

ART «» ENTERTAINMENT

FILM



Donald Sutherland (left) runs from the bodysnatchers from space; Leonard Nimoy (right) calms a woman whose husband has been transformed.

Pods return as house plants

INVASION OF THE BODY-SNATCHERS (United Artists)

By Pat Aufderheide

He used to be a small-town C.F. who made house calls. Now he's a harassed health inspector with no clout, glumly hunting rat turds in French restaurant bouillabaisse. They used to live in a little Our Town where trellises dressed front lawns. Now they drape their ferns in the windows of the urban brownstones. It's a new kind of people that attract the latest bodysnatchers.

The new *Invasion of the Body-Snatchers* (United Artists) is a fast-moving, scary-fun hit; Pauline Kael even called it a new classic. The 1956 version is, of course, a cult classic. The horror of both those excellent American films is built on paranoia, the most fashionable chronic disease of the postwar era. And they both are windows on the fears of their different times.

The approach of both versions is the same, but in the new one both the social setting and the threat are altered to achieve an equally effective horror. In both films, the filmmakers chose a romantic American lifestyle myth (in one, the small-town life; in the other, the good life in the trendy city) with a will to show its weak side. Both do so deliciously well.

But in 1956 an entire small town, and — metaphorically — a whole culture, was both at stake and at fault. In 1978, however, only individual identity is left to lose, along with fragile, informal alliances; and the menace is a totalitarian group identity.

The story remains the same. Seeds from outer space with the capacity to take the form of any life land on earth. Only a handful of people recognize that others are turning into "pods." They resist, but it's hopeless. (The earlier version finally got a false-optimism ending, tacked on against director Don Siegel's objections.) The outsiders become the insiders, and they can do so because of weaknesses in the way the insiders live.

Some saw the original as inveighing against conformity in general, while others read it as an anti-communist tract pitting brain-washing aliens against good Americans. Siegel, known for his tough-guy individualism, claimed to condone conformists with "bodysnatchers" and said, "I think that the world is populated by pods, and I wanted to show them."

Director Philip Kaufman (who

also made *White Dawn*), producer Robert Solo and scriptwriter W.D. Richter have said they intended to make a film that raised some of the same issues that the original did. Solo says, "Today the premise of [the film] has taken on ramifications more pertinent and chilling than those of 20 years ago." And he is right when he says, "Unlike a lot of current space fantasies, *Invasion* is all firmly rooted on Earth. It's about our world and what happens to us."

This film makes sly and pointed references to its ancestor. It opens, for instance, with the earlier version's star, Kevin McCarthy, right where he left off in 1956, standing in the road screaming, "They're here!" But this time they get him. And old loner Don Siegel has a brief role as a pod-cabbie. This film, like its predecessor, ends with a coda; but instead of providing us with hope, it shows us that hero Donald Sutherland, too, has turned into a pod.

It's not just with in-jokes that the movie shows how times have changed. Throughout, both society and the pod presence are described differently in order to make the same paranoid point: that They are Us.

In the 1956 film, pods look and act very like the people they were before. It seems an idyllic small town; people call cops by their first names, sweethearts know each other from childhood, people do the same business every Saturday morning in the central square.

It's hard to detect the pod-people in time because they act just like us—almost. They attack family ties, though, by destroying individuality. A child cannot recognize its mother, nor a niece her uncle. The hero says he fears that as pods they will all become "evil and inhuman"—but he also claims that people do so anyway in the process of living. Pod-dom lies just under the surface of daily life, when "we harden our hearts."

These days there is no social unit, only a slice of a class, the single and young-people professionals of San Francisco. They have the best of stereos, go to Vail for the weekend, have good clothes, fashionable haircuts, brownstones, and tons of trendy plants symbolizing their natural lifestyle (and making them prey to the pod invasion).

They are dentists, civil servants and technicians. But they're not straight—they're a little off-beat or funky or, at the least, highly

stylized. The character of Jack Bellicec in the two movies shows the difference. In 1956 he's a small businessman with hobbies, who finds a pod on his billiard table. In 1978 he's a wild-eyed poet (Jeff Goldblum) who runs a mud bath. It burbles obscenely.

In this version, the two couples are an endearing group of friends, but they operate pretty much alone in a big city—they're already disconnected. Brooke Adams' lunkish husband pays more attention to the TV game through his earphones than he does to her.

Their psychiatry goes with their way of life. Analysis-huckster Leonard Nimoy gives on-the-spot one-time therapy, and he berates the confused people for finding "non-existent" bizarre behavior in their intimates, saying they are merely looking for a reason to "get out of relationships" because they are afraid of "taking responsibility."

Once, people slipped from a sickly-sweet Our Town kind of human society to pod-dom, and it chilled us with the similarity of Them to Us. These days people go from being chic careerist individuals to being tools of an Organization, and the horror is in how easily we can become the very different Them, the Organization (the Moonies, Jonestown, est).

Now we see the "alternative" pod lifestyle in detail. The zombies become conservative. They wear respectable and even fussy clothes. They march with a mission, looking sometimes like the Jehovah's Witness men come to call and sometimes like the pack of freaks you can run into at the airport. They loom not emotionless but obsessed, grim and methodical.

Vivid gimmicks show us how suddenly the ordinary can become evil. Daily life is streaked with ominous signs, from a cracked windshield to a suddenly-creaky electric buffer, to a sinister flower. The electronic sound track also plays with the sounds of daily life, distorting them into unearthly perversity.

The danger is still within in this *Invasion*, although the stimulus may be without. But times have changed. Don Siegel could both celebrate and sneer at the ties of convention and habit that bind together a small town. By 1978 those ties, for better or worse, no longer bind a horror movie together. The latest urban problem is, instead, cultist surrender. ■

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Short Notice



Cathal McConnell: beautiful music from one tin whistle

Records

ON LOUGH ERNE'S SHORE

Cathal McConnell (Flying Fish Records)
Cathal McConnell (of Boys of the Lough) delightfully demonstrates how much beautiful music can be made from one little tin whistle. McConnell performs his unusual collection of traditional Irish songs, jigs and reels on flute, whistle, and vocals with his customary verve and finesse. **mg**

JUST IN TIME

Justin Hines and the Dominoes (Mango Records)
Sweet-sounding reggae, marred by bottom-heavy production and less-than-inspiring material. There's nothing here as good as the sprightly "Natty Takeover" on their 1976 release, *Jezebel*. **bd**

TOTO

Toto (Columbia Records)
Former back-up musicians for big shots (Box Scaggs, Steely Dan, etc.) step out on their own. Not surprisingly, their sound at various times recalls earlier associations. Toto's debut features a couple of catchy hooks and some likely hit singles, but however polished technically they may be, their music is both soulless and indistinctive. **bd**

SPIRAL

Muhai Richard Abrams (Arista-Novus)
Coming shortly after a disappointing, pretentious studio album, this solo concert recording reaffirms Abrams as a giant of modern piano. Fragments of ragtime, stride, bop and classical themes can be heard in his sprawling improvisations, which, despite

atonalities and angular leaps, unfold with a satisfying logic. **dr**

GOOD OL' PERSONS

Good Ol' Persons (Bay Records)
In this debut album by this almost all-women's bluegrass and old time band, their original compositions are uniformly excellent, delivered in a class three-part harmony. Barbara Mendlesohn's clawhammer banjo picking is outstanding. **msk**



Toshiko Akiyoshi and Lew Tabackin

FINESSE

Toshiko Akiyoshi (Concord Jazz)
That Akiyoshi is an excellent mainstream pianist has been obscured lately by her dominant role as composer, arranger and leader of the most exciting big band in jazz. This subtle trio session should rectify that. Rhapsodic standards and refined originals fully reveal Akiyoshi's encyclopedic style with its shades of Bud Powell, Ellington and Monk. **dr**

SUNLIGHT

Herbie Hancock (Columbia)
Judging by this record, commercial success means the license to indulge in all the technological hardware a recording studio can offer, right down to synthesized vocals. Maybe the bucks from this overblown one-man show will free Herbie to continue his recent experimental return to serious acoustic jazz. **dr**

DUAL NATURE

Lew Tabackin (Inner City)
Also stepping out from his role as big band co-leader, Tabackin (Akiyoshi's husband) gets a chance to extend his dual instrumental talents on this splendid quartet album. Propelled by drummer Shelley Manne, the flute side swings with a polished classicism. And the full, warm tone and relentless melodic probing of Tabackin's tenor sax ranks him with the best in the Sonny Rollins, early-Coltrane tradition. **dr**

NASHVILLE WEST

Nashville West (Sierra Briar Records)
One of the very first bands to experiment with country rock sounds that have since become flat and overproduced. This unevenly recorded release of some early sessions captures some of the power of the genre. The historical roots of many bands, Gene Parsons, Gib Guilbeau and the late Clarence White, are often dazzling. If you like the old Flying Burrito Brothers... (Sierra Briar Records, 11312 Santa Monica Blvd., Suite 7, Los Angeles, CA 90025.) **msk**

CITY AND TREE

Dave Fritz (Wild Eye)
A fine, smooth sounding collection of guitar instrumentals, with two vocal cuts for balance, by this little-known West Coast musician. Fritz plays 12-string guitar in a style similar to that of Leo Kottke. Avoiding the sometimes heavy sound that can detract from the beauty of the instrument, Fritz plays with a feeling rooted in classical styles. All the music is original, and the album is the first on the new Wild Eye label, another in the growing number of small record distribu-

ters in the San Francisco Bay Area. (Wild Eye Records, P.O. Box 503, Oakland, CA 94604.) **es**

LINES ON THE PAPER

Kate Wolf and The Wildwood
Flower with The Cache Valley Drifters (Owl)
Like her first album, northern California folk singer Kate Wolf's second was recorded live in a friend's living room. Like her first album, it contains more than one memorable song. "Everybody's Looking for the Same Thing," a lively topical tune about the signs and advertisements people post around stores and colleges, is already a hit on several local non-commercial radio stations. An *a capella* number, "The Lilac and the Apple" describes the fate of many unsuccessful settlers in the West through a conversation between two foreign plants left behind by the former residents. (Owl Records, P.O. Box 711, Sebastopol, CA 95472.) **es**

FIRST LIGHT

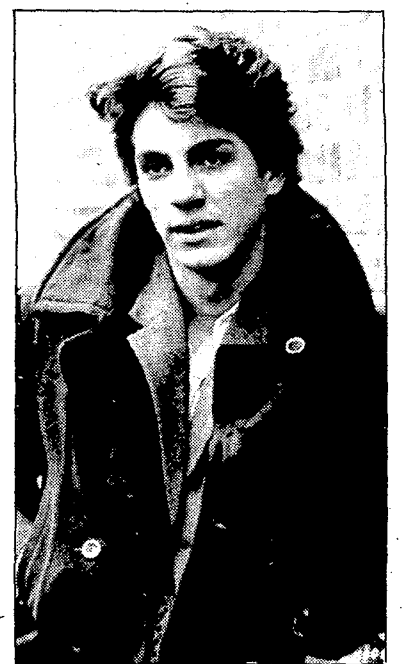
Richard & Linda Thompson (Chrysalis)
The master of British folk-intro-rock, ex-Fairport Conventioner Richard Thompson creates another original lp full of mournful, magnificent music. Thompson writes strikingly contemporary lyrics for his traditional-style melodies, then builds on the effect with an unlikely blend of folk and rock instruments—including hammer dulcimer, button accordion, synthesizer, and lots of guitar. Add Linda Thompson's bittersweet, heart-wrenching vocals and album credits reading like who's who in British folk, and you've got an album which will please folkies and rockers alike. **mg**

Video

IN THE MIDST OF PLENTY

UCV, Studio A, Rarig, U of Minneapolis, Mpls MN 55455
This one-hour videotape exposes growth of rural poverty on a dwindling number of family farms in outwardly-prosperous Midwestern states. Producers Greg Pratt and Jim Gambone follow the large Kellen family as they struggle to establish a small dairy farm in the face of low farm prices, high food and medical costs, and banks that repeatedly refuse them loans. It suffers from slow pacing, and from a cumbersome narration that smothers the Kellens themselves; its personal

approach provides little opportunity for analysis of the impact of corporate farms. But it pointedly reveals the inadequacies of urban-oriented welfare policies (which treat farm vehicles as luxury second cars) and it documents the entrapment of the rural poor. **bw**



Eric Roberts: recognize him?

Movies

KING OF THE GYPSIES

Paramount
Disappointing as schlock. Frank Pierson, who brought you the last *A Star Is Born*, confirms his directorial incompetence in a gypsy story that gives almost no information on the living Romany culture. The plot wanders blindly before blowing up in a burst of violence. Paramount had dedicated \$1.5 million just to make star Eric Roberts (who looks like a cross-clone of John Travolta and Robbie Benson) familiar. A better vehicle would have helped. **pa**

BRASS TARGET

(United Artists)
The movie is the TV teaser at length, and it's headed straight for early-hour television. Everyone's teeth stay permanently clenched; Patton (George Kennedy) growls through his, while villain Robert Vaughan hisses. The audience sighs. One's sympathy for John Cassavetes, Max von Sydow and Sophia Loren, stuck in dreadful roles, fades by midpoint. **pa**

Contributors: Myrna Greenfield, Bruce Dancis, Derk Richardson, Michael Kimmel, Ed Schoenfeld, Bill Warren, Pat Aufderheide.

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TELEVISION

Taxi mixes comedy and drama in solid working-class sitcom

By Albert Auster

When *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was in its heyday a reporter asked Ed Asner (Lou Grant) if he ever got tired of his role, Asner answered, "We never get bored around here. The scripts are too good." The reason was the two electronic Neil Simons who wrote the show, James L. Brooks and Alan Burns. They not only created interesting characters (Mary, Lou, Ted Baxter) but also wrote some great lines: Mary: "I think you're asking a lot of personal questions you have no right to ask!" Lou: "You know, you've got spunk. I hate spunk."

MTM Enterprises has fallen on evil days recently and all its old standbys have either retired (*The MTM Show*, *The Bob Newhart Show*), been cancelled (*Rhoda*, *Phyllis*), or are barely hanging on (*The Lou Grant Show*, *The White Shadow*). This fall from grace may have something to do with the departure last year of Brooks and some other members of the MTM shop (Stan Daniels, David Davis and Ed Weinberger) to form their own production company.

The first venture of the Brooks group, the sitcom *Taxi*, is one of the few hits of the new TV season. *Taxi* has consistently rated among the top ten shows since the very beginning of the season. *Taxi* also returns Brooks to the urban milieu he first used to such good advantage in his late '60s Emmy Award winning program, *Room 222*. An anthology series about a black schoolteacher (Lloyd Haines), *Room 222* was a hit on ABC when the industry joke was

"If you wanted to end the war in Vietnam all you had to do was put it on ABC and it would be cancelled in 13 weeks."

Some of *Taxi*'s success comes from its being conveniently hampered between two other ABC hits—*Three's Company* and *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. It has other things going for it, like concentrating on people rather than punchlines and even nudging the workplace family format pioneered by Brooks at MTM along the road to a video version of working class solidarity.

Robert De Niro would never recognize the characters that populate the Sunshine Taxicab garage (a play on *Amos 'n' Andy*'s Fresh-Air Taxicab, Inc.). For instance, there is a woman, Elaine (Marilu Henner); a Rocky-type pug (Tony Danza); a Midwestern naïf John (Randall Carver); an aspiring actor whose last try-out was for the horse's part in *Equus* (Jeff Conaway); and an immigrant garage mechanic (Andy Kaufman), who speaks a dialect half Spanish-half Polish, and all nebbish ("Thanks you vebby mooch").

The elder statesman of the group is Emmy Award winner Judd Hirsch (*The Law*), who plays Alex Reiger. Alex is of some indeterminate—although, since he's played by Hirsch, Semitic—origin. While he is supposed to be the group's center of stability, and even likes his job (only heaven knows why), sometimes the zaniness catches his good sense off-duty.

All of this sounds as if *Taxi* is the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* gone cruising among the working class. However, Brooks and Co. have

made some significant adjustments to that old formula. For instance, they shifted the emphasis of the old MTM format away from the contrast between the good sense and cooperation of some of the workers (Mary, Murray, Lou) against the uncooperative, egotistical, or misguided worker (Ted, SueAnne) to the cooperation and even feelings of solidarity of the cabbies as opposed to the alienation and isolation of their noisy and hostile loudmouth boss, Louis DePalma (Danny DeVito).

De Palma is a runty Italian boss-dispatcher who sits above the drivers in a caged perch shouting out Scrooge-like commands like, "Don't pick up cripples," or making single entendre jokes and passes at Elaine. So far Louis hasn't been touched by TV's heart-of-gold syndrome, and unless the show gets a bout of the cutes he may continue to be someone you can actually dislike. Indeed, for the moment the cabbies either ignore or barely tolerate him.

Nevertheless, *Taxi* is not *Odets*. As a matter of fact, it most nearly resembles *O'Neill* in focusing on the characters' pipedreams of love, championship, stardom, and success rather than any of their political or economic problems (nobody mentions leasing or defective cabs here). However, it hasn't always played things only for laughs, either. For instance, on the very first show of the season the cabbies got together to drive Alex to a Miami reunion with a daughter he hadn't seen since she was born.

This warmedy (comedy-drama) approach has sometimes touched



Judd Hirsch as Alex picks up elderly passenger Ruth Gordon, a "Sugar Mama" who likes to take expensive taxi rides.

on some interesting themes. For example, in one episode John and his wife Suzanne (Ellen Regan)—a woman he married on impulse after one of the drivers told the shy John that a good line for picking up women was "Why waste time on preliminaries—let's get married"—have their first fight over who should quit work and let the other support them through college. Of course Alex saved the day with a loan so they can continue. By then the show had made the point that they couldn't go on because inflation had made it impossible for Suzanne's parents to subsidize them as they had in the past. And both John and Suzanne were equally adamant about staying in school.

The show has not produced a Travolta or Winkler type star, and a sense of a group has devel-

oped. Part of the credit here goes to Hirsch. He had already starred in an ill-fated NBC series (*Delvecchio*), and could have dominated the other younger and less experienced players. However, by constantly underplaying, Hirsch has allowed an ensemble effort to grow. This is a welcome change in a season where all the applause and hoopla have gone to *Mork and Mindy* and its star Robin Williams, whom the *New York Times* recently called "the comedian for the narcissistic late '70s." Hopefully, Brooks and Co. will continue producing the kind of shows that support the very opposite of *Mork*. If they do, someone ought to start thinking about giving them their own network.

Albert Auster is an editor of *Cineaste*.

MUSIC

Disco swamps radio audience

By Cary Baker

Disco now dominates the fiercely competitive airwaves in the nation's largest city. Disco records on the RSO label alone held the number one spot in the *Record World* album sales charts for 39 weeks last year. "Disco fashion" has become a viable commodity in the department stores and shopping malls. And disco has gained acceptability on television that rock'n'roll never attained in 20 years.

Matthew Clenott, program director of New York's top-rated WKTU, an FM station playing disco music around the clock, says, "When pop is at a peak period, the artist is at the forefront. In disco, unlike the dominant periods of rock, the producer is the star," he says.

Disco, indeed, is a producer's music, the product of state-of-the-art studios and hundreds of musicians whose names and faces are unknown, but whose music is lately inescapable. Like production forebear Phil Spector, the disco producer may literally control stables of vocalists and musicians, assembled to create an uptempo, happy and anonymous sound on command.

Clenott continues: "Whenever pop is at its peak of social consciousness, as in the time of Elvis, the Beatles and Woodstock, something was very offensive to some sectors, threatening the existing order. The people who get into it really like it. Now that's happening with disco, which is clearly more than a go-go. It's a social phenomenon."

Apparently so, if WKTU's latest Arbitron listenership rating is any indication. The station, owned by SJR Communications, a division of the San Juan Racing Association, switched to disco from what the broadcast industry calls "beautiful music" last July 24.

Market researchers predicted the station would secure a 5 or 6 percent share of the New York radio audience, healthy even when compared against traditional forerunner WABC-AM's 7 or 8. WABC, an ABC-owned "contemporary" (Top 40) station, has never been overtaken in the ratings by a music station, receiving a battle only from talk-oriented WOR-AM. An FM station has never dominated the ratings.

Until, that is, WKTU placed a staggering 11.3 cumulative, reportedly the first double-digit rating in New York history. WA-

BC finished a distant second with a 7.1 share, certainly no slouch as major market ratings go. But miraculously, disco WKTU managed to tip all the givens of the ratings system in its very first "book." All of the city's Top 40, AOR (album-oriented rock), black, country and news/talk stations looked sickly in comparison.

What is important about WKTU's sweep is the broad social range of its new listeners. On the quarter-hour, the station reaches an audience that is 63 percent core city and 37 percent suburban; 40 percent black, 34 percent white and 26 percent Latin. The format attracts men and women almost equally, dominating certain segments of 18-34 males and females at different times, though the age range of WKTU listeners spans pre-teens to late 40s. The station appeals to a variety of income and education brackets as well.

"There aren't too many classes of people we're not reaching," says Clenott. "Nobody anticipated anything like this."

Who has more fun?

Cold, grating, unchanging—few disco people would deny the charges their music has faced



WKTU-FM program director Clenott discusses disco with marketing consultant Wanda Ramos.

from critics. But few feel the need to defend its merit. There is sales-proven "party music" and discos are temples for relieving the week's tensions. Of course disco is that, but rock fans claim their music cures the same ills, and that their "release" entails even greater abandon. Disco's proponents point to rock's abandon and defiant flamboyance as the bane of the music merchandising world, and an accoutrement of the '50s and '60s.

Rockers, in turn, boast their music as one of the enduring victories of the Movement and, for better or worse, the culmination of 20-odd years of development. No way, they claim, can disco's mechanized beat displace Jag-

ger's raspy sexuality or Springsteen's dramatic street sensibility. Rock and disco have not exactly proven the best of neighbors on the charts, especially now that disco has claimed as many as seven spots on *Billboard* magazine's Top 10 in an average week, the scant remainder divided between the Billy Joels and the Foreigners.

"We're an environment," Clenott says. "An environment people carry around on their transistor radios while walking through the Bronx, and one now heard in banks, dentists' offices and department stores, ones like Saks and Bloomingdales."

Cary Baker writes for *Billboard* magazine.