

The Incredible Shrinking Man

By Barry Keith Grant

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 after befriending a female midget, Clarice (April Kent), whom he meets at a circus. But then he begins to shrink again, becoming so tiny that he must live in a dollhouse, his wife towering above him. When he opens the dollhouse's front door, a convincing matte shot shows the face of the seemingly colossal pet cat looming outside. Soon Carey is so small that his wife cannot hear his calls for help when she re-



A lobby card from the film. Courtesy Library of Congress Online Prints and Photographs Collection.

turns home from her errands and, seeing him gone, presumes that the cat ate him, although it has only chased him into the basement.

Alone in the basement, where more than half the film takes place ("the cellar floor stretched before me like a vast primeval planet," he says), Carey must fight for his survival, negotiating a variety of commonplace objects that are now giant dangerous obstacles or potential tools ("Use less for best results" reads a label on a giant coffee tin), like a common pin. In the thrilling climax, Carey battles a spider for morsel of cheese. The Freudian implications are unavoidable in Carey's containment in the dollhouse, his flight from the hungry housecat, and his fight with the hairy spider, but the film's informing castration anxiety is perhaps clearest in the scene when, after one of Carey's doctor's visits, his wedding ring slips off his finger.

After defeating the spider, Carey slips through the mesh of a window screen and, no longer shrinking in fear from his plight, finds himself at ease as he prepares to dwindle to subatomic size and merge with the universe. In a revelation, Carey comes to see that the infinitesimal and the infinite meet, "like the closing of a great circle." He is comforted by the thought that, as he puts it in voice-over narration, "To God there is no zero" as he slips through the basement window screen into the starry night, seeming to disincorporate in the grass. This ending was strikingly unusual, not only for its lack of conventional narrative closure but also because it evokes the Transcendental philosophy of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman ("If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles," writes Whitman in the conclusion of his revolutionary "Song of Myself") in its astonishing openness toward nature and the natural world, in stark contrast to the paranoia characteristic of the genre at the time.

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."

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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