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Images of Wonder:
The Look of Science Fiction

Although a great deal has been written about the images in science fiction (SF) films, most often that writing has been more descriptive than analytic. There has been only minor consideration of the nature of SF images and their function in the creation of a film genre which—in photographic content—is unlike any other. Instead, discussions of the visual surface of the films have usually seemed to degenerate into a delightful but critically unproductive game film enthusiasts play: "Swap that Shot", or "The Robot You Love to Remember." Although there is absolutely no reason to feel guilty about swapping nostalgically remembered images like baseball trading cards, it does seem time to go beyond both gamesmanship and nostalgia toward a discovery of how SF images—content and presentation—function to make SF film uniquely itself. What, if anything, do all the films have in common in their visual surface?
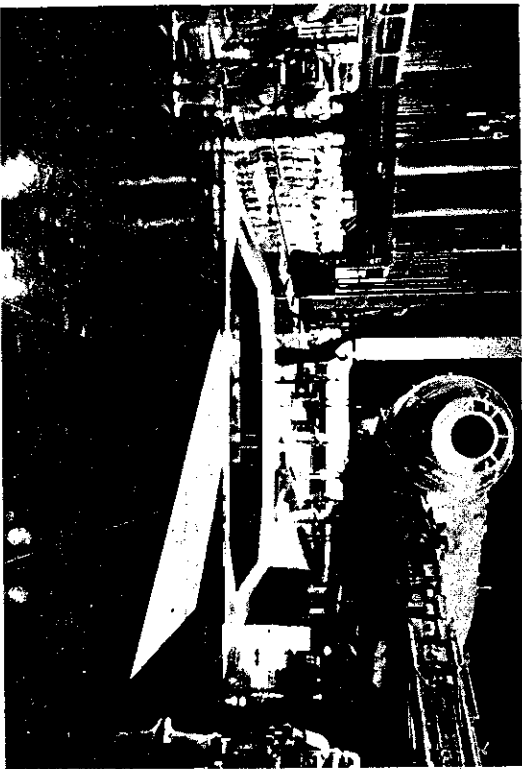
Iconography

One approach to the images in genre films (most often the Western and Gangster film) has been iconographic. Jim Kitses, one of the

critics to discuss the relationship of iconography to the genre film in his *Horizons West*, explains the basis of the approach: "As a result of mass production, the accretions of time, and the dialectics of history and arche-type, characters, situations and actions can have an emblematic power."[1] And Colin McArthur, in *Underworld U.S.A.*, emphasizes the "continuity over several decades of patterns of recurrent objects and figures in dynamic relationship" which "might be called the iconography of the genre."[2] McArthur goes on to say: "The recurrent patterns of imagery can be usefully divided into three categories: those surrounding the physical presence, attributes and dress of the actors and the characters they play; those emanating from the milieux within which the characters operate; and those connected with the technology at the characters' disposal."[3]

In certain groupings of films, then, the visual units which manifest—and often dictate—character, situation, and action have been examined as those elements which not only link the films together, but which also carry mean-ing and emotional nuance beyond their physical particularity in any one film. Because these elements of visual content appear again and again in film after film, they have become visual conventions or icons, pictorial codes which are a graphic shorthand understood by both filmmaker and audience.[4] The Western topography (whether photographed in the United States or Spain) is not just any place; beyond the specificity of badlands, mountains, rangeland, desert, its appearance evokes associations in the viewer which are, perhaps, more metaphysically than historically based. The same could be said of the city of the Gangster film; buildings and alleys, rooftops and fire escapes surround themselves with clusters of meaning and yet-unplayed actions, with emotional reverberations which have little con-nection with the same physical objects represented, for example, in an urban comedy like Preston Sturges' *Christmas in July* (1940), or an urban musical like Robert Wise's *West Side Story* (1961). Costumes and tools also become objects of totemic significance in certain film genres; the gun of the Western is different in significance as well as in kind from the gun of the Gangster film.

This recognition of iconography is, perhaps, what Michael Butor was trying to indicate when, attempting to define science fiction, he felt it was sufficient to say: "You know, those stories that are always mentioning interplanetary rockets."[5] His statement, however, brings us to a crucial issue regarding any iconographic consideration of the SF film. Butor, him-self, acknowledges that rocketships are not—in themselves—necessary to science fiction.[6] And one could create a list of such SF "objects" as the spaceship which do indeed *evoke* the genre, but which are—specifically and physically—not *essential* to it: the New Planet, the Robot, the Laboratory,

Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977). SF iconography: those stories that are always mentioning interplanetary rockets. While such objects evoke the genre, they are not essential to it. (20th Century Fox)

Radioactive Isotopes, and Atomic Devices. On the other hand, it is extremely difficult to think of a Western which does not take place in a visually represented "West" with guns and horses, or to recall a Gangster film which does not show a nightclub or which has no guns and no automobiles. These settings and objects seem physically essential to these genres and their iconographic significance seems readily approachable and comprehensible because they appear and send the same messages to us in almost every film.

It is also highly significant that both these genres are visually circumscribed by an awareness of history, the Western even more so than the Gangster film. This linkage of situation and character, objects, settings, and costumes to a specific *past* creates visual boundaries to what can be photographed and in what context. This historical awareness, which leads at least to an imaginative if not actual authenticity, demands repetition and creates consistency throughout these genres. This is not true, however, of the SF film, a genre which is unfixed in its dependence on actual time and/or place. There is, then, a very obvious reason for the fact that most iconographic analysis has focused on the Western and the Gangster film. Simply, these genres play out their narrative in a specific, visually identifiable and *consistent* context, and the objects of these films accrue their meaning not only from repetitious use, but also because they function in a much more

Silent Running (Douglas Trumbull, 1971). There is no consistent cluster of meanings provoked by the image of a spaceship. (Universal)

circumscribed and limited way than do objects in other genres. This limitation of meaning should in no way be considered a cinematic, aesthetic, or thematic liability—but it should point to why iconographic analysis serves a less potent critical function when it is used as a method to seek meaning in settings and objects in other film genres less affixed to history.

Consider, for example, the railroad—a frequent, although not mandatory, icon in the Western. The meanings which are suggested by its appearance on the screen are both complex and richly paradoxical, yet they are also circumscribed in scope from movie to movie. The railroad is not merely its physical manifestation; it *is* progress and civilization. It threatens the openness and freedom of the West and individual enterprise, but it also promises the advantages of civilized life and brings the genting influence of the Eastern heroine who plays the piano and uses an English saddle if she rides horses at all. The ambiguity and paradox contained in the Western's images of the Iron Horse are as rich as our mixed feelings about civilization and progress, but they are also limited to those feelings and those feelings only. The railroad is not interchangeable with other means of transportation in the Western; its meanings are not those which surround the images of a

stagecoach, horse, or covered wagon. From its first silent chugging to its clangorous present, the railroad in the history of the Western film has not altered in its physical particularity or its specific significance; it is, indeed, an icon.

Now let us examine one of the most potential icons of SF cinema: the spaceship. Any inspection of the genre leads one inevitably to the conclusion that there is no *consistent* cluster of meanings provoked by the image of a spaceship. The visual treatments of the ship vary from film to film— and sometimes even vary within a single film. Beyond the fact that seeing a spaceship on the screen signals the viewer that he is watching a film which does not take place in the present (and even that signal is weakening since space flight is now a reality), there is no constant meaning generated by that image; because there is no consistent meaning, there is little accumulation of "enblematic power" carried by the object from movie to movie.

There are those films, for example, which treat the spaceship lovingly, positively, optimistically. There is no doubt as to the "goodness" of a technology which can produce such a magnificent toy (although this goodness does not necessarily extend to the men who created the technology nor to the men who employ it). The ship itself is "good." It is aesthetically beautiful. It is fun to play with. It promises positive adventure, an ecstatic release

When Worlds Collide (Rudolph Maté, 1951). The film presents us with a positive image of the spaceship, an "interplanetary Noah's Ark." (Paramount)

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from the gravitational demands of Earth, and it can remove us from ourselves and the complexity of life on our planet, taking us to new Edens and regeneration. In *Destination Moon* (Irving Pichel, 1950), the silvery sleekness of Ernest Fegté's single-stage spaceship almost palpably glows against the velvet black and star-bejewelled beauty of a mysterious but nonhostile space; it is breathtakingly beautiful, awe inspiring, and yet warmly comforting like the night light in a child's bedroom. In the interior of the ship the crew delights in its weightlessness, playing games with gravity like children released in a schoolyard for recess. *When Worlds Collide* (Rudolph Maté, 1951), although its plot and themes evoke what John Baxter sees as "a Thirties vision of Armageddon,"[7] presents us with the positive image of a spaceship as an "interplanetary Noah's Ark,"[8] destined to carry a group of potential colonists from a doomed Earth to a new world. The spaceship— plumper and looking more fecund than its predecessor in *Destination Moon* —is visually divorced from the chaos and squabbling on Earth. Completed, it sits horizontally on its launching pad on a mountainside high above the confusion and it "glows like gold, while the sky is in perpetual sunset."[9] It visually promises, in contrast to the orange and dying hues of Earth, a golden dawn. Among other films which visually celebrate the spaceship and
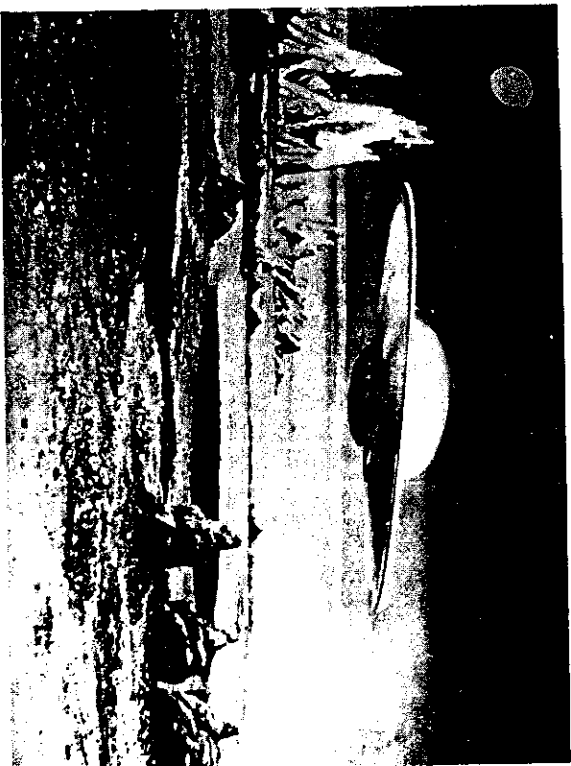

Forbidden Planet (Fred Wilcox, 1956). Another celebratory image of the spaceship is this flying saucer operated by "quanto-gravitetic hyperdrive" and postonic transfiguration." (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer)

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dwell on its surfaces with a caressive photographic wonder which precludes any ambiguous interpretation of its essential worth are *Conquest of Space* (Byron Haskin, 1955), with its lavish treatment of takeoffs, maneuverings, and landings, and *Forbidden Planet* (Fred Wilcox, 1956), whose "palatial flying saucer"[10] operates "via quanto-gravitetic hyperdrive and postonic transfiguration."[11]

There is, however, a demonic side to the spaceship. In many films it is a trap from which there is little hope of escape. Its sleekness is visually cold and menacing, its surfaces hostile to human warmth. It functions mechanically and perfectly, ignorant of its creators and operators—or it prefers to rid itself of its unsleek and emotionally tainted human occupants. Instead of glowing like a night light, it coldly glitters like the blade of a stiletto. Instead of humming, it ticks. It evokes associations not of release, but of confinement. The womb-like and protective warmth of a positive visual treatment is nowhere apparent; rather, the ship is seen negatively, viewed with antitechnological suspicion, the images of it suggesting a tomb-like iciness, a coffin-like confinement. Its corridors and holds echo the sounds of human isolation or provide a haven for alien and lethal dusts and slimes; in unseen corners the subversion of human life begins.

In *20 Million Miles to Earth* (Nathan Juran, 1957), a spaceship return-ing to Earth from Venus crashes into the sea, carrying aboard the gelatinous embryo of an alien monster who subsequently hatches and proceeds, after growing, to terrorize Rome. The ship of *Mutiny in Outer Space* (Hugo Grimaldi, 1964), harbors a deadly fungus and transports it to a space station from whence it threatens to infect the Earth. These rockets and countless others harbor, support, and transport alien "things" which ulti-mately threaten not only Earth, but life itself as we know it. Even more menacing is the ship "Discovery" which is to take astronauts Bowman and Poole to Jupiter in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968). Al-though the film does not in any way deny the aesthetics of technology, it gives us in "Discovery" a mechanism which barely tolerates and finally rejects human existence. Despite the vastness of the ship, the visual treat-ment impresses upon us a sense of claustrophobic and stifling confinement, cold, and death. Most of the crew are temporarily frozen in cryogenic beds which resemble the sarcophagi of "Egyptian mummies."[12] Their movement from life to death because of a computer malfunction is discernable only through the impersonal and yet somehow malevolent red lights and com-puter print which let us know that their life support systems are no longer operative, and by the needles on the screens above their glass coffins which "run amok on the graphs and then record the straight lines of extinction."[13] Vast as it is, the ship allows no room for privacy; Bowman and Poole at-
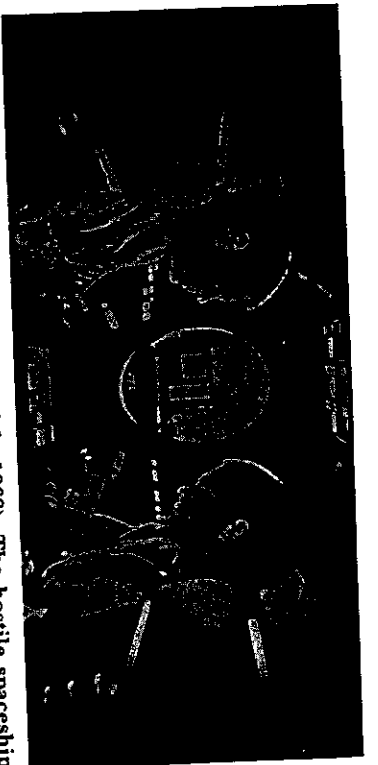

2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, 1968). The hostile spaceship: Discovery I. Astronauts Bowman and Poole attempt to hide from main computer HAL's omnipresent surveillance. The ship and its computer finally reject biological life. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer)

tempt to hide from the main computer HAL's omnipresent eyes and ears and unctious voice so they can discuss a possible solution to their predica-ment, but HAL can read lips and we are given a subjective camera shot to prove it. The astronauts are forced into their bulky and oppressive space-suits by the ship and its computer's increasing rejection of biological exist-ence; HAL's paranoia is the ship's madness as well. This sense of entrap-ment and confinement is echoed in a more "realistically" plotted film, *Marooned* (John Sturges, 1969), which "was released during the week the world waited for Apollo 13."[14] Three astronauts are confined in a mal-functioning space capsule; almost all the visuals are in close-up, showing the men cramped in their potential coffin orbiting the moon. The capsule is dubbed "Ironman One," a name perhaps suggestive of the medieval torture chamber, called the "Iron Maiden," in which the victim was most securely confined. And, in *Silent Running* (Douglas Trumbull, 1972), the space freighter "Valley Forge" literally becomes a coffin for its crew, murdered by Freeman Lowell (the ecologically minded protagonist) to pro-tect his specimens of plant life from destruction. In this film, the visuals emphasize the vastness of solitary confinement, the deadness of a her-metically sealed existence which is silent and unyielding in its evocation of eternal loneliness.
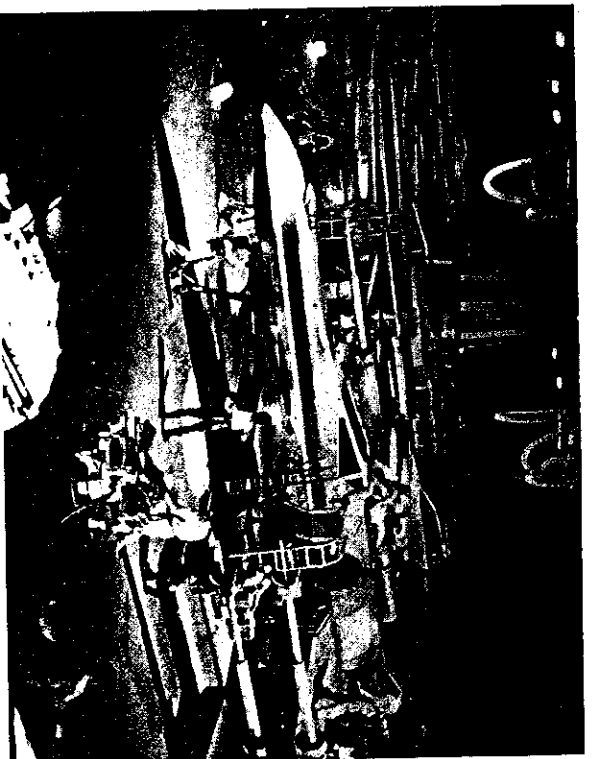
The spaceship need not, however, be treated either positively or nega-tively. In numerous SF films, it is seen and used neutrally; its wonders are deemphasized visually, made to seem commonplace, accepted not only by the characters but by the camera as well—matter-of-factly. The ship is merely a means to get from here to there—and has about as little visual impact and iconic power as a Greyhound bus. The dials and lights and

Marooned (John Sturges, 1969). The hostile spaceship: Ironman One. Three astronauts are confined in a malfunctioning space capsule. (Columbia)
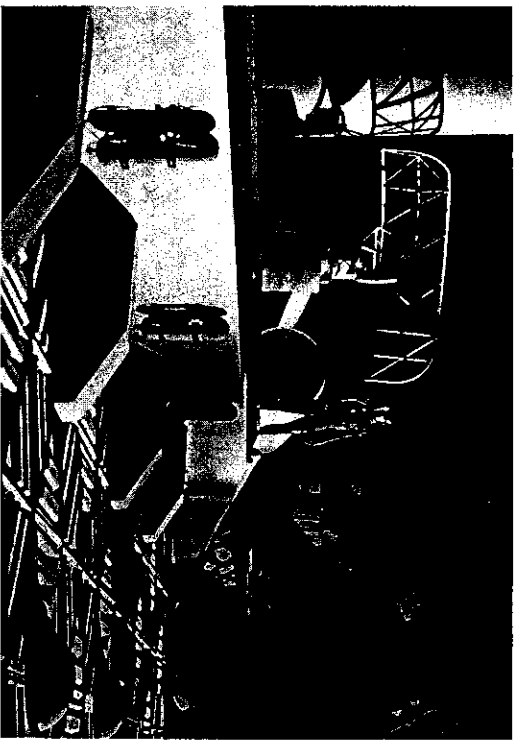
Silent Running (Douglas Trumbull, 1972). The hostile spaceship: Valley Forge. The visuals emphasize the vastness of solitary confinement; the ship literally becomes a coffin for its crew. (Universal)


Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977). The spaceship need not be treated either positively or negatively. In much SF film, it is seen and used neutrally. (20th Century Fox)

switches are neither warmly supportive nor coldly sinister. They exist—like an automobile dashboard—as something familiar, conquered, and forgotten. The complex workings of the ship pose no problems to the garage-mechanic confidence aboard. In *Marooned*, when the capsule malfunctions, one astronaut helplessly and impotently refers to the good old days in contrast to a present whose technology no longer admits salvation through tinkering. "We used to fix the planes we flew with paperclips," he says, frustration apparent on his face. In those films which treat the spaceship like a Ford, repairs on malfunctions can be affected with the equivalents of paperclips and hairpins—or the problem is so "understood" by the crew in their mechanic-like overalls that there is no mystery whatsoever connected to the malfunction. Films like *Rocketship X-M* (Kurt Neumann, 1950), *The Angry Red Planet* (Ib Melchior, 1959), and *Queen of Blood* (Curtis Harrington, 1965), treat the spaceship as a mechanical convenience which, devoid of wonder, will carry the crew to visually exciting adventures having little to do with a technology already accepted and dismissed. To be nostalgic for a moment, but also to the point, I fondly remember a scene aboard the spaceship in *The Angry Red Planet* in which the attitude toward

Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977). The ship is merely a means to get from here to there. The controls exist like an automobile dashboard—something familiar, conquered, and forgotten. (20th Century Fox)
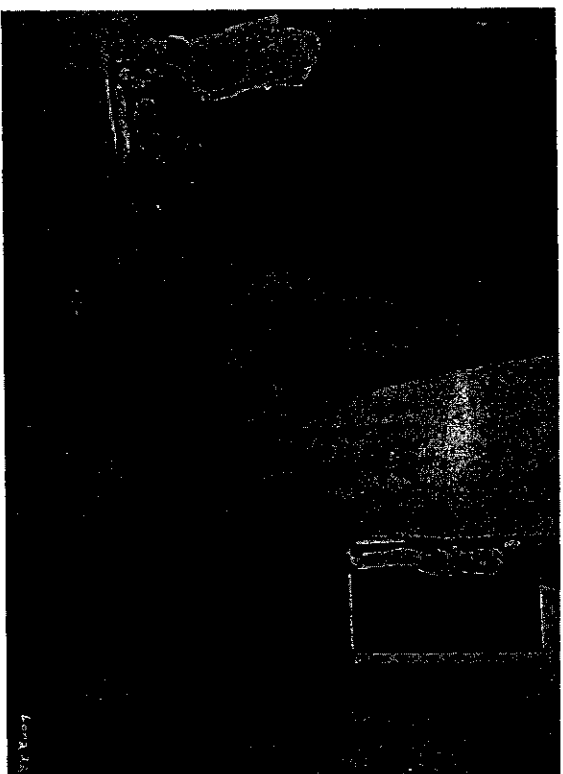
The Angry Red Planet (Ib Melchior, 1959). The spaceship is treated as a mechanical convenience to carry the crew to exciting adventures having little to do with a technology already accepted and ignored. (American International)
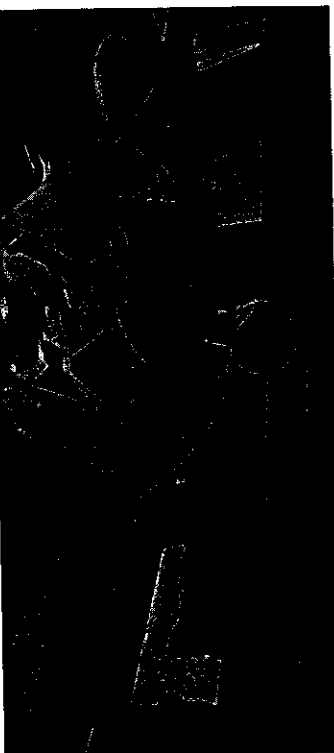

2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, 1968). Space conquered and domesticated, the spaceship commercialized. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer)

the voyage to Mars is visually encapsulated: one sees the hero shaving with an electric razor and the heroine putting perfume behind her ears while a tape bank records a mundane log entry. This domestication of the spaceship leads one to recall the recent terminology used by actual astronauts on the various moon flights and aboard Sky Lab, their references to "housekeeping." Perhaps no film to date, however, has visually evoked the reduction of space flight to "the ultimate in humdrum"[15] as has 2001: A Space Odyssey in the section in which space scientist Floyd flies Pan American to an orbiting spaceport and from there to the moon. As Joseph Morgenstern aptly comments: "We see that space has been conquered. We also see it has been commercialized and . . . domesticated. Weightless stewardesses wear weightless smiles, passengers diddle with glorified Automat meals, watch karate on in-flight TV and never once glance out into the void to catch a beam of virgin light from Betelgeuse or Aldebaran."[16]

The spaceship of the SF film, then, is in no way comparable to the railroad of the Western in the latter's ability to communicate by its standard physical presence a constant and specific cluster of meanings throughout an entire genre. Unlike the railroad, in so far as the spaceship is a means of getting from here to there, it is, at times, functionally interchangeable with other modes of transportation like the time machine. In films such as The Time Machine (George Pal, 1960), and The Time Travelers (Ib Melchior, 1964), there are definite mechanisms which are at least physically differentiated from the spaceship, but in World Without End (Edward Bernds, 1956), and Planet of the Apes (Franklin Schaffner, 1968), the spaceship is the time machine. Unlike the railroad, not only can the spaceship's meanings and functions change from film to film and from decade to decade, but its very shape and color are plastic and inconstant—ergo, the sleek and

Silent Running (Douglas Trumbull, 1972). The spaceship as plastic and malleable: the "Valley Forge," a combination of dark awkward bulk and delicate latticework. (Universal)
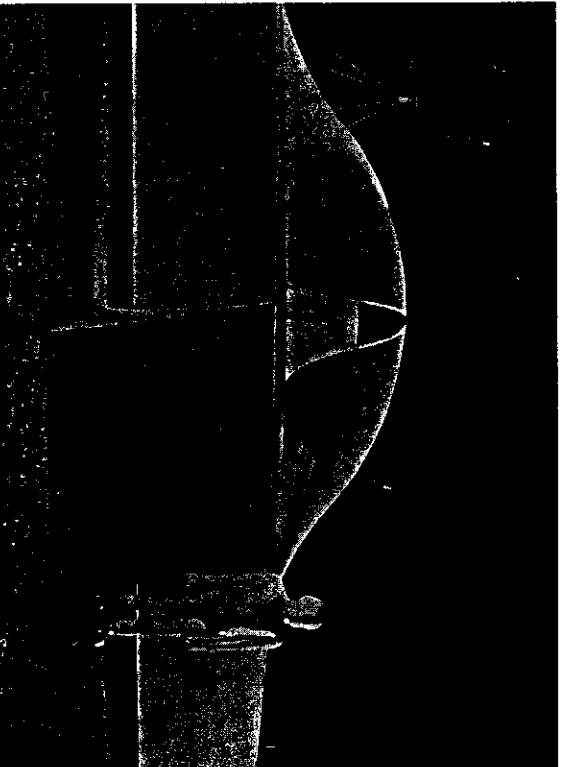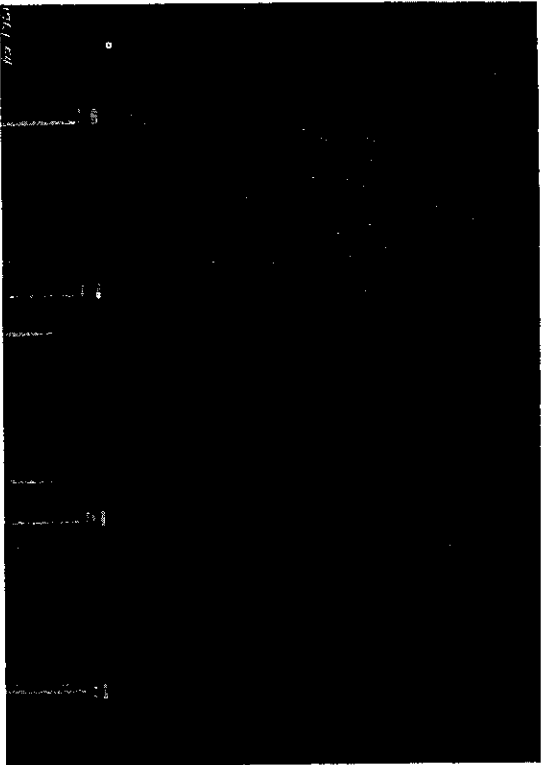

The Day the Earth Stood Still (Robert Wise, 1951). A thing of beauty, the alien flying saucer's ascetic design evokes the Platonic virtues of clarity, sanity, and reason. (20th Century Fox)

silver body of the ship in *Destination Moon*, the circular perfection of the flying saucer in *Forbidden Planet*, the bright yellow of the miniaturized submarine in *Fantastic Voyage* (Richard Fleischer, 1966), and the combination of dark awkward bulk with the latticed delicacy of the plant domes on the "Valley Forge" of *Silent Running*.[17] In addition, one can draw no conclusions from the films as to a tendency to visualize positively those ships which belong to us (Earthlings) and to visualize negatively those ships which belong to "them" (aliens). Treated as a thing of beauty, the alien Klaatu's 350-foot flying saucer in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951), is so pure in line, so ascetically designed by Lyle Wheeler and Addison Hehr, that it concretizes the Platonic virtues of clarity, sanity, reason—virtues sadly lacking in the Washington, D.C., *mise en scene* in which the saucer comes to rest.[18] On the other hand, the Martians' individual war ships in *War of the Worlds* (Byron Haskin, 1953), could hardly be more sinister (and eerily beautiful) in their realization; their shape suggests a cobra or the ocean's deadly manta ray, their silent movement over city and countryside metaphorically turns Earth's atmosphere turgid, their inexorable progress is punctuated only by the hissing of their incinerating rays.[19] The morally ambiguous and finally reprehensible Metalunans of

War of the Worlds (Byron Haskin, 1953). The Martians' individual war ships are both sinister and beautiful. (Paramount)

This Island Earth (Joseph Newman, 1955). The alien spaceship as visual marvel: a series of translucent tubes that transform their occupants' molecular structure to accommodate space travel. (Universal)
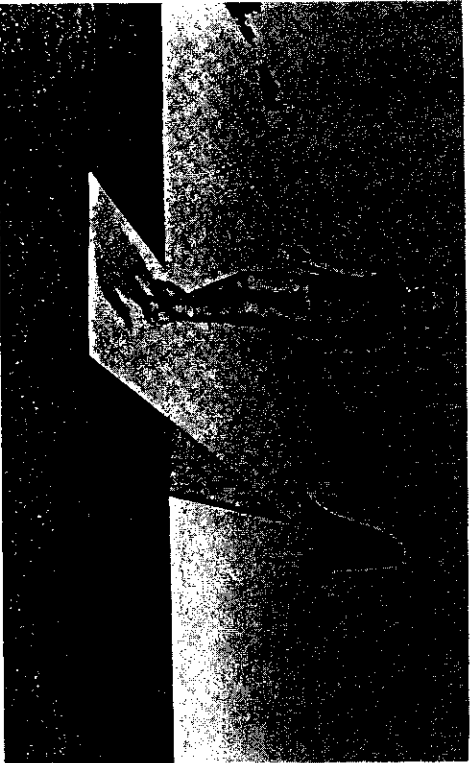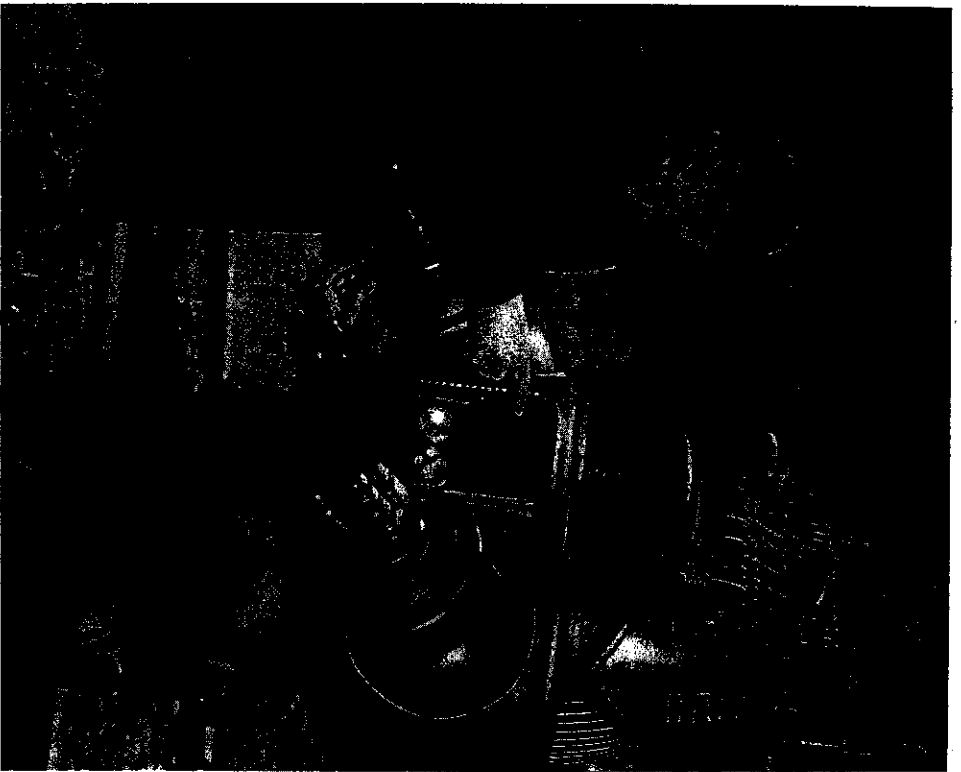
The Day the Earth Stood Still (Robert Wise, 1951). Gort, the huge intergalactic policeman, is a perverse visualization of the medieval knight in shining armor. (20th Century Fox)

This Island Earth (Joseph Newman, 1955), kidnap two Earth scientists and transport them to another world aboard a spaceship which is pointedly emphasized as a marvel of design, containing as it does such visual delights as a main control center composed of a brightly lit and revolving replica of the atom, and a series of translucent tubes which transform their occupants' molecular structure before our eyes.

Even more obvious in their capacity to change shape and color and evocative power than spaceships are SF robots, all too frequently considered *en masse*, lumped together superficially and erroneously for critical convenience as emblematic of that vague term "SF technology." Yet, again, after seeing robots in a wide range of films, the viewer must be drawn inevitably to a recognition of their essentially expressive singularity. Gort, the huge intergalactic "policeman" of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, is definitely mysterious and menacing. Shot much of the time from a low angle, he is faceless; the otherwise smooth and metallic impenetrability of his blank visage is broken only by a visor which slowly opens to reveal a pulsing light or to emit incinerating rays after which it silently closes. His metallic surface, that visor, is a perverse visualization of the medieval knight in shining armor, and the images of Gort are far removed from those of the lumbering

Tobor the Great (Lee Sholem, 1954). Tobor, the "answer to the problem of human space flight," is treated with the reverence one usually reserves for a can opener. (Republic)

but pleasant clumsiness of *Tobor the Great* (Lee Sholem, 1954), devised as the "answer to the problem of human space flight."[20] Tobor is treated with the reverence one usually reserves for a can opener, and in one highly comic scene, the robot—operated by a scientist's young grandson—walks stiff-leggedly about the house crashing into furniture and through doors in what amounts to a parody of Frankenstein's Monster. Tobor becomes a

Forbidden Planet (Fred Wilcox, 1956) Robby, the Robot, the most famous of the fifties' SF film robots. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer)

mindless hero because of his inexplicable emotional attachment to the little boy, explained away in the film as "a new synthetic instinct, race-preservational concern for the young."

Perhaps the most celebrated robot of all SF film, Robby of *Forbidden Planet*, bears no resemblance whatsoever to either Gort or Tobor. He was "one of the most elaborate robots ever built for a film production. More than two months of trial and error labour were needed to install the 2,600 feet of electrical wiring that operated all his flashing lights, spinning antennae and the complicated gadgets that can be seen moving inside his transparent dome-shaped head."[21] Visually, Robby looks like the offspring of some mad mating between the Michelin tire man and a juke box. He is "a phenomenal mechanical man who can do more things in his small body than a roomful of business machines. He can make dresses, brew bourbon whiskey, perform feats of Herculean strength and speak 187 languages . . . through a neon-lighted grille. What's more, he has the cultivated manners of a gentleman's gentleman."[22] Although essentially a servant and programmed according to Isaac Asimov's famous Robotic Laws of SF literature (whose prime directive is that robots shall not harm human beings), Robby has a distinct personality. He is comically humorless and proud. ("This is my morning's batch of Isotope 217. The whole thing hardly comes to ten tons," he says, carrying the "whole thing" around.) He is alternately petulant and helpful; "when Francis [Anne Francis, who plays the role of Alta in the film] asks him for star sapphires, he croaks, 'Star sapphires take a week to crystallize. Will diamonds or emeralds do?' 'So long as they're big ones,' Francis says. 'Five, ten, fifteen carats are on hand,' Robby replies smugly."[23] Robby's personality—although treated positively—prefigures to a degree the more sinister HAL of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the computer (an immobile robot) who pushes Robby's comic *hubris* over the edge of reason. "It is when HAL cannot admit he has made a mistake that he begins to suffer a paranoid breakdown, exhibiting overanxiety about his own infallible reputation and then trying to cover up his error by a murderous attack on the human witnesses."[24] Ultimately, despite their similarity of manner, Robby and HAL are decades apart in both visualization and meaning. Even if HAL were physically realized as more than "a bug-eyed lens, a few slabs of glass,"[25] it is hard to imagine him becoming the darling of the toy industry as Robby was to become after the release of *Forbidden Planet*. Robby's cute rotundity and comic primness, however, did not influence the subsequent screen images of robots. He was revived the following year in *The Invisible Boy* (Nicholas Nayfack, 1957), as "the playmate of his inventor's ten-year-old son"[26] and then he disappeared.

Through the fifties and sixties, mobile robots continued their singular ways, sometimes visualized negatively, sometimes positively. And they also occasionally functioned interchangeably with other SF manifestations. In

The Invisible Boy (Nicholas Nayfack, 1957). Robby's second and last movie appearance. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer)

Kronos (Kurt Neumann, 1957), the robot is not an instrument of an alien race as was Gort in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*; brought to Earth by a fireball, Kronos is the alien, a "strange machine, half creature, half construction."²⁷ The huge electronic robot of *The Colossus of New York* (Eugene Lourié, 1958), is a monster also, but his technologically devised exterior is motivated by impulses found in the most traditional horror films. The robot's brain is not a complex gadget or an incomprehensible alien mind; it is the transplanted human brain of a scientist's son and it turns against its father, its creator, as Frankenstein's monster had done years before.

Perhaps the most innovative and intellectually complex treatment of robots was in the low budget *Creation of the Humanoids* (Wesley Barry, 1962), a film which considers the robot both positively and negatively. Here is posited and visualized a "history," of robotics which leads to the creation of humanoids. The rationale for making the machines look and act human is that "Humans found it psychologically unbearable to work side by side with machines." Finally, the dividing line between robot and human is totally extinguished. Interpreting Asimov's Robotic Laws literally, the robots have been transferring and duplicating sick humans and accident victims into perfect mechanical bodies; as one robot says, "Humanity doesn't always
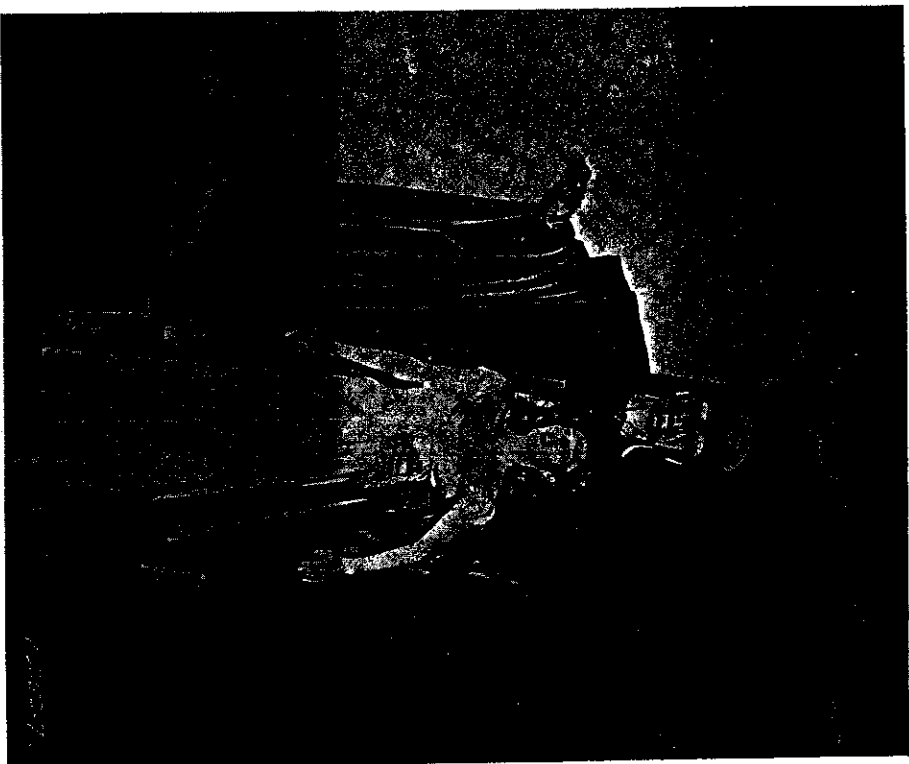
The Colossus of New York (Eugene Lourié, 1958). Publicity still. This electronic robot was motivated by impulses found in traditional horror films. (Paramount)

know what is in its best interest." The film's protagonist, antirobot and member of the Order of Flesh and Blood, turns out to be a humanoid himself and —along with the heroine—is finally raised to the humanoid level R100 by undergoing an operation which will enable him to "humanly" contribute to the reproductive process, a function which the robots see as crude but which "fulfills a psychological need." The film ends with a close-up of a pleasant-looking "man"—our narrator—who smiles directly at the viewer and says,

"Of course the operation was a success or you wouldn't be here."

The mixed treatment of robots is still apparent in the seventies, in the new group of SF films which followed the commercial success of 2001. The mechanical "drones" of *Silent Running* are affectionately named Huey, Louey, and Dewey, but although they waddle, their visual realization reminds one less of Disney than of Tolkien. (Paul Zimmerman has aptly called them "iron hobbits."[28]) They are unaesthetic squat boxes on stumpy short legs, neither marvelous nor sinister in their physical realization. It is their very ordinariness which makes them endearing. The drones are not superhuman like Gort or Robby, nor are they capable of insubordination like HAL; they don't even talk and their literal interpretation of the English language results occasionally in functional *faux pas*. And yet, as the film progresses and they are programmed to play poker, to perform a surgical operation, to be "companions" to the isolated Lowell, the camera's treatment of them becomes progressively sympathetic and subjective, suggesting the merest hint of an animate life of some kind tucked away in their circuitry. As William Johnson points out in an excellent review of the film: "They are machines with at least as much claim to animate being as a responsive and well-trained pet."[29] The subjective camera lets us see out of

Silent Running (Douglas Trumbull, 1972). The mechanical "drones" are programmed as companions to crewman Lowell. (Universal)

Silent Running (Douglas Trumbull, 1972). The drones seem nearly sentient, and man is linked to his own creation "in a single circuit of consciousness." (Universal)

their monitor-screen "eyes" in a way which does not deny their machineness (the images are obviously poor TV quality and in black and white), but promotes as well a feeling of sentient watchfulness. "When two drones, standing side by side, bury a dead crewman, Lowell sees part of the body through one drone's eye and part through the other's. Later, this odd subjectivity is taken a stage further: when Lowell is talking to the two drones, we (the audience) are shown their monitor screens, through which we look at Lowell and Lowell looks at us. . . . Here, through the drones' eyes, "man is linked with his creation in a single circuit of consciousness."[30]

Such is not the case in *Westworld* (Michael Crichton, 1973). The subjective camera may let us in one instance look through the scanner-eyes of the robot gunfighter (coldly played to mechanical perfection by Yul Brynner), but what we see is so remote from human vision that we are emphatically made aware not of a "single circuit of consciousness," but of the vast separation between man and his creations. The little colored cubes which move geometrically over a graph paper-like grid may be aesthetically pleasing in their pastel visualization, but they deny any but the most

tenuous connection between the robot's vision and our (the audience) vision of a warm-blooded and ungeometric human being trying to escape from mechanical retribution. The robots which run amok in this nightmarish extension of Disneyland do so for no known reason. The initial competence of the scientific staff who run the resort, the calm and often boring visual emphasis on computers and monitor screens under expert control, the close-ups of mechanical "operations" and repairs which in their detail suggest a technology thoroughly understood, routinized and conquered—all are quickly subverted by images which emphasize chaos and claustrophobia in the control center, and a world outside which has been stolen from its anthropomorphic gods in white lab coats. The robots' malevolence which goes beyond mere malfunction is inexplicable in scientific terms. And Asimov's Robotic Laws seem purposefully mocked by the mechanical creations turned perfect and skilled killers.

The fluctuating meanings of what superficially seem to be iconic objects in SF films can be demonstrated many times over. Time and place are not constants either. The temporal setting of science fiction has no obligation to his-
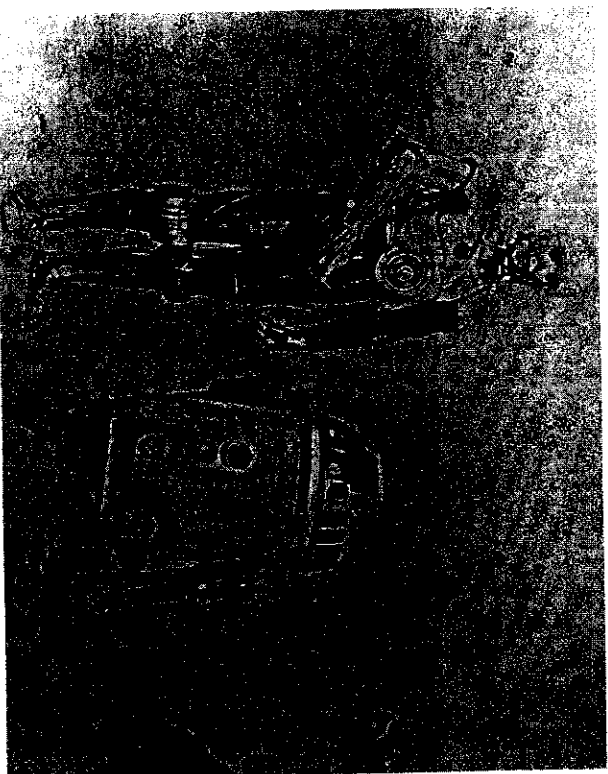

Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977), Robots C3P0 and R2D2 are iconic in their visual function as wondrous pieces of machinery. It is the very plasticity of objects and settings that defines SF film. (20th Century Fox)

tory; it may be a speculative past (*Creation of the Humanoids*), the present (*Seconds*, [John Frankenheimer, 1966]), the immediate future (*The Andromeda Strain*, [Robert Wise, 1971]), the distant future (*Forbidden Planet*), or a combination of times as in the *Planet of the Apes* series. As well, the settings of science fiction know no geographical boundaries and may be found literally anywhere—from small town USA, to distant and undiscovered galaxies, to the interior of a human body. Inevitably, then, we must be led away from a preoccupation with a search for consistent visual emblems into more ambiguous territory. It is the very plasticity of objects and settings in SF films which help define them as science fiction, and not their consistency. And it is this same plasticity of objects and settings that deny the kind of iconographic interpretation which critically illuminates the essentially static worlds of genres such as the Western and Gangster film.

Visual Functions

Although it lacks an informative iconography, encompasses the widest possible range of time and place, and constantly fluctuates in its visual representation of objects, the SF film still has a science fiction "look" and "feel" to its visual surfaces. This unique look and feel embraces all the films of the genre, is quickly recognized by the viewer, and begs for some kind of critical identification. Yet, if the visual connections between the films cannot be located in the repetitious and therefore emblematic use of specific visual representations, where do we find them? The visual connection between all SF films lies in the consistent and repetitious use not of *specific* images, but of *types* of images which function in the same way from film to film to create an imaginatively realized world which is always removed from the world we know or know of. The visual surface of all SF film presents us with a confrontation between and mixture of those images to which we respond as "alien" and those we know to be familiar. This observation, however, is more complex than it may first appear. Certainly, if we think in terms of alien images in SF, what first comes to mind are the imaginative "impossibilities" of the special effects men and designers: creatures, flying saucers, the terrain of Mars, etc. Yet whether an image evokes a sense of strangeness—a sense of wonder—or whether it seems familiar is not always dependent upon the inherent strangeness or familiarity of its actual content. In *Invaders From Mars* (William Cameron Menzies, 1953), a small town police station becomes a setting as visually jolting and alien as any other-worldly planet, and in *Soylent Green* (Richard Fleischer, 1973), a tomato and a wilted stalk of celery are as strange and wondrous as any alien plant life designed in the studio.

The major visual impulse of all SF films is to pictorialize the unfamiliar, the nonexistent, the strange and the totally alien—and to do so with a verisimilitude which is, at times, documentary in flavor and style. While we are invited to wonder at what we see, the films strive primarily for our belief, not our suspension of disbelief—and this is what distinguishes them from fantasy films like *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* (Nathan Juran, 1958), or *Jason and the Argonauts* (Don Chaffey, 1963). This is not so rhetorical a distinction as it may seem, for it determines the unique visual construct of every SF film. For in order to be believed, to achieve credibility, the SF film must also deny its alien images at the same time it promotes them. To make us believe in the possibility, if not probability, of the alien things we see, the visual surfaces of the films are inextricably linked to and dependent upon the familiar; from the wondrous and strange and imagined, the cameras fall back on images either so familiar they are often downright dull, or neutralize the alien by treating it so reductively that it becomes ordinary and comprehensible. Thus in every SF film there is a visual tension between those images in such earnestness in no other genre—a tension between those images which strive to totally remove us from a comprehensible and known world
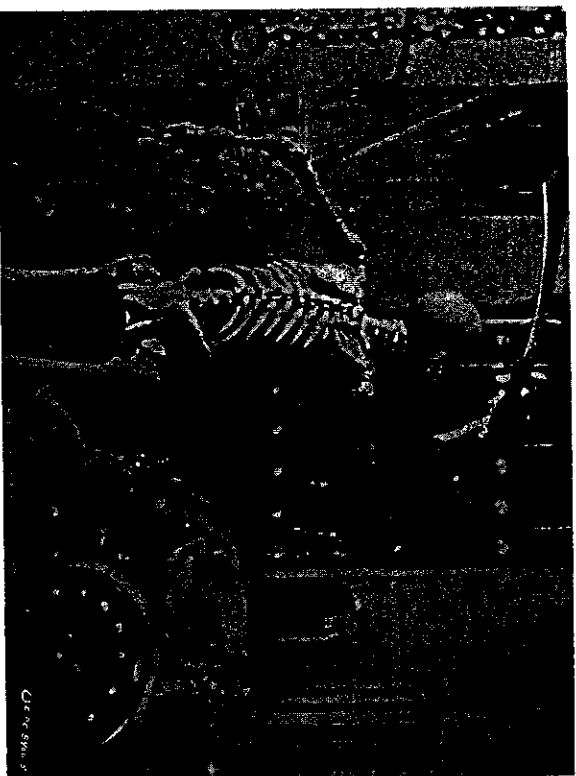
The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad (Nathan Juran, 1958). **What distinguishes fantasy from SF films is that the latter strive for the viewer's belief, the former his suspension of disbelief. (Columbia/Morningside)**
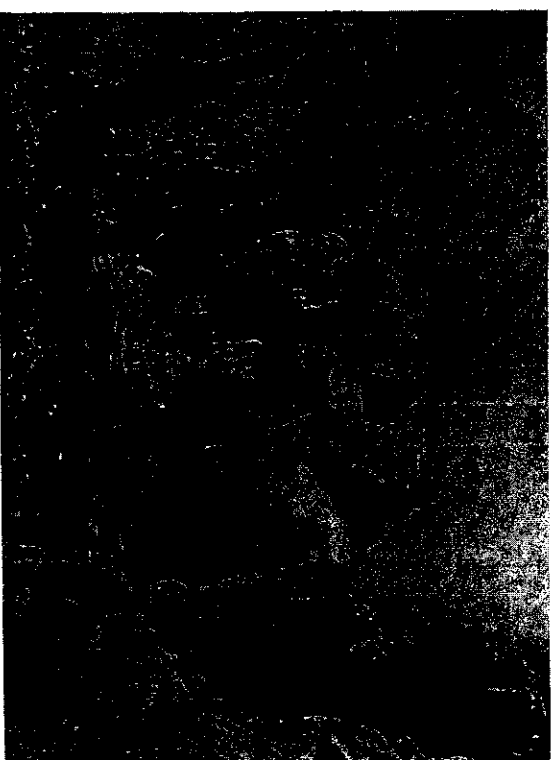
Jason and the Argonauts (Don Chaffey, 1963). **The fantasy film feels no obligation to make itself credible in relation to the world outside the film. (Columbia/Morningside/BLC/World Wide)**

into romantic poetry and those images which strive to bring us back into a familiar and prosaic context. For a better understanding of this visual tension unique to science fiction, it becomes useful to isolate the two basic kinds of images (the alien and the familiar), examine their components, and then deal with their interaction.[21] But we should not, in the following process, forget that this isolation of types of images is arbitrary, useful only in so far as it allows us to see how *all* the images of science fiction interact and function in the films themselves, in films seen as whole and complex entities.

The Alien

The Speculative

Science fiction writer and critic Damon Knight has asked the question: "If your alien planet is just like Broadway, or even just like Uganda, what the devil is the use of leaving Earth at all?"[22] Implied here is the expectation we all have of SF film—that it show us things we've never seen before, that it move us beyond the confines of the known (Broadway)

Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977). "If your alien planet is just like Broadway, or even just like Uganda, what the devil is the use of leaving Earth at all?" (20th Century Fox)

Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977). The expectation we have of SF film is that it shows us things we've never seen before. (20th Century Fox)

Invaders From Mars (William Cameron Menzies, 1953). The Martian "mastermind" is never reductively defined by human activity. (20th Century Fox)

or even the known of (Uganda). On the most obvious level, the SF film attempts to meet our expectations by using the magic of design and special effects cinematography to show us things which do not exist, things which are highly speculative, which astonish us by the very fact of their visual realization on the screen since they have no counterparts in the world outside the theater.³³ One can point to innumerable images in SF films which struggle—sometimes successfully, sometimes laughably—to exceed the anthropomorphic limits of the human imagination while still attempting to remain comprehensible.

A representative sampling of alien beings on the SF screen, for example, might include the image of the Martian "master mind" in *Invaders From Mars*; enclosed in its magically suspended transparent globe, it is an exotic head and upper torso around which its graceful tentacles curl like vines. Seen in close-up, the eyes in its wizened glowing face move in what seems a mechanical unison from side to side, while its expression remains frozen. The malevolent grace and silence of this alien can be contrasted to the busy comic strip activity of the Mutant in *This Island Earth*, "a clawed creature with an enlarged and exposed brain, apoplectic eyes and five interlocking mouths."³⁴ What it gains in menace, it loses in imaginative power for it is required to *do* too much and its shuffling activity defines it reductively in human terms as merely a movie "heavy." More provocative in its visual power, in its ability to make us truly wonder, is the final image of *2001*; the questionably human fetus of the Star Child in its amniotic sack suspended in black space above a revolving blue-green Earth, its vague eyes haunting because they are unfathomable.³⁵ The personal preference indicated here has not been accidental. If the totally imaginative visualizations of alien life forms in the SF film strive to dislocate us from the narrow confines of human knowledge and human experience, they best do so when they are virtually
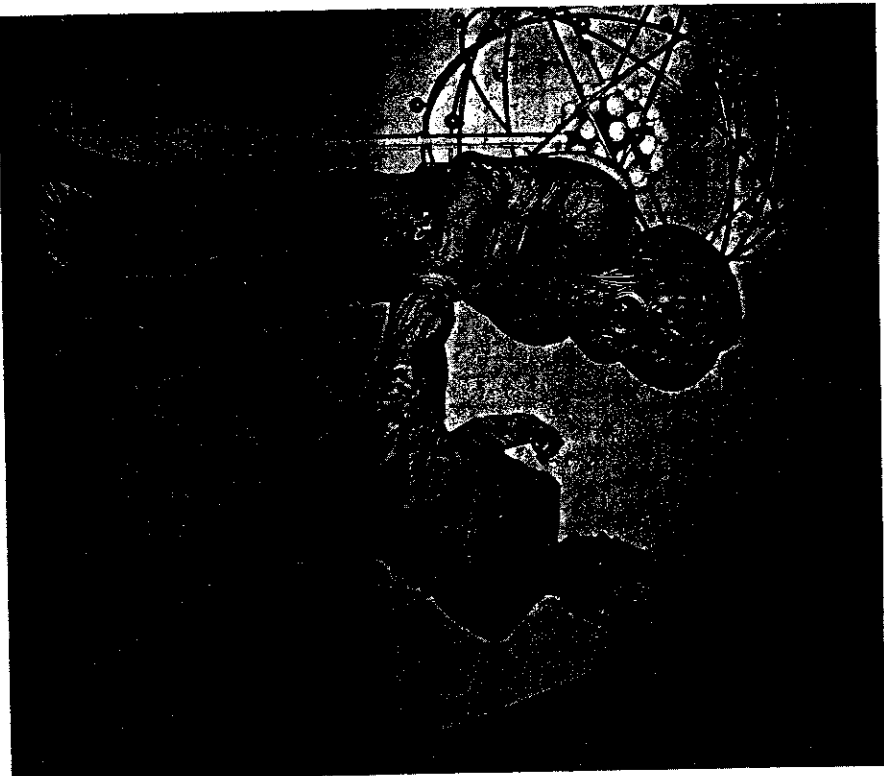
This Island Earth (Joseph Newman, 1955). Publicity still. The alien mutant is reduced by his comic strip activity. (Universal)

silent and primarily inactive. (The alien creatures skillfully designed by Ray Harryhausen and followers are a case to be discussed later, as the images in which they appear are not aimed at removing us from a familiar context.) To give such imaginative visual realizations voice and function is to make them comprehensible and reduce their awesome poetry to smaller human dimensions; they exist most potently on the screen in a state of suspension, of pregnant possibility, of potential rather than realized action. Michel Ciment notes: "One of the weaknesses of science fiction is that it too often fails to

Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977). Alien life forms dislocate us from the confines of human experience when they are in a state of potential—rather than realized—action. (20th Century Fox)

break away from an anthropomorphic view of the cosmos. There are 100 billion stars in our galaxy and 100 billion galaxies in the visible universe, and one of the stock themes of science fiction is that of alien civilizations. But it is difficult to imagine these different worlds without falling back on human standards and thus making them ridiculous."[38] And Raymond Durgnat also suggests the problems inherent in creating truly alien beings: "It's hard enough to understand certain assumptions of the Samoans, the Balinese or the Americans, and all but impossible to empathize into the perceptions and drives of, say, a boa constrictor. How much more difficult then to identify with the notions of, say, the immortal twelve-sensed telepathic polymorphoids whose natural habitat is the ammonia clouds of Galaxy X?"[39] This difficulty is perhaps also reflected in the relative lack of subjective camera shots in SF film which attempt to link us visually with nonhuman life. Previously, the use of such subjectivity has been discussed in reference to the subjective robotic vision which punctuates *2001*, *Silent Running* and *Westworld*, cinematographic instances which are quite powerful. But we might also point to the earlier vision of films like *It Came From Outer Space* (Jack Arnold, 1953). Here, the inadequacy of both 3D cinematography and a shimmering, quivering "whirlpool" superimposed over familiar sights to convince us that we were seeing through an alien's eyes and consciousness
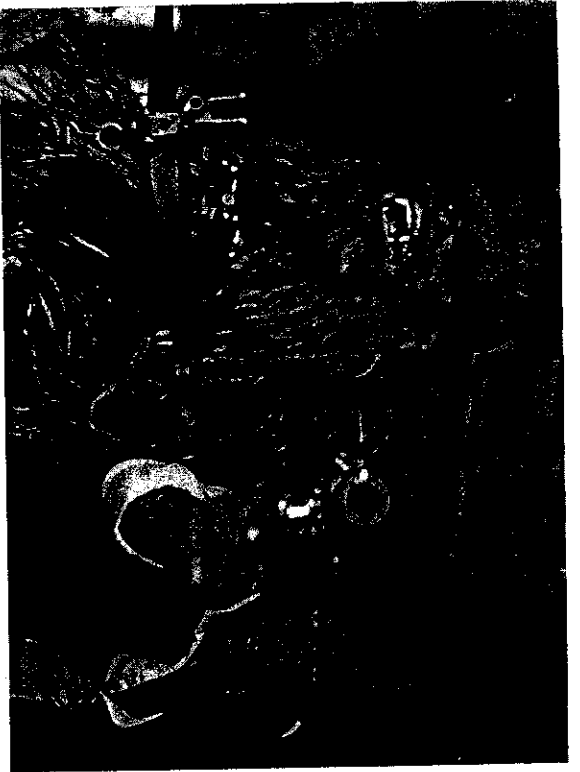
is clearly apparent. And only slightly more adequate is the multiple vision of the insect-headed scientist in *The Fly* (Kurt Neumann, 1958), its impact caused more by the then-fascinating novelty of seeing multiplied images on the screen than by a sense that we were really seeing as a fly does. Attempts at stretching our perceptions by using a subjective camera to represent alien consciousness are relatively rare in SF film, probably because—dependent as they are upon the viewer's comprehension—such images must extrapolate from human vision and therefore cannot attain the inventive and speculative freedom they pretend to.

Less prone to anthropomorphic reduction is the studio-created geography of science fiction. Since it is usually not required to do anything but simply *be*, it is able to achieve a visual power which can last, if not over-done and over-used, through an entire film, maintaining our responses to it as alien and wondrous. Certainly, to this critic at least, the imaginative, if not completely prophetic, landscape of *Destination Moon* resonated more dramatically than the real moon televised from its own surface, a moon which turned out to be a dusty disappointment compared to the harsh images of a cracked, grayish-yellow "dried-up river bed which looked effective even

though it has now been proved to have been a wrong guess."[38] Indeed, the craggy peaks, strange seas, swirling atmospheres, stark shadows, multiple moons, disquieting but breathtaking colors of other-worldly environments in SF film are powerful sights which stretch the imagination. Although, John Baxter writes, referring to *Forbidden Planet*, "Little is made of the landscape of Altair IV, with its green sky, cloud striped oversize moon and red earth,"[39] little has to be made of it. We only need see it for its image to provoke wonder. More is made in the film of what Durgnat calls the "flowers-and-leopard sentimentality"[40] of Alta's (Anne Francis) humanly conceived Edenic playground, but its ability to take us beyond ourselves is minimal. In the same film, successfully attempting to stretch our conception of dimension to its limits, is the vast subterranean and abandoned urban landscape of the vanished Krels, buildings and generators and shafts dizzying in size and scope. Equally remote from earth-bound existence are the ravaged surface and strange light of Metaluna in *This Island Earth*, the bizarre and occasionally overworked Mars of *The Angry Red Planet*, and the post-Jupiter landscape of *2001*, all "mauve and mocha mountains, swirling methane seas and purple skies."[41] In the later film, studio sets are not necessary to the creation of an alien and speculative landscape; color and optical printing have been used to camouflage the actual photographic content of the images (the Grand Canyon, Monument Valley, and the Hebrides Coast) so that what we see is like nothing we've ever seen before:

Snowdrifts and floating icebergs lose their true color under layers of magenta and cyan filtration. They defy recognition, just as do the canyons and crags we should recognize from innumerable westerns. But intercut with strange sunbursts of light and continuously agitated by thrusts of the zoom lens, these sights seem the contours of another planet, or perhaps the anchor point of consciousness itself.[42]

The speculative, created geography of science fiction need not, however, extend its visualizations to outer space to evoke a sense of removal from the known world. *Fantastic Voyage* achieves its wondrously alien effects by taking us into the human body rather than out of this world; yet, regardless of the more than $3 million spent to realize anatomically correct sets,[43] we might as well be on another planet where anatomy no longer exists. In fact, although the plot and characterizations are generally cliched and banal, the film's visual conception is remarkably profound; here are our own bodies made alien and, paradoxically, antianthropomorphic. Our inside becomes the outside. Drawing a similar equation, Parker Tyler sees in the film what he calls "a great micromacrocosmic tension" and goes on to say:

The space-within exists—and must exist however consciously it be

avoided—equally, co-extensively, with the space-outside. The science-fiction type of film, therefore, was bound to get around to viewing the interior of the body as an artifically constructed inner space corresponding with the real body's inner space, which in turn would be a trope for actual space: the "out there" space shared with all other men." *

Despite the anatomical accuracy, the medical precision that went into the making of the film, it is illuminating to note the poetic rather than cooly descriptive language which has been used to describe its images. John Baxter aptly comments on the film's visual power: "Model sets like the white vaulted cathedral of the heart and the veiled jungle that is the scientist's brain touch, however lightly, the core of wonder that draws us back time after time to fantasy."[46] At one point in the film, the miniaturized travelers are menaced by a respiratory process we actually see
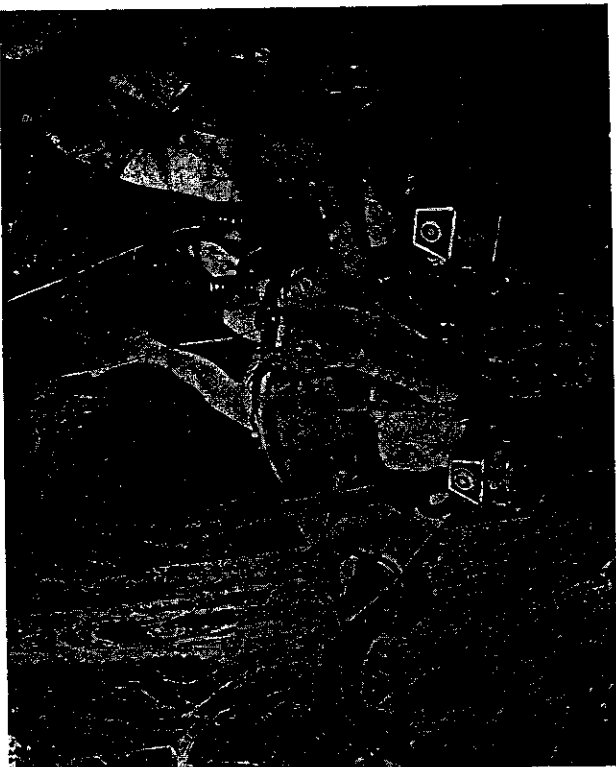

Fantastic Voyage (Richard Fleischer, 1966). The human body: the view we have of it is an impossible one. Inside becomes outside. (20th Century Fox)

and they enter a brain which Luis Gasca describes as "an enchanted place ... with its iridescent and phosphorescent reflections emerging from a bluish shadow."[46] These phosphorescent reflections were achieved frequently in the film through a process John Brosnan describes as "painting with light."[47]

The human body in *Fantastic Voyage* truly belongs to that group of speculative images which are totally invented, for despite its anatomical and medical accuracy the view we finally have of it is an impossible one, a view not only impossible in perspective but in philosophical approach as well. Even though what we see is extrapolated or copied from actual scientific knowledge, the sets were, as well, "designed in a deliberately abstract fashion so as not to upset those with weak stomachs among the audiences."[48] And, director Richard Fleischer himself acknowledges the film's underlying speculative nature: "The whole thing was a product of the imagination and every interpretation of that imagination into realistic, technical terms had to be invented and manufactured."[49]

Perhaps less flamboyantly spectacular than *Fantastic Voyage*, but equally alien and disquieting is the almost continually abstract decor and design of *THX 1138* (George Lucas, 1971), a film which presents a totally different kind of visual speculation. The images consistently dislocate human faces and forms from their surroundings by using sets and compositions which subvert our ordinary awareness of size, dimension, and perspective. Originally a fifteen minute short conceived as "a lighting exercise" in which the filmmaker's aim was "creating an environment out of just film,"[50] the exercise became an expanded feature film which visually dislocates the
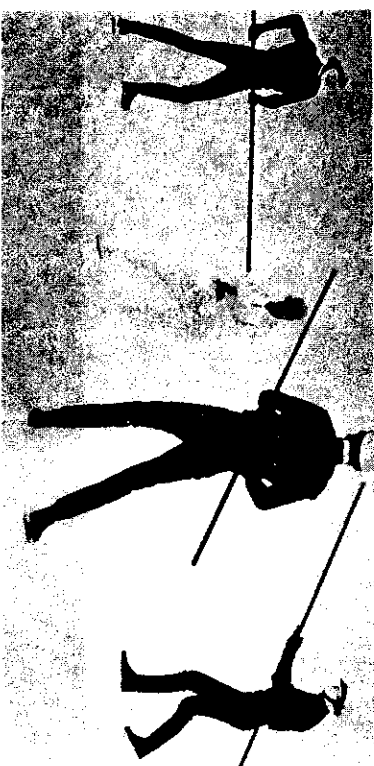

THX 1138 (George Lucas, 1971). The wide screen is used like a canvas on which human forms are placed at vast distances and disturbing angles from each other. (Warner Brothers)

viewer as much as it does the characters from the known world. Using a wide screen, carefully selected color, and abstract composition, *THX* achieves its distancing effects by its evocation of a world which is so visualized as graphic art that it could not exist except in a frame. Through much of the film, a white vast background is shockingly punctuated by the discrete use of pure primary colors and black. Human beings—hairless and dressed in white clothing—show up against the white screen as disembodied heads and hands floating in limitless space, disconnected from a context and from themselves. Their own bodies are fragmented visually. Composition in the frame is just as disorienting; the wide screen is used like a canvas on which human forms are placed at vast distances and disturbing angles from each other. One responds to these images as to modern paintings, sculpture, graphic art, a work by Mondrian or Alexander Calder; their human content becomes almost totally absorbed by abstract form.

The kind of speculative image we see in *THX 1138* is fairly rare in science fiction; in fact it is fairly rare in commercial cinema of any kind. This is because it moves toward abstract art, toward form with a minimum of content which can be called narrative in the traditional sense. However, scattered here and there throughout the American SF film, there are moments of such abstraction. And there is one film made in the fifties which actually
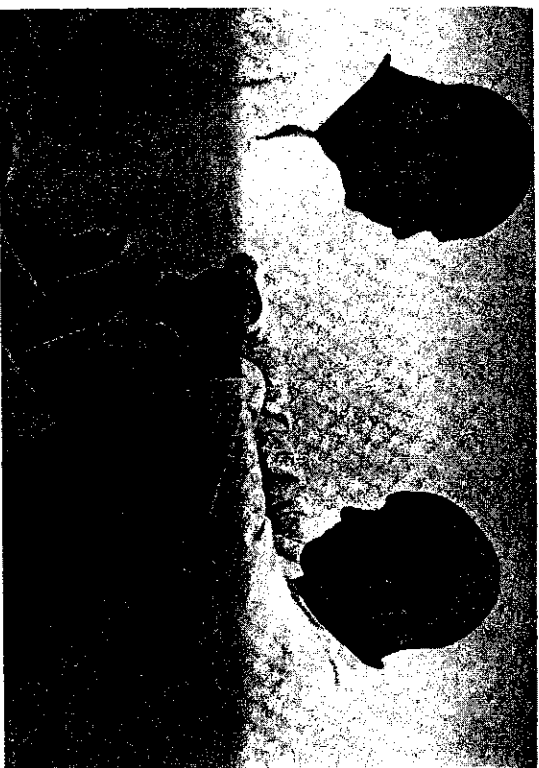
THX 1138 (George Lucas, 1971). Human beings—hairless and dressed in white clothing—punctuate screen space. (Warner Brothers)
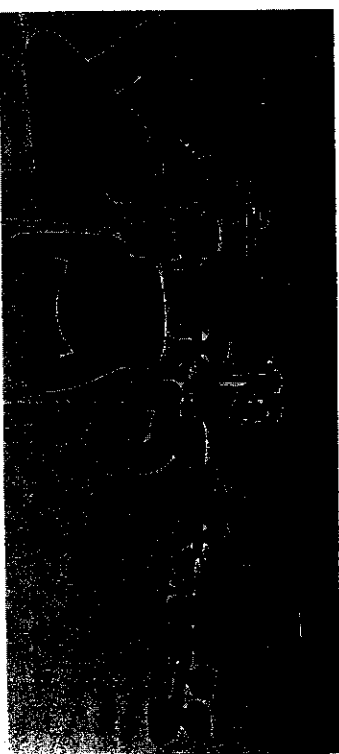
2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, 1968). The wide screen as an abstract canvas. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer)
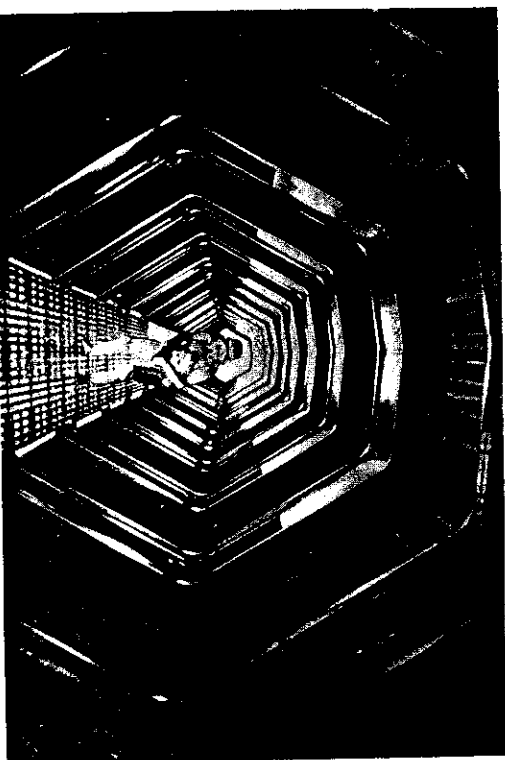

Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977). The alien nature of symmetry. As abstraction, symmetry removes us from the "real" and random world. (20th Century Fox)

depends for its visual evocation of wonder, separation, and strangeness on the distancing power of abstract forms: *The Monolith Monsters* (John Sherwood, 1957). Here, an unknown element brought to Earth by a meteorite "grows" when it comes into contact with water. What we see in grandly isolated images on the screen are black, giant crystals which thrust out of the desert landscape like German Expressionist skyscrapers. Their

growth is almost as painful to watch as it is beautiful, the forms geometrically exciting to the eye but representing a visual scream of splintering, shattering, stretching.

The Extrapolative

Similar to and yet also different from the invented or totally speculative images of SF filmmakers are those images of things in SF film which have an existence outside the movie theater but which—despite their reality —are visually denied to us because we humanly lack the physical ability to perceive them. Paradoxically, with the aid of fakery, special effects, model work, and mechanical devices, certain SF film images redeem portions of the physical world from the relative obscurity which their dimensions impose upon them. We know, for example, that there are planets in space, orbiting in some grand design, but our visual knowledge of them is generally limited to the unsatisfactory vagueness of the night sky or to a blurred photograph obscured by Earth's atmosphere in an astronomy book; even a clearly taken scientific snapshot cannot give us a sense of the magnitude of what's really out there. Similarly, we cough
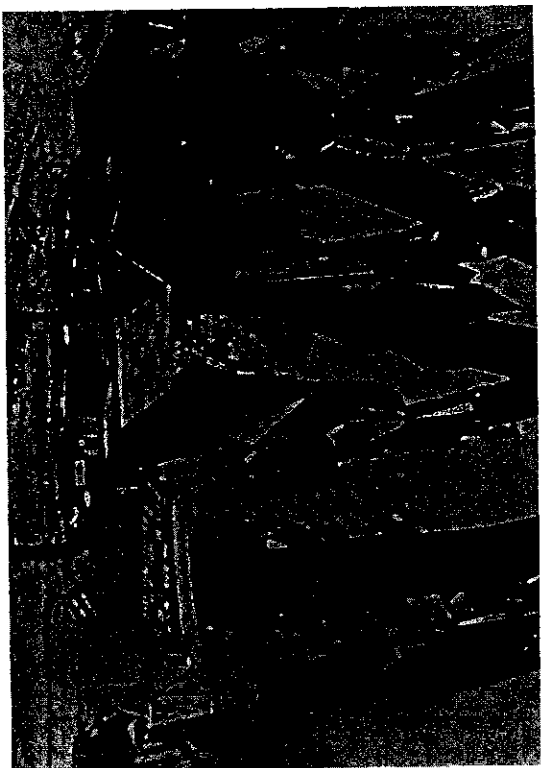
The Monolith Monsters (John Sherwood, 1957). The distancing power of abstract forms: giant black crystals like German Expressionist skyscrapers. (Universal)

and **sneeze** enough to admit without doubt the existence of such things as viruses, but our visual knowledge of them is as remote as a handkerchief at such times is familiar. The SF film gives us images—even if manufactured—of the immense and the infinitesimal. Extrapolating from known and accepted science, these film images derive their power to induce wonder in the viewer not from the imaginativeness of their stance and their scope, but from the imaginativeness of their content, but from the imaginativeness of their stance and their scope. We don't marvel that there are such things as planets; we marvel at the fact that we can see them in a way which transcends our own human size and physical limitations. Those images which awe us, stun us, do so not merely because they seem meticulously authentic but because they alienate us from our corporeal selves, from human notions of time and space. It is in this sense that they are truly alien visualizations although based on known scientific realities.

The world "breathtaking" is therefore literally appropriate to such images as the Earth seen in its totality from space in *Destination Moon*, Mars and her surrounding planets viewed objectively at the beginning of *War of the Worlds*, the opening shots of *Forbidden Planet*. Speaking of the latter film, John Brosnan describes its marvels:

The film begins with a sequence showing a flying saucer from Earth hurtling through space and entering an alien solar system. Here the eclipse of an enormous red sun is seen with the saucer silhouetted by the corona—a breathtaking panorama which is almost equal to the astronomical simulations in the later classic *2001: A Space Odyssey*.[51]

We are given through these images the visual scope of a god; as viewers we are no longer human. Speaking of *2001*, Stanley Kubrick says, "The mystical alignment of the sun, the moon, and earth, or of Jupiter and its moons, was used throughout the film as a premonitory image of a leap forward into the unknown."[52] Whether or not one finally accepts the mysticism of *2001*'s planets, moons, and monoliths, one has to agree that we do leap forward visually into the unknown by the transformation of our perception. There, before us, in the same frames, we can see all of the sun and the moon and the Earth, or all of Jupiter and its moons.[53]

As we are allowed to see the infinitely immense, so SF film also allows us to view the infinitesimally small. "In the mind of God there is no zero," says Scott Carey (Grant Williams) at the end of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Jack Arnold, 1957). While this film, despite its theme, derives its visual significance and power primarily from images highly dependent on a familiar world whose dimensions are clearly known to us (a world which will be discussed in those terms later), its main character's metaphysical discovery is akin to ours when, for example, we enter the hugely magnified

Silent Running (Douglas Trumbull, 1972). Images of planets, eclipses, suns, and moons remove us from out of our limited physical selves and give us the visual scope of a god. (Universal)
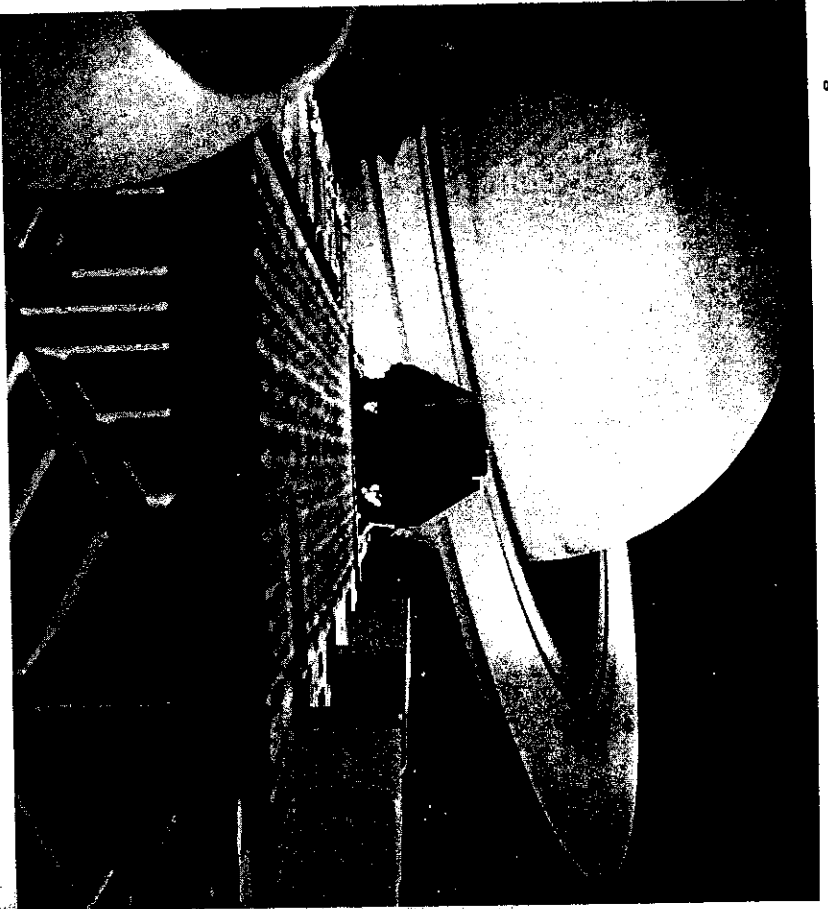
microscopic images of *The Andromeda Strain*. With our god-like vision, there is no zero. We watch the unknown alien "virus" grow under extreme magnification which almost totally fills the screen with what we cannot physically see at all under normal circumstances. Through electron microscopy and its magic, we discover the virus' crystalline form and watch it divide. We become incredibly sensitive to "the tremendous energies accumulated in the microscopic configurations of matter." [54] We are in the "reality of another dimension" which, however simulated, extrapolated from its base in fact, is "but a portrait—seen in a certain perspective—of the world in which we live." [55] That certain perspective, however, is definitely alien to us and SF film lets us assume it with authority. While it may

be visually more god-like to enter the world of a virus, there is also power, albeit a trifle more secondary, to stretch our perceptions in the kind of close-up "documentary footage" of ant life inserted in *Them!* (Gordon Douglas, 1954). Removed from context, again in a film which visually moves us primarily by its manipulation of alien and familiar elements within a well-defined *mise en scene*, the close-ups of ants building and battling awe us not merely by their actions, but by our ability to visually penetrate into a world otherwise inaccessible to us. The SF film allows us to enter into the very circuitry of a computer or into the lethal interior of an atomic reactor and we become omniscient and omnipotent as gods.

I have attempted thus far to discuss those particular SF images which are obviously alien to us in either content and/or perspective. These kinds of images—introduced to amaze us—seem to stand alone in the films, deriving their poetic power from their very separation from a familiar context. Usually they—and they alone—must fill the screen to awe us. They are most effective in their lack of human association, alone in close-up and removed from a recognizable and reductive context or *mise en scene*. Therefore, at their most provocative, we see such images juxtaposed with other more familiar images, but usually not in the same frame with them. A SF film, however, cannot live by alien images alone. It goes almost without saying—but I shall say it anyway—that no narrative film, no fiction film, can sustain itself on visual surfaces which are completely and continuously strange and alien to either our experience or our mode of perception. We have to understand what we see and if what we see is unfamiliar, it must—to have meaning—be eventually connected to something we can comprehend, to something we know. The SF film, although it strives in part to transcend the limits of human knowledge and imagination, is not aimed finally toward achieving total abstraction. There is, indeed, an urge toward abstraction contained in these alien images—and it is very much connected to a basic thematic concern common to all SF film: man and his relationship to the physical environment which surrounds him. Abstraction, itself, says one critic, "stems from the great anxiety which man experiences when terrorized by the phenomena he perceives around him, the relationships and mysterious polarities of which he is unable to decipher." [56] The SF film is concerned with this anxiety and reflects it, but not to a point of withdrawal from narrative into total abstract art; rather, it deals with this anxiety on a human as well as transcendental or formal level. The SF film is ever aware —thematically and visually—that we have to live in our own future, and that future, unknowable as it may finally be, is very real. The films are not interested ultimately in escaping from human connection, human perception, and human meaning into the realm of the avant-garde. Although they may contain many alien images, isolated for wondrous effect, images which evoke

the "unknown" in all its scientific, magical, and religious or transcendental permutations, the films must obligatorily descend to Earth, to men, to the known, and to a familiar *mise en scene* if they are to result in *meaning* rather than the abstract inexplicability of *being*.

This prosaic urge brings us to a consideration of how the SF film tempers the awesomeness, the abstractness, the poetry of its isolate, alien, visual surfaces. The issue has been discussed peripherally but in some detail in the previous section on the "iconography" of the spaceship, its neutralization in some films as an image of awesome visual effect, and it has also been alluded to in those remarks about the reduction of the strangeness of the alien Mutant in *This Island Earth*. There are three primary ways in which the wonder of alien visual surfaces in SF films can be subverted, bringing us back to a sense of comfortable familiarity with what we see. The first way is through repetition of the alien image so that it becomes familiar (and, unfortunately, in some cases contemptible). The second method is the humanization of the alien image so that we understand it rather than wonder at it. The third way is a deemphasis of the alien image by the camera in order to remove the viewer's attention from it. All three methods are used in SF film with the intent of bringing the visualization of the alien image from isolation into an *active mise en scene* (activity being the visualization of understood cause and effect) so as to integrate that image back into human connection. As well, all three methods tend to coexist and commingle in the films rather than functioning


This Island Earth (Joseph Newman, 1955). Three ways to reduce the alien: (1) repeat it, (2) humanize it, and (3) deemphasize it. (Universal)

singularly, their end result turning our wonder to interest, our interest to comprehension and acceptance. (It should be emphasized, however, that interest and acceptance are not seen here as negative responses to the film image nor as some failing of the film image, but merely as responses which are different in kind from awe and wonder, from a sense of total dislocation and alienation.)

This process of change can be demonstrated, for example, in the use of the Korova Milkbar in *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971). The opening tracking shot back from an immense close-up of an "alien" face (alien because of our perspective, our lack of context, and the face's disorienting makeup and expression) to an almost completely static long-shot of the Korova Milkbar, composed as it is of bizarrely dressed "human" figures and sterile, white, nude sculptures, is truly wonderful. The image could hardly be more strange in its use of color (the black background seems to recede infinitely, denying yet also suggesting walls as does the lettering hung against nothing; and the human figures and sculpture are primarily white, accented and punctuated by bits of lurid violet and orange fluorescence). Also strange is the composition of the shot; the placement of figures emphasizes pools of disquieting space between their groupings. And the content of the shot, alien as it seems, is made yet more strange by its stillness; the human figures are almost as still as statues, the statues—human in form—are sculpted in attitudes of frozen motion.

The Korova's wonder becomes diminished, however, as it is repeatedly used as a setting. Our eyes become familiar with its plastic surfaces, its
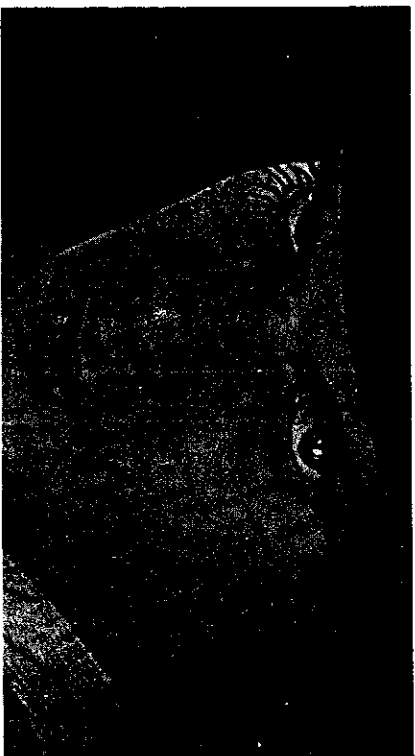
A Clockwork Orange (Stanley Kubrick, 1971). The opening tracking shot back from an immense close-up of an "alien" face begins as contextless and disorienting (note the expression and makeup). (Warner Brothers)
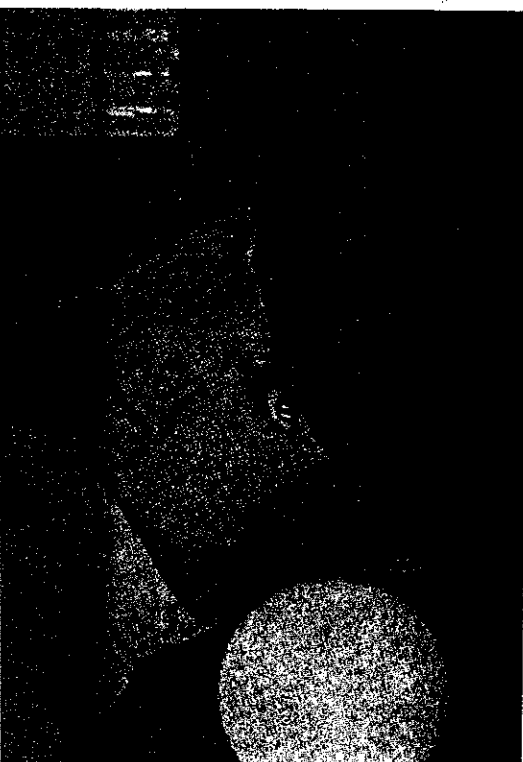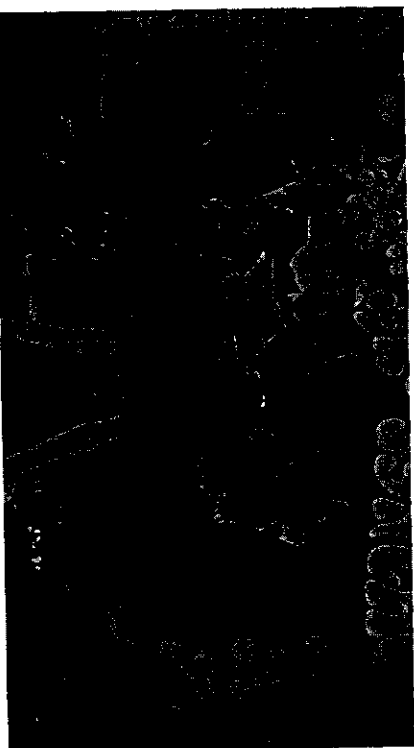
A Clockwork Orange (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) Tracking back further, the composition becomes more abstract in design (note balance of milk and light and whiteness). (Warner Brothers)

color and light. As well, its wonder is reduced because it becomes human-ized, it comes "to life" and is made to function (act) comprehensibly. The strange postures of the sculptures become defined in terms of furniture and vending machinery and finally the Korova is accepted by the viewer as a visual extension of the malt shop around the corner. It also becomes visually deemphasized as we understand its function; the camera shows us both itself and the Korova's clientele taking the Milkbar for granted, and also dwells less on its surfaces, moving instead closer to the characters (whose initial abstractness has been charged into human characterization through action and dialogue) so that the strange context becomes subordinate to their comprehensible interpersonal conflicts. The static Korova Milkbar we respond to with wonder in the opening shots is not the Korova Milkbar we've accepted later in the film; its initial unlimited possibility has been circumscribed and defined by its duration on the screen and by the familiar and comprehensible function it serves and by the very human activity within it. This process of lessening the visual wonder of science fiction is not limited, of course, to only visually reductive means. The alien images of the SF film can also be brought back down to Earth by way of music and dialogue, elements which will be discussed in the next chapter.

A Clockwork Orange (Stanley Kubrick, 1971). Further back, the *mise en scène* has not yet been defined by activity that will reduce it to the "malt shop" around the corner. Again, symmetry, lack of movement, imprecise depth, create wonder and awe and discomfort. (Warner Brothers)


A Clockwork Orange (Stanley Kubrick, 1971). The Korova Milkbar's wonder diminishes as it is repeatedly used. The strange postures of the furniture become functional, and we focus more on the human characters. (Warner Brothers)

The Alienation of the Familiar

We have discussed those SF films which, through their extensive use of studio-devised settings and special effects cinematography, strive to remove

us from familiar experience and perception into the realm of the unknown, but which at the same time also attempt—for the sake of narrative, meaning, and relevance—to relate their alien images to human and familiar concerns. The result is visual tension, produced from two opposing impulses. The same visual tension can also be found in those SF films which are literally grounded, films which because of budgetary limitations and/or story line do not leave the Earth and its familiar terrain for distant galaxies, films which cannot or choose not to manufacture a totally alien environment or depend on elaborate special effects and creative machinery for their visual evocation of the unknown. These films, starting from home base and the familiar, strive not to bring us down to Earth, but to remove us from it in various ways, at the same time we remain visually grounded. The visual movement of such films is not toward a neutralization of the alien and abstract, but rather toward the viewer's alienation from the familiar and concrete. In some cases, that alienation is accomplished by disguising the familiar. John Baxter points out three spectacular instances in which Earth's environment, combined with a few special effects, was "framed in such a way that it appeared alien." He cites *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* (1964), in
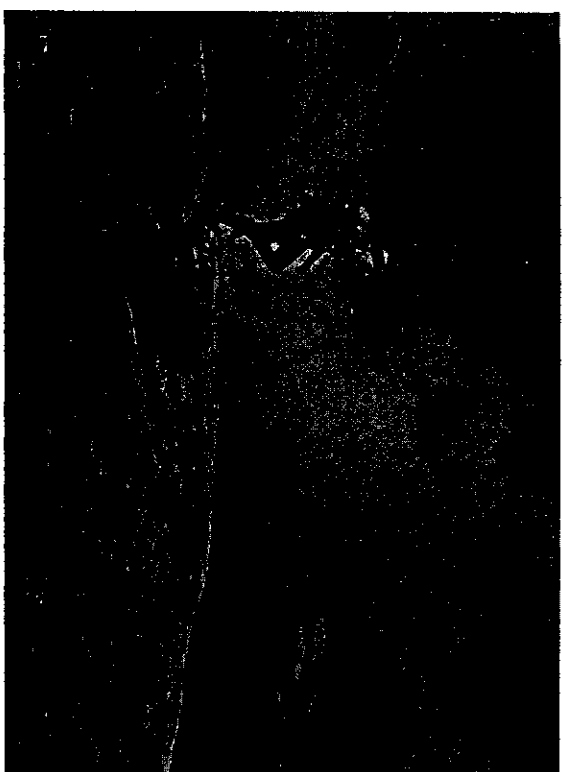
Robinson Crusoe on Mars (Byron Haskin, 1964). **The alienation of the familiar: Death Valley is transformed into the alien landscape of a hostile Mars. (Paramount)**

which director Byron Haskin "chose as his setting the eroded nightmare of Death Valley" spiced by a pumpkin-colored sky; *Planet of the Apes* (Franklin Schaffner, 1967), part of which was filmed around Lake Powell; and *Marooned* (1969), in which John Sturges used Death Valley landscapes to represent not Mars, but the moon." In other cases, however, the strange images of some high budget and most low-budget SF films are created from extremely ordinary visual content, less disguised than abstracted or distorted to evoke wonder. Such imagery may, additionally, cause anxiety because it is abstracted—literally—where we live, close to home. One might well echo Philip Strick and Peter Nicholls in their prefatory remarks to a National Film Theatre Bulletin announcing a series of SF films to be shown in London: "Although we have great affection for the familiar absurdities of low budget Hollywood sf, we feel that it's time that more credit be given to its positive achievements—the unfettered visual imagination, the creative use of already existing locations, the brooding landscapes, the deserts and deserted cities." [38]

Although there were many low-budget films best left to the kind treatment memory nostalgically provides them, films which feebly and laughably tried to imitate the more expensive spectaculars using one room, one dial sets and obviously rubber aliens, there are also a large number of films which deserve critical attention—those films we might call the *film noir* of science fiction. Quietly and grayly, they turn the familiar into the alien, visually subvert the known and comfortable, and alter the world we take for granted into something we mistrust. Using a minimum of special effects, if any, the films evoke wonder in their visual ability to alienate us from Earth's landscape and from human activity and from the people next door. But unlike the wonder generated by inherently unfamiliar images (in content and/or scope) which is often exciting and exalting in quality, the wonder created by these smaller films is ultimately depressing in its implications, its pessimistic vision. Although he hasn't linked the terms to any particular hierarchy of films within the genre, Parker Tyler, in one of his more lucid paragraphs, has discussed the optimism of big-budget science fiction and the pessimism of low-budget science fiction, using psychologically apt terms: "The science-fiction genre, in or out of film, is destined (with a fate now much realized) to cope with that combined spatial megalomania and spatial paranoia that I define as mankind's oldest known sort of self-harassment." [39]

In these low budget SF movies the viewer is not confronted with the alien as something "other" than himself or as something "away" from his world, nor has he the exhilarating ability to see the physical world as a god might see it (an ability which could serve as the filmic fulfillment of "spatial megalomania"). In such movies, we are not gods although our perceptions are, indeed, transformed. Indeed, it is our security in the power of being human which is visually undermined (causing a definite

sense of "spatial paranoia"). The wonder we feel at such films is the wonder of being totally suspended in limbo; we are visually denied the comfort of a familiar and anthropomorphic Earth and we no longer have the power to reach the stars.

Subversion of the Landscape

Inherent in the big-budget SF film which moves toward the neutralization of its many alien images is a visual aura of confidence and optimism. The strange is conquered—not just in terms of the plot, but also in terms of the visual movement of the film itself. The infinite is introduced and made finite, the unknown is made familiar. The cold vastness of impersonal space, the terror of man confronting the universe and the void—out there—is diminished through an increasing movement away from abstract presentation of wonderous imagery toward its integration with the known and human. This positive visual movement is informed by the somewhat smug and optimistic belief in infinite human and technological progress and by a view of the unknown as a beautiful undiscovered country (no neighbor to Hamlet's) which holds only minor terrors and creates minimal anxiety because it is, in visual fact, ultimately discoverable and conquerable. In movies like *Destina-*
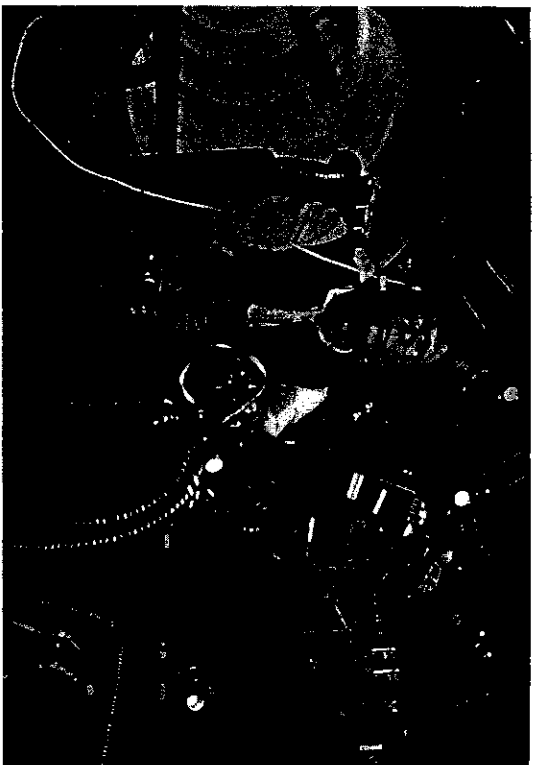
Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977). Big-budget SF film is visually optimistic, believing in infinite human and technological progress. (20th Century Fox)
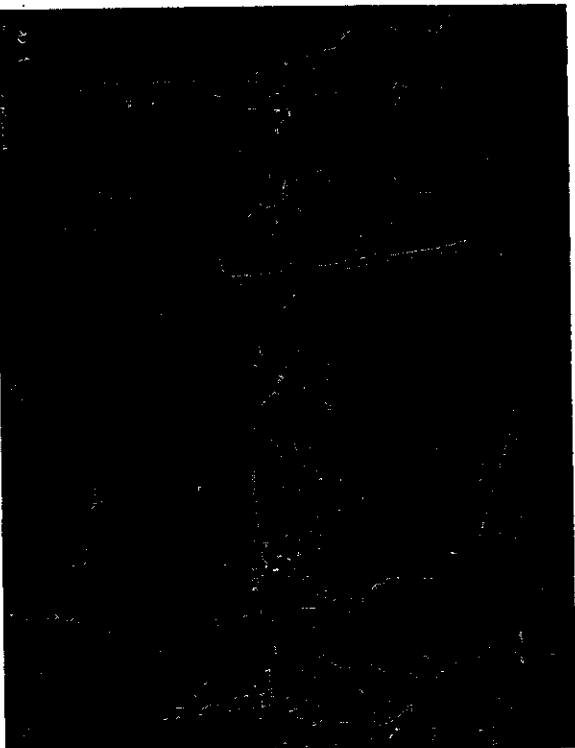
Destination Moon (Irving Pichel, 1950). Man's jargon, technological accomplishments, banal competence, and Tom Swiftian enthusiasm has robbed the infinite of its ability to terrify. (United Artists/Eagle-Lion)

tion Moon, Riders to the Stars (Richard Carlson, 1954), *The Conquest of Space* (Byron Haskin, 1955), man has always slipped into his rocket as though it were a new automobile. His jargon has been reassuring; his technological accomplishments, banal competence, and Tom Swiftian enthusiasm has—within the protective armor of his starship—robbed the infinite of its ability to really terrify us, and reduced its blank impenetrability to the dimensions of a highway.

Those films which take us "out there" into space or to other planets via the magic of special effects are visually optimistic. They reassure us in their very view of the alien and strange as something "other," as something separate from man and his personal domain, *our* planet. We're out there because all earthly terrain has been challenged and conquered and there is nowhere to go but—literally and metaphorically—up and away. This optimism is also apparent in those films which bring the "other" here. The aliens fighting on earthly battlegrounds fight not just against men but against the planet itself; Earth is on our side. Earth and Man are an organic unity, a known quantity, working together to repel the alien "other." The Martians of *War of the Worlds* are killed not just by God's wisdom, but by Earth's

gems; the very atmosphere rebels against such unscrupulous intrusion. In these films, our cities and traffic and technology, our churches and national monuments all give an anthropomorphic—and therefore reassuring—face to our planet. They suggest that we and the very ground we walk upon are ultimately bound together in a symbiotic relationship, harmoniously entwined in some metaphysical lovers' embrace.

At the same time these films which celebrated Man and his works and the whole concept of infinite possibility were being made (the fifties through the early sixties), imaginative and financially hampered filmmakers were pulling the ground out from beneath our complacent feet; in their films Man's previously harmonious marriage to the landscapes of our planet ended in divorce. In search of cheap locations which were "neutral" enough to admit the introduction of the extraordinary and fantastic into what was, after all, a real and familiar world, such filmmakers as Jack Arnold, John Sherwood, and Gordon Douglas discovered the desert and the beach. What happens in their films (and the films of others who staked out similar territorial rights) is that the extraordinary and fantastic—the monsters and mutants and alien invaders—become virtually subordinate in their ability to evoke awe and wonder to the impressive visual power of the terrain itself. What creates the terrifying wonder and pessimism in these films is not primarily the giant ant or spider, not the Creature, not the alien invader—all of which appear in this group of films either fairly infrequently or in shadow or are not seen at all because they are technically inferior to their more expensive relations. Rather, what evokes awe and terror is the terrain of Earth itself. Viewing those dark and brooding seascapes, the dull wet sand and the surf crashing crazily against the outrageous and indefinable geometry of towering rocks, seeing the unshadowed and limitless stretches of desert punctuated by the stiff and inhuman form of an occasional cactus or the frantic scurrying of some tiny and vulnerable rodent, the spectator is forced to a recognition, however unconscious it may remain, of Man's precarious and puny stability, his vulnerability to the void "right here" as well as "out there," his total isolation, the fragile quality of his body and his works, the terrifying blankness in the eyes of what he thought was Mother Nature.

As opposed to those imaginary other worlds created on a studio set or those real urban worlds so filled with the outcropping of our achievements that they appear anthropomorphic, the desert and the beach exist as the receptive breeding ground or hiding place for those things which threaten to destroy us and thus become hostile areas of a formerly nurturing and anthropomorphic Earth. Working inversely from those movies which optimistically reduce the infinitudes and uncertainties of space to a view seen from an in-

tergalactic automobile, the films which show us the "other-ness" of the world in which we actually live expand the finite and certain limits of a car world into a journey through the desert or along a lonely stretch of seacoast road into a journey through an infinite and hostile void. When the land which has nurtured us threatens us, we are truly lost in space. What such films as *It Came From Outer Space*, *Them!*, *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold, 1954), *Tarantula* (Jack Arnold, 1955), *Beast with a Million Eyes* (David Kramarsky, 1955), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956), *The Monolith Monsters*, *The Space Children* (Jack Arnold, 1958), and *Most Dangerous Man Alive* (Allan Dwan, 1961), tell us is that the Earth is not a part of us, it does not even recognize us. These films—in whole or in part—take us away from our larger structures, our cities and skyscrapers which normally break up the disturbing blankness of the horizon. Our civilization and its technological apparatus is at best a small town set on the edge of an abyss. Watching these films with their abundance of long shots in which human figures move like insects, their insistence on a fathomless landscape, we are forced to a pessimistic view of the worth of technological progress and of man's ability to control his destiny.
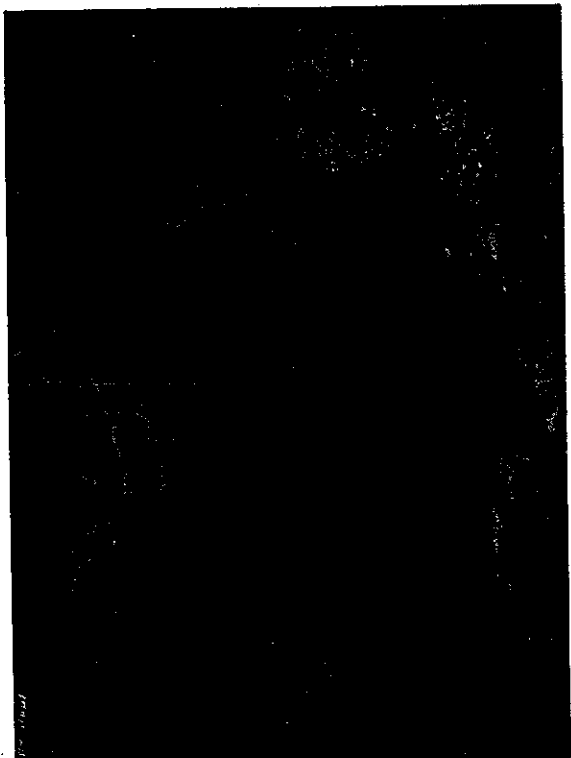

It Came From Outer Space (Jack Arnold, 1953). This film and other low-budget SF of the fifties take us away from the cities and skyscrapers that break up the disturbing blankness of the horizon. (Universal)

We are shown human beings set uncomfortably against the vastness and agelessness of the desert and sea, are reminded by the contrast that land and water were here long before us and our cities and towns and will be here long after we and our artifacts are gone. We see ourselves—normal, human, incredibly mortal—against an unblinking and bare landscape that refuses any anthropomorphic sweetness with which we strive to endow it.

In *It Came from Outer Space*, the camera scans a desert in which a row of telephone poles and the men working on the wires appear ineffectual in breaking up the endless wasteland and the empty sky. The men doing their jobs, trying to impose limits on an expressionless and terrifying expanse of space, seem to unconsciously recognize the futility of their attempt to make an impression on the desert. One of them voices the uncertainty and discomfort we already feel from the images on the screen: "You see lakes and rivers that aren't really there, and sometimes you think the wind gets into the wires and sings to itself." The desert is deceptive and the wind sings, not to man, but to itself. People go into the desert and don't return or they return transformed in some way by the experience: the little girl stumbling out of it in shock in *Them!*, the "taken over" small town folks of *Invaders from Mars*, the hired man in the unfortunate, but still fascinating, *Beast with a Million Eyes*, the gangster in *Most Dangerous Man Alive*. In *Beast with a Million Eyes*, the camera, at the film's beginning, lets us peep into the desert (which we shall see more extensively later on) through a curtain of safe and civilized foliage while the narrator talks about the strangeness and evil of place: "It has to do with a feeling you get when you think about what's out there beyond the grove." The desert nurtures and protects the alien, the mutant; in this setting which—like the beach and sea, and less frequently the Arctic—has experienced every form of evolving life, nothing is strange. The giant spider of *Tarantula* or the ants in *Them!* look normal in such a context; it is only in comparison with Man and his works that they seem huge and grotesque. The house isolated in the desert in *Tarantula* is visually doomed when we see it; it cannot possibly survive against so straight and vast a horizon and it doesn't, whereas the mutated animal organisms seem immediately at home. In bleached sunlight, a man and a woman stand in the desert, minute against a fathomless sky and an ungeometric, uncivilized outcropping of rocks, their automobile parked diminutively by the side of a quasi-road; they stand uncomfortably and the man says, "Every beast that ever crept or crawled the earth began here. All this was once an ocean. You can still find seashells out there." As far as the desert is concerned we could all be "a pair of ragged claws, scuttling across the floors of silent seas."[61] It remains connected to the primordial past and thus makes the present acutely uncomfortable.

As well, the earthly landscape of the seacoast with its beaches and caves

can be powerfully transformed into an alien environment as in *The Space Children*, a film which is a bit logically inoperative and, therefore, often dismissed without regard for its visual surfaces. A rocky seacoast and beach harbor an alien power (something which starts out as a provocatively glowing pebble, but which grows into a ridiculously glowing brain). Only the children in the area know of its existence and it telepathically commands them to sabotage a missile on a military base at which their fathers work. The power is more laugh-provoking visually than it is terrifying; what is terrifying, however, is the landscape. Only the children in the film possess any connection with the desolate environment, unaware of the implications of its frightening limitlessness, but even their connection to it seems one of morbid and visually controlled fascination. There are no happy beach scenes, children romping in bright warm sunlight; the film's images show us a beach and an ocean gray in a flat, bleak light by day, or dangerously dark and dank by night. The children are constantly seen clutching sweaters, picking up jackets, protecting themselves physically as they silently serve what's hidden in one of the caves. *Creature from the Black Lagoon* opens "[25] a camera prowls through writhing mists and half-glimpsed landscapes; the sea rolls endlessly to the horizon, and as it washes on a dark and empty
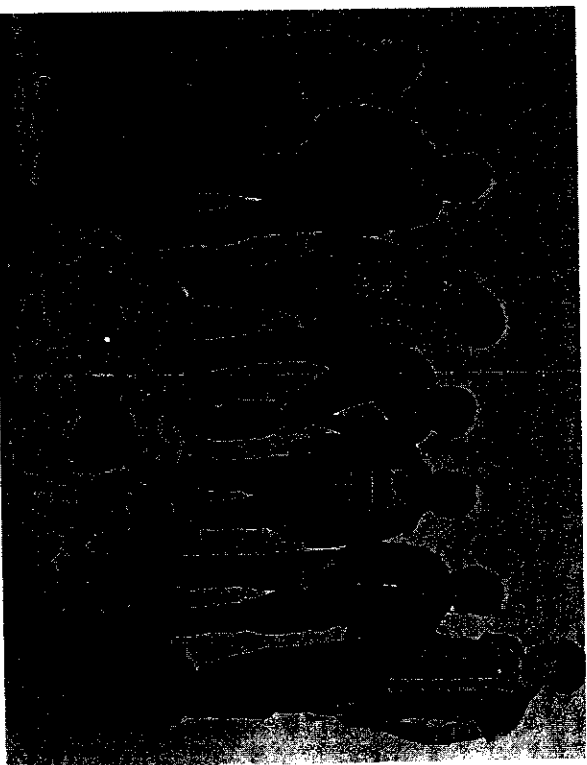
The Space Children (Jack Arnold, 1958). Publicity still. **In this film, the landscape and the children's relation to it are far more chilling than the alien invader. (Universal)**

beach, formless footprints are seen leading from the water up into the darkness."[[ ]] Possibly aeons later, we see the Creature, this "evolutionary dead end" in the shimmeringly beautiful but finally unfathomable Black Lagoon. The pastoral loveliness of the water's surface is transformed by the camera to a "primal sink"[[ ]] in which the Creature is seen as graceful, sensuously and powerfully swimming, at home in an environment in which man looks ridiculously gawky in flippers and oxygen mask. Like the desert and the seacoast, "the lagoon is a place . . . of clarification and terror."[[ ]] Its depth throws Man—and the viewer—into an awareness of his isolation, his essential homelessness. This homelessness, this feeling that Man is no more than a transient on the planet, is visually realized in many of the films where the characters are seen as not even strong enough to set up permanent dwellings on the hostile land. The family of the little girl who has stumbled off the desert in *Them!* was living not in a house but in a trailer which we see demolished, its personal belongings and furniture strewn about on the sandy ground as so much straw in the wind, broken and ravaged. The general store which is raided for sugar by the ants is made of boards, rickety and full of cracks; not only do we hear the wind blowing through the chinks in its poor armor, but we see the sand insinuating its way in to coat the counters and the floor, already starting a process of erosion which will eat away all traces
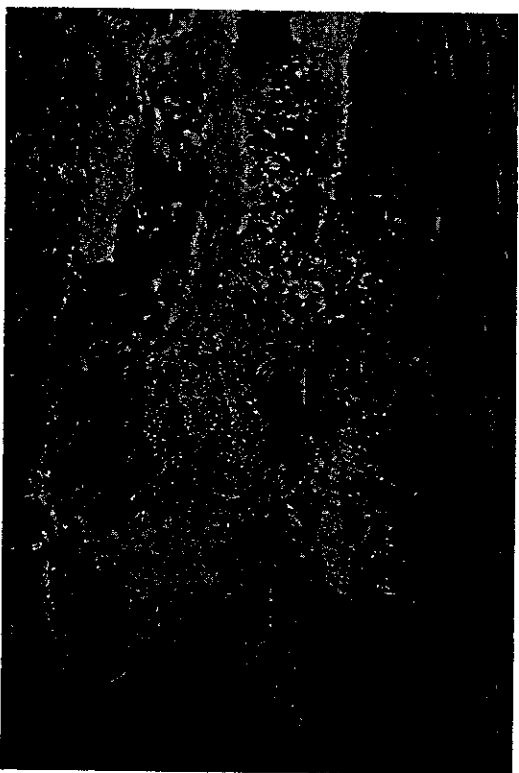
Creature from the Black Lagoon (Jack Arnold, 1954). The Black Lagoon's pastoral loveliness is turned to a "primal sink," a place of both "clarification and terror." (Universal)
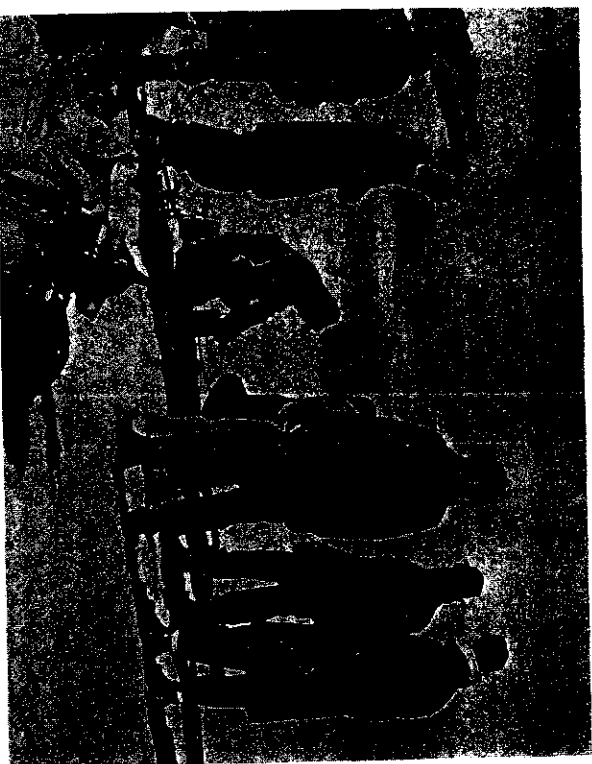
The Thing (Christian Nyby/Howard Hawks, 1951). Subversion of the landscape: the frozen and hostile world of the Arctic in which human geometry is chillingly at odds with the landscape. (R.K.O./Winchester)

of Man. In *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, the characters live in a boat, fragilely floating on the surface of an unknown world. In *The Space Children*, the children and their parents live in little mobile homes, a trailer park on the brink of infinity; the lights in the windows—seen against the bleakness of the terrain and the blackness of night—are only the smallest candles lit against this chaotic and incomprehensibly alien void here on Earth, a world made out of once-familiar things.

Films visualizing the terrain of Earth as alien and hostile have been made in locations other than the desert and beach, although not as frequently. The Arctic has effectively given us the frozen and hostile world of *The Thing* (Christian Nyby/Howard Hawks, 1951); the long-shot of the men physically describing a circle on a vast field of ice in an attempt to discover the dimensions of a buried space vehicle is awesome not because of what's beneath the ice, but because their diminutive achievement of geometry is so chillingly at odds with the landscape. The beginning of *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (Eugene Lourié, 1953), also takes advantage of the Arctic as a hostile background for the discovery of the Rhedosaurus, which will proceed to produce a different kind of visual power when it arrives in Coney

Island. The swamp and jungle have threatened us much less effectively, however, and have been used with even less frequency than the Arctic in SF film; they seem to belong more to the landscape of the horror film than they do to science fiction: *The Leech Woman* (Edward Dein, 1960), or *Frogs* (George McCowan, 1972). They have not been particularly useful in evoking that sense of the void which gives the low-budget film its uniquely devastating visual quality. The swamp and the jungle—however alien to those of us who are used to pavement beneath our feet—are too leafy, too obstructed, and constricted to allow us that sense of limitless and unconquerable space that can be visually evoked by the desert, the sea, and the Arctic, that sense of rootlessness and impermanence which awes and terrifies us all. Here it might be interesting to note that as long as the "other" is on the desert, on the beach, or in the water, it is almost always indestructable. As long as it is connected with the landscape which supports it, Man cannot successfully subdue it. That previously anthropomorphic union between Man and his physical environment has been changed to show a union of hostile forces. Man can only conquer in his own small enclaves. The giant ants are killed in city drains, not in the desert; the "Thing" is electrocuted indoors, not destroyed on the frozen wasteland of Arctic ice; the alien power in *The Space Children* can return, unharmed, from whence it came since it has made no move to leave the cave on the beach; the Creature is safe as long as he remains in the Lagoon.

There is yet another type of visual subversion of a familiar landscape in SF film which should also be considered here and which is not confined to low budget films: the transformation and alienation of the city. There are images in certain SF films (most often those dealing with postatomic holocaust) which show us emptiness on a scale which is psychologically as well as visually awesome. These films depend for their visual power not on a grand battle between man and alien forces in a familiar and active urban context, but rather on a subversion of that context's familiarity. When we think of the city, when we see it in "real" life or even in most movies, it is bristling with activity, people, traffic, motion. To see it robbed of that motion (which is, after all, a visual sign of life) is to see it as something devastatingly strange, to see it "as if some robot camera had continued to unwind film and photograph the world without man's help." 45
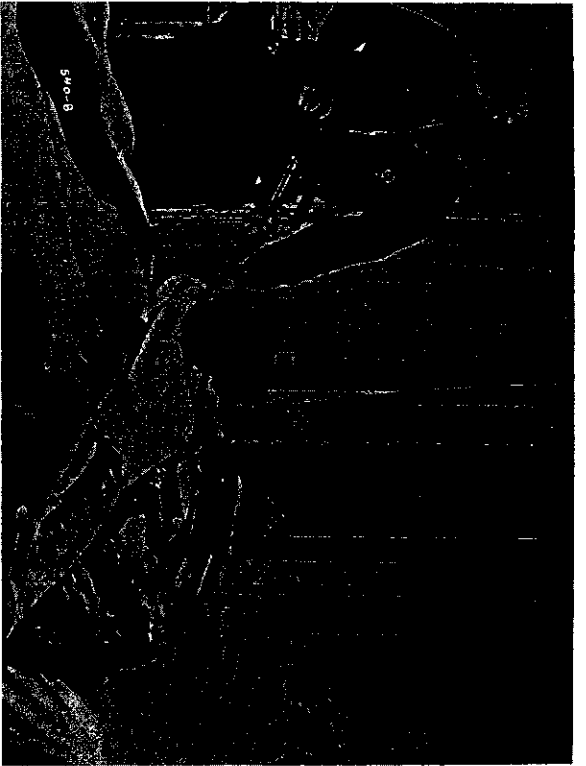
In *Five* (Arch Obler, 1951), we enter, with the heroine and villain, an empty canyon whose walls are skyscrapers, whose floor is punctuated by static and forlorn automobiles distraughtly angled; nothing moves but the car in which they slowly ride, and a skeleton stares out at them from a window. *On the Beach* (Stanley Kramer, 1959), shows us a submarine crew trying to find the source of a signal from a radioactively dead America. The men wander in an empty San Francisco only to "discover the source of the
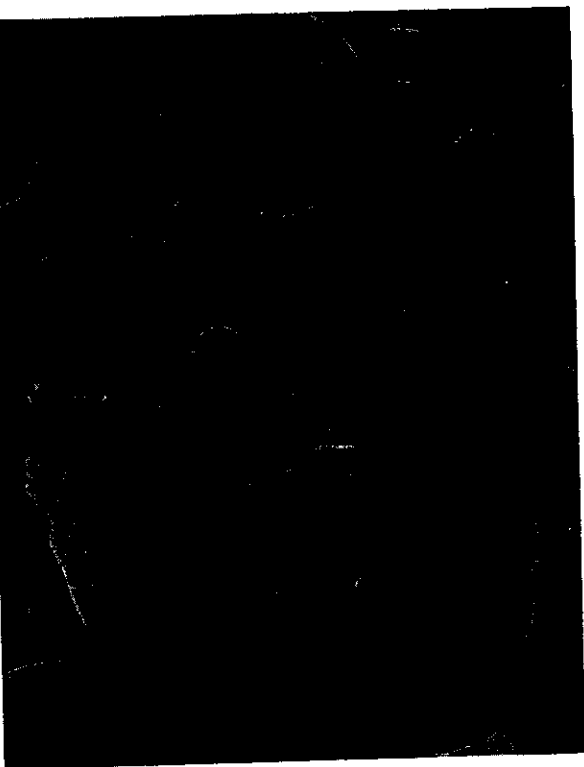
On the Beach (Stanley Kramer, 1959). One of many films featuring the inactive, dead city. (United Artists)

signal, the random tapping of a morse key by a bottle caught in a window blind; the final, horrifying irrelevance." 46 (And a Coke bottle, no less.) This dead stillness, this emptiness, is continually explored by the camera in *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (Ranald MacDougall, 1959), which roams through New York City, down Wall Street, around the United Nations building. Cars eternally stalled on a bridge, newspapers blowing down the street as if to mock animate existence—these are recurring images in the postholocaust cities of science fiction from the fifties through the seventies. Different than the visual impact of the photographed action of disaster, this is the still and silent "garbage of disaster"; 47 the Statue of Liberty literally brought low in *Planet of the Apes*, the razed and time-encrusted Radio City Music Hall marquee and the subway station of its sequel *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (Ted Post, 1970), or "the empty city, the untended houses, the corpse-filled hospital beds" 48 in *The Omega Man* (Boris Sagal, 1971).

The city, then, is as susceptible to the void as the small town sitting on the edge of the desert or by the sea. "Film photography of a world untenanted by man (the streets of a modern city ...) brought to men themselves, the spectators of this fantasy, an awareness of their own self-created

world nominally, technically, and finally divorced from their participation. Man had made this world no longer 'his,' insofar as he was foreseeing the time when mankind would have no hope for survival, become virtually extinct." [69]
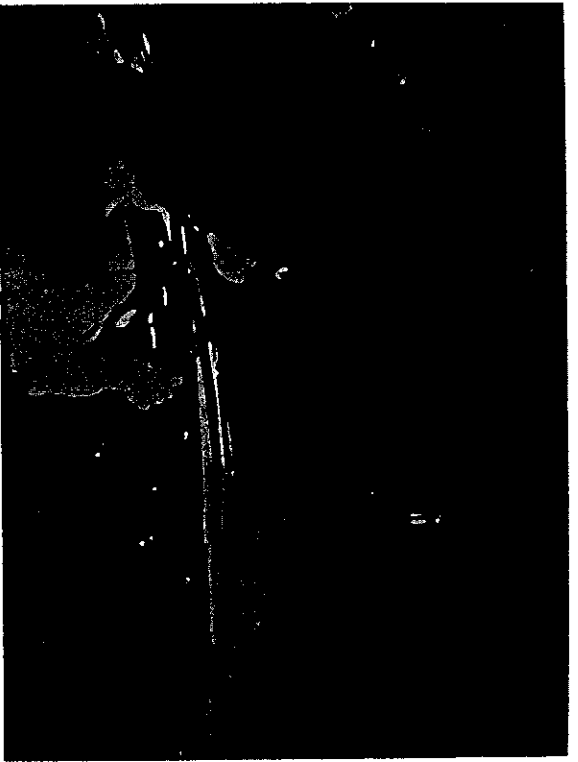
The Dehumanization of Humans

Visual subversion of the familiar, of course, is not limited solely in subject to the landscapes or cityscapes of science fiction. The same negative imaginations which alienated the viewer from his beloved and anthropomorphic Earth were also the imaginations which changed filmdom's "friendly people next door" into the cold and passionless alien beings who invaded so many low-budget movies. Although certainly less visually startling and physiologically amazing than the assorted flamboyant aliens and slimes created through the use of expensive special effects, the "taken over" human figures of the low-budget SF film make up in their power to disturb us what they lack in the power to astonish. While we may react with varying degrees of detached wonder to invading Martians or Metaluman Mutants who are distinctly seen as "other" than ourselves, our responses to those aliens clothed in our

The Omega Man (Boris Sagal, 1971). The still and silent "garbage of disaster." (Warner Brothers)

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own familiar skins are another matter entirely. We expect unnatural behavior from something seen as unnatural, alien behavior from something alien. What is so visually devastating and disturbing about the SF films' "taken over" humans is the *small*, and therefore terrible, incongruence between the ordinariness of their form and the final extraordinariness of their behavior, however hard they try to remain undetected and "normal."

Most of the films which subvert human form and behavior—make of them something unknown—depend for their visual and emotional effectiveness on the contrast between the most dully normal, clichéd, and commonplace of settings and the quiet, minute, yet shockingly aberrant behavior of the invading aliens who pose as just plain folks. Thus, the setting of nearly all such films is small-town America, a community which is as familiar, predictable, snug, and unprivate as a Norman Rockwell magazine cover for *The Saturday Evening Post*. In such a world, against such a background, the smallest deviation from the norm, from ritual and habit, from warm, friendly, social—and even eccentric—Americana will carry the visual force of a Fourth of July fireworks display, if not a space-age nuclear detonation. What is chilling about the films, what causes our uneasiness, is that they all stay right at home threatening the stability of hearth and family, pronouncing quietly that nothing is sacred—not even Mom or Dad, nor the police chief, not even one's own true love.

In *Invaders From Mars*, the first to be "taken over" are a little boy's father and mother, then a little girl, and next the chief of police. (As in the majority of such films, we do not see the actual process of transference from alien body to human, although the gimmick is revealed: a red crystal embedded into the base of the victim's neck accomplishes the transformation.) *It Came From Outer Space* has the protagonist's girlfriend among those "taken over." The brilliant *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* transforms families (a little boy flees from home and hysterically maintains that his mother isn't his mother anymore); authority figures, friends, and, finally, the heroine whose passionate humanity has been cooled by the aliens while she sleeps. *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (Gene Fowler, Jr., 1958), carries the threateningly successful charade into the nuptial bed. And *The Day Mars Invaded the Earth* (Maury Dexter, 1962), presents us with the final and cinematically singular perversion of familial togetherness: a scientist and his family are "taken over" in an atypical finale, the end of the film revealing them "incinerated by the Martians' rays and their ash silhouettes flushed down their empty swimming pool, while their simulacra drive off in the family car."[70]

Much of the attraction of these invisible invasion films has been attributed to their metaphorical realization of the *angst* of modern man living in a technological, bureaucratic, and conformist society. More than any other

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aspect of the SF film, the plot device of being "taken over" has commanded the serious attention of critics of both film and popular culture. Thus, for example, the protean *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* has prompted various political and social analyses which are, as well, relevant to even the worst of the alien "infiltration" films. (Briefly, for those readers unfamiliar with the film, *Body Snatchers* tells the story of a town invaded by aliens who take over humans while they sleep, aliens who after having grown to maturity—inside giant seed pods—look like their human counterparts but are really emotionless simulacra.) Ernesto Laura feels "it is natural to see the pods as standing for the idea of communism which gradually takes possession of a normal person, leaving him outwardly unchanged but transformed within."[72] Brian Murphy bases the film's appeal on its convincing atmosphere of paranoia: "the image of people, your postman, your policeman, your wife, being taken over by an alien force was rendered with horrible and frightening conviction."[72] Charles Gregory writes: "Made in 1956 in the middle of the decade, peopled by men in gray flannel suits, the silent generation, the status seekers, Senator Joseph McCarthy, and lonely crowd, Siegel's science fiction

It Came From Outer Space (Jack Arnold, 1953). The subversion of the human—the alien invasion in which humans are "taken over" creates visual paranoia. (Universal)

thriller was a cry of frustrated warning against the conformity and uniformity of a society that was blissfully living in the best of all possible worlds."[73] Susan Sontag goes beyond this one film to generalize about the significance of being "taken over," depersonalized, in all the films of this type. She views being "taken over" as "a new allegory reflecting the age-old awareness of man that, sane, he is always perilously close to insanity and unreason"[74] and she also sees in the films the playing out of the ambiguous appeal of pure reason. And Carlos Clarens looks at such films thus:

The ultimate horror in science fiction is neither death nor destruction but dehumanisation, a state in which emotional life is suspended, in which the individual is deprived of individual feelings, free will, and moral judgment . . . this type of fiction hits the most exposed nerve of contemporary society: collective anxiety about the loss of individual identity, subliminal mindbending, or downright scientific/political brainwashing.[75]

Amid all this critical activity, one might also note that there is a definite emotional appeal to the idea of being "taken over" which goes beyond the inherent attractions presented by the pod-psychiatrist in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and which is echoed in all the other films as well: "Love, desire, ambition, faith—without them life is so simple." That added emotional attraction is "no more responsibility." Being "taken over" can be likened to being drafted, to having to follow orders. "Taken over," we cannot be held accountable for our crimes—passionate or passionless.

In the heat of all the critical fires stoked by the varied significance of pods and Martians and other assorted aliens who insinuate themselves under our skins, it is quite easy to forget that all the discussion starts from a visual base, from images which, after all, are quite another thing than ideas. It is interesting, and just, that Don Siegel, director of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, although keen on the "message" about people as pods, speaks most convincingly in visual terms; he moves from the abstract concept to the visually concrete:

To be a pod means that you have no passion, no anger, that you talk automatically, that the spark of life has left you. Remember the scene in the movie in which Kevin and Dana walk down the street pretending to be pods? He tells her to walk normally, blankly, react to nothing, but she can't help letting out a gasp when she thinks a dog is about to be run over in the street. In a world of pods who don't care if a dog dies, her humanity betrays them.[76]

What I thought was quite delicious was our playing with the fact that as a pod you don't feel any passion. So, when he comes back to the cave and she falls, he tries to kiss her awake in a delicious non-pod way but she's a limp fish and he knows immediately that she is a pod.[77]
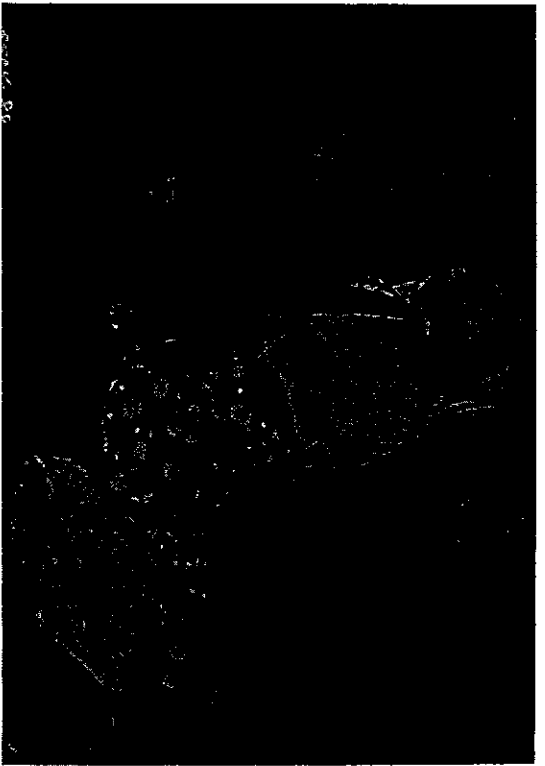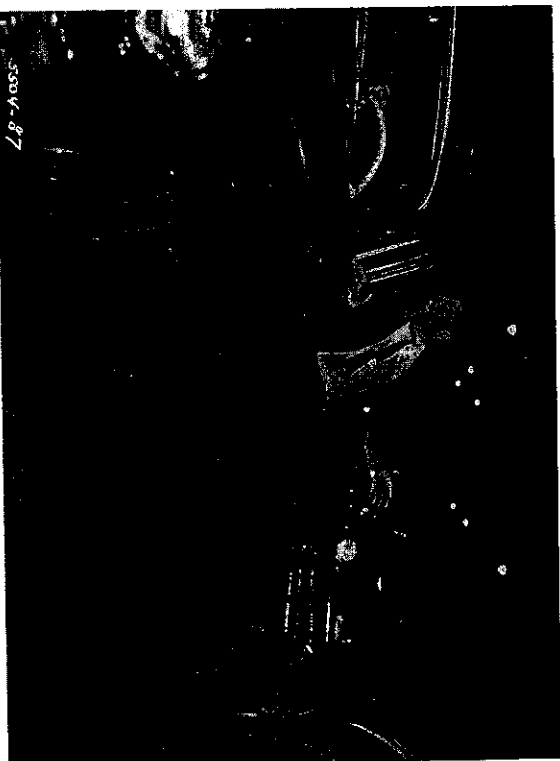
Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Don Siegel, 1956). When you're a "pod" you don't feel any passion. Miles is not able to kiss Becky back to humanity; she has been "taken over" by the aliens. (Allied Artists)

What is visually fascinating and disturbing about the images in films like Siegel's *Body Snatchers* is the way in which the secure and familiar are twisted into something subtly dangerous and slyly perverted. Looking at the small town America of the film mentioned is like looking at Andrew Wyeth's paintings; the subject matter is familiar, ordinary, but one experiences a tension which seems to spring from no readily discernable cause, a distortion of angle so slight as to seem almost nonexistent, but so great as to set the teeth intolerably on edge. Those aliens in the films who have "taken over" human bodies behave so nearly correctly that their primarily quiet distortions of human behavior are like a slap in the face. One cannot laugh at such almost perfect performances; the "straight" and "trusted" characters who fill the screen in their purposefully gray and dull way do not act in a manner so crude or obvious as to parody human behavior. As viewers, we are forced into an extremely active role watching these films, a role not often demanded of us by movies; we are seduced by the minimal activity and novelty of what's on the screen into an attentive paranoia which makes us lean forward to scan what seem like the most intentionally and deceitfully flat images for signs of aberrant alien behavior from the most improbable of suspects. In an excellent monograph on violence and genre films, Lawrence Alloway indi-

rectly suggests that *suspense is nothing happening*.[78] If this is so, the films we've been discussing could hardly be more suspenseful and engaging for most of their duration—and this is not meant ironically. The fact that so little happens in a "movie" makes us, as viewers, exceedingly suspicious and watchful.

What gives the aliens away? As Siegel has pointed out by his examples, it is primarily a matter of *negative* behavior, of *not* doing something: a gasp not gasped, a kiss not returned. For most of the various films' duration, then, we sit attentively watching ordinary people being ordinary, so pointedly ordinary at times that they appear finally as wooden as the aliens and create an extra visual tension—not only can't we tell who *has* been "taken over," but we also can't tell who *hasn't* been "taken over." Thus, the films' flat angles, uninspired camera movements, and downright unimaginative cinematography seem finally purposeful in creating a *mise en scene* in which a drumming insistence on the ordinary creates extraordinary tension. In the films, it is an absence of response, a nonaction, we are told to watch for, a rather inverted and disturbing movie-going experience in itself. To see things "not happen" one has to watch the screen very carefully, indeed—and, in the few cases where the alien "human" actually does something revealing (the

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Don Siegel, 1956). The creation of paranoia: for most of the film's duration we attentively watch ordinary people being ordinary. (Allied Artists)

presence of action, rather than its absence), it is extraordinarily shocking no matter how small the action is nor how deemphasized it seems to be in the *mise en scène*. We cannot miss it, however "hidden" it is, for we have been compelled to watch those familiar images on the screen with the eyes of a hawk—and to distrust them with the heart of a paranoid.

John Baxter gives examples of both the active and passive aspects of the "take over" films in a discussion of Jack Arnold's *It Came From Outer Space*:

...Arnold cleverly uses disturbances in behavior to convey mood. All those people who have been "taken over" behave in a way slightly but eerily out of key; the two truck drivers, glimpsed in town by Putnam and cornered in an alley, emerge from the shadows *holding hands*, while one of the men, his attention drawn to the blazing sun, looks up and stares unblinkingly into it. When Putnam faces his girl on a windy hillside at dawn, she stands untroubled by the chill desert wind, while he must pull up his collar and flinch against its bite. Economically we are told that there is something outside our experience, a "different-drummered" world beyond our own.[70]


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It Came From Outer Space (Jack Arnold, 1953). A recurrent image is a loved and trusted person staring coldly into the camera or into off-screen space. (Universal)

We are told in these films that, indeed, there is something outside our experience—but we are also shown that the "something" is inside our skin. The intimacy of the threat is what causes us to respond with discomfort, if not downright anxiety. The films are rife with images of mothers and fathers, good doctors, average nice-guy truck drivers, telephone company linesmen—as well as images of little girls and boys and even a faithful dog (the latter

The Manchurian Candidate (John Frankenheimer, 1962). The "take over" films of the fifties transformed into the surreal paranoia of the sixties: The "aliens" are now Communist brainwashers, and Mom is the Arch-Villain. (United Artists)

is transformed in *Beast with a Million Eyes*) who finally do not act in ways merited by such usually sacrosanct roles. The major recurrent image in these films is that of a loved and trusted person staring coldly into the camera or into off-screen space, ignoring the protagonist's distastefully human, emotional display of concern or love. Visually, then, the films are heretical. The familiar characters we see on the screen and to whose roles we respond with complacency are not what they appear to be. And, because the image attempts to deceive us, no familiar person or activity finally escapes our scrutiny and our suspicion. The smallest gestures of the most innocent characters become suspect; nothing and no one can be taken for granted. Mother, father, husband, wife, child, neighbors, civil servants, must be watched for signs that they are, under the surface skin—invaders. We cannot automatically believe what we see. Thus, these films visually—as well as thematically—suggest that to trust and believe in other people (even those nearest and dearest and most familiar to us) is ridiculously naive and self-destructive; the way we watch the films—suspiciously—is the way we should watch each other, and "healthy" paranoia is made to seem a reasonable and self-preser-
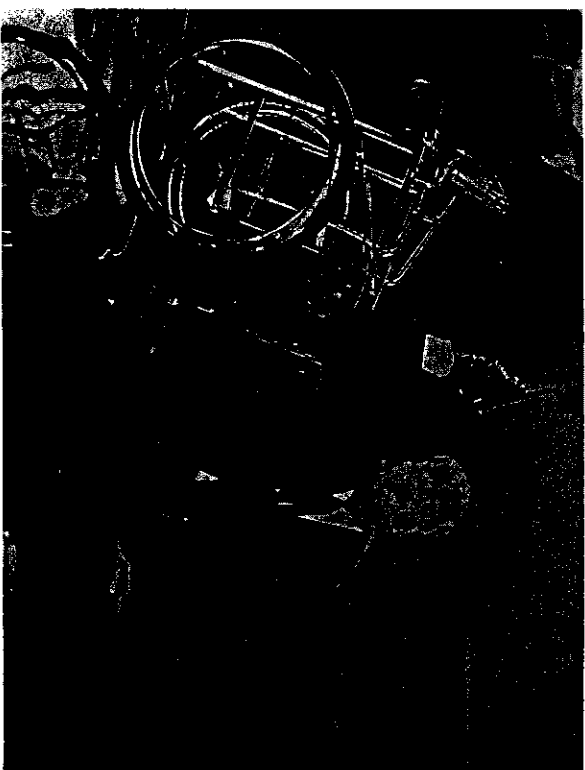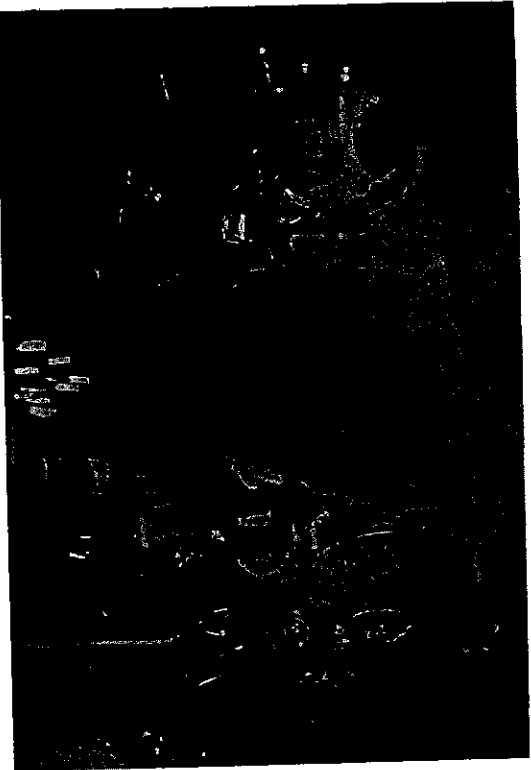
Dr. Strangelove: or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (Stanley Kubrick, 1964). Publicity still. The human is transformed and distorted into the alien with lenses, angles, lighting, and stylized performance. (Columbia)

vational alternative to trust. (It is interesting to note here that what is implicit in these films—most of them made in the fifties—is explicit by 1962 and John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate*. This political SF film, made when pessimism and chic disenchantment became big business, is bizarrely comic at times in its blatant revelation of Mom as Arch-Villain and its visual device of having the brainwashed "taken over" men remember their communist captors as little old ladies at a garden club meeting.)

Another means of transforming the human into the inhuman, the familiar face into an alien physiognomy, depends less on cinematic passive-aggression (that suspense created by "nothing happening") than it does on an actively aggressive and flamboyant use of filmic elements like lighting and/or distorting lenses. In a film like Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove: or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), the distortion of human faces and bodies is used to create a black comedy; the film deals with the insane inevitability of some high-placed madman pushing the button which starts a thermonuclear war. The "evil" and "mad" characters are lit so grotesquely as to suggest they have just stepped out of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* or an old Universal Studios horror film made in the thirties. Their gothic treatment is funny because it is incongruous with their more modern milieu (an up-to-date air force base) and their contemporary problems and idiosyncrasies. As characters who evoke the German Expressionist cinema by virtue of the angles at which they're photographed and the lighting which makes their faces grotesque, both General Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden) and Dr. Strangelove (Peter Sellers) are out of visual step with the style of the backgrounds in which they move, the characters with whom they interact. Their look is twenties cinema (the thirties at the latest), while the look of the backgrounds and most of the other characters is fifties: a gray and two-dimensional image capturing flatness with unimaginative and non-horrific light.

Obvious distortion juxtaposed with flat and gray images is also combined to fine effect in John Frankenheimer's *Seconds* (1966), a film in which James Wong Howe's use of distorting lenses conveys not humorous incongruity but, rather, chilling paranoia. *Seconds* is the story of a man who would like to start life over again and is able to pay for a spatial, occupational, physical, and hopefully spiritual "nose job." The protagonist (Rock Hudson) gets his second chance, but cannot, finally, escape himself; his "rebirth" is only a superficial one—and he blows his new life and his new "cover" and becomes an embarrassment to his corporate rejuvenators who must, at last, eliminate him. Cinematographer Howe uses a fish-eye lens to distort human forms into horrendous grotesques which evoke both paranoia and a sense of the mutability of flesh itself:

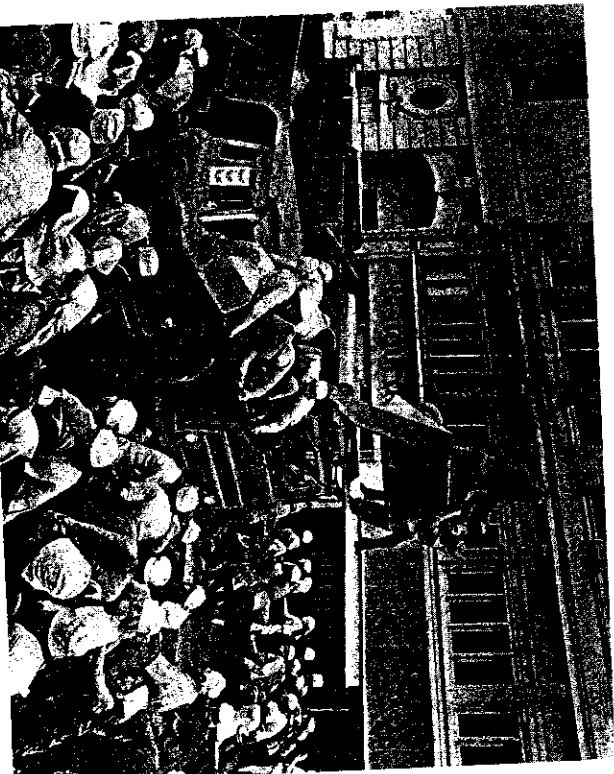In the climactic scene, the central note of the hero's awareness is that

there is no escape. Hence it is fully appropriate that the hands of the medical assistants who strap him down should be monstrous, utterly nonhuman. Nor should it bother us that their arms, similarly close to the camera and wildly exaggerated as to size, are themselves as large as all the rest of their bodies. What we see here is not the real world, but the subjective insight of a beaten man, overwhelmed by irresistible, diabolic strength.[30]

Human beings are not the only familiar subjects transformed in the SF film, made strange and new through visual subversion. *Soylent Green*, for instance, is at its best when visually convincing us that the staples of life we take for granted today are completely unknown to all but the most influential and wealthy inhabitants of New York City in the year 2022. Two scenes (excerpted from the unpublished screenplay and used in the film) establish how a visual treatment can make us wonder at something which normally wouldn't cause us to bat an eyelash. The first takes place at night in a place called Brady's Market; the *mise en scène* is thus described:

Dr. Strangelove: or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (Stanley Kubrick, 1964). In contrast to the Gothic visual treatment of madmen Strangelove and Ripper, the look of the military is fifties—gray, two-dimensional, unhorrific. (Columbia)

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Seconds (John Frankenheimer, 1966). Cinematographer James Wong Howe uses a fish-eye lens to distort human forms into horrendous grotesques. (Paramount)

Soylent Green (Richard Fleischer, 1973). The film is at its visual best when convincing us that small things (a tomato, running tap water) are wondrous and strange. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer)

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A man with a shotgun sits guard just inside the door. Against one wall there are bins containing not more than a half dozen each of items like bread, apples, lettuce, celery, onions. There are some shelves with jars, not cans, of preserved fruits. There is an old refrigerated case with glass doors revealing some bottles of milk and small cubes of butter. Mr. Brady, nobody's fool, and all of these goods are protected by a wire mesh rising from the counter dividing him from his customers. It looks more like a pawnshop than a black market grocery store.[81]

In this setting, when we finally do see a small piece of beef (the script says it is "unappetizing by our standards"[82]), it is—or was in the only mildly inflated days of 1973—as alien to us as it is to the girl who is paying $279 for a small bag of groceries. Later, the film's protagonist, a detective named Thorn (Charlton Heston), is so entranced with the taken-for-granted sensual pleasures of a middle class bathroom that it is impossible for us to look at the bathroom in the film as a familiar place:

...Thorn almost reverentially turns on the sink taps. The water cascades out. He lets it run over his hands for a moment. He spots a piece of soap. Smells it, then experimentally tries it on his hands. After rinsing off the lather, he again smells his hands in some wonder. Then he cups his hands and splashes it on his face, hair, neck.[83]

Soylent Green may have its moments, but like many big-budget, color, SF films starring Charlton Heston (the rich man's Richard Carlson), the visual subversion of familiar images seems only a peripheral concern, a way station on the road to bigger and better and more shocking or spectacular revelations. The very dramatic and technical impulse toward visual extravagance and leisure which compose the artistically rich blood of the big-budget SF films results in a film style completely antithetical to the economic anemia which keeps the low-budget films so utterly and rigorously dependent on their visual use of a familiar world. Therefore, despite its occasionally effective transformation of the familiar, *Soylent Green* seems to visually meander among its various cinematographic options in contrast to the visual insistence and single-mindedness of a low-budget SF film like Jack Arnold's *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. The latter film's entire visual movement is toward a transformation of the absolutely familiar into the absolutely alien, and this is accomplished with an economy of means Martin Rubin justly feels transforms "functionalism into the poetry of the mundane."[84]

In *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, we are forced by the slow process of Scott Carey's (Grant Williams) miniaturization to constantly reevaluate our responses to the ordinary and normal, to the animate and inanimate. John Baxter, for example, points to the changing role of the family cat "from
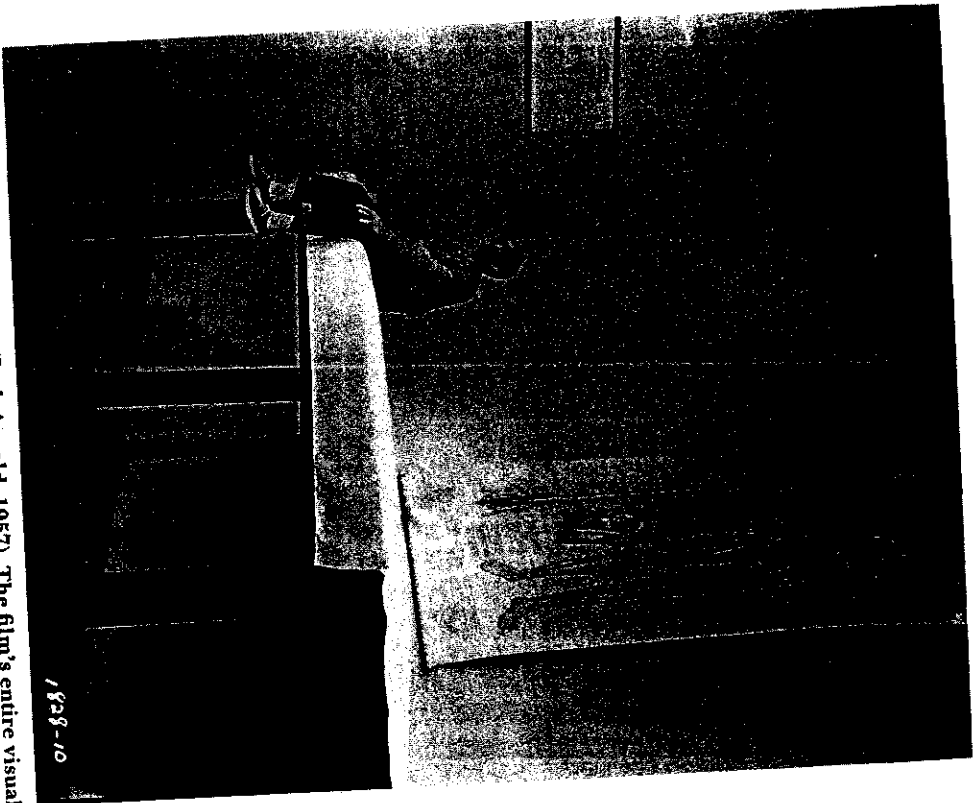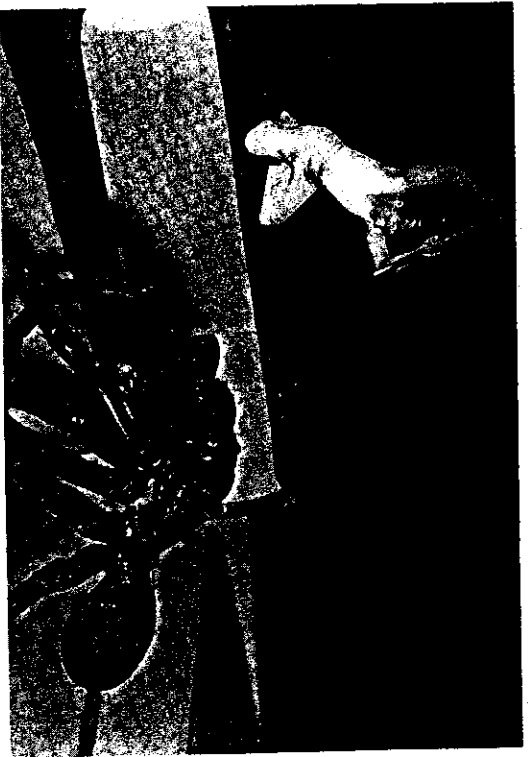

The Incredible Shrinking Man (Jack Arnold, 1957). The film's entire visual movement is toward a transformation of the absolutely familiar into the absolutely alien. (Universal)

prop to companion to menace."[85] Scott's wife and brother become increasingly less sympathetic, their humanity dwindling as they physically loom larger on the screen until they are obliterated by a kind of visual synecdoche: a huge foot on the cellar stairs. It is fascinating and indicative of the film's entire visual emphasis that the cat and the spider who are Scott's antagonists become more personalized than either Scott's wife or brother. But, as Martin
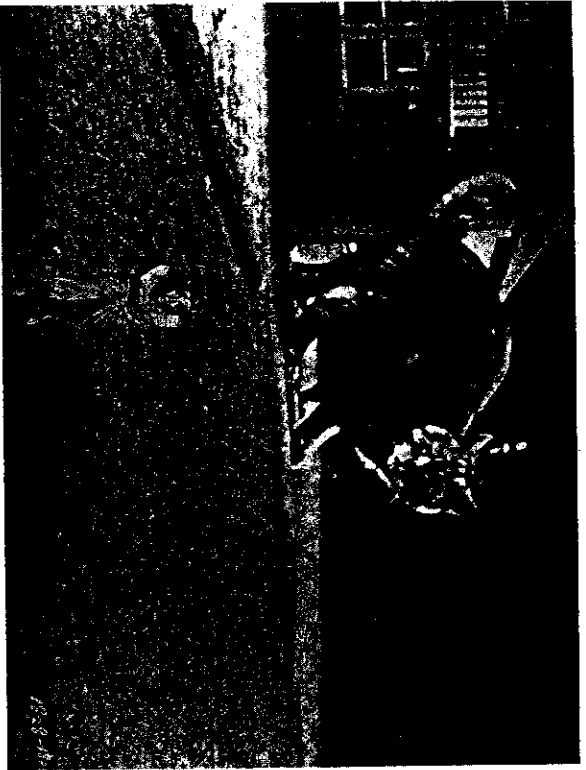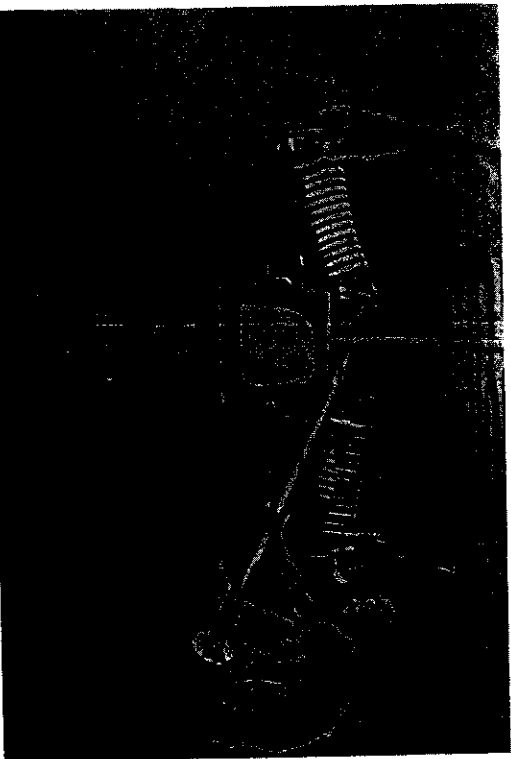
The Incredible Shrinking Man (Jack Arnold, 1957). We are forced to reevaluate our response to the ordinary and normal. The family cat, for instance, changes in function from "prop to companion to menace." (Universal)

Rubin notes, what causes even more wonder than these animate "monsters" are the film's mundane objects, which take on entirely new meaning without having to change their appearance.[86] (Physically, of course, they do change size, and are the result of art directors Alexander Golitzen and Robert Clatworthy's suitably proportioned sets, as well as effectively used back projection and optical effects.) Rubin also draws a parallel between the way in which the film makes us newly aware of the ordinary and what is called New Realism in modern art (e.g., Warhol's Campbell Soup can): "A lawnmower . . . could almost be a Ready-Made by Duchamp. A coffee can, a pin cushion, a drop of water, the corrugated surface of wood . . . to resemble an exhibit of ultra-realistic modern sculpture."[87] *The Incredible Shrinking Man* is, perhaps, paradigmatic in its ability to totally alienate us—and its protagonist—from a customary taken-for-granted environment. Despite its somewhat gratuitous and metaphysically upbeat ending ("In the eyes of God, there is no zero"), visually the whole film moves us pessimistically and existentially away from the supposed security of human relationships, the comforts and connotations of "home," into a totally vast, unstable, and non-

The Incredible Shrinking Man (Jack Arnold, 1957). The cat and spider as Scott's antagonists become more personalized than either his wife or brother. (Universal)

The Incredible Shrinking Man (Jack Arnold, 1957). What causes even more wonder are the film's mundane objects. As with Warhol's Campbell Soup Can, we are forced into a new relationship with the ordinary. (Universal)

anthropomorphic universe. As Carlos Clarens has pointed out, the film "introduced a very different type of fear into the dark solitude of movie houses, not instant annihilation but a gradual inexorable descent into nothingness."[88]

Although there will always be exceptions, in the final analysis it is the low-budget, black and white, SF film which has created a definite and sustained *visual style* arising from its subversion of the familiar. It is unfortunate, however, that because the films are so visually quiescent, so deceptively flat, many film critics have seen not a style, but rather a lack of style. Martin Rubin, for example, while admiring *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, not only fails to make a distinction between low- and big-budget science fiction, but also seems to see the SF films' visual success as highly dependent on the *lack* of talent and imagination of their directors:

...science-fiction films are best served by bland or mediocre talents. For instance, a Wellesian director would have overinflated this film and compromised its sense of the ordinary with shadows and angles, while a more accomplished stylist of almost any other order would have softened it too much—such attitudes are better off in the horror film ....the genre is best represented by efficient and functional technicians like Gordon Douglas and Joseph Sargent. In such a stylistically blind (and bland) world, one-eyed directors like Arnold, Don Siegel, and Stanley Kubrick are kings.[89]

Clearly, Rubin sees SF film style paradoxically deriving from its very stylelessness, its lack of "personality." And certainly, if one equates flamboyance with style, the low-budget SF film does, indeed, lack style. But if one sees visual style as a specific cinematic way of looking at the world and as a specific way of responding to it, then the low-budget SF film has style enough to spare. The combination of inexpensive settings and unexpressive actors with a special effectless and relatively confined *mise en scene* has resulted in a group of films which have at their worst made mediocrity mildly interesting, and at their best have created memorably bleak, pessimistic, and poetic visions of a fragile and precarious Earth inhabited by equally fragile and hollow men.

The Alien and the Familiar: The Aesthetics of Collision

Thus far we have explored the visual nature of two basic types of SF film, each, generally speaking, antithetical to the other and each visually communicative in its own unique way. Where the more solvent color science fiction extravaganza is confident and optimistic in its "I came—I saw—I

conquered" visual movement (a movement which creates and then subdues the extraordinary), its lower budget counterpart is marked by a relentless pessimism reflected in a constant visual affirmation that, indeed, each man is an island, isolated and alienated from even the most familiar of people and places and things (a visual movement which surrenders to and then destroys the ordinary).

There is, however, a third kind of SF film which seeks a middle ground —a sort of cinematic demilitarized zone—between visual optimism and visual pessimism. In fact, this type of SF film is principally dependent for its power upon its ability to achieve visual neutrality, to evenly balance both its alien and familiar content—its fantasy and realism—in the same frame, so that we are amazed by their togetherness and their collision, by their compatibility and their incongruence. In these films "the poetry ...radiates from the bombardment of the familiar by the unfamiliar."[90] Most often, however, that poetry is climactic rather than constant, the films' major visual movement a kind of photographic foreplay, a teasing and tickling of the viewer's anticipation of and desire for the final collision and bombardment of opposite elements in the same frame.

Thus, in such films as *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, *The Amazing Colossal Man*, and *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (to name only a random few in the grouping) the visual movement is from *montage* to *mise en scene*, from unremarkable fragmented editing of separate shots to the long take and a climactic collision of previously isolated elements in the same frame. The suspense in these films is generated not merely by the literary question of whether the monster or aliens can be stopped and mankind saved, nor is it prompted only by an anticipation of cathartic disaster; a great deal of our rising curve of excitation is based on a cinematic teasing of our desire to see "everything" in one uncut long shot, to see what we know is unreal and impossible made real—authenticated—by its presence in a real and familiar context which has been photographed in a manner reserved for actual and real happenings, uninterrupted by either art or commentary. The rhedosaurus in *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* is remarkable primarily in its visual relationship to Coney Island and the roller coaster; abstracted in closeup, fragmented by editing, it might as well be an ordinary lizard.[91] *The Amazing Colossal Man* is no big deal (is, in fact, just another actor: Glenn Langan) until he strides through a recognizable Las Vegas and we see him remove and wear a giant crown which has topped one of the casinos. The flying saucers of *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* are memorable not for their static symmetry, but for their aggressive action in long shot, their attack against a Washington, D.C., defined by its monuments and landmarks and by its realistic appearance on the screen. Ray Harryhausen, who engineered the special effects for the film, explains the realism:
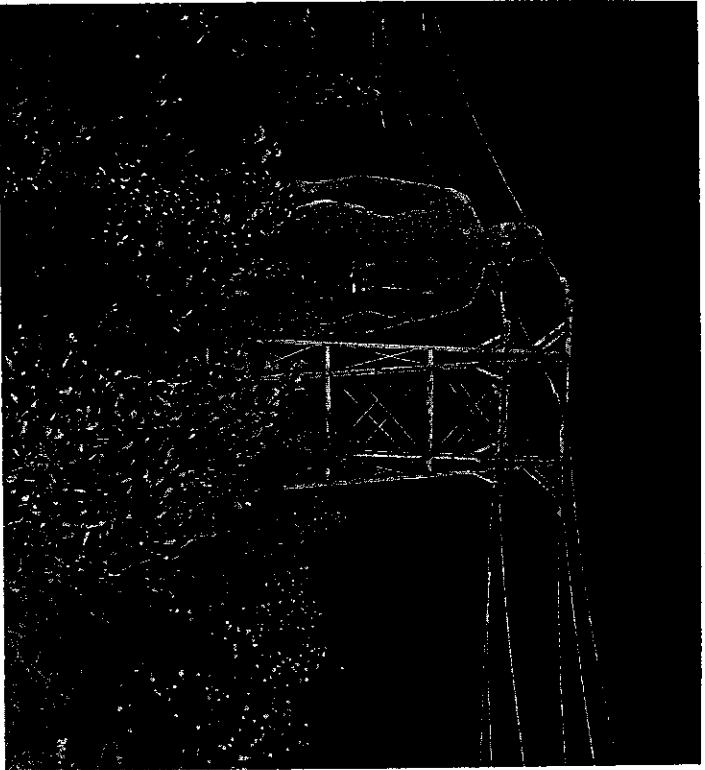
War of the Colossal Beast (Bert I. Gordon, 1958). This sequel to *The Amazing Colossal Man* attempts to set the giant against a familiar landscape, but lacks the original's amazing specificity of place, its setting in Las Vegas. (American International)

Many shots were of the real buildings in Washington. We, of course, did have model duplications for the destruction sequences but our budget didn't permit high-speed shooting so the collapse of the buildings had to be animated frame by frame. That meant that each brick was suspended with invisible wires and had to change position with every frame of film. Dust and debris were added later. It was something I would never do again.[92]

Whether or not such painstaking work was done again is another story, but the urge toward this kind of authenticity is certainly relevant here.

At this point, it is interesting and quite apropos to note that in his famous essay, "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," film theorist André Bazin used fantasy films as examples to demonstrate how the illusion of realism can be achieved or destroyed by the editing decisions made by the film-

maker. Much of what he has to say about the use of *mise en scene* or the long shot and long take to "authenticate" a fiction could be well applied to the visual thrust of this last large group of science fiction films, films which move from the fragmentation of editing (*montage*), from separate shots in which neither humans, city, nor Creature are particularly amazing, toward the spatial unity, maximized "reality" and wonder of the long shot and long take which reveals humans, city, and Creature together in one frame (*mise en scene*). The plots and visual progression in such films move toward that one climactic moment when "those elements previously separated off by montage"[93] are brought together in the same frame so that what has until that moment been kept imaginary and unwondrous is presented with "the spatial density of something real."[94] Thus, the climax of this third group of SF films is a moment in which a spatial relationhsip—not merely a Creature—is revealed: the giant octopus created by Ray Harryhausen for *It Came From Beneath the Sea* (Robert Gordon, 1955), wrapping its tentacles around San Francisco buildings and destroying the Golden Gate Bridge; Willis O'Brien's *The Black Scorpion* (Edward Ludwig, 1957), tangling with a helicopter and an express train in Mexico; *The Deadly Mantis* (Nathan Juran, 1957), finding refuge in a tunnel under the Hud-
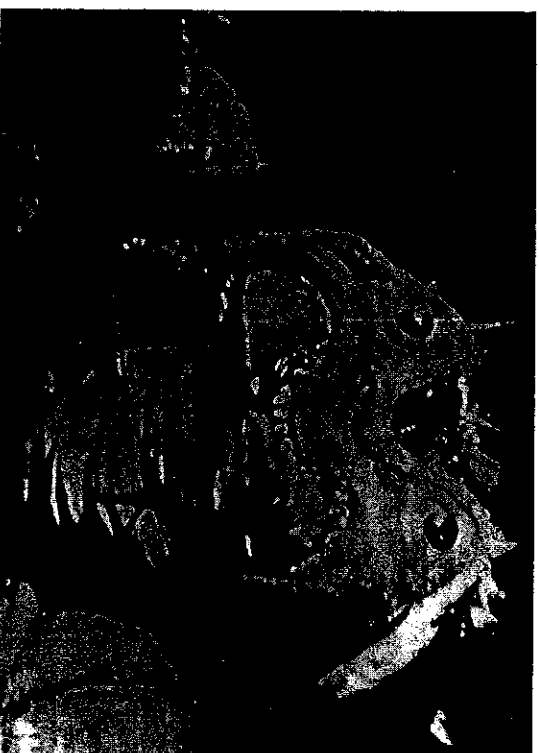
The Black Scorpion (Edward Ludwig, 1957). Fake looking in close-up, this "scorpion" gains power and poetry only when it is restored to the *mise en scene*. (Warner Brothers)

son River; Harryhausen's Venusian "Ymir" wrecking Rome and bar-ling an elephant in *20 Million Miles to Earth* (Nathan Juran, 1957). In reference to his work in this last film, Harryhausen said: "In designing it we used all the Roman ruins and monuments, including the real Colosseum. The creature was matted into the real scenes."[95]

What we move toward, thirst for, in such films, what fulfillment we find in them is in the cinematic realization of an *imaginary action* occurring in what seems to be documented *real space*. As Bazin points out: "If the film is to fulfill itself aesthetically we need to believe in the reality of what is happening while knowing it to be tricked."[96] The fictions of these SF films and their ability to give us pleasure "derive their full significance . . . from the integration of the real and the imaginary."[97] The creature, in other words, was matted into the real scenes. What is so satisfying in the visual climax of such films is not simply an act of destruction, of wrecking, and the catharsis and aesthetic pleasure which Susan Sontag suggests is the result of being able to "participate in the fantasy of living through one's own death and more, the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself."[98] Catharsis, loosely defined as it is these days, can be brought about by films which have nothing to do with science fiction. And wrecking, with its scatological satisfaction, is also not unique to science fiction (witness the whole concept of the demolition derby and the spate of "disaster" films


20 Million Miles to Earth (Nathan Juran, 1957). Imaginary action in "real space." (Columbia/Morningside)

which show us ocean liners overturning, skyscrapers tumbling or ablaze). There is, however, a satisfaction which is uniquely derived from the SF film, which arises from the combination of those two antithetical words—"science" and "fiction." The satisfaction comes from seeing the visual integration of actual and impossible in the same frame, from the filmmaker's ability to make us suspend our disbelief at the very moment we are also wondering, "How did they do it?"

Both the creation and the release of emotional tension in these films is equally brought about by the cinematic introduction and resolution of a visual and perceptual paradox: the coexistence of the real and the fake in the same frame, the same context, the same moment of screen time and viewer apprehension. Most often scorned, and defined primarily by the Creature whose singular iconic fate seems to have been its confrontation with urban civilization, this group of SF films under discussion moves toward a *simultaneous* collision and collusion between what is real and what is faked, between what we know to be a fact (Washington, D.C., in *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* or Rome in *20 Million Miles to Earth*) and what we know to be a fiction (those flying saucers and the Venusian Ymir).

The wonder, then, which is caused by this simultaneous visual collision
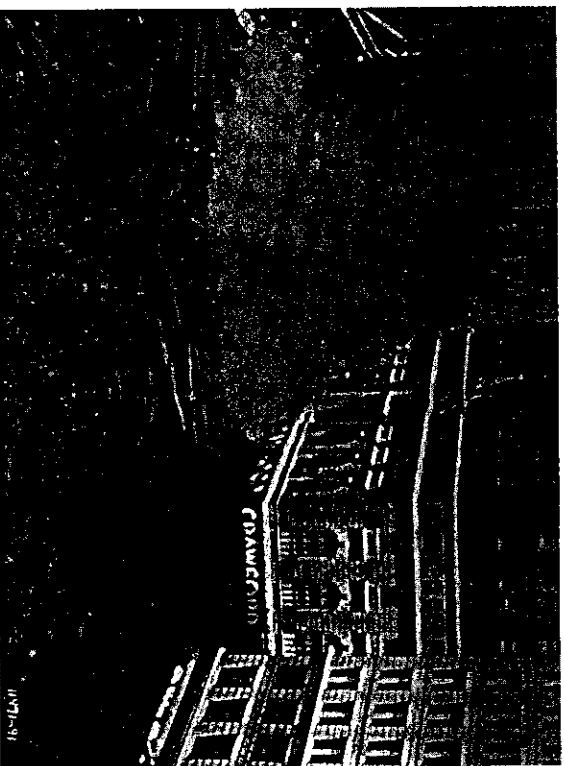
When Worlds Collide (Rudolph Maté, 1951). The collision of the real and the imaginary in the same frame. New York is inundated by a tidal wave as a roving planet moves toward Earth. (Paramount)

and collusion does not necessarily arise from the "aesthetics of destruction . . .", the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess," as Susan Sontag suggests it does.[99] The mess is only contributory to the wonder, and not the source of it. Certainly, images of destruction are peculiarly pleasing and satisfying to watch on the screen, but they are not dependent upon the juxtaposition of the real and the fake for their aesthetic effectiveness. A volcano erupting in a documentary gives us similar aesthetic satisfaction as Tokyo toppling in *Godzilla*. The wonder of this last grouping of SF films arises from a more particular visual source than destruction itself, a source dependent upon a juxtaposition which creates *incongruence*, "the same special, deliberate incongruity we see in surrealist paintings . . . the kind of incongruity which makes one stare and stare and stare because of the confusion of emotional associations attached to different objects placed in the same visual frame."[100] Thus, demolition, destruction, and wrecking are not essential to the wonder generated by the incongruent content of the images on the screen. The toppling of national monuments by flying saucers, the squashing of automobiles by alien reptilian feet, aesthetically pleasing as they may be in their destructiveness, are finally a flamboyant demonstration

Reptilicus (Sidney Pink, 1962). Although we find aesthetic pleasure in destruction, that pleasure is also the result of seeing a flamboyant demonstration of incongruence in action. (American International)

of incongruence in action; the mere fact of action is a Q.E.D. to a proposition already proved more quietly: the coexistence and equivalence of the real and the imaginary in the film frame. Destruction is not a necessary element of the wonder we feel; *The Amazing Colossal Man* amazes us quietly by inspecting a woman's slipper of giant proportions which has been atop a Las Vegas casino, by being absorbed in his own concerns while he towers over a city whose actual size and landmarks are known to us.

The wonder which we feel at the incongruence of elements within the frame is also critically enhanced by its flat presentation, a presentation which has been seen less as a condition of our amazement than as an aesthetic joke. Surely, what finally adds to our amazement is the camera's eerie and inhuman *lack* of amazement. The incongruence is accepted and contained with the utmost blandness by the camera, the camera which not only rejects the hysteria of motion and the emotionalism of angles but which faces the incongruence with such documentary coolness, such bizarre placidity, that one wonders at the implacability of its stare as much as one wonders at the subject of its gaze. The blandness of the camera's view is incongruent with what it is viewing and an extra element of incongruence is thus added to the content of the image. It is odd, then, that those very few critics who have noticed the neutral flatness of the camera vision have pejoratively
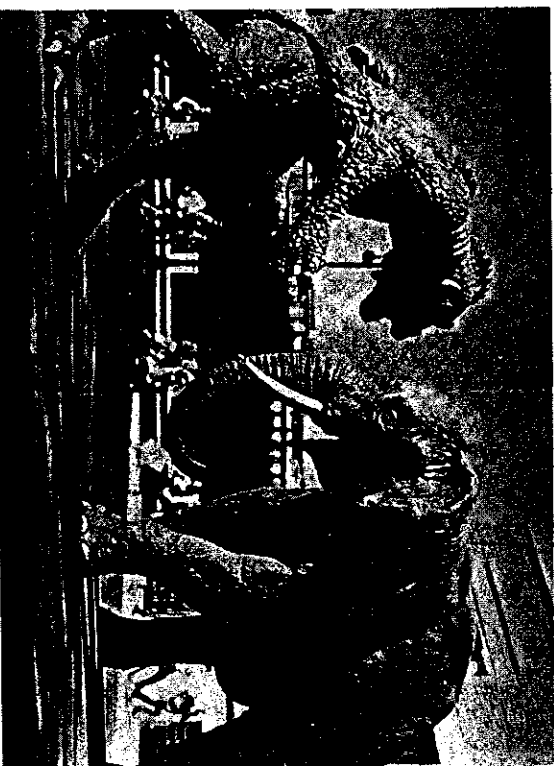

20 Million Miles to Earth (Nathan Juran, 1957). The camera's eerie and inhuman lack of amazement. (Columbia/Morningside)

evaluated it as a demonstration of "bland and mediocre talents"[101] or as a recurring accident rather than as a definite style used—consciously or unconsciously—in connection with specific subject matter in the most rigid and classically conventional manner possible.

Frank McConnell, for instance, is one of the few critics who acknowledges the visual nature of such films and correctly assesses their effect: "the remorselessly plain camera angles of these movies insist on the same vantage for humans and monsters; and therefore inadvertently project flat visual equivalence between the 'normal' and the freakish which is finally a devastating reduction of humanistic perception." [102] What is disturbing about McConnell's acute analysis, however, is that he sees the effect of the insistent cinematography, and the resultant reduction of humanistic perception, as something negative. Might not the lack of imagination McConnell sees demonstrated by the flat vision of the camera, the "reduction of humanistic perception," as readily be seen as positive, as an expansion of perception beyond the human, as—indeed—inhuman but in being so also offering us an imaginative alternative to the way we "normally" view the freakish. Finally, the impassive third-person camera eye, in its flatness, its balanced and symmetrical attention to both the real and the imaginary, creates a wonder which is unique. It arises not from the visual transformation of the alien into something known as
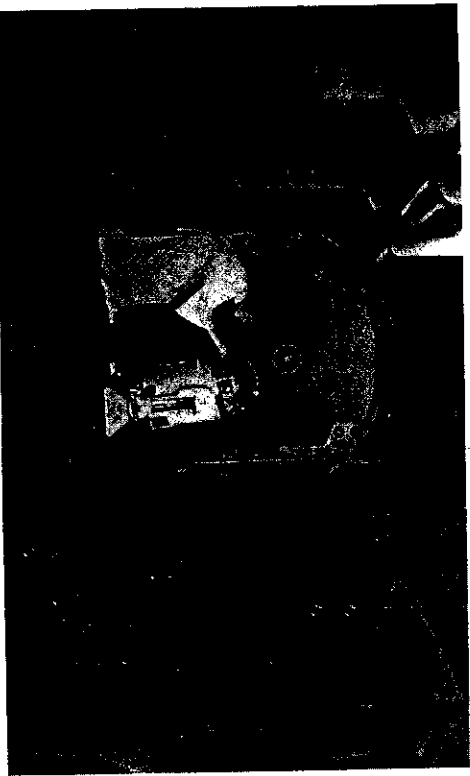
Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977). The impassive third-person camera eye, in its flatness, its balanced and symmetrical attention to both the real and the imaginary, creates a wonder unique to science fiction. (20th Century Fox)

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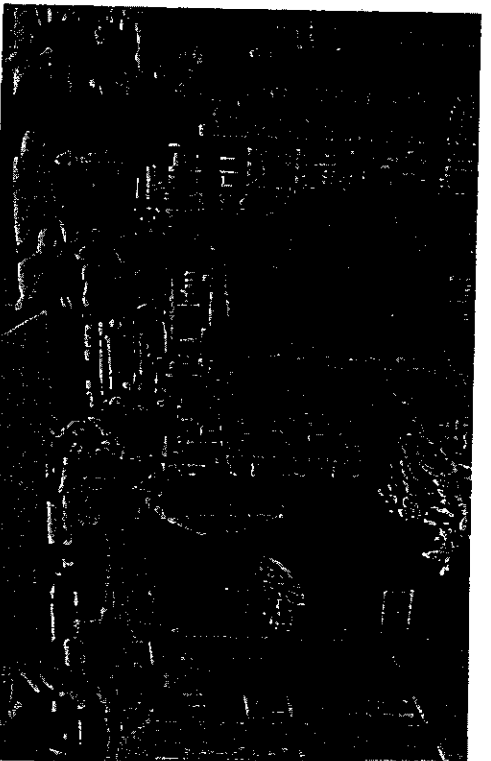
The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms (Eugene Lourié, 1953). The Creature films simultaneously evoke the security and safety to be found in objectivity and the terror created by such apocalyptic indifference. (Warner Brothers)

does the optimistic visual conquest of big-budget science fiction. Nor does it arise from the conversion of the ordinary into the alien as does the pessimistic visual subversiveness of low-budget science fiction. Rather, this third group of much-maligned SF film balances and equates the ordinary and the alien in a vision neither humanly optimistic nor pessimistic.

To some viewers, the films of this group are not worth the watching. And it is finally true that in most of them we are treated or subjected (depending on one's response) to fragmented images which only at the last gain visual significance in *mise en scene*, to plots and images which are the most rigidly repetitious and conventional of all science fiction films from their first montage of news casters to their last surveillance of the wreckage. To some, those few moments of wonder are not worth waiting for. But the wonder is finally generated and the vision (like the techniques used to create it) is finally paradoxical in its simultaneous cinematographic evocation of the security and safety to be found in objectivity and the terror created by apocalyptic indifference. Susan Sontag begins her now-classic essay "The Imagination of Disaster"; "Ours is indeed an age of extremity. For we live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror." [103] What is unique about this last group of SF films is that its visual style demonstrates simultaneously both the unremitting banality and the inconceivable terror.

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