Becky Driscoll as *femme fatale*?

Elements of *film noir* in Don Siegel’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*

The 1956 movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, which depicts a small town community that is invaded by an extraterrestrial force, is usually regarded as a classical science fiction film. Moreover, popular readings of the film suggest that it reflects the Cold War paranoia of its time: the fear that communists, represented in the movie by the Body Snatchers, would infiltrate the American society and turn Americans into communists, or emotionless pod people as they are called in the film.

But there are other readings of the film that at first glance seem less obvious. Steven Sanders, for example, perceives *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* as a *film noir*. This interpretation is especially interesting because the movie is said to belong to the genre of science fiction. How does Sanders arrive at this conclusion? What features of *film noir* can be found in the movie? Narrowing down the scope of the *film noir* elements in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, in the following chapter I will focus on the leading female protagonist, Becky Driscoll, and in how far she can be seen as a *femme fatale*, one of the most popular features of *film noir*. I will set Becky in contrast to the conservative role model of American women in the 1950s and point out various aspects of her character that make her a *film noir’s femme fatale*. 
The United States in the 1950s – the time period in which the film is set – were on the one hand influenced by economic prosperity as an outcome of World War II and on the other hand by the constant threat of the Cold War. Regarding the private life of the Americans the “decade came to seem a time of pervasive affluence and consumerism, of cheap gasoline and big cars, of new suburban homes and family togetherness, of conservatism and conformity” (Boyer 844). This emphasis on conservative values already indicates that her “suburban home” and family defined the role of the woman. During World War II many women were important work forces at the home front while their husbands fought in the war. After the war however, these women were supposed to return to domesticity, housekeeping and family. This idea was also promoted in the media. According to Paul S. Boyer “[p]opular culture … glorified marriage and parenthood more than ever before” and “television invariably pictured women as at-home mothers” (861). But the perfect housewife shown on television also had its counterpart in Hollywood movies, as Susan George points out. She claims that “besides doing its part to promote the ‘proper’ role for women in the public and private spheres, 1950s Hollywood also produced cautionary tales regarding what could happen if female sexuality and ambition were not contained” (3).

In contrast to the positive, happy family life portrayed by American pop culture, the experiences of World War II and the constant threat of the Cold War were reflected in the genre of film noir. Roger Westcombe notes that “America’s movies were growing darker” (3, emphasis in the original) as a result of its “dark” experiences with war. Especially the visual effects reflect the “desperation and hopelessness” (“Film Noir”) of real life with its play with shadows and darkness. This can already be seen in the French term noir meaning ‘black’ or ‘dark’ as opposed to ‘light’. Filmic elements such as “low-key lighting” and “chiaroscuro effects” (Horsley 1), meaning the contrast between light and dark, are important in this respect.

Apart from these devices, the genre also depicted certain themes and character constellations. The main protagonist or “noir hero” often had to realize that things were completely different from what they appeared to be and had to deal with the consequences (Horsley 2). Another important character of the film noir is the femme fatale. Femme fatale is a term frequently used to describe a certain type of woman.

This woman is usually extraordinarily beautiful and an object of desire for many men. But she can also become a dangerous seductress, or “a siren-like figure of desire whose distinctive characteristics, compared to previous female archetypes, were her independence, strength and ruthless desire” as Roger Westcombe phrases it (4). Famous examples of classical noir actors that come to mind are Marlene Dietrich, Rita Hayworth and Ava Gardner as femme fatales and Humphrey Bogart and Dick Powell as the noir heroes. More recent examples of noir characters could be Sharon Stone in Basic Instinct and the newest Batman movies by Christopher Nolan with Christian Bale as the dark superhero.
The *femme fatale* of the *film noir* was to seduce the hero, often with dangerous consequences for him. The cinematic journal *Images* compares the character to “black widows who slowly drew in the heroes with come-hither looks and breathless voices … the *femme fatale* knew how to use men to get whatever she wanted” (“Film Noir”). The depiction of the *femme fatale* can also be seen as a reaction of male anxieties towards emancipated working women. The fact that many men who returned home after World War II found their wives working and independent created a “new male anxiety” and as a result the image of the *femme fatale* (Westcombe 4). Her characteristics, the independent and sexually emancipated identity, were opposite to those of the traditional, loving housewife.

How are these *noir* aspects visible in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*? As mentioned earlier, Steven Sanders reads the movie as a *film noir* and presents different elements of the film to support his thesis: “Its flashback structure with voice-over narration, unusually angled shots, scenes of claustrophobic darkness, crisply rendered dialogue, and a sense of sinister purpose and impending doom” (55). This sense of “impending doom” is reflected in the film’s storyline, dealing with the invasion of extraterrestrial forces, called pod people, which take over the form of human beings turning them into emotionally dead creatures.

In an important scene of the movie, the main protagonist, Miles Bennell, discovers four pods that are coming to life in his greenhouse; the room is dark and seems claustrophobic. In addition to this, the camera angle is estranging, showing the whole scene from an upper corner of the room. Moreover, Miles himself has features of the *noir* hero: On the one hand, Miles realizes that things are different from what they seem. He finds out that many people in his town have been turned into pod persons. On the other hand, his character development is similar to that of the *noir* hero, who changes from a self confident, respected doctor to a haunted person, full of anxiety: “the movement of the protagonist from one role to another constitutes key structural elements in noir narrative” (Horsley 1). In the final scene of the movie, Miles has escaped the pod people but finds himself in a mental hospital and his rapid speech and body language indicate his deep fear and confusion.

When looking at the movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* as a film with classical *noir* elements and Miles as a potential *noir* hero, it only seems logical that his female counterpart Becky Driscoll represents a *femme fatale*. The first time she appears in the movie, Becky is wearing a pretty dress and her hair and make up are carefully done. She is a beautiful, attractive woman and it does not take long for her and Miles to refresh their old romantic feelings for each other. Becky’s looks can be compared to that of a classical *noir femme fatale*, the curly hairdo, shaped eyebrows and a make up that accentuates her seductive eyes and sensuous lips. Apart from her appearance, the fact that she was recently divorced is equally important. The 1950s ideal of a woman was a married mother, a housewife. Contrasting this ideal, Becky’s marriage has failed, and she does not have any children. Having been married also implies that she is sexually experienced. Katrina Mann
points out that “Becky’s divorce culturally resonated as evidence of her unrestrained sexuality. The female divorcée … was presumed to be more sexually available than unmarried women … [and] had increased awareness of herself and her desires” (60). Moreover, a sexually emancipated woman was seen as a danger to society by attracting and seducing men, thus representing the opposite of the traditional housewife: “Writers … were warning that female desire and sexuality, if not properly contained, could distract men, destroy families and make the nation weak and ripe for Communist infiltration” (George 2). In the movie, Becky eventually turns into a pod person and through this transformation she becomes a danger to Miles’ life, like the femme fatale to the noir hero.

The first scene in which Becky appears is set at Miles’ office. As soon as she enters the room, a light, seductive music sets in and her soft voice seems to resemble the tone of the music. She is wearing a pretty dress that shows her bare shoulders and, as already mentioned, her hair is done and she wears makeup and jewelry. Her face is illuminated and highlighted by a spotlight. We see Becky in an over-the-shoulder shot from Miles perspective and it is obvious that he is stunned by her appearance, smiling at her and joking. He closes the door behind her as if he was seeking intimacy. A mutual attraction becomes obvious to the viewer as Becky seems flirtatious with Miles. When she sits down to talk to Miles we see her from a bird’s eye perspective, she is looking up at Miles and especially her eyes seem very large and sensual. At the same time she is giving the impression of a self-confident woman. In this scene, Becky clearly shows attributes of the femme fatale, being beautiful and seductive, attracting Miles.

Farther into the movie, Becky is cooking breakfast in Miles’ kitchen, after he had rescued her the night before from being transformed into a pod person. At the beginning of the scene the soft, seductive music sets in again. The fact that Becky stands in the kitchen cooking for Miles might imply that she does have traditional housewife qualities. But Becky’s clothes speak a different language. She is wearing a large man’s shirt and jeans, the opposite of what one would expect from a 1950s housewife. These clothes make her look like an emancipated woman, another feature of the femme fatale. Miles seems very much in love with her, dedicated to please. When she asks him how he likes his eggs, he says that he wants them the same way she makes hers. He also makes remarks about how he liked to rescue and take her home in the middle of the night. Becky on the other hand seems more rational and in charge of the situation.

In another scene at the office, Miles hides with Becky from the pod people, which had been trying to find and transform them. Miles and Becky decide that they need to stay awake the whole night in order to withstand a transformation into a pod person while sleeping. Before the camera fades out, the two kiss passionately, and music is playing in the background. Katrina Mann observes that the next picture, which shows the scene in the morning, displays a full ashtray, which she interprets as a “postcoital commemoration with a macabre twist” (61). Taking this as an indicator for a sexual encounter between Miles and Becky it can be as-
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sumed that Becky got what she wanted. She succeeded in seducing Miles. After this it does not take long for her to be turned into a pod person, endangering Miles’ life, like the femme fatale endangers that of the noir hero.

Later in the scene, the music becomes more dramatic and the room seems somewhat claustrophobic, because of the dark shadows that were not there in the first office scene; these are clearly elements of film noir. Miles is trying to think of a way to battle their persecutors and he takes two knives from a cabinet: “No. It wouldn’t work. I might get one or even two, but I couldn’t get three.” And Becky replies: “You’re forgetting something, darling – me. It isn’t three against one. It’s three against two. Give me a knife.” Miles presumes that he has to fight the pod people by himself and that Becky, being a woman, is not capable of this. She on the other hand appears to be very strong and self-confident when she tells him that she can fight, too. She takes his hand with the knives in it with a strong and determined grip. She “takes action,” which, according to Westcombe, is another distinctive feature of the femme fatale, who “is not passive … she takes action to get what – and whom – she wants with a directness and aggression previously re-served for male players” (4).

One of the last but probably most crucial scenes is where Becky is being transformed into a pod person. She and Miles have run from their persecutors, the pod people, and hide in a cave. Miles leaves Becky alone for a moment to find help and when he comes back he discovers that she has fallen asleep. He takes her into his arms and kisses her passionately. In this moment, dramatic music sets in and we see a close up of Becky’s face. When she does not kiss Miles back with the same passion he realizes that she has been transformed during his absence. Becky opens her eyes and stares at him coolly, her hair is messed up and her face covered in dirt. She lifts one of her eyebrows in an almost cynical way. She appears wild and dangerous with her white teeth clenching, almost animal-like. This shot is followed by a close-up of Miles’ horrified face. It is obvious that the beautiful, flirtatious Becky that he fell in love with is completely and irreversibly gone and he is shocked. When he starts to run from her, Becky calls out for the other pod people to get him.

In his voice-over, Miles states that he has never been so afraid in his whole life. Becky has become his ultimate threat: “I didn’t know the real meaning of fear … until I had kissed Becky. A moment’s sleep, and the girl I loved … was an inhuman enemy bent on my destruction. That moment’s sleep was death to Becky’s soul.” In this scene, Becky can again be perceived as a femme fatale, because she betrays and endangers Miles by shouting out for the pod people to get him. Although her appearance has changed from the beautiful and carefully styled woman she was in the beginning of the movie to a dirty, scary face she still fits the image of the femme fatale.

Susan George writes in her essay on the “Science Fiction Vamp,” where she compares the former to the femme fatale, that stories about this kind of seductive and dangerous woman serve “as a cautionary tale for the unsuspecting men they
may seduce and as a warning to women to stay in their place or they will, literally, turn monstrous and be dispatched without mercy” (14). Becky, too, has turned truly “evil” and she even appears somewhat “monstrous” with her widely opened eyes and clenched teeth. Moreover, it can be argued that she is a seductress because of her attractive appearance and the fact that it did not take long for Miles to fall for her. When Becky has become a pod person, her body is still alive but Miles realizes that her soul is dead. “Death was usually the fate of the SF Vamp” (George 3) and the same could be said for the femme fatale. One might argue that Becky in the end does not resemble a femme fatale anymore, because she is a pod person without emotions or sexual desires. On the other hand, Becky’s transformation can also be perceived as a final act to “pull the hero down” (“Film Noir”). At the same time Becky succumbs to the fate of the femme fatale, because her “soul dies” (“Film Noir”).

In conclusion, Becky shows various features of the femme fatale. According to Richard Westcombe, the three “key components” of the femme fatale are her “independence”, “strength” and “ruthless desire” (4). All three components can – to a certain extend – be found in the character of Becky. She is divorced from her husband, no longer depending upon him. She shows self-confidence and strength, and insists on taking up a fight against the pod people. She shows desire when she flirts and kisses Miles. She also stands in contrast to the traditional role model of American women in the 1950s.

Yet Becky does not give a fully homogenous picture of the femme fatale. In the second office scene, right before she tells Miles that she can fight the pod people, too, she breaks down crying and telling him that she does not want to live in a world where there is no love, a world where there are only emotionless pod people, and that she wants to have Miles’ children. This seems contradictory to an independent and dangerous femme fatale and it shows that Becky’s character has further components than mentioned in this chapter, e.g. the longing for love and children. But when looking at the 1950s Italian movie poster of Invasion of the Body Snatchers the image of Becky as a femme fatale is somewhat taken to an extreme, showing her tanned and naked, voluptuous lips and breasts, her hands seem like sharp claws – a truly wild and dangerous femme fatale. In my opinion, it is this impression of Becky that lasts because this is what her character has become at the end of the film, and though the picture of her as a femme fatale is not fully homogenous, it can be concluded that Becky does more than just sharing certain characteristics with the film noir’s dark heroine, the femme fatale.
Works Cited


Mann, Katrina. “‘You’re Next!’: Postwar Hegemony Besieged in Invasion of the Body Snatchers.” Cinema Journal 44.1 (Fall 2004): 49-68. Print.
