

The Boys from Brazil (1978)

The Boys from Brazil is a science fiction film based on the novel of the same name by Ira Levin about an underground neo-Nazi society in South America trying to clone Adolf Hitler, the dictator of Nazi Germany during World War II, to restore the Nazi movement. The film was directed by Franklin Schaffner and released in 1978 by 20th Century Fox in Los Angeles, California. The Boys from Brazil is a film that was one of the first films to depict cloning, and to discuss the ethical implications of genetic engineering, cloning, and eugenics.

The Boys from Brazil is based on the novel of the same name by Ira Levin, which was published by Random House in 1972. The Boys from Brazil is 125 minutes long, and the film stars actors Gregory Peck, Laurence Olivier, and Jeremy Black. In both the film and novel, the main characters are Ezra Lieberman, portrayed by actor Laurence Olivier, a Nazi hunter or someone trying to bring escaped World War II Nazis to trial, and Josef Mengele, portrayed by actor Gregory Peck, a World War II Nazi physician. Lieberman's character parallels the historical Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal. Wiesenthal was a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. After the war, Wiesenthal spent his life searching and prosecuting Nazi criminals and bringing awareness and education about the Holocaust. Mengele is based on the historical Josef Mengele, a Nazi during World War II. He worked as a physician in the Auschwitz concentration camp and conducted medical experimentation on Jewish prisoners, primarily focusing on twins. The historical Mengele was a highly sought-after Nazi criminal, but he went into hiding after the end of World War II to escape trial.

According to science communications scholar David Kirby, The Boys from Brazil was one of the first science fiction films to consult scientists for the scientific aspects of the film. Schaffner used Derek Bromhall, a developmental biologist at Oxford University in Oxford, England, as the science consultant for the film. Bromhall researched nuclear transplantation in rabbits. Nuclear transplantation, also called cloning, is the process in which the nucleus of one cell is relocated into a donor cell that has had its nucleus removed. Bromhall explained the process of cloning, and Schaffner used the explanation for the scene in which cloning was explained to Nazi hunter Ezra Lieberman. At the time of film's production, scientists debated cloning topics. Despite the lack of universal agreement in terms of how to define cloning, Schaffner used Bromhall's method and approach as the model for cloning to add scientific accuracy for the film.

The film's first scene is in Paraguay where a young Nazi hunter, Barry Kohler, discovers an organization of World War II Nazi war criminals. He learns that Josef Mengele, a war criminal and Nazi physician who worked in the Auschwitz concentration camp during the Second World War leads the organization. Kohler phones Ezra Lieberman, a Nazi hunter, to inform him about Mengele's location and the secret organization. Lieberman disregards the information, telling him that everyone knew Mengele was in Paraguay. The phone call ends, and in the next scene, Kohler learns of the next meeting and that Mengele would attend the meeting. He eavesdrops on and records the meeting using a hidden microphone. Kohler discovers that Mengele plans to kill 94 65-year-old men in different countries around the world. Kohler phones Lieberman again with this new piece of information. As Kohler begins to play the recording, he is interrupted and killed by the members of the underground Nazi organization. The recording is still playing and Lieberman hears Mengele's voice through the phone ordering the members to kill the 94 men all in Europe and North America.

After the death of Kohler, Lieberman changes decides to investigate recent deaths of 65-year-old men around the world. As he begins his investigation, he contacts a journalist, Sidney Beynon, to help Lieberman get in contact with incarcerated ex-Nazi war criminals. Lieberman then proceeds to interview the widows of the murdered 65-year-old men. Lieberman recognizes that all of the

widows he interviewed had very similar looking black-haired, blue-eyed sons all around the same age, all portrayed by actor Jeremy Black. Lieberman also discovers that the husbands were all the age of 65 and all had cold, domineering, and abusive personalities towards their sons, while the widows were all the age of 42 and were depicted as doting, caring, and loving mothers. Lieberman notes that the black-haired, blue-eyed sons are strikingly similar to Adolf Hitler, the dictator of Nazi Germany during World War II.

In the next scene, Lieberman is in Germany and meets with Professor Bruckner, an expert in cloning. The scene implies that Lieberman has suspicions about the similar black-haired, blue-eyed children of the widows he had interviewed, wondering if human cloning was possible. Bruckner describes the process of cloning to Lieberman, and Lieberman questions if the cloning process is possible in humans, to which Bruckner assents. Lieberman openly expresses his fears about his suspicions regarding the possibility of Hitler clones.

The next scene shows the journalist Beynon helping Lieberman set up an interview Frieda Maloney, a former Nazi guard currently serving a lifelong prison sentence. Lieberman discovers that Maloney had worked with an adoption agency prior to her incarceration. Through the interview, Lieberman learns that after World War II, Mengele had preserved a sample of Hitler's DNA. Using the sample of Hitler's DNA, Mengele fertilized surrogate mothers in a Brazilian clinic to produce clones of Hitler. The fertilization resulted in ninety-four clones of Hitler who were then adopted with families in different parts of the world. The scene implies that Lieberman also comes to understand the reason for the similarities in the temperaments of the murdered 65-year-old men and their widows. Mengele had reproduced Hitler through cloning, but to successfully recreate Nazi Germany at the start of World War II, the Hitler clones had to be placed in environments Hitler had when he was growing up, which included an abusive father and a doting mother.

Mengele's superiors, who provide Mengele with financial and authoritative support, grow uneasy about the operation as they learn that Lieberman is uncovering their intentions of trying to recreate Nazi Germany with a clone of Hitler. Worried that Lieberman would soon expose them, Mengele's superiors stop the operation, but Mengele carries out the operation on his own.

The film then changes location to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Mengele flees to Pennsylvania to meet with one of the Hitler clones, Bobby Wheelock. Mengele intends to kill Wheelock's father to carry out his plan. Simultaneously, Lieberman travels to the same location to warn Wheelock's family of Mengele's plan. Mengele arrives first at the Wheelock household and is confronted by angry dogs at the entrance that attack anyone who appears a threat to the Wheelock family. After Mengele introduces himself with false, good intentions, Wheelock's father placates the dogs and puts them in a closet. Mengele, now safe from the threat of the dogs, kills Wheelock's father and proceeds to wait for Lieberman. When Lieberman arrives, Mengele discloses his plan to return Hitler into the world, and the two get in a fight. Lieberman is injured and in a last-minute attempt to save his life, he releases the dogs from the closet, and they attack Mengele. During this time, Wheelock arrives home from school, and he intervenes, calling off the dogs.

In the next scene, Mengele, Lieberman, and one of Hitler's clones comes together for the first time in the film. Mengele, badly injured, explains that he admires Wheelock because Wheelock is a clone of Hitler. Wheelock is suspicious of Mengele's intentions due to the dogs' earlier behaviors, implying that they would not have attacked Mengele if he did not appear to be a threat. Lieberman warns Wheelock to call the police, adding that Mengele had just murdered Wheelock's father. Wheelock finds that Lieberman was telling the truth and orders the dogs to kill Mengele. The film depicts Wheelock unfazed and even enjoying the graphic scene, implying that he has similar traits to Hitler. Following Mengele's death, Lieberman takes a list from Mengele's dead body. The list contains the names and whereabouts of the other Hitler clones around the world.

Later in the film, as Lieberman is recovering from his wounds he meets David Bennett, an American Nazi-hunter, who encourages Lieberman to expose Mengele's plan to the world. Bennett wants the list made public so that the clones can be killed before growing up to become tyrants like Hitler. The film ends with Lieberman arguing with Bennett, after which Lieberman decides to burn the list, arguing that the clones are just children and do not deserve to be killed.

The Boys from Brazil was released in 1978, grossing nineteen million dollars in the United States.

Both film critics and the public praised the film, and the film was nominated for the Saturn Award for Best Science Fiction Film by the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Films. Actor Olivier was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actor, and actor Peck was nominated for the Golden Globe Award for Best Motion Picture Actor for their portrayals of Lieberman and Mengele, respectively. According to Craig Cormack, a science communications analyst, the film was noted for the use of accurate science in respects to cloning.

Sources

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