Censored War,* 8-9.}\)
only the shadow of Gray can be seen upon the cemetery wall (fig. 7). In order to comply with film code regulations, this macabre act is implied rather than explicitly depicted.

Additionally, the murder of the young street singer, perhaps the most suspenseful of all the film’s scenes, takes place in complete darkness. This has to do with both the climate of film censorship as well as the concern to safeguard the body during wartime. Gray follows her into a dark tunnel as she unknowingly continues her song (fig. 8). After Gray’s carriage enters the tunnel it disappears into the darkness. The audience is alerted to the murder by the abrupt end to the woman’s song. But we are left in the dark, without visual knowledge of the event.

Similarly, in a time of war, the public was kept in the dark when it came to the injury and death of American soldiers. The government aimed to shield the public from the anguish of seeing the bodies of loved ones violated, but this censorship was not simply about the knowledge of these bodies being damaged--family members surely knew of their relatives’ injuries. It was the photographs, the visual information of the desecration of bodies, which were kept from sight.
CHAPTER 4

MacFarlane’s Hallucination and the Distortion of Visual Information

The film does not merely focus on the dichotomy of seeing and not seeing. It also complicates this binary with an assertion that visual information can be distorted, a third condition of visual information situated between these two poles. The anatomical diagrams themselves, with their constant transformation and often limited presentation, indicate this distortion. Because they are always changing, the viewer is never quite sure which state of the posters represents truth.

Towards the end, The Body Snatcher displays this concern with visual distortion more overtly in the scene which ends with Dr. MacFarlane’s death. By this point in the narrative, the doctor has murdered Gray in order to end his dependency on this monstrous man. He soon realizes, however, that in order to continue his business he must now procure bodies for dissection himself. With Fettes in tow, he travels to a cemetery where a recently deceased woman is said to have been buried, and after several minutes of digging, he and Fettes unearth the remains. Unable to fit the corpse into the carriage’s storage area, the men are forced to position the body upright between them. Dr. MacFarlane becomes increasingly agitated by the presence of the corpse and a strange voice that eerily repeats “Toddy,” the nickname Gray used to taunt MacFarlane. He finally directs Fettes to shine the light upon it, claiming that the body has moved. When MacFarlane removes the sheet, he sees the dead body of John Gray (fig. 9), whose corpse had been previously dissected by MacFarlane’s medical students. Frightened, MacFarlane lets out a gasp, and the horses take off into the night, leaving Fettes behind. As the carriage speeds down the bumpy dirt road, MacFarlane tries his best to steer while the body of
John Gray glows brighter with each lightning strike. The carriage eventually crashes down a nearby hill, and when Fettes arrives, he sees that his mentor has been killed by the accident, and the sheet-covered corpse that they had retrieved together lies next to him on the ground. Fettes lifts the sheet only to behold the body of a woman (fig. 10), which had presumably there all along. Therefore, the audience is led to believe that the specter of Gray was Dr. MacFarlane’s hallucination, a distortion of visual knowledge which caused his death.

This distortion of knowledge had distinct relevance for 1940s America. During the war, information was purposely distorted for a variety of reasons, including the containment of sensitive military information. Another particularly interesting reason which applied specifically to visual information, had to do with the deliberate manipulation of the American public. Depending on what message the government, influenced by the Office of Wartime Information (OWI), wanted to convey, certain images were censored, while certain images were permitted.

George H. Roeder argues in The Censored War, that this manipulation reflected the changing status of the United States in the war. In the early months of the war, American casualties were high, and the United States experienced multiple losses. In order to keep morale high, images of dead American soldiers were kept from sight, in the “Chamber of Horrors.” As the war progressed and the United States approached victory, the government decided to display


25 Roeder, The Censored War, 7-27.

26 Ibid., 8.
many of the once censored images, to prevent the public from becoming complacent. In order to maintain the American workforce and morale, which was considered pivotal to America’s success in the war, visual information could be skewed in either direction.

The government also needed to distort information to keep crucial military information away from the enemy. Although the Office of Censorship, in collaboration with the OWI, claimed to provide transparency, in actuality they only supplied the guise of it. According to former censor Theodore Koop, oftentimes facts were doled out only partially, in order to secure military information. Journalists were occasionally uncooperative, arguing “that if A was publishable, there was no harm in adding B.” “Sometimes,” Koop argues, “that logic was correct; in other instances A and B might equal a C that could convey an important conclusion to the enemy.” In this way, the American government parceled out information, distorting the way in which it was received.

For MacFarlane, this distortion of visual information turns out to be disastrous and leads to his death. The danger of distortion is also evidenced in the reconnection of the heroic Doctor to the murderous scoundrel and body snatcher, John Gray, a theme which is developed throughout the film. The audience learns through certain bits of dialogue that at onetime, the pair were classmates at the same medical school. Although they began at the same place, the two separated professionally, yet eventually become mutually dependent on each other to continue their respective businesses. Increasingly irritated by Gray’s torments, Dr. MacFarlane finally

---

27 Ibid., 16-20.
29 The censor had to perform a dangerous dance in this wartime era. Certain information could be given to the public, but it had to be discreet enough not to alert enemies. Other times, distorted information was used purposely to mislead the enemy. Ibid., 210.
decides to rid himself of the body snatcher once and for all, and murders him in his apartment. After Gray is gone, dissected by his students, MacFarlane’s spirits are lifted; he is happy to be free of the coercive monster who holds a distinct power over him. The doctor is quickly brought back to reality by his mistress, Meg, who emphatically declares, “You’ll never be rid of Gray!” Her statement becomes all too true, as MacFarlane himself immediately transforms into a body snatcher after Gray is dead and gone. Furthermore, his death is caused by an image of Gray, which refuses to leave his mind.

Meg’s statement has further repercussions for the history of medicine and body snatching. “You’ll never be rid of Gray,” suggests foremost that the medical establishment will always be dependent on unsavory practices for medical advancement. Gray, therefore, represents body snatching as an enterprise, an industry which enabled physicians to perform dissections. Indeed, progress in the medical field has been due in large part to dissection and newfound awareness of how the human body functions. Without Gray, and body snatching in general, Meg suggests, developments in medicine would be impossible.

Her statement also implies that the medical establishment will never be rid of the ethical ambiguities, the “Gray” areas, that propel it. These ethical ambiguities began with the practice of body snatching and the bodily violation of dissection, but they continued into the 1940s with burgeoning medical practices that were both inspiring and disturbing.

Medicine in this era involved quite frightening experimentation on animals and on humans performed by Americans and Nazi scientists. In 1934, Robert E. Cornish began

---

30 This advancement is also due in part to certain laws making corpses more available. By 1913, nearly every state that housed a medical school permitted the dissection of the unclaimed poor, therefore making body snatching unnecessary. Sappol, A Traffic of Dead Bodies, 4.
revivification experiments on his dog Lazarus IV. He would place the dead dog on a teeterboard to stimulate blood flow and inject it with a combination of epinephrine and the difibrinated (unclotted) blood from another dog. He successfully managed to revive Lazarus IV as well as Lazarus V, but only for a few hours. Cornish wished to attempt his experiments on humans, petitioning the Nevada State Prison in 1934 to allow him to utilize the bodies of recently executed criminals; these petitions were ultimately rejected. Unlike John Gray in The Body Snatcher, who supplied corpses to MacFarlane to dissect, Cornish believed himself to be an actual “Resurrectionist,” bringing once-deceased animals (and potentially humans) back to life. Like John Gray, however, Cornish crossed an ethical line when it was discovered that he was first killing the dogs on which he planned to experiment. One after the other, he would kill a dog, attempt to resuscitate it, and it would die again, seemingly in pain as one journalist described the dog’s actions, “whining, panting, barking as if ridden by nightmares.”

Nazi research surpassed the atrocities of medical experimentation on animals by forcibly testing on human subjects. According to Deborah Lipstadt, in the early 1940s The New York Times printed much evidence of these experiments performed by Nazi physicians on Jewish captives, and despite claims to the contrary, the American public was aware of much of the

---


33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 288-289.

35 “Science: Lazarus, Dead and Alive,” Time Magazine March 6, 1934.

36 Ibid.
horror taking place. Studying hypothermia, Nazi scientists submerged their subjects in a tank of freezing water for up to five hours. Jewish subjects were also used to test Nazi weaponry.

In 1944, an article from The New York Times explains that Czech Jews were used as “guinea pigs” to test the effects of newly developed poison gas. Because it was constantly in the news, Americans were aware of the possible inhumanity of medical experimentation.

Despite the frightening aspects of medicine in this era, advances were continually being made, especially on the battlefield. New organizational methods--triage--helped sort the wounded “according to the severity of their injuries,” and evolved into mobile surgical units which would travel to necessary sites. In addition to these new organizational methods, which helped put bodies where they could be best cared for, new surgical practices allowed wartime surgeons to better care for wounded soldiers. Although blood transfusions were already common before the start of World War II, the benefits and convenience of plasma were discovered. Debridement, a new procedure which cut the dead tissue around the wound, helped surgeons reduce the risk of infection. These benefits and hopes of medical progress coexisted with the fears of medical inhumanity, creating a climate of ambiguity for the medical establishment.


40 This new development had evolved from the civil war, which was mostly without medical advancement. Mobile surgical teams were a completely new development for World War II. Cowdrey, Fighting for Life, 5-7, 120.

41 Ibid., 166.

42 Ibid., 163
CHAPTER 5

The Body Snatcher as Propaganda

The ambiguities embedded into the medical establishment of the 1940s, can be seen in the film’s ambiguous character formulations. Dr. MacFarlane and John Gray are not simply two ends of a spectrum; the film complicates the typical hero versus villain dichotomy by making each of these two characters both heroic and monstrous. Indeed, at many points in the film, they reverse roles.

The surgeon MacFarlane is a wealthy and well-educated man with a medical school under his command. Additionally, he gives a young girl the ability to walk by performing a complicated spinal surgery. As the film progresses, however, it is apparent that the good Doctor has a dark side. He becomes increasingly callous towards Fettes’s complaints about the violation of bodies, explaining that a good doctor must endure these ethical ambiguities. When Fettes informs him of the street singer’s murder, MacFarlane urges him to make the correct notation in the transaction book and forget it, lest they be implicated as co-conspirators in the act. By the end of the film, MacFarlane has completed the transformation. He himself becomes a murderer as well as a criminal body snatcher in Gray’s stead.

John Gray is himself a complicated character. As the apparent monster of the film, he fits this role in several ways: he continually antagonizes Dr. MacFarlane, and he incites fear in many

---

43 These types of complicated characters were popular during a time when medical films ruled the silver screen. As Naomi Rogers suggests, “Hollywood’s portrayal of medical science and scientists in the 1930s and 1940s has been frequently taken as a marker of the medical profession’s prestige and the cultural esteem of science, and as compelling evidence of what has been called the ‘Golden Age’ of American medicine.” Ambiguous characters become more popular in the 40s with films like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (MGM, 1941) which were very successful at the box office. Naomi Rogers, “American Medicine and the Politics of Filmmaking: Sister Kenny (RKO, 1946) in Leslie J. Reagan, Nancy Tomes, and Paula A. Treichler, eds. Medicine’s Moving Pictures: Medicine, Health and Bodies in American Film and Television (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 201.
of the films characters, including Fettes. Visually, his haggard appearance and dilapidated residence add to the terror of his character. Curiously, however, other characters are not afraid of Gray. The innocent Georgina Marsh, who is remedied by Dr. MacFarlane’s operation, laughs and jokes with Gray as she meets him outside the medical school (fig. 11). Indeed, it is Gray that persuades (and perhaps coerce) the doctor to perform the surgery on the young girl. Additionally, after MacFarlane fails to motivate the girl to use her new ability to walk, she appears to hear the sound of Gray’s horse, which inspires her to rise from her wheelchair and take a few steps. Gray is partially responsible for this success, not only because of his friendship with the girl but also because without the murder of the street singer, Dr. MacFarlane wouldn’t have been able to operate, and Georgina could not have been saved. Gray, therefore, is not merely a monster; he provides a necessary service for medical progress, one that is, perhaps, worth the ethical ambiguity.

The idea of a worthy sacrifice translates easily to home front culture during World War II. The filmmakers seem to stress that sacrifice is necessary for medical progress or a successful outcome. The public was bombarded with propagandistic messages urging them to conserve materials like rubber and aluminum, materials necessary for the war effort. It was also necessary to stress specifically bodily sacrifice to the American public. Home front production was considered a vital part of the war effort and the government had to assure that bodies in America kept working, so that American bodies overseas could continue their jobs, and make their own sacrifice, which often meant the sacrifice of their lives. Additionally, home front culture was often asked to sacrifice parts of their own bodies in the form of blood, which, along

44 Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 143.
with the medical advance of blood transfusions, helped keep American soldiers alive.\textsuperscript{45} These bodily sacrifices were urged and lauded by the American government as citizens doing their part to support the war effort.

This propaganda effort extended to Hollywood films urging civilians to do their part. According to the OWI, films were to support the war in any way possible by considering seven questions before releasing the picture.\textsuperscript{46} The first and most important of these questions was, “Will this picture help win the war?”\textsuperscript{47} Indeed, films were imbued with messages of sacrifice, including bodily sacrifice. The film \textit{Guadalcanal Diary} (Twentieth Century Fox, 1943), which focuses on the preparations for and initial campaign on Guadalcanal, includes a scene in which letters are opened by the soldiers. One of the letters includes an inspiring account of citizens donating blood at a local high school. According to Robert Fyne, the implicit message of this scene is for the audience to remember to donate blood.\textsuperscript{48}

As the decade progressed, films began to visually prepare the home front for the immense sacrifices being made.\textsuperscript{49} \textit{The Body Snatcher} asserts the necessity of bodily sacrifice for progress, by visually emphasizing the changing anatomical posters. The diagrammed bodies on the open posters help the audience visualize the advances that are made by dissection; they become a symbol of bodily sacrifice as well as the ambiguities that are necessary for medical progress; they visually represent body snatching and dissection. Closed, the posters remind the audience

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., and Cowdrey, \textit{Fighting for Life}, 1.

\textsuperscript{46} Koppes and Black, \textit{Hollywood Goes to War}, 66.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{The Hollywood Propaganda of World War II} (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1994), 47.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 162.
of the individual sacrifices and the emotional loss of familiar bodies, the losses of loved ones and friends. In this way, *The Body Snatcher*, like many other wartime films, prepares the home front for bodily sacrifice, for the deaths of American soldiers, but it does so in a specifically visual manner through the anatomical posters.

Although *The Body Snatcher* does indeed follow the propagandistic methods of other contemporaneous films--and it certainly had to adhere to censorship regulations and motivations of the government and film industry--it does so in a more subversive manner, underscoring the reliability of visual information for progress. While the film seems to suggest that sacrifice is necessary, partially through the visual diagrams of the human body, while also signaling the emotional significance of the human body, it also seems to emphasize the importance of visual knowledge for progress. According to the film, censorship and distortion of visual information have detrimental effects; the unavailability and unreliability of visual knowledge leads to death. *The Body Snatcher* thus negotiates this atmosphere of 1940s propaganda and censorship while commenting on specific attitudes about the human body during an era consumed with anxiety about the wartime destruction, and medical preservation of those bodies.
Figure 1. Anatomical posters hung in the background while students dissect. *The Body Snatcher*, RKO, 1946.
Figure 2. A Public Dissection circa 1900 in Philadelphia, from Suzanne Shultz’s Body Snatching, 16
Figure 3. The discovery of a familiar body and rolled-up anatomical posters. *The Body Snatcher.*

RKO, 1946.
Figure 4. Georgina’s operation and the disappearance of the posters. *The Body Snatcher*, RKO, 1946.
Figure 5. Doctor MacFarlane (Henry Daniell) operating on Georgina. *The Body Snatcher*. RKO, 1946.
Figure 6. Thomas Eakins, *The Gross Clinic.*
Figure 7. Gray’s shadow in the graveyard. *The Body Snatcher*, RKO, 1946
Figure 8. The street singer enters the tunnel. *The Body Snatcher*, RKO, 1946
Figure 9. Dr. MacFarlane and the glowing body of Gray. *The Body Snatcher*. RKO, 1946.
Figure 10. The actual exhumed body--a woman. *The Body Snatcher*. RKO, 1946.
Figure 11. Georgina Marsh (Sharyn Moffett) and Gray. *The Body Snatcher*. RKO, 1946.
CHAPTER 7

Bibliography


