

Amanda Hagood,
Mellon/ACS Postdoctoral Fellow, Hendrix College

Science Fiction in the Suburbs

This presentation explores one small corner of the “suburban turn” in U.S. environmental thought: the ways in which concepts of domesticity, consumerism, and private property began to claim a place beside older, more publicly-oriented environmentalist paradigms of resource conservation and wilderness preservation in the years after World War II. Though mid-century suburbanization was often understood as a utopian project – the creation of a safe haven against the crowded cultural “confusion” of the city – this paper shows how at least one science fiction films of the era, Jack Arnold’s *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957), actually linked suburban life with the deeply disturbing public health threat of pollution. Juxtaposing vulnerable human bodies with an oppressive sense of the suburban space, the film creates a powerful visual argument against the security and stability of suburban life; it also emphasizes suburbia’s connection to the military industrial complex that both enabled it to exist, and made it seem so very necessary.

The film opens as Robert Scott Carey (Grant Williams) and his wife, Louise (Randy Stuart), sunbathe on a boat, in the midst of what appears to be a romantic vacation. Isolated in an otherwise empty ocean, Scott and Louise become the iconic postwar couple, seemingly removed in their single-family “home” from all other family or social connections that might otherwise be in the picture. After Louise descends into the galley in search of a drink, Scott is left to face an unexpected danger that blows in suddenly: a large, mysterious cloud wafting rapidly from the horizon. Descending upon the sparsely clad man, the glittering dust forms a striking image of

both human vulnerability and human potential. Scott has become both the victim and the hero of a close encounter with nuclear fallout, and his death-dusted body will soon become the proving ground for the role that nuclear and other new technologies will take in his everyday life.

The film then flashes forward to “an ordinary day, six months later.” The strangeness of the cloud episode is almost completely forgotten, masked by the appearances of domestic regularity: a milkman strides briskly up the sidewalk, Louise appears at the door in dress and apron, and a pet cat appears for its daily share. But the fallout has left its mark: Scott soon discovers that his body is gradually but certainly shrinking. Several rounds of medical examinations, many of which feature radiation technologies made available by nuclear science, reveal that an abnormal chemical compound permeates Scott’s cells. Not a cancer, as Louise suggests, but “anti-cancer,” these anomalous cells overturn the growth process of Scott’s body, leading to “a diminution of all the organs proportionally.” Even more shocking, the doctors are able to pinpoint the trigger which spurred this remarkable change: not just his accidental exposure to the mysterious mist, but a far more prosaic sequence of events by which Scott, walking into a blind alley, crossed paths with a truck that was spraying his neighborhood trees with insecticide. The mutative power of the fallout, combined with the high toxicity of the pesticides, brought about “a deadly chemical reversal of the growth process,” which remains, for the time being, incurable.

From this point onward, the Carey’s home life begins to deteriorate: unable to work, Scott sells his story to the American Press Syndicate and finds the lawn and the sidewalks around his house suddenly invaded with reporters, policemen, and a selection of gawkers. The relations of visibility and privacy that govern the suburban neighborhood have effectively reversed, changing the Carey’s house from a comfortable retreat to a fishbowl open to the world’s view.

At one point, a toddler-sized Scott, shot in a forced perspective which makes Louise appear tall enough to fill the entire screen, angrily demands that she “use [her] influence” to obtain an unlisted telephone number. Their domestic bliss becomes “a caricature,” and without the proper, socially-determined size and shape to define him, Scott’s very identity falls into crisis. The film’s key turning point comes when a mouse-sized Scott, now living in a doll house, is chased by his own pet cat into the cellar, symbolically enacting his own eviction from the living spaces of the domestic realm.

As Scott takes up residence in the cellar, that uncanny foundation upon which the living areas of the home rest, he is surrounded by a bewildering universe of junk: odds and ends, unused tools and the appliances that keep the house running comfortably from their unseen posts. The perspective shots which juxtapose his tiny figure with the great, shadowy space signal the basement as hostile territory for Scott: the familiar hallmarks of a suburban cellar transform into enormous terrors as he is flooded out by a leaky hot water heater, puzzled by the challenge of climbing shelves to secure a few cake crumbs, and relentlessly hunted by a spider, a common resident in the darker recesses of human habitations. The film combines oversized set pieces – such as the enormous Fire Chief matchbox in which Scott sleeps – with what was then innovative blue screen technology to produce images which defamiliarize common household objects. The viewer becomes suddenly aware of the cluttered quality of the basement, and discovers, alongside Scott, that these objects are as much *obstacles* as aids to living.

Read one way, these juxtapositions of person and thing suggest the waning importance of individuals in a rapidly commercializing society, where identity is drawn in terms of one’s relationship to consumer goods. But more interesting is the *totalizing effect* of these endless vistas of objects and un-lived-in spaces, this artificially bounded world from which Scott is now

forced to make his living. The sense of containment conjured by the *mise en scène* – containment being an idea which was already so powerful in the cultural imagination of the Cold War Era – also implies a mirroring sense of *environment*, of being surrounded and even closed in upon. Within the walls, floor, and ceiling of Scott’s suburban basement, a sinister ecosystem of domestic goods begins to function: one that is all-encompassing, one that responds to his wish to “dominate my world” with equal violence, and one that makes Scott seem “small” and insignificant in comparison. Indeed, watching Scott so frequently dwarfed by the enormous, enveloping objects around him the viewer cannot help but recall the shocking initial image of Scott being engulfed by the radioactive cloud.

In its closing, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* goes so far as to link its suburban locale to the next great frontier: outer space. As his shrinking brings him to, and even past, the point of invisibility, the image of Scott standing next to the screened window that had kept him trapped in the cellar so many months fades into a still shot of distant galaxies and nebulae. Scott intones rapturously that even while his body “dwindles” and “melts” into a final “acceptance,” he does not cease to exist, but begins existence in another form. Once paralyzed by the horror of atomic radiation’s invasion into his body and home, Scott now appears to assume the privileged worldview of a “man of the future,” a perspective that places the smallness of the atom and the vastness of space on the same spectrum of technological malleability. In this rather surprising turn, Scott manages to transform his own grotesque fate from a cautionary tale about atomic experimentation into an opening salvo on the dawn of a new humanity. Not with a bang, but with a feeble chirp, Scott Carey cries back from his an unknown dimension, “I still exist!”

In closing, I want to argue that films like *The Incredible Shrinking Man* helped to provide the vocabulary through which new crises, including the postwar environmental dilemmas which

began to evince themselves in the 1950s, would be understood and discussed. The film examines the role of the subject caught in the contradictions between the prosperous, comfortable aspirations of postwar domesticity and the psychological realities of a highly tense society constantly mobilized for war. The shrinking Scott becomes, for his era, that odd creature that Dana Haraway famously named the “cyborg”: “a hybrid machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.” (149) Shot through with radioactive rays and contaminated with toxic pesticides, Scott’s body is as much the product of technology as of nature, and he therefore blurs any distinctions we might wish to make between the two categories. But even more important, Scott, like Haraway’s cyborg is most significant in the way he foregrounds a condition he shared with his viewers: his complicity, his embeddedness, within the social order created by the United States’ technological ascendancy. In films like *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, the suburban space finds a sharp critical edge, showing how Americans both sheltered in, and become trapped by, the new way of life the second half of the twentieth century brought.

Works Cited

The Incredible Shrinking Man. Dir. Jack Arnold. Universal Studios. 1992. VHS.