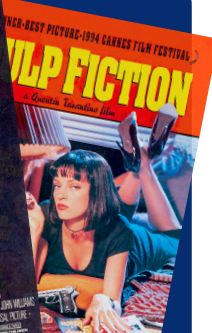
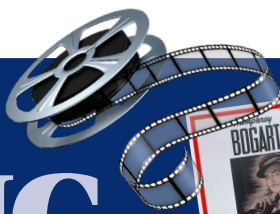


THIS WEEK'S CLASSIC MOVIE

by Madeline Pritchard



Eco-warrior: Bruce Dern as eccentric astronaut Lowell



The box-office returns for 1969's *Easy Rider* caused Hollywood to sit up and take notice. Suddenly, previously conservative studios were willing to greenlight low-budget projects that showcased emerging talent.

Over at Universal, there were follow-ups from the *Easy Rider* boys themselves: Dennis Hopper's *The Last Movie* and Peter Fonda's *The Hired Hand* – the first a flop so legendary that its title became almost prophetic, as Hopper wouldn't direct another picture for more than a decade. George Lucas' *American Graffiti* was the only one of Universal's youth projects to make the profits its producers had hoped for – its success lent Lucas the cachet to request the sequel rights for a little script he was working on called *Star Wars*.

In amongst these anointed and soon-to-be anointed movie legends was Douglas Trumbull. Known as a visual-effects pioneer, Trumbull's experiences working with Stanley Kubrick on *2001: A Space Odyssey* had pushed him to direct for the first time. The project was to be based on a concept he had devised, an ecological sci-fi tale called *Silent Running*.

As much a product of the counterculture as *Easy Rider* and the rest, *Silent Running* is a sci-fi story that has the preservation of the natural world at its heart. Joan Baez sings hauntingly about children in the sun as we watch Lowell (Bruce Dern) tenderly caring for the plant and animal life he has cultivated in vast geodesic domes aboard a ship orbiting



Silent Running

'There is no more beauty! And there's no more imagination! And there're no frontiers left to conquer!'

Saturn. The plan – at least, so he believes – is some day to return these habitats to Earth and repopulate its now desolate surface. With him on the ship are three fellow crew members (none of whom shares Lowell's commitment to their mission) and three service 'drones'. These robots, charmingly

played by four amputees in suits – Mark Persons, Steven Brown, Cheryl Sparks and Larry Whisenhunt – are the highlight of the film. They have definite characters, but are never anthropomorphised or given anything we could recognise as a face – the closest they come to a human gesture is when one taps the

other on the shoulder, telling it to turn around (a happy accident, a moment between the actors Trumbull decided to keep in). George Lucas, who tried to persuade Trumbull to work on *Star Wars*, has cited the drones in particular as an enormous influence on R2-D2 and his other droids.

That *Silent Running* was made for \$1m, less than a tenth of the cost of *2001*, was in part possible because Trumbull reused and perfected effects he had developed for the earlier movie. Another money-saving wheeze was to shoot the interiors on a decommissioned aircraft carrier from the wars in Korea and Vietnam, the USS Valley Forge (which lends its name to Lowell's spaceship). The set lends a down-to-earth realism to the affair – here, space travel is not a novelty and there is no glamour attached. While other films have been credited with the invention of the 'used universe' look – a gritty, beat-up future, featuring ships manned by blue-collar space truckers – Trumbull clearly did it first, before *Star Wars* or *Alien*.

The movie was a commercial failure, probably because the studio put little in the way of effort or investment into publicity, and Trumbull's career as a director fizzled out (he made just one more feature, the ill-fated 1983 sci-fi thriller *Brainstorm*). He later exercised his considerable skill and unique vision in creating effects for *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*, *Blade Runner* and *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, but *Silent Running* is his true legacy – a film full of heart and hope that also created a look for sci-fi that we now think of as the norm.



Space men: Dern with director Douglas Trumbull

Saturday ■ Horror Channel ■ 6.45pm

Photos: Alamy