

Snatching Bodies

By Rodrigo Fresán

*At first glance, everything looked the same.
It wasn't.*

Dr. Miles Bennell (Kevin McCarthy) in
Invasion of the Body Snatchers

My father glows in the dark.

My father glows in the dark, like one of those deep-sea fish that the light never touches.

Or better yet:

My father glows in the dark, giving off that odd and unmistakable phosphorescence of those Aurora-brand model-kit figures advertised in the

back pages of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, a magazine I've subscribed to since its first issue.

And, true, the dates don't fit: the magazine was first published in 1958, yes, but the Aurora-brand monsters didn't go on sale (fill out the coupon, cut it out, send it in, wait for the mailman to deliver the package) and get promoted in the magazine until 1961.

I confirm the correct years now with a rapid dance of fingers across the keyboard and, instantaneously, the more or less accurate electricity of the encyclopedias in that other simultaneously outer and terrestrial space. So-called cyberspace and all of that, which doesn't interest me much, because, I think, the fact that here and now—in the present, with telephones that are televisions, with cybersex, videogames, and virtual second lives—is where science fiction has landed is nothing but a form of defeat. The end of an adventure and an impulse that kept mankind looking outward, forward, far away.

And all of this happens—happened—in 1959 when, one summer afternoon, I went to see a movie called *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and I thought I understood everything, having, of course, understood absolutely nothing. And I understand now that I have been defeated too: few are the time machines built to travel back into the past rather than to launch into the future.

In my deposition, I'll say that I was thirteen (and I am again in order to write this, to make memory is to unmake time) and that my father glowed (glows) in the dark. A pale green glow so similar—I already said it, already remembered it—to that of the pieces of the Aurora-brand model kits. Pieces corresponding to the hands and faces of Dracula, Wolf Man, Frankenstein's Monster, The Mummy, The Phantom of the Opera. Claws and heads of ancient monsters. Strange monsters. Monsters imported from the Old World by Universal Studios to star in movies full of shadows and stairways and bats flitting in through windows and Egyptian mists roiling in cauldrons and wolves running across mountain passes.

And my father glows in the dark and some nights he wakes up screaming and asks my mother to, please, do something to shut up all those New Mexican coyotes howling inside his brain, and I hear him and cover my ears, downstairs, in the living room, the eye of the TV on and never blinking, showing me the exact moment when the sad and long-suffering Larry Talbot is beaten to death by a cane with a silver wolf's-head handle, or

when Quasimodo falls from the heights of the cathedral, or when Him-ho-tep burns, things like that.

And those Universal movies (I'm not entirely sure that *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was one of them) are, despite being old, good movies. And there is nothing more irremediably *old* than that which happened before you were born. Something that happened much farther away than on another planet and, at the same time, as close and as unsettling as one of those parks or forests we are advised not to go anywhere near once the shadows trip and fall. But, at the same time, there is something too . . . *theatrical* in all of those movies: the monsters, obviously, are actors—their last names are brands: Karloff, Lugosi, Chaney—they like to act, to associate with normal beings, with their victims who fear them at first, then succumb to their charms, and later destroy them in intimate combat, body to body. They are, yes, histrionic monsters. In those movies, the monsters *play* monsters. And, except for in the case of *Frankenstein*, in Frankenstein's laboratory (primitive machinery closer to alchemy than to Physics or Chemistry), there isn't much science in any of them. Really, the most scientific thing about them is that they appear on television. The inexplicable and still novel wonder in whites and grays and blacks. Late television nights when everyone else is sleeping and I get up and turn on the TV and watch those movies as if they were ancient scrolls, with the volume down really low and my ear almost touching the screen. Almost nothing like the movies of today, the ones I go to see at the cinema on Saturday afternoons. Science-fiction movies that have science in them. *The Thing*, *The Blob*, *Them!*, *It Came from Beneath the Sea*, *It Came from Outer Space*, *It Came from Wherever* . . . in double features. Double Session and Creature Features and a brief intermission between one and the next to fill up on the stimulating fuel of sugar. The monsters in those movies, though, sometimes, were human once (product of an experiment that didn't come out as the calculations and equations predicted) are not humanistic monsters. In them, all humanity—never *this* or *that* human being in particular—is nothing but a vast living organism to enslave or exterminate. Those monsters don't really suffer, they aren't concerned with earthly things, their defeats are, really, more touristic mishaps or problems of adaptation than anything else—on one occasion they succumb to something as banal as a flu virus—which, even still, “the good guys” invariably celebrate as if they were epic victories.

In the end, beaten by the Army or the Marines or the Air Force (all of them, always, played by awful actors in spotless uniforms firing off quick technical outbursts in front of their computers and most-dubious radar screens) the *creatures* (something very different from the *monsters*; as I said) are changing or changed humans. The *creatures*—even when their origin was a sane doctor falling victim to an accident or mad scientist causing an accident—seem to expire with little anguish, aware that others will arrive from some corner of deep space or that something will once again go wrong in some top-secret and subterranean sanctuary. Some and others come from elsewhere, or no longer are what they once were, and will even forget what they used to be before long. Sometimes, watching Saturday after Saturday the different threats and invasions or prehistoric monsters awoken from their lethargy by a radioactive storm, I wonder how it is that the men and, especially, the cities (because these antediluvian beasts or these flying saucers seem to know, always, which emblematic building or historical monument to take out with a gamma ray or a giant slap) recover so quickly. We haven't even gotten over the hangover of the last catastrophe and here we are again: men talking into tense walkie-talkies, debating the calibers and voltages and megatons of the weapons to use on the next roll of film. And I leave that cinema—always the same—and pause a few seconds, adjusting my eyes to the white blaze of the summer afternoon, and walk a few shaky meters, exaggerating the effect of the exterior light on the interior darkness that doesn't want to let me go. And I return home the way someone returns to the set of another movie. A strange movie that I don't know what genre it belongs to or when it will end so that another one can begin in which, maybe, in brilliant colors, the protagonists will suddenly exclaim a "Let me explain" and then—without possible explanation, something far more disturbing than any extraterrestrial behavior—the music will rise in volume and, without warning, everyone will be singing and dancing through the excessively clean and perfect streets of a Hollywood movie set.

My father glows in the dark (his glow is not ancestral but futuristic) and my father is a scientist who works for the military and he no longer is what he was and it won't be easy for him to become again what he used to be.

My father glows in the dark and he is getting smaller and smaller and beneath his skin his bones seem to be losing density and size like those of the protagonist of *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. But different. My father doesn't shrink. My father is consumed. My father speaks less and less and,

when he speaks, his voice is strange and he only uses it to say things that are even stranger with his new strange voice. It is a metallic voice.

My father glows in the dark and sounds like he's eaten a robot. Piece by piece. Nut by nut. Screw by screw. And like all those pieces—not by the art of magic, but by the art of science—had been arranged to come together and assemble themselves there inside, inside of him. And so, skin like a larva, a husk, a membrane. Like wallpaper. Like the cover my mother puts on the couches when we leave the house. Our home like a spaceship that has landed on a planet with an unbreathable atmosphere. A black air that seeps in under the door and through poorly latched windows and that is slowly poisoning us, while my father speaks little and strangely, with that voice of Gort, that robot who in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* doesn't speak but obeys orders given in such an alien language.

Slowly, I approach my father, sleeping on the sofa. My father has fallen asleep. His almost-transparent hands have dropped a book. I read the title: *Praeterita*, by John Ruskin. I go up to my father and next to his ear, in a low but steady voice, I say: “Gort! Klaatu barada nikto.”

Years later, someone will tell me—in front of a TV screen, watching that movie, passing me a joint—that *nikto*, in Russian, means *nobody* or *none*.

My father glows in the dark and says strange things, glowing words, glittering monologues. My father tells me about mariachi trumpets ringing out in the desert, about barbed-wire fences, about those strange balls of straw and roots that tumble down the invisible sand highways, about lizards big as crocodiles, about cacti with too many arms and thorns, about tunnels and passageways, about formulas on chalkboards that they write and memorize and erase and then burn the chalkboards so no trace remains, about Aztec children dancing in circles, and about one perfect morning when, through a crack in the sky, something entered our lives to never leave again.

My father glows in the dark and tells me that we are lost, that we'll never be found.

My father glows in the dark and tells me that we are doomed, that they awakened something while everyone else was sleeping.

One afternoon in 1959, I go to the cinema to see *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* not really knowing what I'm going to see. I know that it's a science fiction movie, yes, but from the poster and photos exhibited in the lobby I understand that it won't be a movie like all the others, not just another Saturday.

On the poster, a man and woman are shown running and being chased by other men and women who, in appearance, seem as normal as they are. A black handprint takes up a good part of the poster. "The nightmare that threatens the world," I read. "In Superscope," I read. A second poster above the popcorn and soda stand—bigger, more elaborate, of a horizontal design—shows the same couple running, chased by the same mob from the other poster; but this time, out of a dark space you can see the silhouettes of various planets (one of them a poorly drawn Saturn), shooting multiple ominous rays of light, like galactic reflectors and I read: "They came from another world," "Incredible! Invisible! Insatiable!" and "Something is happening! Send your man of science quick! The panic stricken cry went over the phone to Washington D.C. until the lines went dead!" A lot of exclamation points, yes. The exclamation point like an indispensable ingredient of all science-fiction movie posters.

I buy a Coca-Cola and go in and watch and listen. The credits show a landscape of clouds furrowing the sky. It is a movie with a lot of dialogue and few special effects. Which disappointed me a little at first, but before long I started to find it interesting. There aren't, in appearance, any *creatures*. There are husks, larvae, *pods*. There are monsters, yes, but they are not *creatures*—though they were once—and they are the same as the humans. They are creatures whose only desire is to acquire human appearance. Invasion by falsification.

There is a town doctor who is so kind that, sometimes, it's hard to take. There is an English girl named Becky.

There are people who, suddenly, say they don't recognize their loved ones: a boy running in desperation, a terrified woman watching her uncle mow the lawn. We are shown a suddenly vacant restaurant because, apparently, the impostors don't like to go out to eat.

There are conversations about "neuroses," "an epidemic of mass hysteria," and "a malignant disease spreading through the whole country," and about "seeds drifting through space for years," and they have "the power to reproduce themselves in the exact likeness of any form of life."

There is an unfinished replication, without any fingerprints, atop a pool table.

There is a scene in a greenhouse where we are shown how a pod opens and the fake body bursts out coated in a thick foam.

There is a moment when someone asks, “Do you want to see how they grow?”

There are people who first feel fear and later feel nothing and are happy because “you are reborn into an untroubled world” where “there’s no need for love.” “You’ve been in love before. It didn’t last. It never does. Love. Desire. Ambition. Faith. Without them, life is so simple, believe me,” points out someone who once was human and no longer is.

And there’s one scene—a terrible moment—when you hear a celestial music, beautiful, the music the extraterrestrials listen to as they cultivate their pods and suddenly a terrible sound comes on over the loudspeakers, like the lowing of a monstrous cow.

And everyone runs.

And the important thing is to not fall asleep, because it’s while they’re sleeping that the humans are replaced by their perfect and functional doubles. Falling asleep means never waking up again, being processed and replaced.

And, near the end (years later I would read that *that* was the true ending, that the movie should have been 76 and not 80 minutes long, that in the original version there was no voiceover and no more or less happy ending where the FBI, the forces of order, are called, and so *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* ends where all other invader movies begin), there is a desperate man, running through cars on the highway, cars that don’t stop, drivers who yell at him to move out of the way, his face looking out at me, eyes huge from lack of sleep, screaming and screaming at me, at me, sitting in the darkness, “You’re next!!!”

And I don’t see them, but it’s as if they were there, in the voice of the poor Dr. Miles Bennell, all those exclamation points, one after the next. An unhappy ending that the producers considered problematic and risky and the brief coda they added really ends up sounding and looking *so fake*, as if acted and directed by replicas to fool the poor doctor, like one last and sinister joke. But they don’t fool me: *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is a very good movie that can only end badly.

And I leave the theater—“Just like any Saturday morning,” someone on the screen said—and return home and I’m cold. A new kind of cold. An extraterrestrial cold. And my mother is in the kitchen preparing herself a martini with the face of *I Married a Monster from Outer Space!* and I look at her with the face of *My Father Glows in the Dark!* and the residential neighborhood where we live isn’t called Santa Mira—the town in California

where *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is set—but it might as well be the same place. The different name—Sad Songs—is not enough to alter the lifestyle, a way of understanding reality and on TV, on the news, someone says “they are everywhere and they won’t rest until they infiltrate positions of power and destroy our beautiful and powerful country.”

My father listens and laughs and then cries and in the end it’s really hard to tell the exact point where his laughter ends and his tears begin.

My mother goes out into the yard with her glass in one hand and a golf club in the other holding it aloft and standing there, motionless, like a statue. Overhead, the first lightning of a summer storm begins to streak across the sky and my mother stays there, letting the rain soak her, waiting for a bolt to come looking for her and find her and make her glow even brighter than my father.

I go up to my room and promise myself that I’ll never fall asleep again, that I won’t let them replace me, and I wonder why it might be that—of all the planets in the universe, of all the possible ways of life to imitate and supplant—the aliens in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* have chosen beings as imperfect as us to resemble and what might be in it for them and what are they going to do when they finish their work, when there are no bodies left to snatch.

They come and take my father away. They take him away in a big car. A few days go by before I resign myself to the fact that no, they aren’t going to bring a double or replica of my father to substitute for the defective model that now they have hidden—or eliminated—who knows where. I go up to his room and look under his bed to see if there’s a pod or larva or something like that. There’s nothing. I ask my mother where they’ve taken him. My mother says to a hospital. I ask her when we can go visit him. My mother tells me, like all her answers, that the hospital where they have taken my father *isn’t one of those hospitals where you can go visit the patients* and that my father prefers it that way, that I not see him yet, *until he is better*, she adds looking at the kitchen wall where there’s nothing to see but a Coca-Cola calendar, where she’d rather look than look me in the eyes.

My father no longer glows in the dark.

My father is invisible now.

There are nights when I’m almost certain I can hear him, there are mornings when I could swear that my Aurora-brand monsters have changed

position. Dracula switching places with Wolf Man. All of them turning their backs on me, as if I'd disappointed them, as if I'd abandoned them, as if I'd traded them in for others.

A couple years later, the world isn't other, but it is different. The world has been swept away and another world put in its place, so similar to this one and yet . . .

Sputnik, *Watch the Skies!*, and it all began in October, 1962, when a spy plane, an almost invisible U-2, on a more or less routine mission, revealed missile bases being built in Russia. Russian missiles. We erected bases for combat rockets on the border with Turkey and the Soviet Union and they, in retaliation, landed on Havana beaches. Flower shirts and mojitos and atomic warheads aimed at great American cities. Kennedy and Khrushchev talking and arguing and shouting into telephones that aren't yet red but are red-hot and after that will never be black again. And so the Bay of Pigs and the Berlin Wall and the mutual and inconfessable certainty that the third act will have to be something great, something explosive. They take inventory, make calculations, add up all the silos—Semyorkas and Atlas and Sam and Titan—and predict casualties and ships that come and planes that go and headlines on every page and in big letters and our president on TV, the 22nd of October, announcing a barely coded message that they have begun general training for the end of the world and inviting all of us to play a part in the show. And everything seems to indicate that, on the 27th of October, the curtain is ready to be drawn up and my classmates and I, in school, all practicing for the Apocalypse, under our desks looking at each other, terrified and containing our laughter, because what protection can our fragile wooden desks offer us from that nuclear wind that will soon be blowing in our direction, ripping the skin from our bones in tatters, atomizing us, turning us into part of a story that will now be history, futuristic but instantly ancient history.

There I am—elbows on my knees, head between my hands, nose against the floor—when the principal comes into the classroom and says my name and asks me to come to his office and there is my mother, dressed in black, and she tells me—just the necessary words, without inflexion, like a telegram—that my father is dead. My mother is smoking when she says it and the smoke from the cigarette accompanies her words and it's as if she were speaking the language of fog. My mother is not my mother, I decide

then and there, my mother is a being from another planet, my mother is from a faraway galaxy.

I'm seventeen years old and have a leather jacket and a motorcycle that I have put together and taken apart multiple times and I leave home and it is then that the rest of my life begins.

The whole world has been ruled by adults for too long. The adults are extraterrestrials and I am part of the resistance. Of the last beatniks and the first hippies. Not the one or the other. The best breed. The best of both worlds, of both planets, I suppose.

The road as destination and not just means of getting from one point to another. Hitting the road.

And the secret to wisdom and the key to happiness are, yes, in keeping your eyes open, in taking it all in, in not falling asleep. Never sleeping.

When I reached the sea, my eyes were no longer my eyes and I had forgotten the meaning of the word *eyelids*. I dragged myself to the shore and took a few steps into the sea and plunged my head under the salt water.

It was night and I saw in the distance the color of a bonfire, the peculiar color of fire. Surfboards stuck in the sand like totems. There were a handful of people and someone was singing a song that was so sad it made me feel happy to be alive. It was the voice of a redheaded woman with freckles on her nose and she was your mother and your mother looked at me and I knew—seeing myself for the first time in her eyes, seeing myself the way she looked at me—that nobody had seen me like that, the way she saw me, and it was like being seen for the first time and, thus, I was someone worth seeing.

And that—fallen from the sky, like a strange seed, drifting through deep space, floating from the far reaches of the universe and reaching that definitive night—was how you came to this world and into our lives.

This is what I left out of my story.

It is quite a bit.

It is, I suppose, what will make my story into something irremediably terrestrial and at the same time interplanetary.

This is what I left out.

I wouldn't say it's the love part (I haven't been able to rid myself of that), but it is the light part. The light that has been devoured by black holes the way science fiction, as a genre, has been devoured by the magnitude of

its ambition and its failure: there is no life on other planets, we are alone and so, desperate, crazy with loneliness, we have become our own invaders: we travel toward ourselves, seek to clone ourselves, to be the same but better, stronger, to last longer, to reach the optimal physical condition that will allow us to survive on the surface of this dead planet that is ours and that we'll never leave.

I left and leave things out in the way a writer decides to eliminate a few key details in a story so that the reader can fill in the blanks. It is a privilege and a trap. It is also, in a way, a kind of alien abduction. A way of possessing another living organism and making our story theirs.

I don't want to do something like that to you because I love you too much and because—though so much time has passed since the last time I saw you—I still feel in my hands the echo of that feeling of lifting you and tossing you up into the air and then catching you, your light weight on my fingerprints, and the sound of your voice, your little cries, your eyes that were so hard for you to close at night because you never wanted to go to sleep. You weren't afraid of the dark: you were afraid the dark would keep you from seeing something important, unrepeatable. You were always brave and so you took the sudden disappearance of your mother during the appearance of her illness much better than I did. Your mother, whom I never replaced with another woman because she was impossible to exchange or replace.

Maybe that's why, now, I tell you about things that I didn't see, that I couldn't or didn't want to see. Too many question marks where I would rather put exclamation points.

Why did my father glow in the dark?

Was he part of the Manhattan Project, of the Oppenheimer team at the Trinity Test Camp, Los Alamos, New Mexico, where the atomic bomb was developed?

Had he worked on successive projects, moving from the A Bomb to the H Bomb?

Had there been some kind of accident, something radioactive, that had made him glow in the dark?

Uranium or Plutonium?

Or did I just want to believe that that was why he glowed and not on his own and in his own right and the truth was something else?

His "glow" like a way of denouncing *something*, like a coded signal, like a message for times yet to come?

Was my father a man depressed and tormented by something he had done?

Was he persecuted by the committee investigating something called “Un-American Activities”?

Was he a communist sympathizer?

Had he found out that my mother was cheating on him with another man?

Did my mother hate him and had she told him that I wasn’t his son, that I had come from another dimension or something like that?

Did my father have cancer or some other incurable illness and the glow he gave off was the consequence of the medical treatment he was receiving?

Was my father an extraterrestrial life form?

Was Lee Harvey Oswald a snatched body on that morning in Dallas, in 1963, when *everything* began to transform into *something else*, when history changed sign and frequency?

Was *I* a snatched body, coming back from Vietnam, irreversibly *other*, after breathing in Agent Orange and having seen everything I saw, running through the jungle, having forgotten how to shut my eyes because, falling asleep was dangerous and every time I shut them, the most unreal of realities kicked them open, the way certain doors are opened, never to close?

Was it there, in an alien war, in that twilight zone where I chose to forget so many things, or had I forgotten them before and had gone there, voluntarily voluntary, in search of the alibi that would justify the perfect crime of my oblivion?

Who were the invaders there and then?

What was the name of the cinema where I saw *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* for the first time? Empire, Rialto, Alhambra, Rex?

I have no answers. My childhood is like one of those feature-films full of scratches and missing scenes and that, when you project, often cut off and burst into flame and the lights come up in the theater and people look at each other as if waking from a strange and unfamiliar dream that, at the same time, contains all of them, unites them, binds them together in a brief but intense familiarity.

I never returned to *my* Santa Mira and—like what happens in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*—everything remains ambiguous and diffuse and possible to interpret in multiple ways. Is *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* a film that attacks or defends? Does it warn of a danger that comes from far away or that emerges on our own street? Can we trust anyone? Can we believe the ones we love and the ones who say they love us?

Too many questions and successive remakes of the film (the best is the 1978 version, which ends badly, very badly, and in which the invaders

go about their work while listening to the emotive verses of “Amazing Grace”, communicating by opening their mouths very wide, like in the scream from that painting, and releasing a terrible sound, and in which we get to see what happens to the original bodies when they are replaced by their doubles and what happens to them is not at all pleasant) haven’t offered an entirely convincing answer. The only thing I dare to claim is that *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is not—contrary to what tends to be said—a political film. What *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is about—its transparent moral—is that, sooner or later, we always end up discovering that other people are never entirely who or what we thought.

And yesterday I went to see a new version—nothing new, a few changes to the original script, the obsession with modernizing the classic—starring that Australian actress who for a while was married to the being from another planet who smiles too much, baring his teeth, smiles that bite.

When I exited the theater it was raining and didn’t care that I was getting wet. I don’t care about much anymore.

Repeated viewings of the original (I can recite it from memory, the way others recite Shakespeare, and about which I know absolutely everything, down to the most minute and curious and absurd detail, even that that man who in one short scene, in Dr. Bennell’s basement, comes in to check the gas meter, is none other than the then future and now deceased film director Sam Peckinpah) haven’t offered me any new clues either. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is the Rosetta Stone of my past, but I can’t figure out how to decipher it.

Maybe it’s better that way.

I’m an old man, as old as the movies of Universal Studios once appeared to me. A human monster. A monster to be disassembled, missing its most important pieces, the pieces that glow. A tired being, a bad actor, who looks up at the sky too often, trying not to be convinced that the sky never looks back. A man who, after seeing a movie, walks to the cemetery to tell headstone inscribed with a name and some dates about it. Under the headstone, they tell me, a body rests in peace. They tell me, also, that I’ll see her again on the other side of things. She’s waiting for me there. Who knows. I hope it’s true. But I’m not under too many illusions.

Like I said: happy endings that happen in the final minute of the movie, just before the credits, never really convinced me.

Meanwhile and in the meantime, people are running in the streets—chasing and chased—and there’s always someone screaming “You’re next!” and nobody believes it; because it would be so nice to believe that we won’t have to worry about anything anymore, not even about love that doesn’t last

or that lasts too long and hurts too much, and that we'll be reborn in an untroubled world where at first glance everything looks the same, but it isn't, on that other planet that's in this one and that now nobody will bother to invade.