

# The Stepford Wives

*analyzed by David Bartholomew*

**THE STEPFORD WIVES** is one of the select few genre films more important for its ideas than its genre excitements.

THE STEPFORD WIVES A Columbia Pictures Release. 2/75. In Color. 114 minutes. Produced by Edgar J. Scherick. Directed by Bryan Forbes. Screenplay by William Goldman based on the novel by Ira Levin. Executive producer, Gustave M. Berne. Associate producer, Roger M. Rothstein. Music composed and conducted by Michael Small. Director of photography, Owen Roizman. Production designer, Gene Callahan. Film editor, Timothy Gee. Costume designer, Anna Hill Johnstone. Executive for Fadsin Cinema Associates, Martin Fribush. Assistant director, Peter Scoppa. Second assistant director, Mike Haley. Unit manager, Neil Machlis. Makeup artist, Andy Cianella. Hair dresser, Romaine Greene. Script supervisor, B. J. Bjorkman. Camera operator, Enrique Bravo. Drawings by Don Bachardy. Set decorator, Robert Drumheller. Property master, Joseph M. Caracciolo. Sound mixer, James Sabat. Filmed on locations in Connecticut and New York City. A Fadsin/Cinema Associates Production.

Joanna ..... Katherine Ross  
 Bobby ..... Paula Prentiss  
 Walter ..... Peter Masterson  
 Carol ..... Nanette Newman  
 Charmaine ..... Tina Louise  
 Dr. Francher ..... Carol Rosson  
 Ike Mazzard ..... William Prince  
 Kit Sunderson ..... Carole Mallory  
 Marie Axhelm ..... Toni Reid  
 Mrs. Cornell ..... Judith Baldwin  
 Marie Ann Stavros ..... Barbara Rucker  
 Claude Axhelm ..... George Coe  
 Ed Wimpiris ..... Franklin Cover  
 Raymond Chandler ..... Robert Fields  
 Mr. Cornell ..... Michael Higgins  
 Ted Van Sant ..... Josef Somer  
 Welcome Wagon Lady ..... Paula Trueman  
 Mrs. Kirgassa ..... Martha Greenhouse  
 Dave Markowe ..... Simon Deckard  
 Mr. Atkinson ..... Remak Ramsay  
 Patrick O'Neal as Dale Coba

The major theme—the subversion of human emotions and individuality in a foreboding, clearly macroscopic situation—and much of the actual plot of THE STEPFORD WIVES have long been durable staples of genre filmmaking. Endless variations spill out, some good, most bad, with the alien force, if indeed identified at all, variously witches, devil pacts, secret gases and chemicals, outer space creatures and even primitive religions. Or clones, as in the Bryan Forbes/William Goldman film at hand. The theme received its most controlled and subtly frightening treatment in Siegel's INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS, and Bernard McEveety contributed an interesting version in BROTHERHOOD OF SATAN, a feisty, bloody and pessemistic exercise that stopped short, unlike THE STEPFORD WIVES, of treading into sexual matters. At the bottom end of the scale, along with many others, are THE HUMAN DUPLICATORS and THE CREATION OF THE HUMANOID, which reach giggly lows in their fusion of bad acting with ill-conceived scripts in which you can't tell, as you're meant to, the emotion-less robots from the real endangered people. In THE STEPFORD WIVES, a young family tries to escape the bustle of New York City life by moving to a sleepy Connecticut town (much of the film is shot in Westport). There is an unnatural feeling to its ambience and its slow-moving citizens, which is picked up almost immediately by the young wife (Katherine Ross). She allies herself with another recent arrival (Paula Prentiss) but discovers too late why the men are nervous and their wives are complacent models of mothers, mates and domestics.

I want to note right from the start that THE STEPFORD WIVES is one of the select few genre films more important for its ideas than its genre excitements. As a suspense film, it is only a moderate success, which serves only to remind us in many scenes and themes of a similar, much better movie, ROSEMARY'S BABY (also based on a Pop novel by Ira Levin). The tension we're accustomed to feel in the best genre films is mostly absent here, for the filmmakers' chief goals lie elsewhere than in sweaty palms. Most genre films fail when they attempt important ideas, with a few notable examples in Arch Oboler's FIVE AND THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND THE DEVIL, both trapped in, respectively, social and racial compromises as befits the '50s, and two similar '70s films, TROG and Gordon Douglas' SKULLDUGGERY, both nearly total failures.

Forbes and Goldman have done an astonishing thing with their theme (and Levin's fast-read novel)—they have casually turned it into a vastly successful metaphor for the plight of women and their movement for liberation and then use that specific, rightfully, as a plea for human freedom as a whole. THE STEPFORD WIVES is probably the only viable, intelligently conceived movie about women and their future made in the past decade. It succeeds admirably where the emerging "serious" films about women fail. When an act-

ress on-screen begins talking about either her career and difficulties with men, success, or love or, at the other end, children and housewifery, the resultant soulsearching seems false, hopelessly unnatural, nearly laughable, for whatever reasons I don't quite know. These films somehow remind us that the women on-screen aren't real, just gesturing actresses and postured movie stars who don't share the serious problems the characters they play speak of and suffer with. THE STEPFORD WIVES moves almost into the area of satire with its women and their views; it uses extremes to effective purpose because the genre, in this case a mixture of horror/science fiction/fantasy, will support it almost by definition. The film can discuss reality without having to attempt it. Hence, the film's women are extremes, apart from Ross, perhaps, who must provide a fulcrum for the film's point of view: Nanette Newman's (in real life Forbes' wife) emotionally metallic clone/wife and Prentiss' overly bubbly buddy "before" compared with her stiff, empty-eyed "after." The changeover is immediately evident via clothes: her jeans and halters replaced by a dress and apron, her hair fixed and carefully coiffed, and her face made-up and Revlon-perfect.

Prentiss had passed the four month time limit needed for Stepford town leader Patrick O'Neal's forces to make and program her clone replacement. Earlier she and Ross try to arouse the Stepford Wives from what they consider at first their (mere) unenlightened and constraining lifestyles. In a series of vignettes, the pair are rebuffed by women deeply involved in baking and gardening; each of these short scenes are overplayed and ludicrous, yet the points are made, which a "serious" film could not without provoking damaging laughter. THE STEPFORD WIVES uses that laughter, because Forbes realizes that movies have yet to be able to talk seriously about the serious problems of women. Indeed, Prentiss, after the change, poses the sticky answer that confounds and separates most questioning liberationists who cannot convince all subjects that they need the oft-times painful process of enlightenment: "What is wrong with looking like a woman and keeping a decent home?" Prentiss (before) is the prime loner—she is the one to suffer the obligatory "irrational" scene where she puts all her fears and thoughts of conspiracy together and blurts out a silly (away from the parent situation) theory, in this case picking up the Birch society's dependable staple about "things" in the water supply, to a disbelieving (male) outsider. Oddly enough, like ROSEMARY'S BABY, THE STEPFORD WIVES is partly about the power

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Opposite Page: Katherine Ross is faced with her blank-eyed android duplicate at the conclusion of THE STEPFORD WIVES, a vastly successful metaphor for the plight of women and their movement for liberation.



Top: In Bryan Forbes' spooky, generic ending, a rain-soaked Katherine Ross registers confusion, fear and disbelief at discovering the secret of *THE STEPFORD WIVES*. Bottom: In the confrontation with her android-perfect duplicate, the *Playboy*-ideal enlarged breasts, created by makeup artist Dick Smith, strike just the right chord.

of aroused maternal instinct, as Ross charges out in search of her children just as Rosemary will tentatively stay to care for her "baby." Since the maternal instinct is taken off the pedestal in liberation for a thorough examination, one would consider it fully built-in and at its strongest in the Stepford clones' programming. Note too how Ross' art is enriched (at least according to the stuffy critic, whom Forbes may be having a bit of fun with, at our expense) when she begins to photograph children. Finally, each real woman is killed, fittingly enough, by her clone replacement, and in Ross' case the weapon is a nylon stocking (which she shuns wearing in the film—it thus becomes a symbol, like makeup). The clone has giant, Walter-Keane eyes, echoing one of those hideous paintings hanging in one of the clone/wives' homes. *THE STEPFORD WIVES*, with its down outlook which is expanded in the last portion of the film, represents a pessimistic view of the women's movement, the futility of changing lives and opposing narrow traditional ideas.

Forbes has filled the film with a host of fine details, although it does not build as smoothly or as terrifyingly as *ROSEMARY'S BABY*. He accomplishes a necessary sense of things not being right, inducing unease from a cheerfully sunlit world. A man carrying a nude store mannequin along a New York street prompts Ross to photograph it again and again, compulsively. Ross' daughter tells her father she just saw "a man carrying a naked lady," a verbal mistake for the child but later a conscious choice for the husband. In Stepford, the shopping center is named "Good Wives." Other details: a busload of quiet, staring children not too far removed from the blond brood in *VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED*; a loud ambulance siren cutting the village's absolute quiet while no one notices or reacts (almost a trait of city living), a minor traffic accident which is treated as a catastrophe while the ambulance with the victim (Newman) speeds off in a direction away from the hospital; Ross' child cries her first night and talks about her "Teddy bear's unhappy face," an inanimate object which for the child takes on life and feelings as the clones will later be Teddy bears for the husbands; a bulldozer tearing up Charmaine's (Tina Louise) tennis court is oddly disturbing; Ross' throw-away line of dialogue early on as she admires Charmaine: "What I wouldn't give for a chest like that" not knowing that her husband has already dealt with the same question.

The film is cleverly plotted. The cloning process is multi-faceted: the careful sketches by a *Playboy*/Vargas-like artist played by William Prince; the examination of the bedroom to duplicate it in the Men's Association building where the clone will be programmed; the collector of accents who himself stutters (rightly enough, most of the men in the film suffer from some physical ailment, which beautifully counterpoints their wishes for perfection in their women) and the recording of the tape by Ross that will furnish the clone's voice and mind with carefully limited knowledge, precluding the ability to think, and which also accidentally provides a clue for discovering the unaffected—another genre staple—in the word "archaic," which is (significantly) not on the list.

O'Neal, who plays a bachelor, provides a new answer to Ross' final, again, obligatory genre question: "Why?" "Because we can do it," he answers. As the architect of the Stepford plan, he has no real motive for erasing sexual worry from the lives of a group of rich, successful executives (Prince plays the only "artist" in sight). O'Neal beams at one point to Ross who is preparing coffee, "I like to watch women doing little domestic things." Using technology as a foil, he has earlier been linked to Disneyland, a canny move, which is something to think about the next time you're at Disney World seeing Abe Lincoln walk-



ing around and talking. O'Neal is also, incidentally, the only character in the film to get dramatic, "spook" lighting to increase his villainy.

The film's lack of overt evil as well as O'Neal's question-mark character and motives are problems in the film. A bigger hole in it is caused by Ross' husband (Peter Masterson); we simply do not know what prompts him to participate in the Stepford scheme. At least Cassavetes became rich and famous for his deal-making. Masterson is even unhappy in the plan's progress; Cassavetes is clear-eyed the night of the "deed," but Masterson must drink himself half stuporous before arranging the actual replacement. Perhaps he's having off-screen second thoughts, just as in Archie Mayo's *SVENGALI* (1931), John Barrymore eventually recognized and grew tired of his "manufactured love" ("for I find I am only talking to myself"), a realization that cost him his life but saved his soul. Anyway, we cheer, because of the film's tension and need for release, when Ross bashes him over the head, and the blood splashes across *The New Yorker* cover (a cute but misplaced detail which links the menace to urbanity—should not the magazine have been *Better Homes and Gardens*...?).

Another husband's motives, those of Ed, the TV executive, are also in doubt. His wife, Tina Louise, who has not been changed when the film opens, is already a perfect image of plastic beauty and stunted thoughts. Perhaps one is meant to grasp that her conception of femininity is not so much *Playboy*—she has the looks and body for it—as *Cosmopolitan*, which is just as limited and false a conception and probably doubly a threat to Ed's masculinity. Contrary to the film's negative ending, there are an awful lot of dysfunctioning clones to contend with, which implies the system has an innate technological weakness. For instance, Newman's husband may have had her cloned to rid him of her drinking problem, but she still drinks too much at the garden party. One also wonders at the Welcome Wagon lady (played to the hilt with Ruth Gordon mannerisms by Paula Trueman). She is the only flesh-and-blood woman in Stepford—we have no reason to believe her a clone. What are her motives for sharing in the Stepford scheme, surely she knows about it, since she is the first to greet and "loosen" up the new wives, beginning to gather the information necessary for the cloning. The film thus posits and depends on a surmised presence of evil, and humans happily complying with it, that offers no real rewards or grandiose pleasure or powers, a notion difficult for me to accept.

The film itself is remarkably open-ended. The prime examination of women remaining thinking and feeling and sexual individuals also reflects and uncovers (because it is a dream-product of) the men's dangerously limited concept of sexuality, both male and female, which seems particularly American, the emphasis of which is, as Prentiss puts it, on "the good old days when *Playboy* still used the air brush." The town cop extends the film's basic metaphor even further to materialism when he cautions Ross, who is looking for her runaway dog and strays too near the Men's Association (which she will later pay a fatal Gothic visit to, a trip like the reporter's to the hospital in *SISTERS*); he says, "People have things we have to protect," meaning wives and property interchangeably.

Finally, the film's chilling, neatly choreographed coda sequence remarkably stretches the concept to an entire modern world-view, logically symbolized by the supermarket. Owen Roizman's camera glides gracefully, roaming the aisles, panning right and left to catch the wives smoothly moving by, filling up their carts from the array of cans and boxes absolutely perfectly piled and shelved. The lighting and colors are rainbow-hued and soft, like the wives' summer dresses and floppy hats. They ask each other banal questions and respond with the same unheard answers. The language is *Commercialese*, without even the false dignity and polysyllabic density of Newspeak, that formerly threatening, Orwellian, Pre-Nixonian fear. The operative word here is "fine." It is a pretty but sterile world, commercially seductive. It's the ultimate in "I'm OK, you're OK." And it's almost ours, now.

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