

THE CURRENT CINEMA

Male Revenge

IRA LEVIN's novel "The Stepford Wives" had a shrewd, potentially good movie idea—the same basic idea as that of the low-budget 1956 sci-fi horror film "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." In the small-town setting of "Invasion," everyone is turned into a vegetable. In the suburban community of Stepford, however, it's only the wives who are dehumanized; when they show the first stirrings of interest in consciousness-raising, their husbands turn them into domestic and sexual slave-robots. The plot of "The Stepford Wives" is "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" with a women's-lib theme. The idea of a quiet, undeclared all-out war of men against their wives has a perverse charm, and satirical possibilities leap to mind. How could anyone with half a spark of humor resist showing us scenes of the husbands being irritated by the wives' new demands and then being blissfully, sneakily happy with the undemanding robots? But Levin's book was barely a novel at all; it was more like a solemn outline that he couldn't bother filling in. And the

adapter, William Goldman, and the director, Bryan Forbes, probably had too much contempt for the book to think the film through. The dialogue is gummy, the situations dimly functional; the movie gives the impression of a patchwork script, and it's blah and becalmed.

The film of "Stepford" preys on women's fears (and men's guilt), as "Rosemary's Baby," from an earlier novel of Ira Levin's, did, but not teasingly this time. The film "Rosemary's Baby," keeping the spirit of the book, had a freaky-scary naughtiness, and a psychological dimension. Rosemary's terror was like a woman's worst masochistic pregnancy fantasies—that she was helplessly caught, involved with a husband who didn't care about her, and that she would give birth to a monstrosity. The audience identified with Mia Farrow's terrified, emaciated vulnerability, and the whole movie was told from her point of view. It was an honestly trashy thriller entertainment—skin-crawling but sophisticated and funny, and with a comic twist at

the end: Rosemary cooing over her infant Satan. I don't like the queasy and the grisly mixed with entertainment, and I didn't really enjoy "Rosemary's Baby," but it wasn't a boobish picture, like "The Stepford Wives." The story of "Stepford," too, is told from the threatened wife's point of view, but Katharine Ross, who plays the victim-heroine, Joanna, a wife who fears that the move from New York to Stepford will close her world in, doesn't have a very distinctive personality, and there isn't a hell of a lot of difference between her and the robot housewives right from the start.

It's a disastrous piece of casting. Katharine Ross is lovely-looking, and she's not a bad actress. It might be better if she were: a coarse performance might give us something to react to. But Katharine Ross is vacantly intelligent and somewhat reserved, almost blocked. Joanna goes through the motions of being a sympathetic mother to her two kids, as if she'd read about how to talk to children in a good, sound book. Ross is a peculiarly careful yet convictionless actress; she always looks tentative, as if she weren't quite sure that she wanted to come to life. Hardly the actress to make us feel the

encroaching horror of suburban blandness. Levin's idea of making Joanna creative by having her be a gifted photographer is a lazy out—a substitute for writing a character with some life in her to lose. Even the worst cant of the women's movement has often been high-spirited—and the explosive charge told us more than the rhetoric—but Joanna is a low-spirited woman. And in the movie the photographs she takes of children at play are so wholesomely creative that they're practically the photographic equivalent of adding an egg to a packaged cake mix.

A suspense-horror film generally needs a certain amount of funkiness; even a little clumsiness and incompetence can help it along. But "Stepford" is tastefully tame; it



"It's an objet, all right, but is it d'art?"

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IMPORTED BY SCHIEFFELIN & CO., NEW YORK

has been made as if no one involved had any hope for it—it's literal in a way that seems a wasting disease. The super-household-appliance wives are Librium-slow. The reason is apparent, but robot people can be fun if they're quick and jerky, while these spacey robots are a drag. The pasty-faced automaton wives, with shiny, gluey eyes and bosoms tilted skyward, are like Raquel Welch or Ann-Margret without the lewdness. In other words—nothing. Instead of the developments one awaits, there are chunky scenes that don't come from the book and don't sound like Goldman's usual up-to-the-minute pseudo-hipness, either (Joanna reassuring one of her children, who's upset, by talking as if it were the child's Teddy bear who had the problem; Joanna and her friend Bobby, played by Paula Prentiss, visiting an old suitor of Joanna's named Raymond Chandler and having a pointless and horribly facetious chat about detective novels). Since the women haven't enough personality for us to get scared for them—where's the terror in robots' being turned into robots?—"Stepford" has nothing but its cautionary parable to go on. It's a depressing thought, but an awful lot of people may be willing to accept it on that humorless, cautionary level.

That is exactly the level on which, I think, it has no validity. As a statement—a text for our times—with the slave-wives parading somnambulistically in the aisles of the Stepford supermarket, stacking canned goods in their carts, it's really a crock. If women turn into replicas of the women in commercials, they do it to themselves. Even if the whole pop culture weighs on them—pushing them in that direction—if they go that way, they're the ones letting it happen. And as long as they can blame the barrenness of their lives on men, they don't need to change. They can play at being victims instead, and they can do it under the guise of liberation.

"The Stepford Wives" doesn't need to be a good movie in order to succeed, because it panders to the softheaded psychological commonplaces of the moment, just as "David and Lisa" did, and, on a somewhat more skillful level, "The Graduate," or, in its own way, "Easy Rider." It's a perfect movie for precisely those women for whom the tour of the supermarket is the high point of the day; "Stepford's" view of the relations of the sexes is just what those women are purchasing now from the

magazine rack near the cash register. It's for women who have nothing in mind that they really want to do, except maybe fantasies of losing some weight and becoming an airline stewardess, women who feel trapped by the deadliness of their lives and are envious of their husbands' supposedly exciting time at work. These women can be turned on by "Stepford" because the ideas floating around in it confirm their fantasies. Joanna discovers that the automatons were active, creative, intelligent women before their husbands organized and, under the leadership of the sinister Dale Gribble (Patrick O'Neal)—known as Diz, because he used to work at Disneyland—began systematically turning them into male ideals of femininity. The responsibility for suburban women's becoming overgroomed deadheads, obsessed with waxed, antiseptic households, is thus placed totally on the men. And one look at the men and you know that the women were their superiors in every way. The men (and this is a bit of shrewdness that's not in the book) are aging, courteous mice, nervously scuttling in and out of the woodwork. The only man in the movie meant to be even remotely attractive is the suave scientific mastermind Diz; he's unmarried—presumably his ego is bigger than his id.

As a guilt provoker for men, this picture may be peerless. It says to them, "You're a vacuous, inadequate excuse for a man; you've been demeaning a sensitive, intelligent woman, and now that she's trying to lift her head and get her consciousness raised, you'd rather kill her than let her find herself." It also says that these mousy men can be desired sexually only by women who are programmed to lie to them. "Stepford" hits men below the belt and tells them it's for their own good. Columbia

Pictures may not know what it has got. The company seems to be selling "Stepford" as a sci-fi cheapo, but, given any halfway smart promotion, how can the picture not succeed?

The most salable part of the women's-liberation movement is the idea that women have been wronged by men—not "He done her wrong," as in the old he-robbed-her-of-her-virginity-and-wouldn't-marry-her sense, but, rather, "He done her wrong by marrying her for his comfort's sake, and that is all he cares about." It's a women's-lib continuation of soap opera: it all comes down to "He doesn't love



me for myself," with the new addition of "How could he, when I've become a blank?" There's so much of this in the air now that men are probably beginning to accept the guilt, just as middle-aged parents accepted "The Graduate's" view of their materialistic dirtiness. "Stepford" is for wives with feelings of superiority mixed with feelings of hopeless inadequacy. If the movie had any wit or perspective, we'd see how the men, accepting their role as providers, strapped themselves into boring jobs and turned themselves into creeps, and maybe we'd even see some of the young wives' delicious relaxation in the pleasures of having snared men who were going to take care of them. It could be an entertaining parable only if we saw the women's dreams and the men's dreams go sour, and masochistic and sadistic fantasies build. "Stepford" provides nothing but drab masochism.

What is the danger represented by robotization but giving in to commercialism and letting the advertising society set the models for one's own behavior? Right now, there's a pop subculture peddling this gutted view of women's liberation. I dislike "The Stepford Wives" for reasons that go beyond its being a cruddy movie: I dislike it for the condescension implicit in its view that educated American women are not responsible for what they become. Women, the abused, are being treated like the innocent young pot-heads of the late sixties—as a suffering privileged class. This sentimentality is degrading.

—PAULINE KAEEL

To demonstrate his interest in the billing process, the physician can write "O.V." (office visit) on the patient's card and say, for example, "That's \$15.00." Handing the card to the patient, the physician then says, "Please give this to Mary on your way out."

The office person is instructed to say politely, "That will be \$15.00 plus a balance of \$35.00, which is \$50.00 all together."

The patient should walk out of the office with either a receipt or a bill in hand.—*Family Practice News*.

After kissing Mary goodbye.

THE JOY OF ERROR

[From the Boston Globe]

ST. LOUIS (UPI)—A shipping error resulted in a Roman Catholic school for girls receiving 25 copies of the "The Joy of Sex" instead of "The Joy of Cooking."

Sanford Jaffe, president of Paperback Supply Inc. of suburban Webster Groves, said the school did not complain and paid the bill, even though it totaled \$25 more than the cookbooks would have cost.

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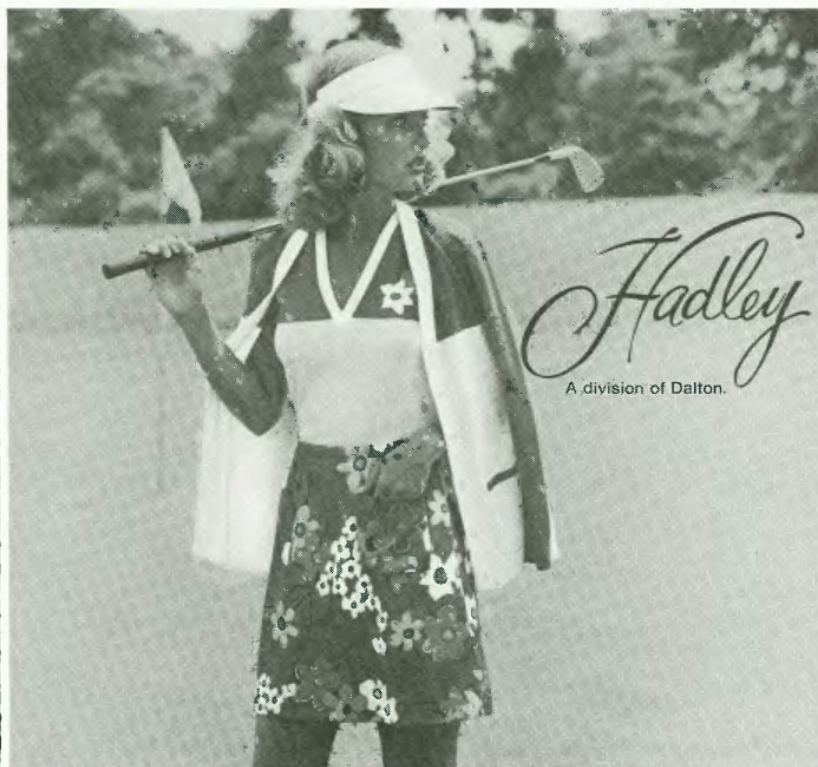
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