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Obey, Consume

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Obey, Consume: Class struggle as revenge fantasy in They Live

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Introduction
‘They Live is a documentary!!’ announced pro wrestler ‘Rowdy’ Roddy Piper on the social networking platform Twitter in September 2013. The actor, who played the lead in the 1988 film, was only repeating the argument he made in his conversation with director John Carpenter on a commentary track recorded for the 2001 European DVD release: ‘You were so much ahead of your time, because I think this is happening. I kept the glasses!’ Later in the commentary, speaking again of how ‘real’ the film is to him, Piper discusses the film’s ability to raise political consciousness, though the mood quickly turns sombre:

There’s many people who have watched They Live that have commented about how the homeless were used, and commented on the situation. So you did bring a certain amount of awareness. I’m not saying we cured the world, but we brought an awareness. (Carpenter 2001 [1988])
‘You can’t cure the world,’ Carpenter mournfully replies. ‘There’s nothing we can do.’

No history of ‘the lives and deaths of the yuppie’ could be complete without consideration of They Live. Vastly outstripping its initial commercial disappointment in video rentals, DVD sales and late-night cable re-viewings, the now cult-classic science fiction–horror hybrid translates the familiar alien invasion narrative to the ‘Reaganomics’ of 1980s consumer capitalism by revealing all commodities, advertising and mass media as the subliminal mind-control technology of hideous alien invaders, calculated to instil subservience and obedience in an unsuspecting populace. [They Live] was my rage at the Reagan Revolution, and yuppies, and the greed of the 80s,’ Carpenter recently told Marc Maron during an interview on the WTF podcast in June 2016. ‘I couldn’t take it.’ The film’s delightful combination of leftist political allegory and B-movie aesthetics – and especially its central imaginative trope, the magic sunglasses that allow a person to see the injunction to OBEY and CONSUME that (the film suggests) is the true content of all media we encounter under capitalism – has made They Live a favourite of academics and activists for decades. The artist Shepard Fairey (the designer of the iconic Barack Obama ‘HOPE’ poster in 2008) famously combined the film’s satire of advertising with the image of deceased professional wrestler André the Giant for his viral ‘OBEY GIANT’ sticker campaign of the 1980s and 1990s. In a 2011 article in the Los Angeles Review of Books, Mike Davis revisited They Live as a decades-early anticipation of the Occupy movement, noting how the film’s juxtaposition of ‘a huge third-world shantytown [...] reflected across the Hollywood Freeway in the sinister mirror-glass of Bunker Hill’s corporate skyscrapers’ paralleled the relationship of Zuccotti Park with Wall Street (Davis 2011). The film is likewise a favourite reference of Slavoj Žižek, who calls the film a ‘true lesson in the critique of ideology’ (Žižek 2009); McArthur ‘Genius Grant’ recipient Jonathan Lethem even published a book-length exegesis of the film in 2010. The film retains its startling relevance, Carpenter told Maron, because ‘the 80s never ended. They are still with us today. And They Live is truly more of a documentary than it is a dramatic film. It is real’ (Maron 2016).

Here, I will interrogate the ultraviolent revenge fantasy at the core of They Live. By transforming financial and cultural elites into uncanny alien monsters, who cannot be reasoned or negotiated with and who can thus only be killed, They Live radically shifts the terms of class struggle from a dispute among humans to a life-and-death battle between separate and incommensurate species. But the moral clarity of this violence turns out, quite unexpectedly, to be precisely what is most utopian about the film: the prospect of having a clear, implacable enemy who one might directly fight. They Live, writes Evan Calder Williams,

is the wish-image of an absent clarity, and it is the necessary frustration of such desire. For lingering behind the sense that, can you imagine how awful it would be if the world was run by powerful aliens?, is the real question: wouldn’t it be nice if it were run by powerful aliens, if we could find some inhuman driver at the wheel, if we knew who to blame all along? Isn’t that what we really want, to know once and for all that there is some conspiratorial reason and order behind the blind contingencies of the world order? Because, at the end of the day, the problem isn’t how to defeat those who run it all. It’s how to find and direct anger at an other kind of apocalyptic world. (Williams 2011: 7, original emphases)

What would the difference be if the global elite were actually monsters, rather than only acting like monsters? At least then their callous infliction of misery, and their short-sighted destruction of the planetary biome as a whole, would make sense! One can hear the echoes of this odd wish in more recent monster cinema like Pacific Rim (2013) or Godzilla (2014); if only global capitalism or climate change were a monster we’d know exactly what to do; all doubt and second-guessing would finally disappear; we’d have something we could literally fight. As the film goes on, however, They Live is
unable to hold to the binary logic implicit in this perverse wish; by the end the political and ethical
centre of the film is not what to do with the aliens, but rather what to do with the human traitors, with
the ones who have chosen to obey not as the result of subliminal programming but rather as the
consequence of a freely made and informed choice. The most loathed enemy becomes not so much the
millionaires and billionaires who run everything but rather the careerists and the strivers who eagerly
seek to join their ranks – the yuppies. Thus the film dialectically returns us to the very moral crisis that
its strategy of science fictional allegorizing had hoped to bracket: what is the proper role of violence –
and of revenge – in class-based revolution? The final turn of the film complicates this question further,
unexpectedly suggesting in the film’s disruptive final moments that They Live’s viewing audience may in
fact have more in common with the film’s monsters and traitors than with its actual heroes.

‘Put On the Glasses’
Critical interest in They Live has centred overwhelmingly around the ‘magic sunglasses’ visual set-piece
that occurs half an hour into the film. Until this point They Live has primarily been presented in a
realistic mode, tracing the movements of itinerant worker ‘Nada’ as he settles into a shantytown at the
margins of Los Angeles in search of employment. Only a few odd touches – ‘They Live, We Sleep’ graffiti
scrawled on walls; the ominous blind street preacher played by Raymond St Jacques; hackers slicing into
a TV signal with strange warnings about mind control; a church that seems to be operating purely as a
front for some sub rosa revolutionary conspiracy; the fact that the film has been directed by legendary
horror/science fiction director John Carpenter – alert us that anything is amiss. But with the sunglasses
everything begins to change. After a police raid on the shantytown that is clearly centred on the
mysterious church, Nada comes into possession of a pair of sunglasses that, when worn, reveal a twisted
truth hidden at the core of our society. Through the glasses, we see that nearly all the messaging of our
society, from books to magazines to advertising copy, is actually subliminal brainwashing, reducible to a
baseline of totalitarian imprinting regardless of its nominal content: OBEY, CONSUME, HONOR
AUTHORITY, MARRY AND REPRODUCE, and so on. The imprinting is undergirding everything from
vacation advertising to book and magazine content, and even extends to money, which through the lens
of the glasses is revealed as blank pieces of paper emblazoned with only the words THIS IS YOUR GOD.
Carpenter frames the view through the glasses through black-and-white cinematography to concretize
the difference between the two perspectives – a quiet suggestion of 1950s alien invasion narratives like
Don Siegel’s Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) – but we hardly need the visual marker to tell the
difference between Nada’s new reality and our world of illusion.

Atop traffic lights sit invisible transmitters, repeating a sonorous command to ‘sleep’ over and over.
Worst of all, Nada discovers that strange creatures – seemingly aliens, though they are called ‘ghouls’ in
the closing credits – walk among us, dressed in the finest clothes and driving fancy cars, belligerently
talking down to any ordinary humans they encounter. On a television screen, Nada sees one such
creature standing in front of a podium, delivering a Reaganesque speech about optimism:

The feeling is definitely there. It’s a new morning in America... fresh, vital. The old cynicism is
gone. We have faith in our leaders. We’re optimistic as to what becomes of it all. It really boils
down to our ability to accept. We don’t need pessimism. There are no limits.

Behind the ghoul-politician is a giant banner reading simply OBEY; we never see the banner except
through the glasses, but we can intuit that it is standing in front of a giant American flag. Nada can only
laugh; despite the shock of these events, he feels unsurprised, as if deep down he’s known all along that
this was the truth. ‘It figures it’d be something like this,’ he says.
The usefulness of this narrative situation as an allegory for ideological coding is immediately clear. Hiding underneath the supposed variation and free consumer choice of late-twentieth-century American capitalism we find instead our true situation of stifling and oppressive anti-choice, a crushing sameness that forces us all to participate automatically in identical gestures of conformity. Indeed, the situation rapidly proceeds along Althusserian lines from the ideological state apparatus (ISA) of advertising to the repressive state apparatus (RSA) of the police (Althusser 1972). As Louis Althusser explains, the state has two forces it can use to reproduce the conditions of its own existence by extracting obedience from its citizens. The RSA – the police, the army, etc. – unleashes physical violence to force citizens to comply, but violence has real costs in disruption, instability and chaos, as well as damages the infrastructure and worker bodies needed for production (and, of course, always has the risk of spiralling out of control into riot and revolution). Far better, Althusser’s critique suggests, to draw on the seductive power of ideology to persuade people that obedience to the system is what they actually desire; if you can use ISAs like schools, the family, the church and mass media to persuade the workers to go along willingly, no violence is ever required.

As Nada turns away from the political speech on the television, he confronts an older ‘ghoul’ dressed in furs, repeatedly calling her ugly; unfortunately, in the course of his rant he reveals that the sunglasses allow him to see her true nature. As he stumbles confusedly towards the door, the woman speaks into her watch: ‘I’ve got one that can see.’ Soon all the ghouls in the store are staring at him, each muttering descriptions of Nada into the watches, we find, that they all wear. Outside he is confronted by police; it is soon revealed that both of the cops who attack him are also ghouls. This too is in accord with Althusser’s theory of the state; the violence of the RSA (the police) steps in only as a kind of last resort when the ideological system of compliance (the ISA) fails.

Nada fights and defeats both officers, ultimately killing both with one of the officers’ sidearms. He then steals a police shotgun and, attempting to avoid being detected by an oncoming police car, he enters a bank and announces to a crowd of shocked onlookers (in an iconic line said to have been written by Piper himself): ‘I have come here to chew bubblegum and kick ass – and I’m all out of bubblegum.’ A ghoul dressed as a security guard fires at him and misses, and so another massacre ensues; after killing several of the aliens, Nada discovers that the watches contain an emergency teleportation device as one of the ghouls disappears before his eyes. Nada then has a confrontation with an unmanned drone in an alleyway, which leads to a brief glimpse of the drone’s-eye POV; after destroying the drone, Nada encounters a human working as a police officer, but allows the man to run off rather than kill him.

From here the story tracks the paranoid mode of the standard alien invasion plot, albeit with some key differences. Nada takes a woman hostage, only to lose the upper hand to her and wind up pushed down the high slope of her posh house in the Hollywood Hills; the woman, Holly (played by Meg Foster), who works as an assistant programme director at a local cable station, later returns as a resistance fighter, only to be surprisingly revealed in the closing sequence as a traitor. Holly, the character embodying the position of the yuppie in the film, and her deliberate betrayal of Nada (as well as the parallel betrayal of another, the Drifter, discussed below) allegorically positions the entirety of the upwardly mobile ‘yuppie’ class as traitors. Aside from Holly, the yuppie lifestyle also comes in for intense scorn via the periodic diegetic snippets of television commercials that we see throughout the film, all advertising goods, services and lifestyle opportunities relevant to yuppies. The first billboard ad in which Nada sees OBEY is, in fact, likewise an ad aimed at yuppie professionals rather than the poor: it advertises computers for business. The nearby MARRY AND REPRODUCE ad likewise pitches a vacation to the Caribbean that would certainly be out of reach for someone of Nada’s economic strata.
Next Nada runs into his friend Frank, asking him to put on the glasses and join him in the fight against the invaders; Frank refuses, and the two men come to blows. The fight, originally scripted to be brief, is in fact interminable, lasting almost six minutes as the two men (nominally friends!) utterly destroy each other’s bodies. When commentary on the film has not focused on the glasses it has commonly focused on the inscrutable gratuitousness of this scene. Within the terms of the narrative, Nada is a wanted man, and Frank feels betrayed for having trusted him – but, as Žižek notes, within the terms of the allegory, what Frank is so violently resisting is enlightenment itself. ‘The fight, which goes on for an unbearable 10 minutes, with moments of exchange of friendly smiles, is in itself totally “irrational” – why doesn’t Armitage accept to put the glasses on, just to satisfy his friend?’ Žižek asks. ‘The only explanation is that he knows that his friend wants him to see something dangerous, to attain a prohibited knowledge which would totally spoil the relative peace of his daily life’ (Žižek 2009). In The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology (2012) he elaborates on this point:

We in a way enjoy our ideology. To step out of ideology – it hurts, it is a painful experience. [...] This is a paradox we have to accept. The extreme violence of liberation: you must be forced to be free. If you trust your spontaneous sense of well-being, or whatever, you will never get free. Freedom hurts.5

A similar effect happens to Nada whenever he wears the glasses for too long: they give him a splitting headache.

Žižek’s reading of the two glasses sequences as underscoring the pleasures of ideology explains, perhaps, one of the odder features of They Live: the fact that the aliens themselves seem to unironically participate in the same propagandistic consumer culture as their enslaved subjects. They too buy newspapers, watch TV; there seems to be no difference between their consumption of these messages and our own. Lethem (2010) asks:

Which do the ghouls’ robotic orbs register as they scan (presumably like a supermarket laser run over a bar code) the dummy media with which they’ve overpainted our world: exhortations like CONFIRM and OBEY, or the illusionary articles and photographs, or both? Maybe they’re seeing some third-level media, something we’d have to call ‘Real Ghoul News’, which is being broadcast on a wavelength perceptible only to their eyes. (Lethem 2010: 80-81.)

Here again, Althusser is illuminating when read alongside the film:

the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class ‘in words’. (Althusser 1972: 132–33)

Ideology is thus as important to ‘them’ as it is to ‘us’; they need to be taught to be masters just as we need to be taught to be slaves. But perhaps Žižek is right that even this is an unnecessary level of abstraction; perhaps they read and watch TV, and buy fancy cars and purchase expensive vacations, simply because they, like we, enjoy it.

**Hey baby, what’s wrong?**

The first of two apocalypses depicted in the film is, in Evan Calder Williams’s reading, ‘the end-of-the-world plot of final battles and dividing lines that let you be the ass-kicking agent of retribution you’ve waited to be all along’ (Williams 2011: 7). (‘What makes They Live a comedy,’ Lethem adds dryly, ‘is Nada’s inadequacy to this insight’ [2010: 60].) Much of the remainder of the film proceeds along these
lines; now united, Frank and Nada work together to join back up with the resistance: ‘We can't be the only ones who can see, we've got to find the people who made these.’ They commit themselves to any and all necessary violence in the service of this goal; having never worried about the ethical status of the aliens, they abandon any concern for the humans working for them as well, murdering them with an abandon that totally erases Nada’s earlier act of quiet mercy towards the human police officer. By the end of the film, during their final raid on the television station broadcasting the aliens’ brainwashing signals, they have no compunction about killing any ordinary humans who find themselves in the crossfire, even without any particular evidence that those humans have any knowledge about what they are really doing or who they are actually working for. Like the similar explosive shootout at the end of *The Matrix* (1999), a film often said to be inspired by *They Live*, any unknown human is potentially an agent of the aliens, and so none of them can be trusted.

Indeed, the ultimate act of violence in the film is directed not at the aliens but at the yuppie traitor Holly, who has killed Frank during the assault on the television station and who is now threatening Nada as well. Nada coldly shoots her between the eyes; in the DVD commentary, Piper, describing his acting process during that scene, notes that he worked himself up to perform the scene by imagining the unhappy ending of a previous romantic relationship, suggesting the way in which this moment in the film shifts the violence from the political to the personal: ‘I didn’t want to just kill her to kill her; I was hurt more. That’s where I was coming from.’ The film similarly ducks any real discussion of when or why Holly turned – was she *always* with the aliens? Did she switch sides at some point during the film? – rendering her actions as pure malice rather than as a choice made for some potentially understandable, rational reasons.6

The film’s lack of interest in Holly is mirrored by its investment in the opinions of a different human traitor, the Drifter (played by George ‘Buck’ Flower). We first meet the Drifter in the shantytown at the beginning of the film; later, we meet him again, now clean-shaven and tuxedo-clad, having joined the alien forces. The Drifter is given the explanatory monologue that Holly is never allowed:

> You still don't get it. There ain't no countries anymore. They're running the whole show. They own the whole planet. They can do whatever they want. We can have it good for a change. If we help them, they'll leave us alone to make some money. You can have a taste of the good life. It's what everybody wants. [...] We all sell out every day, might as well be on the winning team.7

In comparison, Holly says only, ‘Don’t interfere; you can’t win. Come inside with me,’ before Nada executes her; her motivations remain absolutely inscrutable. Notably, the Drifter activates the teleportation mechanism on his watch and escapes, while Holly is summarily dispatched.

In the traitor, more so than in the figure of the alien, do we find *They Live*’s true reflection of the yuppie: not the decrepit billionaire masters of the world, but the young, upwardly mobile, upper-middle-class professionals who have sold out in their service. Indeed, one is struck watching the film by how little the yuppies’ perfidy has cost; they have betrayed all of humankind merely for ‘promotions, bank accounts, new houses, cars’. At what appears to be a relatively low-rent banquet for ghouls and human traitors visited at the end of the film, we hear that ‘this year alone’ the per-capita income of the ghoul side has grown ‘an average 39 per cent’ – a fine return, to be sure, but still rather paltry given the enormity of their species-betrayal.

One reading of this aspect of the film would suggest that no distinction is to be drawn between the aliens and the human traitors, that both are equally bad. This would be a kind of maximalist approach to class struggle: ‘you’re either with us or against us’. We are glad, this reading would suggest, to see both
the ghouls and the traitors pay in blood for what they have done to the innocent and unknowing people of the world.

But the closing montage of They Live cuts against this interpretation significantly, and pulls us in another direction altogether. After killing Holly, Nada destroys the transmitter before being killed by the aliens. The signal is interrupted; in a quick-cut montage that mirrors the logic of channel-surfing, the aliens among us are revealed to the unsuspecting human population in the television programmes they are watching (newscasters are revealed as ghouls, as are movie critics Siskel and Ebert) as well as in the real-life environments (as in a bar). One of these aliens even seems able to, impossibly, look out through the television, lock eyes with us, and recognize with shock that we are able to see him for what he is, despite the fact that he is a character in a prerecorded commercial. The very last shot of the film is most illustrative of all; it is of a human woman having sex with an alien while the car commercial plays on television. He notes the horror on her face before asking, almost kindly, ‘What’s wrong, baby?’ In a film with so few women, it cannot escape note that aside from Holly, the most memorable female character in the entire film appears naked for mere seconds, with no lines, in a scene of extreme sexual violation bordering on rape that is nonetheless played entirely for laughs. Between this and Holly’s murder, in such close succession, the nagging question of a not-even-secret misogyny that undergirds the revolutionary fantasy becomes unavoidable: while in the first case male violence against women is unleashed in the service of the revolution, in the second the male is the alien violator, and the woman the victim of exploitation on both sides of the camera. This, in Lethem’s reading, is the film turning the revelatory gaze of the glasses on the ‘complicit (male) viewers’ themselves: ‘Was it that sort of movie all along? Do I owe someone an apology? [...]’ We’re stranded here, at the end, women handcuffed to men, in bed with the pun/chline’s verdict: We’re all fucking ghouls’ (Lethem 2010: 156, original emphases). We are asked, in essence, to choose our poison: that either the weird misogyny of They Live’s last shot before an abrupt and unsatisfying cut to black is a symptom of the full brokenness of our society – or else it is a slap-in-the-face critique of its (predominantly male) audience’s own willing complicity in these structures, despite its nominal ‘awareness’ and assumed good politics. In the final moments, They Live’s ideology critique becomes reversed, and the viewer becomes utterly implicated. Fredric Jameson writes that

‘Conspiracy’ texts like They Live, which reveal the true masters of our society and provide us with a site (like the single-point-of-failure of the signal transmitter) to direct our resistance, can thus be read as reflective of a utopian ‘desire called cognitive mapping’ (Jameson 1992: 3). But They Live’s reduction of these structures to a flat, laughable alien invasion plotline (which it then leaves entirely unresolved) works in the opposite direction as well: it not only satirizes the class relationship, it also bitterly satirizes our desire for a ‘happy ending’ or a ‘quick fix’ precisely by foregrounding the audience’s own distance from Nada’s revolutionary violence in favour of dulled, passive consumption. We’re not the revolutionary heroes; we’re the yuppie dupes watching the ads. This is the second apocalypse, the ‘capitalist apocalypse’, which Williams uncovers lurking behind the first one in They Live: an expanding circle of submission and complicity that rapidly balloons in size so as to become utterly hopeless: ‘[t]he apocalypse is not the revelation of who’s behind this mess: it’s the fact, persistence, and resistance to thought of the mess itself’ (Williams 2011: 7–8).
The totalizing pessimism of this secondary apocalypse – not the utopian fantasy of an enemy we could actually target, but rather a reflection of the everywhere-and-nowhere disaster we are actually living through without registering any complaint – only amplifies the pessimism of the original source material for *They Live*: Ray Nelson’s 1963 short story ‘Eight O’Clock in the Morning’, later adapted as a comic, *Nada*, for Eclipse Comics. In both, the Nada character is awoken not by magic sunglasses but by a hypnotist’s command to ‘awake’. His now-independent thought detected by the hidden alien ‘Fascinators’, Nada is told by a phone call that his heart will stop the next morning at eight o’clock. And, after Nada cuts a similar swatch of revolutionary violence across his city – including the murder of several innocent non-aliens, one of whom Nada ‘didn’t like to shoot […] with the poison dart gun, but he had to’ – this is exactly what happens. Though Nada awakens the city and begins a war that is ultimately victorious, he does in fact drop dead of a heart attack at precisely 8 a.m. the next morning, still ultimately under the Fascinators’ control and unable to survive into the post-Fascinator world. And in *They Live* we get even less hope than this: Nada again dies, but neither we nor he have all that much sense that his plan will actually succeed.

The recognition of this doubled apocalypse answers a complaint sometimes levied at the film, which is that it gives no indication about what will happen following the revelation of the aliens’ existence: ‘[Carpenter] immediately cuts to the credits with absolutely no hint of a new revolution sweeping out the old, no realistic, tangible sense of political upheaval: just that final, terrible gag as the film’s exclamation point’ (Sellars 2010: 729). When we recognize this as a conscious directorial decision rather than as some accidental ‘failing’, the film’s odd ending can be seen in the proper light. Now background details come into focus: the resistance knows basically nothing about the aliens, including whether they’ve recently arrived or if perhaps ‘they’ve always been with us’; its revolutionary agents can only speculate about the aliens’ ultimate plans for the planet and its people, with no idea whether we are to be their slaves, their pets, their food or something else. The resistance is similarly totally outmatched; by the end of the film, Nada is the conspiracy’s only known surviving member, and even he doesn’t make it out alive. With no organization to lead them, we are left to the bare hope that humanity will spontaneously act – largely out of an instinctual, and essentially racist, kneejerk revulsion, rather than considered, intellectualized principles – to simply murder the aliens among them as soon as they are recognized.

And perhaps even this is too much to ask for. Will the people who have been, as Žižek (2009) has it, thoroughly ‘enjoying their symptom’ really suddenly shift gears into such total revolutionary violence against the forces who (still) control everything, including all the police, all the military, all the weapons? Will the force of their recognition of how they’ve been abused really be enough to cause them to revolt – when, as we have seen, plenty of yuppie humans have already been able to come to terms with the ghouls with seeming ease, even delight? The original prose story uses hypnotic reprogramming of the signal to ensure that the humans will revolt, as is seen in the *They Live*-inspired genocidal war against ‘The Silence’ in a plot arc of the British television programme *Doctor Who* in 2011. Without this plot element guaranteeing action, what assurance do we have that otherwise complacent humans won’t just accept the aliens’ right to rule? As Luke Thompson noted in a 2012 interview with Carpenter: ‘[i]t occurs to us that if you were doing *They Live* today, the aliens are actually too subtle. Nowadays, they’d have their own network and their own pundits blatantly advocating for what they were doing’. The second, unsolvable apocalypse of *They Live* thereby reveals the actual present itself as the ongoing catastrophe that we can hardly acknowledge, much less find any way to intervene against; after all, the entire point of the allegory in *They Live* is that we already know the world is like this, and yet we do nothing. By and large, we’re all mostly content to be cogs in the capitalist machine.
Conclusion: And before we judge too harshly

A self-undermining undercurrent, similar to the one in the closing montage of *They Live*, appears in Jack Finney’s novel *The Body Snatchers* (1955), in a flashback scene that has never been adapted for the various filmic *Invasions*. In thinking of the uncanny, not-quite-human false smiles of the Pod People, the narrator recalls his daily encounters with a friendly, elderly African American man who works shining shoes in town. Afterhours, away from the stand, the white narrator hears Bill mock his normal friendliness:

My head was below the level of the car window, I couldn’t see who was talking, but I heard another voice, tired and irritable, reply, ‘Hi, Charley,’ and the second voice was familiar, though I couldn’t quite place it. Then it continued, in a suddenly strange and altered tone. ‘“Morning, Professor,’ it said with a queer, twisted heartiness. ““Morning!” it repeated. [...] The voice was Billy’s, the words and tone those the two knew with affection, but – parodied, and a shade off key. [...] ‘I just love those shoes, Colonel,’ he continued in a suddenly vicious, jeering imitation of his familiar patter. ‘That’s all I want, Colonel, just to handle people’s shoes. Le’m me kiss em! Please le’m me kiss your feet!’ The pent-up bitterness of years tainted every word and syllable he spoke. And then, for a full minute perhaps, standing there on a sidewalk of the slum he lived in, Billy went on with this quietly hysterical parody of himself. ‘Relax, Bill. Come on, now, take it easy.’ But Billy continued, and never before in my life had I heard such ugly, bitter, and vicious contempt in a voice; contempt for the people taken in by his daily antics, but even more so for himself, the man who supplied the servility they bought from him.

When the narrator encounters and recognizes the Pod People, ‘for the first time in years I heard in another voice the shocking mockery I had heard in Billy’s’ (Finney 1989: 134–35). The recognition of the absolute falseness of the world as he has allowed himself to see it is identical – only facing the Pod People he finds himself in the disprivileged, rather than the privileged, position in the power dynamic. A similar critique of whiteness is quietly replicated within *They Live*; while there are many characters of colour, including Frank, ‘no black man will ever be uncovered as a ghoul’ (Lethem 2010: 76).

A similar moment of horrified self-recognition occurs in David Brin’s underappreciated ‘sequel’ to Bodysnatchers-style invasion narratives: the 1992 short story *Detritus Affected*. Here, the narrator is an archaeologist performing excavations in the Los Angeles County dump, pulling out artefacts from the different temporal strata of the garbage: a plastic toy from 1970, a turntable from the 1960s, and so on. Finally, while digging in a stratum from the mid-1950s (that is, the era in which *The Body Snatchers* was written as a novel and then adapted for the screen [as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, 1956]), a body is discovered – then another, then another, then dozens, then hundreds, then thousands. Bodies begin to be discovered in the same strata at other garbage dumps; some indescribable horror happened in the 1950s that has gone absolutely unmemorialized. The ‘old farts’ who were alive at the time refuse to discuss the matter at all, and actively seek to squash any investigation:

What our grandparents created here – what they buried – is fast growing apparent, and they don’t like it. They wander among us, old folks, confused, distracted, grabbing us by the sleeve and begging us to stop. When questioned, none of them can explain why. Tearfully, they just say that it’s wrong. That we must leave it be. (Brin 1994: 82)

Noting the slight differences in the corpses’ skulls, which would have made them ‘more intuitive, more empathetic’ beings than the current inhabitants of the World, the ultimate conclusion is that ‘we’ must be the children of a successful Pod People-style invasion:

Any difference that held true would support the scariest theory – that we’re all murderers.

That we’re invaders.
That the true, rightful denizens of L.A. lie buried where our grandparents put them, after slaying them, one by one. In the course of taking over their city, their lives. (Brin 1994: 83)

Of course, this science fictional allegorizing quickly comes undone when we realize this is in fact the literal situation of those who live in any western culture that is the product of myriad historical social horrors (slavery, colonialism, imperialism, genocide, patriarchy, capitalism, to only begin to name them), which are treated today as if they have had no importance whatsoever in shaping the current divisions of wealth, power and class privilege on the planet. The alien threat inflicts upon ‘us’ the violence we have inflicted elsewhere – but that critique always carries with it the reminder that we are murderers, invaders, fucking ghouls. This parallelism is drawn explicitly within the film, where we are told that ‘Earth is just another developing planet, their third world’ – which suggests that ‘they’ stand in the precise relation to ‘us’ that the privileged ‘we’ in the West have taken towards everyone else on the globe (including many members of our own society).

This is of course one of the oldest dialectical reversals in the history of science fiction, dating back to H. G. Wells’s inauguration of the alien invasion genre in 1898:

And before we judge [the Martians] too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit? (Wells 1988 [1898]: 4–5)

The alienating televisual montage that concludes They Live suggests exactly this horror of self-recognition: the possibility that the audience of They Live is not really on the side of Nada or the other, homeless inhabitants of the shantytown, despite its fantasies – but perhaps instead we are complicit, we are ourselves the traitors, the collaborating yuppie scum whom the film finds more worthy of contempt and hatred than even the alien masters themselves. From this perspective, the film’s descent into ‘the kind of formulaic escapist entertainment it begins by critiquing as the opiate of the people’ (Grant 2004: 18) is simply the second level of its satire; the joke is on us, as viewers, imagining we were ever (or ever could be, or even really want to be) free.

Carpenter ensures there is no distinction between them and us […] [T]he aliens in their human guise are seamlessly integrated into our world, and it is only by a trick of the light that we are able to see them differently. (Sellars 2010: n.p.)

Little wonder then that as the film goes on, and especially in its closing sequence, we find the stark clarity of the binary class struggle breaking down completely as humans and ghouls become increasingly indistinguishable. In the early scenes the ghouls appear to be exclusively rich people ordering around a servant class, but they are later revealed to be working middle-class jobs (newsreader, cop) and even entry-level jobs (we see ghouls who appear to be low-ranked production assistants and administrative assistants during the raid on the television station). The ghouls, that is, are no longer solely the nasty, geriatric super-rich but are also level-functionaries and engineers in the television studio, perhaps aspiring to someday become yuppies themselves:

The film’s scenes of routine ghou intermixing – the beauty shop, the bank, the grocery store, leading up to this pedestrian work environment – have migrated through horror, revulsion, and pointed satire to achieve a kind of drab inevitability: They Live, sure, and so do They schlep, file paperwork, and work fifty weeks for a two-week vacation. (Lethem 2010: 143)

As the gap between ‘them’ and ‘us’ narrows, the nature of the critique inverts. Holly taunts Nada with exactly this unhappy similarity right before she dies, hinting that as a knowing traitor only she is really able to see: ‘I’m clear,’ she says. ‘Are you?’ After all, as Lethem rightly notes, Nada never turns the magic
sunglasses on himself ‘for a look in the mirror’, to see what he might look like through that lens (Lethem 2010: 93). Nor can it escape our notice that in his final gesture of resistance he breaks the fourth wall, shooting a gun that’s pointed right at us – and then, just before he dies, he flicks us off.

**Contributor’s details**

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**References**


**Suggested pull quotes**

‘I’m not saying we cured the world, but we brought an awareness.’
'They Live' was my rage at the Reagan Revolution, and yuppies, and the greed of the 80s’ [...] ‘I couldn’t take it.’

What would the difference be if the global elite were actually monsters, rather than only acting like monsters?

The alien threat inflicts upon ‘us’ the violence we have inflicted elsewhere – but that critique always carries with it the reminder that we are murderers, invaders, fucking ghools.

**Endnotes**

1 Immediately afterwards their attention turns to the scene of police brutality being depicted on the screen, which Carpenter compares to the Rodney King beating, drawing peals of bitter laughter from Piper.

2 Although the original version of the sticker has since been removed from active circulation due to copyright claims on the image, photographs of the OBEY GIANT image can still be seen at Fairey’s website, ObeyGiant.com, and are ubiquitous elsewhere on the Internet.

3 As discussed below, Žižek also takes up the film at length in his 2012 documentary *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*.

4 Lethem in fact begins his exegesis of the film by noting that ‘what you’ll recall of this dream in the morning’ is ‘above all, two sequences’: the glasses, and the fight (Lethem 2010: 1).

5 The clip from *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* discussing *They Live* is available on YouTube.

6 Even during the DVD commentary, Piper admits his ongoing confusion on this point, to Carpenter’s amusement.

7 Carpenter has credited the final line, ‘We all sell out every day’, to a Universal executive who said it to him in earnest (see Swires 1988). The Drifter is later paralleled in *The Matrix* by the character Cipher (Joe Pantoliano), who determines he prefers a pleasant life in ignorance inside the Matrix to a miserable life as a resistance fighter outside it.

8 Jameson also suggests that the revelation and the mapping of the conspiracy in such texts is itself the utopian, ‘well-nigh paradisal moment’ of such works (1992: 79).

9 Indeed, for most of the short story the violence is framed as if indistinguishable from a psychotic break: ‘The eyes and reptilian flesh faded a little and George saw the flickering image of a fat middle-aged man in shirtsleeves. It was still a man when George slashed its throat with the eating knife, but it was an alien before it hit the floor.’ Only the end of the story confirms that the aliens were real. Both short story and comic are available in bootlegged form on the Internet.

10 As Sellars goes on to note, however, citing Žižek, ‘not even a provocateur of [Carpenter’s] experience has been quite able to imagine what exactly comes after capitalism’ (Sellars 2010: 730).