From its pre-credits image of a human figure shrinking away while a mushroom cloud ominously expands, “The Incredible Shrinking Man” pursues its premise with inexorable logic, touching on timely Cold War fears as well as deeper anxieties precipitated by dramatic postwar shifts in gender dynamics. Aided by a combination of excellent special effects, oversized sets, canny editing and camera angles, the film skillfully depicts the transformation of the world of protagonist Scott Carey (Grant Williams) from comfortably domestic to unfamiliar and threatening along with the dwindling of his body. The screenplay was written by Richard Matheson, whose later credits include the novels upon which the films “The Omega Man” (1971), “What Dreams May Come” (1998), “Stir of Echoes” (1999), and “I Am Legend” (2007), among others, were based. Matheson adapted his own novel, “The Shrinking Man” (1956), and although the film leaves out a number of the novel’s more explicit scenes of sexual tension, including encounters with a drunken pedophile and a babysitter, it is thick with images of impotence and emasculation, making it one of the most compelling films about the contemporary crisis of masculine identity.

An apparently healthy and virile American male, Carey is first seen vacationing on a boat off the California coast with his wife Louise (Randy Stuart). While she is below fetching drinks—he refers to her as “wench,” she calls him “captain”—Carey sits at the tiller, the man in charge, when he is exposed to a strange cloud, later determined to be radioactive and the cause of his subsequent shrinking. After his initial scepticism, Carey’s physician finally concurs that he is getting smaller and Carey is subjected to a battery of state-of-the-art medical tests that determine his condition was caused by exposure to the radioactive mist interacting with common pesticides—inevitably invoking the image of manicured suburban lawn, like that of the Careys’ own home—and failure of the American Dream.

As Carey shrinks, he is forced to give up his job, no longer a capable wage earner. When he is approximately three feet, or roughly half his original height, an antidote is found, but it only halts his shrinking temporarily. While in remission, he begins to accept his fate and Carey is subjected to a battery of state-of-the-art medical tests that determine his condition was caused by exposure to the radioactive mist interacting with common pesticides—inevitably invoking the image of manicured suburban lawn, like that of the Careys’ own home—and failure of the American Dream.

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By Barry Keith Grant

The Incredible Shrinking Man

Not in the book, this closing soliloquy was added to the script by director Jack Arnold, who was also responsible for a string of other noteworthy science fiction movies of the period, including “It Came from Outer Space” (1953); “The Creature from the Black Lagoon” (1954) and the first of two sequels, “Revenge of the Creature” (1955); and “Tarantula” (1955). With the end of the science fiction film boom, Arnold turned to television, directing many episodes of “Gilligan’s Island” (1964-66), “The Brady Bunch” (1970-74), and “The Love Boat” (1977-84), each show in its own way every bit as fantastical as his remarkable series of science fiction films.

But “The Incredible Shrinking Man,” winner of the first Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation in 1958, remains Arnold’s most accomplished and enduring science fiction film. It initiated a brief cycle of movies exploiting the visual possibilities of altered scale, including “The Amazing Colossal Man” (1957) and “Attack of the 50 Foot Woman” (1958), the latter of which also addresses similar gender issues as “The Incredible Shrinking Man.” The film also inspired a broadly comic feminist remake, “The Incredible Shrinking Woman” (1981), starring Lily Tomlin as a harried housewife who shrinks as a result of exposure to a combination of common household products. And Matheson himself wrote a sequel to “The Incredible Shrinking Man” entitled “Fantastic Little Girl,” in which the protagonist’s wife follows him into a microscopic world, which was published in the 2006 collection “Unrealized Dreams.”

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