

The Faculty

USA | 1998 | 104 minutes

Credits

Director	Robert Rodriguez
Screenplay	Kevin Williamson
Photography	Enrique Chediak
Music	Marco Beltrami

Cast

Delilah Profitt	Jordana Brewster
Stokely Mitchell	Clea DuVall
Marybeth Louise	Laura Harris
Zeke Tyler	Josh Hartnett
Stan Rosado	Shawn Hatosy
Casey Connor	Elijah Wood

In Brief

Think *The Breakfast Club* meets *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, but way cooler and you are almost there. A disparate band of high school kids start to notice that their teachers are acting much stranger than they normally do and then previously troubled students start becoming grade A achievers.

The Faculty was a total departure for director Robert Rodriguez, his first three films had all had a South of the Border theme (Mexico rather than Carlisle) starting the lower than low budget *El Mariachi*. Now he took on the Teen horror, a sub-genre recently lent a new lease of life by Wes Craven's *Scream* which was also written by *Faculty* scribe Kevin Williamson whose career was on a high with his new teen drama *Dawson's Creek* about to air.

This film launched the career of pretty boy Josh Hartnett, helped the leap from child star to future hobbitdom for Elijah Wood and features the criminally under-used Clea Duvall, although we have the pleasure of all seeing her in *But I'm a Cheerleader*. Often in these films the adults can meld into the background but the casting is uniformly excellent including quality actors such as Bebe Newirth, Piper Laurie, Famke Jansen, Selma Hayek, Robert Patrick and *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart.

During a time when *Scream* imitators are appearing as frequently as pod people, Robert Rodriguez, with the aide of Kevin Williamson's wry postmodern pen, makes the best of contractual obligation by merging Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* with John Carpenter's *The Thing* in order to, as did his predecessors, examine the philosophy, psychology, and sociology of conformity.

Herrington High is an Ohio school in which the students believe their teachers to be aliens. The only problem is that they might be right.

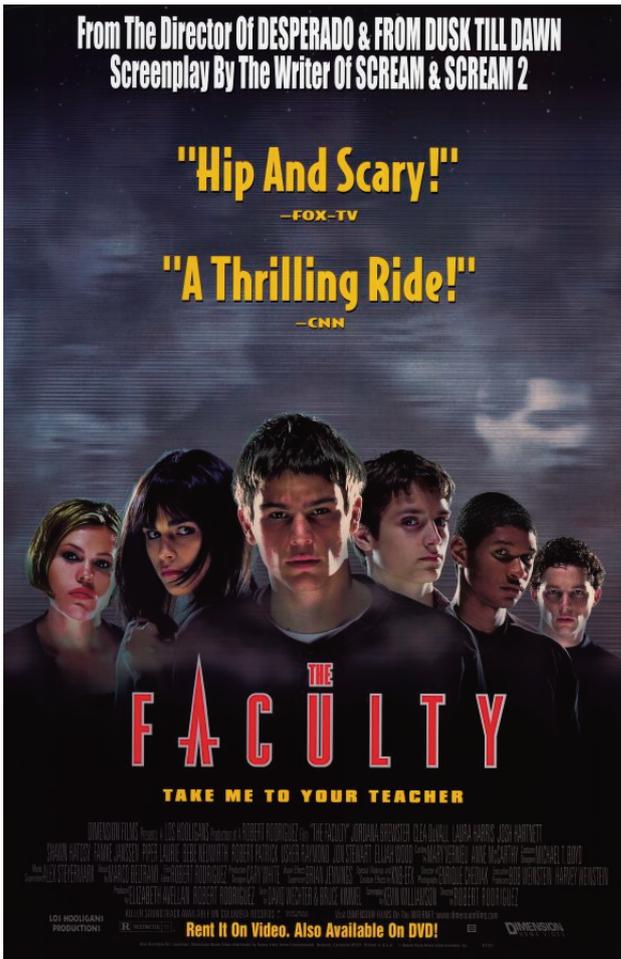
Even though *The Faculty* knowingly sits on the shoulder of giants, Rodriguez avoids the novice mistake of attempting to usurp or even equal the efforts of his predecessors. Instead, the director wisely uses the opportunity to fashion a solid B-movie production. This allows the young filmmaker to incorporate whichever elements of his forerunner's films that serve his purposes while alleviating himself of the burden to provide the proverbial match to Superman. With that, Rodriguez takes Carpenter's Lovecraftian paranoia and merges it with Siegel's critique of herd mentality to produce a fun, rebellious post-*Scream* cinematic romp.

Cleverly, it is through Carpenter that Rodriguez brings us to Siegel. Tentacled shadows literally loom over the proceedings in much the same manner as *In the Mouth of Madness* but, more importantly, Lovecraft's paranoia is epitomized once more in yet another homo sapien litmus, not by way of searing blood, à la *The Thing*, but a mandatory drug test in which students, instead of urinating in plastic cups, are obligated to take "scat," a intentionally poorly-veiled Hollywoodized cocaine-cum-crystal meth home-brewed concoction. What results is a subversive inversion of what teens are told never to do. However, instead of being sophomorphishly cheeky, the manner and circumstance in which Rodriguez establishes the risqué scenario is admirably subversive and is second only to the director's stunning philosophical consistency in respect to his iconoclastic agenda. Knowing that he cannot goad alternative perspectives while inside the group, Rodriguez steadfastly issues a premise in which groupthink is the enemy, thereby validating any and all socially counterintuitive measures, rules which any other standardized storyline would otherwise be forced to oblige.

Like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, the crux of Rodriguez's grudge lies in the constrictive, identity-stealing social duty that is conformity. However, such appears in the guise of civility. What better place to reestablish Siegel's idea than the socially hyperaware setting of high school? This is where our director pushes the envelope first and foremost as *The Faculty*'s threat is initially derived from the teachers of Herrington. Thus, from the beginning, Rodriguez gives us high school instructors, who undoubtedly champion free thought, in speech but not in action, which literally demand their students to be like them. Interestingly, during a time when alternative music is becoming the mainstream, we are then presented with a star football captain, Stan Rosado (Shawn Hatosy), who opts to quit athletics to focus upon academics. Of course, never one to miss the open door labeled irony, Rodriguez has Stan rejoin the "team" in more ways than one by feature's end, yet it is through the outsider that Rodriguez pauses, not to rib, but earnestly



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examine the theoretical validity of individuality.

"You are all individuals!" John Cleese claims to the masses in Terry Jones's *Life of Brian*, before one lone voice retorts, "I'm not," and so goes *The Faculty*, a film whereby being part of the fringe carries as many demands as being one of the proverbial in-crowd. As such, Stokely "Stokes" Mitchell (Clea DuVall) expends as much, if not more, effort attempting to remove herself from the status quo, to the point of labeling herself a lesbian though she's straight, in hopes of further distancing herself from her classmates.

Many critics complain that *The Faculty* is merely a postmodern rehash of the standard, rote horror film, replete with typecast characters. However, such critics seem to be missing Rodriguez's agenda in much the same manner they do with Carpenter's work where identity is relative or explicitly missing. In *The Faculty*, stereotypes in both directions become unavoidable, and the either/or logistic dilemma deliberately leaves no gray area in which character development can blossom. As such, the wry, less-than-subtle act of naming a scandal-mongering reporter "Proffitt" (Jordana Brewster) and the principal "Drake" (Bebe Neuwirth)—in reference to the Drake Equation, is anything but moot. Equally lambasted is Williamson's trademark postmodern awareness, which renders direct and indirect citations of Ridley Scott's *Alien* by way of Sigourney Weaver, *X-Files*, Jack Finney's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Robert Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters*, Ronald Emmerich's *Independence Day*, Barry Sonnenfeld's *Men in Black*, and Steven Spielberg's *E.T.* as well as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Yet, in an age when teens are aware, either consciously or intuitively, of the paradox of individuality, such self-referential attentiveness becomes a thematic compliment rather than a repetition.

Robert Rodriguez's *The Faculty*, aside from being a Who's Who of up-and-coming actors, is a refreshing jibe at society while being a little brother, rather than a blank-faced clone, to two godfather features of film.

Masterfully, the director unflinchingly navigates between camp and misapplied seriousness in order to create his social and aesthetic satire and, in so doing, fashions a picture which gives its audience more than one reason to second guess what your teachers told you. If nothing else, how can one not love a film which tells a haggard drama teacher, who is begging for funds, to "Use last year's set from 'Our Town'"?

-Egregious Gurnow

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