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Monsters: Earthly and Unearthly

The Incredible Shrinking Man
Universal
Directed by Jack Arnold
1957, 81 min.

Cast

Grant Williams
Randy Stuart
April Kent
Paul Langdon
Raymond Bailey
William Schallert
Diana Darrin
Frank Scannell
Helene Marshall
Billy Curtis

Credits

Producer	Albert Zugsmith
Director	Jack Arnold
Screenplay	Richard Matheson
Based on novel	"The Shrinking Man"
Written by	Richard Matheson
Photography	Ellis W. Carter
Special Effects	Clifford Stine
Optical Effects	Roswell A. Hoffman, Everett A. Broussard
Art Direction.	Alexander Golitzen, Robert Clatsworthy

Notes

The continual growth of the reputation of this disturbing little science fiction movie over the past 19 years is almost as incredible as its title. Though the film lacks real brilliance, it has few equals in its category for excellence and sophistication. It was made at the height of the science fiction cycle during the mid-fifties, and it effectively dealt with the two pre-occupations of the genre: the threat of knowledge and the loss of individuality. While the era in which it was created was fascinated with the possibility of nuclear catastrophe, what makes The Incredible Shrinking Man unique was that it reduced this fear to intimate terms, and substituted individual human drama for mindless spectacle and carnage.

This film is still the master work of director Jack Arnold. He made his reputation in the field of science fiction film by creating the most consistently interesting works in the genre. He then abandoned the area when the cycle ended in the late fifties, and to this day has never regained that status nor touch of genius, though his directoral credits appear often on television series. Beginning in 1953, his sci-fi films at Universal Studios were imaginative movies of a world of modern science gone awry, of monsters conjured up from the depths of hell, of humans who were puny, frightened, and confused, but who battled against and vanquished forces they could not understand in order to survive as individuals and as a species. Among the best of them were It Came From Outer Space, Creature From the Black Lagoon, Tarantula, Revenge of the Creature, The Monolith Monsters, and the little known but remarkable The Space Children. But Arnold's reputation firmly rests on The Incredible Shrinking Man.

The film introduced a new kind of fear -- not instant annihilation, but rather gradual and irreversible descent into nothingness. The title described an ordinary man (made even more so by the bland performance of Grant Williams) who by a combined series of accidents of science became a freak in his own home. His predicament leads from alienation to a battle for survival. Science, medicine, and knowledge are all powerless to save him, until he is eventually forced to exist on his own, a tiny, modern Robinson Crusoe or Gulliver in a world of familiar but threatening things. But from this dreadful experience comes a growth in self-awareness as he shrivels in size. The more he dwindles, the more he gains through a raised consciousness, an enterprising spirit, and physical courage.

Neatly divided into two parts, the film begins and continues in a real world that is bland and pale, but which then contains many images of beauty and great visual power in its exciting and meaningful second half. The art direction of Robert Clatsworthy in these sequences contains superb effects that make out-of-proportion sets highly believable. Visually striking are the scenes of the hero, Scott Carey, sprawled on a cellar grating like debris left behind, striking a flaming match-torch, gazing helplessly at the towering edifice of his own cellar steps. Best of all is the titanic and well-staged battle with his adversary for domination of the cellar-world, a thrilling encounter that ranks among the great moments in film. It is a pity that the same brilliant touches could not have been equally employed in the scenes involving the female circus midget during Scott's temporary arrested ailment. Casting a normal sized actress and surrounding the performers with oversized coffee cups and mailboxes only resulted in throwing away what could have been a memorable sequence. But the final effect and curtain speech is still hauntingly thoughtful, and successfully lifts the film's ending into the realm of philosophy, making it one of the most stirring closings in science fiction films.

Notes by Christopher J. Warren
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The American Cinema: A Survey 1896-1976

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