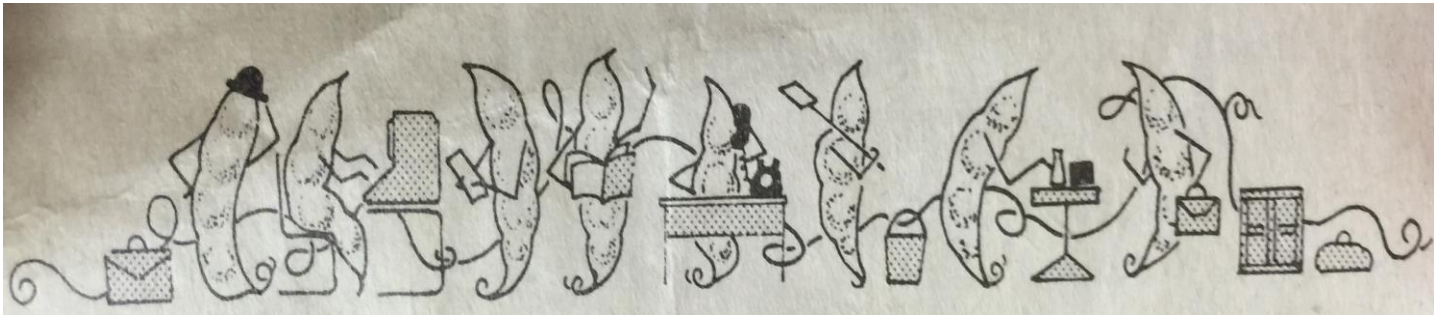


Danger: pods at work

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Action at a distance is essential to IT, but can make for the impersonal approach

‘People are pods. Many of my associates are certainly pods. People have no feelings. They exist, breathe, sleep. To be a pod means that you have no passion, no anger... The spark has left you.’ So said Don Siegel, the veteran Hollywood film director (*Coogan’s Bluff*, *Charley Varrick*, *The Shootist*), to a cinema-buff interviewer in the 1970s. He was explaining one of the basic themes of one of my favourite films, the Siegel science-fiction epic, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.



Made in the wake of the McCarthy era in the United States, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) is a black-and-white excursus into a world in which paranoia reigns supreme. Pods – vegetables from outer space – take over the bodies and minds of masses of US citizens while they are asleep. The pods rid honest Americans of all real emotions, leaving them only with the pretence of such. It becomes impossible to work out whether the person you are talking to has been taken over, or whether he or she had always acted that way anyhow, but you had failed to notice. Worse, each person you try to warn about pods turns out, on close inspection, to be a pod himself.

Were the pods, for Siegel, really an allegory for the communist menace so vividly publicised by Senator Joe? Was *Invasion* a crude warning that subversive inclinations on the part of your neighbours were both deadly and difficult to detect? Anybody familiar with Siegel’s powerful call for prison reform, *Riot in Cell Block Eleven* (1974), will know that his critique of ‘podism’ was no right-wing tract. For Siegel the problem with pods was not so much that they were an alien menace, but rather that they represented an option all too easy for normal human beings to take. To become a pod – to become anaesthetised from your emotions – has mass appeal nowadays.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (the title, Siegel contends, ‘was the idea of some studio pod’) is a scary, absorbing film. It is a warning. It is not about ‘alienation’ in the sense of Albert Camus or Saul Bellow; nor about ‘being a cog in a machine’, in the sense of Chaplin’s *Modern Times* or King Vidor’s *The Crowd*. No, the film frightens because its subject is far from grandiose. The whole thing turns on the simple difference between active human being and active human vegetable.

In my view, the technology of modern organisations has a lot to do with pods. There is, of course, a large body of management literature about bureaucracy and how to get round it. But the problem of pods at work goes further than gimlet-eyed marketing men or admin types. The problem is not particular professions – accountancy, HR – but the fact that more and more of mankind’s agenda today is conducted long range.

We are in an age of action at a distance. In IT the talk is of the convergence between data processing and telecommunications: of bankers putting a terminal on every corporate client’s desk, of visual display units which give top executives at ICI on-line multi-coloured bar-chart reports on every chemicals subsidiary’s business performance. At British Coal, a system known as MINOS now connects gritty underground workers to white-coated surface supervisors through little more than winking screens and a Tannoy.

Throughout, intimacy is reduced, decision-making desensitised. This kind of remote control makes for the multiplication of pods; for if the exchange of ideas, messages and moods relies on mediations that are increasingly artificial in their nature, so we can expect people to lose touch with the personal – to be dehumanised. I say this not to make a point against technology, just to register the facts. The enormous number of romantic 20th century songs that comment on the defects of the telephone suggests that I am right. So, by contrast, do military considerations.

People speak of Ronald Reagan or Mikhail Gorbachev having a ‘finger on the nuclear trigger’. But the phrase is misleading. Part of what it implies is that the person in charge of nuclear weapons is able, at the press of a switch, to unleash devastation, within minutes, thousands of miles away. Yet in principle the same ability to destroy without physical contact has existed since the Second World War. Then, the high-altitude aerial bombardment of cities rid pilots of all intercourse with their opponents. To those responsible for it, the fire-bombing of hundreds of thousands of civilians touched the soul about as deeply as a modern game of Space Invaders.

When you're at the top, a rather successful friend once whispered to me, you don't know how to feel. For when you are at the head of a large firm, or have your head in Mach 2 clouds, you're completely cocooned. At the top, you have the best access to the largest quantity of technological resources. Your levers are long. All too easily, you can become a pod.

In 1963, the American psychologist Stanley Milgram did some famous experiments on people's willingness to set emotions to one side. Ordered to inflict electric shocks at one remove, on supposed victims in another room, Milgram's unsuspecting human guinea-pigs duly obliged, failing to be reassured that they had caused 'no permanent tissue damage' only when they began to apply the highest voltages. Milgram wanted to find out what it was that had made people blithely build concentration camps nearly 30 years before. What is it that induces heartlessness?

<p align="center"><u>Public Announcement</u></p> <p align="center">WE WILL PAY YOU \$4.00 FOR ONE HOUR OF YOUR TIME</p> <p align="center">Persons Needed for a Study of Memory</p> <p>*We will pay five hundred New Haven men to help us complete a scientific study of memory and learning. The study is being done at Yale University.</p> <p>*Each person who participates will be paid \$4.00 (plus 50c carfare) for approximately 1 hour's time. We need you for only one hour: there are no further obligations. You may choose the time you would like to come (evenings, weekdays, or weekends).</p> <p>*No special training, education, or experience is needed. We want:</p> <table><tr><td>Factory workers</td><td>Businessmen</td><td>Construction workers</td></tr><tr><td>City employees</td><td>Clerks</td><td>Salespeople</td></tr><tr><td>Laborers</td><td>Professional people</td><td>White-collar workers</td></tr><tr><td>Barbers</td><td>Telephone workers</td><td>Others</td></tr></table> <p>All persons must be between the ages of 20 and 50. High school and college students cannot be used.</p> <p>*If you meet these qualifications, fill out the coupon below and mail it now to Professor Stanley Milgram, Department of Psychology, Yale University, New Haven. You will be notified later of the specific time and place of the study. We reserve the right to decline any application.</p> <p>*You will be paid \$4.00 (plus 50c carfare) as soon as you arrive at the laboratory.</p>			Factory workers	Businessmen	Construction workers	City employees	Clerks	Salespeople	Laborers	Professional people	White-collar workers	Barbers	Telephone workers	Others
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<p>TO: PROF. STANLEY MILGRAM, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY, YALE UNIVERSITY, NEW HAVEN, CONN. I want to take part in this study of memory and learning. I am between the ages of 20 and 50. I will be paid \$4.00 (plus 50c carfare) if I participate.</p> <p>NAME (Please Print)</p> <p>ADDRESS</p> <p>TELEPHONE NO. Best time to call you</p> <p>AGE OCCUPATION SEX</p> <p>CAN YOU COME:</p> <p>WEEKDAYS EVENINGS WEEKENDS</p>														

The handbill with which Milgram recruited people for his work, which began in July 1961, three months after Adolf Eichmann was put on trial in Jerusalem. Hannah Arendt's New Yorker series, 'Eichmann in Jerusalem', which coined the phrase 'the banality of evil', began on 16 February 1963 – see <http://archives.newyorker.com/?i=1963-02-16#folio=040>. Milgram's article on his results was published in the Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 67 (4), pp371-8, in October the same year – see <http://www.garfield.library.upenn.edu/classics1981/A1981LC33300001.pdf>

At one time or another, each of us has been a victim of pods at work. We have all met the men who stab you in the back with a smile on their face; who assure you that there is 'nothing personal' in their latest dastardly deed; who insist, in a bizarre mix of Zen and *Fortune* magazine, that what you regard as a problem is really an opportunity. At first, it is all too easy to conclude that all this is the result of malice. Then, the awful realisation dawns that incompetence is a more probable *casus belli*. But the truth may even be more disturbing than this: that our superiors have been stripped of all sensibility by the spread of data networks, by the urge to press keys more often than flesh.

Copper wires, optical fibres and the rake of electron beams cannot be disinvented. But they do make separation into society's dominant relation. Once just a medium for broadcasting, screens are today the means by which all sorts of things get done. They have sprung up everywhere, like pods; and now they have brought a terrible progeny of their own.