

LOST IN SPACE [1998]

by

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In 2058, Earth, running out of resources, is planning to colonize other planets. Not wanting to leave his family behind, scientist John Robinson (William Hurt) takes his biologist wife Maureen (Mimi Rogers) and physician daughter Judy (Heather Graham), teen-age daughter Penny (Lacey Chabert) and computer whiz son Will (Jack Johnson) on the 10-year journey. They are reluctantly joined by a macho fighter pilot, Major Don West (Matt LeBlanc). Dr. Smith (Gary Oldman), under pay of secessionist terrorists, has sabotaged their robot (voice of Dick Tufeld), but is stuck on board with the ill-fated crew/family. Will reprograms the robot, but not before considerable damage is done to the ship. To escape falling into the sun, they engage the hyper-drive, which sends them randomly to somewhere else in the universe. They encounter a time warp where they find an abandoned ship sent to rescue them, now filled with terrifying alien spider-like creatures. To escape these, they crash-land on the planet below, only to find another time-warp in which they find Will, now a grownup (having constructed a time machine), and Dr. Smith (turned into an alien spider bent on invading Earth). The adult Will sacrifices his life to restore the family and save Earth. (PG-13)

In the 1970s, science fiction films like *Star Wars* saved the universe. Now, in the 1990s, science fiction films like *Lost in Space* save the family instead.

Hollywood has endlessly mined TV as a source of recent films – sometimes successful (*The Fugitive*, *The Brady Bunch*, *The Addams Family*), sometimes awful (*The Beverly Hillbillies*). With the attraction of an audience already primed by both nostalgia and comfortable familiarity (perhaps these are the filmic equivalents of “comfort food”), TV is a tempting resource. As with much nostalgia, the remembered version has only tenuous ties to its original.

The tackiness of TV’s *Lost in Space* (the spaceship seems to be made from two paper plates glued face to face), which ran from September 15, 1965, to September 11, 1968, was part of its charm – especially for its mostly prepubescent audience. Its look was strictly “let’s go into the backyard and play space cowboys.” There seemed to be no attempt to hide the telltale edges of the cardboard sets. The fact that young Will, with the help of his powerful but friendly robot, constantly thwarted the adult, educated and powerful Dr. Smith didn’t hurt the fantasy aspects for the intended 10-year-old audience. However, as this audience grew up, nostalgia overtook the accuracy of memory. What is commonly forgotten is that TV’s *Lost in Space* is perhaps the most sexist TV show of its day. (Some episodes make *Leave it to Beaver* look like it was scripted by N.O.W.)

Reconfirming the patriarchy was the foundation of TV’s *Lost in Space*. The American model of the family – powerful, active, and knowledgeable males of all ages,

subservient females – was the unquestioned standard. In fact, between *Lost in Space* and a few other TV programs, this family structure became “natural.” For instance, in the world of the Hollywood film, despite what any anthropologist will tell you, this American Family has existed since prehistoric times (*The Flintstones*) and will extend into the far distant future (*The Jetsons*). And, if you look carefully, you will see that the problems addressed by the three sets of families are essentially identical.

The makers of this film are aware of both the successes and the flaws of the TV series and made some obvious corrective attempts, primarily in the family structure. (Women are much stronger in the film than the TV version – Judy is a competent physician, but still needs medical attention from the males, and she does get romantic with Don West on *her* terms; Maureen powerfully prevents macho displays from becoming violent.)

While the family is still the “American ideal” in form, it is no longer so in function: father spends too much time at work and has no time for his wife and children; young Will chafes under the lack of parental attention and becomes surly, partially retreating into a fantasy world of time travel; raccoon-eyed daughter Penny has reached outside the family for attention and is now distraught at losing her friends, while at the same time becoming a punk-dressed rebel in a vain attempt to get parental attention. Parents watching this film will immediately recognize these characters. Perhaps the “naturalization” of these family problems into the distant future relieves contemporary parents of some of the burden of guilt since, if these problems exist far into the future with these very sophisticated people incapable of handling them, we’re not doing too badly ourselves. As I mentioned above, the whole point of *Lost in Space* is not to save the universe, but to restore the family through a series of disconnected adventures.

The film’s plot feels like a random selection of TV episodes and science fiction ideas stuck together in no particular order to fill an hour-and-a-half of screen time: hyper-drive, colonization of other planets, Earth’s impending ecological collapse, sabotaged robots, cryogenics, non-carbon-based life, cute alien creatures, time travel, and so on. Yet each episode is in some way engineered to “fix” one member of the family. For instance, the cute (but with tackiness reminiscent of the TV version) alien creature gives Penny an opportunity to display responsibility and she suddenly becomes a dependable member of both the family and the crew. Dull and predictable, but in our current socio/political climate, apparently necessary stuff.

The most entertaining aspect of *Lost in Space*, aside from the spectacular visuals, is the humor derived from the nostalgia and other media references. Penny’s pet Blurp is a CGI cross between Felix the Cat and Abu, the monkey from Disney’s *Aladdin*. There are cameos from the original cast members including June Lockhart and Jonathan Harris. However, the best bit is a reproduction of the “good night” scene from the *Waltons* – now cast far out into space.

The great special effects cannot make up for the film’s flaws. However, preadolescents of today may remember this film twenty years from now with the same

nostalgia that baby boomers view the TV version. Meanwhile, it is an interesting look into how our family-conscious sociology is finding its way (unsuccessfully in this case) into popular culture.

Directed by Stephen Hopkins. Written by Akiva Goldsman. Distributed by New Line Cinema, 1998.