

IN SEARCH OF RICHARD MATHESON: SCIENCE FICTION SCREENWRITER

[Sample Text]

Dean Conrad

Richard Burton Matheson died on 23rd June 2013, aged 87. As the author of stories that have inspired a slew of notable science fiction films, including *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Arnold 1957), *The Omega Man* (Sagal 1971), *I Am Legend* (Lawrence 2007) and *Real Steel* (Levy 2011), he was always likely to be remembered by *Foundation* in a retrospective tribute article such as this; simply put, ‘[a] science fiction legend has passed...’ (Persons 2013). However, initial research for this piece quickly revealed that it is not quite as simple as that. This writer is a little harder to pin down. We might agree with Ray Bradbury’s statement that Richard Matheson was ‘[o]ne of the most important writers of the twentieth century’ (Matheson 2010: i), but a writer of what? Science Fiction? Horror? Fantasy? Certainly. We might safely agree that Matheson was a master of all three, but there seems to be little agreement over categorisation of individual texts. Bradbury’s quote appears in, amongst other places, the recent Gollancz *SF Masterworks* edition of Matheson’s first published short novel, *I Am Legend*. In his introduction to this edition, Graham Sleight refers to the original 1954 text as ‘one of the simplest of great SF novels’ (Sleight 2010: vii). The afterword for the same volume is written by Stephen King, who refers to the work as ‘horror’, adding that ‘...without Richard Matheson, I wouldn’t be around’ (King 2010: 162) - praise indeed from a master of the horror genre.

This apparent category conflict is not confined to *I Am Legend*; it emerges regularly in connection with Matheson’s work, as he borrows, bends and melds genre tropes in the service of his fantasy narratives. Sleeve notes to a 2007 DVD copy of *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, for which Matheson wrote the screenplay, claim the film to be ‘[o]ne of the best science-fiction films of the 50s’ (see Arnold 1957); Podcaster, Dan Person, calls it ‘...the archetypal 50’s [sic.] horror film...’; and Phil Hardy’s *Aurum Film Encyclopedia* refers to it as ‘[o]ne of the great anxiety movies of the fifties (Hardy 1991: 169). This reluctance to be categorised is reflected in *I Am Legend*’s four distinct screen interpretations, and is further evident in its clear influence on films as diverse as George Romero’s ‘seminal’ zombie classic, *Night of the*

Living Dead (Romero 1968) and L.Q. Jones' post-apocalyptic satire, *A Boy and His Dog* (1975).

Before looking closer at Richard Matheson's screen work, consider this: he published more than 100 short stories and almost 30 novels; two of the latter are considered seminal works of genre fiction. By most measures, that is a successful publishing career. In what might be seen as a secondary career as screenwriter, Matheson wrote over 30 TV episodes, a further 30 or so features for cinema and television, and is credited as the story inspiration for many more projects. By most measures, that is a successful screenwriting career. The following pages examine Matheson's influence on television and cinema. As will become clear, it is impossible to avoid hoary old questions of genre definition as we go in search of Richard Matheson: science fiction screenwriter.

Very Richard Matheson

Late on in the period of research for this essay came a viewing of David Koepp's 1999 film *Stir of Echoes*, adapted for the screen by the director from Matheson's 1958 novel *A Stir of Echoes*. Kevin Bacon plays Tom Witzky, for whom a hypnotism session triggers a series of visions, which he shares with his son. These are ghostly echoes of past events that coalesce to create a current mystery. Witzky's behaviour becomes increasingly erratic and frantic until he solves the mystery. It is a difficult film to pin down in terms of genre. What is notable is that this late screening gave rise to the research note, 'this story is *very* Richard Matheson'. It is a horror story, with resonances of *The Shining* (Kubrick 1980) and a ghost story, with links to *The Sixth Sense* (Shyamalan 1999). It is also framed partly as science fiction, not least through its use of hypnotism as a trigger for Witzky's visions and subsequent behaviour, not unlike the experience of Robert Neary in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg 1977).

This melange of generic elements is typical of Matheson's own screenwriting, both original and adapted (usually from his own work). The use of hypnotism as an attempt to employ science of a sort in order to quantify the irrational is typical of Matheson's *oeuvre* - and central to the search for a label for his work. In his review of Matheson's source novel, Ray Wallace writes:

A Stir of Echoes is Richard Matheson's clinical look at psychic phenomenon as he tries on various occasions throughout the book to try and explain many of the events scientifically. (Wallace 2014)

This scientific justification approach is already well established in the short novel that brought Matheson to prominence in 1954, *I Am Legend*.

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