

# The Illustrated Man

## Film review

Dennis Raymond

1969

There is a tendency to casually dismiss works of science fiction and the supernatural in the arts, as if this type of thinking were just too cheap, too trivial to be bothered with. “2001” was virtually boycotted by the New York dailies and periodicals.

“The Illustrated Man” is a thoughtful, stimulating, and absorbing movie—one that I will return to see again and again and yet, if its early critical reception is any sign, I fear that this film will be largely underrated and thereby lose the very audience it seeks to contact.

Based upon the book by Ray Bradbury “The Illustrated Man” opens quietly, modestly, carefully defining the mood and feeling of the Depression Era. A young drifter (Robert Drivas) encounters a wandering Circus roustabout (Rod Steiger) on a desolate country road, and the two share their food, fire, coffee, and conversation.

As the night approaches and the talk becomes loose, the roustabout reveals the hundreds of tattoos painted on his bare flesh.

“No, don’t ever call them tattoos,” he says. “They’re ‘skin illustrations.’”

It seems that years ago, when he was still a young man, the roustabout was seduced by a beautiful Siren (Claire Bloom) who covered his body with these indelible marks in exchange for a night of love.

He awoke to find the Siren vanished, gone “back into the future,” but her “illustrations” remained—intricate, hallucinogenic, hypnotic drawings that the mind could get lost in.

But don’t stare at them too long,” warns the Circus roustabout, “because they begin to move; they come alive and tell you things that are best not known.”

But as the young drifter studies three of the illustrations—a lion’s head, a rocket ship, and a pair of lips—we, the audience, are permitted an apocalyptic glimpse into three different periods of the future: a future where the landscape is alternately beautiful, horrifying, touching, shocking, and lyrical.

Bradbury’s future is a world where children are capable of destroying their parents without thinking twice about it, where the furnishings in a suburban home look like a plumber’s nightmare, where the falling rain never ceases pelting your brain. It is Bradbury’s vision of hell, and hell was never more poetically portrayed.

Bradbury is an unabashed romantic at heart. He can write on something as distantly removed from our culture as science fiction or the future or the supernatural with the same endearing affection and love that Picasso might have painted his great “Mother and Child” with.

It’s easy to understand why Bradbury has expressed such contempt for Stanley Kubrick’s “2001”; where Kubrick’s future is cool and impersonal, Bradbury finds warmth and poetry. And although his prose sometimes evolves into sheer schmaltz, he succeeds more often than he doesn’t.

Jack Smight’s direction of “The Illustrated Man” also succeeds more often than it doesn’t, and when Smight succeeds, he’s on top of things and his movie turns into something really beautiful. When he fails, he fails in the same way that Bradbury does; his direction turns self-consciously arty and poetic, recalling the worst excesses of “Elvira Madigan,” and the movie becomes embarrassing.

Smight doesn't need to photograph through milky filters or use preposterous camera set-ups because his own simple, unadorned visual style is so close to perfection in itself. His relaxed sense of rhythm paired with the exquisite imagery and Jerry Goldsmith's haunting, evocative score (one of the best I have ever heard) achieves a pure poetry in its own right.

The most effective episodes in the film occur when we are least aware of the artifacts of the medium, when the camera and crew recede and merge with the strong dramatic content almost as one element.

Our interest never falters as Smight deftly juggles the film past, film present, and three variations on the film future without ever skipping a beat. For a stunning demonstration of the artistry of putting pictures together there's nothing in town any better than Jack Smight's "The Illustrated Man."

But even more impressive than Smight's technical finesse is his power to make us tingle with excitement or cower in fear and shock, to touch our hearts and maybe move some of us to tears. The characters who people Bradbury's landscapes are always fascinating, and if we can accept the basic premise of science fiction as a genre, we can accept them and their fantastic situations just as easily as we accept a surrealistic landscape painted by Dali.

The film ends at an impasse. The Circus roustabout, the illustrated man, is left to wander about the country searching for the woman who once made love to him and then left her indelible mark on his body and soul.

And watching this film, I couldn't help but think that everyone, every person that we come in contact with, in some small way, leaves a mark upon us, some evidence of their presence, as each of us moves a separate path around the earth looking for someone who will love us.

When the movie ended, I filed out of the screening room rendered speechless no, disturbed by the powerful presence of this movie, only to discover that, in its own way "The Illustrated Man" had left its own indelible mark on me.

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