



RETURN OF THE OUTSIDER: THE FILMS OF MIKE HODGES

Morons from Outer Space

I first saw *Morons from Outer Space* at the ABC cinema in Oxford on its release in 1986. I went with my family and I remember two things. That the cinema was basically empty and that I laughed harder than I had ever laughed in the cinema. I was 10.

It has never stopped making me laugh. I watch it at least once a year. And I still laugh. I unapologetically love this film.

A box-office failure from 1986 starring Mel Smith, Griff Rhys Jones and, well, Jimmy Nail, it tells the story of four hapless humanoid aliens who accidentally crash land their spaceship (kind of an intergalactic caravan) on Earth, specifically on the M1, just outside Hatfield. It's a spoof – not the most highly regarded genre out there – and most excruciating of all, it's called *Morons from Outer Space*. Probably the worst title ever bestowed upon a film, let alone one which already had so much working against it on paper.

Nobody saw it. Nobody wants to see it. I don't blame them.

So why do I love it? Well, first and foremost, it's a genuinely funny film. And the things that made me laugh when I was 10 are not the same as the ones which make me laugh now (apart from the moment where, watching the riot outside their flat live on TV, one of the aliens says 'that man's about to throw something', at which point a brick flies through the window and brains Griff Rhys Jones). Like the best comedy – and, yes, I might be about to compare *Morons* to Chaplin, it combines the most base physical humour with sophisticated social commentary.

It mocks British social mores, aggressive American foreign policy, and every level of the establishment and media. Then it turns its eye on your average human Brit and shows us how preposterous we are when scaled to the universe as a whole. Beer-swilling, fashion-obsessed, lazy, rude, petulant, with a massive sense of self-entitlement and very little self-awareness.

Specifically, *Morons from Outer Space* was an attempt to burst the bubble of late 70s/early 80s sci-fi as ushered in by Steven Spielberg. It took the grandiose visual style, the dolly-in close-ups of men in suits looking enchanted, the spaceships through the fog, the notion that aliens are of a higher intelligence and coming to share love and wonder – and posits a more likely outcome: that if there is life on other planets, it's likely every bit as flawed and idiotic as we are. If sci-fi's role is to hold a mirror up to society, *Morons from Outer Space* does this in the most literal sense.

I'm going to go a bit further and say that, like all the best sci-fi, *Morons from Outer Space* was actually quite prescient. We live now in an age where technology and communication networks are far more advanced and powerful than almost anyone who actually uses them. You only have to read the comments section under any YouTube video or look behind the wheel of any Audi to confirm this. So, what would happen if a company suddenly produced an affordable, easy to operate space vehicle? We would infect the universe with our idiocy. I'd say this is a notion that has rarely, if ever been explored in sci-fi.

Further than this, *Morons from Outer Space* pre-empted our current rut of dullards-turned-celebrities and celebrities-turned-news stories. Our trio of aliens (Smith lands separately and has his own sub-story through most of the film), liberated from their secret government prison facility, enlist Griff Rhys Jones's

feckless Graham as their reluctant manager and they quickly find themselves on the talk show circuit and performing sold-out stadium gigs despite a total lack of musical ability or general competence.

This shouldn't come as a surprise. Smith and Jones were no slouches when it came to satire, having proved their mettle on *Not the 9 O'Clock News*. Mel Smith didn't make many appearances on the big screen but it was the perfect format for the subtle nuance of his squishy countenance – flitting seamlessly between tetchy insolence, twinkly-eyed pathos, insecure pomposity and desperate heartbreak, all in the tightening and loosening of those big silly lips. *Morons* consistently hints at a cinematic comedy career that could have been, had this film and the duo's second cinematic outing *Wilt* (1989) not been such damp squibs commercially. Smith ended up behind the camera instead.

The real secret of *Moron from Outer Space*'s success, its wry, subtle moments, its brilliant lampoon of Hollywood film language, was its director Mike Hodges, famous for *Get Carter* (1971), *Flash Gordon* (1980) and the less-well-known sci-fi thriller *The Terminal Man* (1974) – a favourite of Stanley Kubrick's.

I recently interviewed Hodges as part of our sci-fi season and when I told him I wanted to discuss *Morons from Outer Space*, his face dropped. Then he started to laugh and told me he hadn't been asked about that film at all in the nearly 30 years since he finished it.

In his eyes, it was a misfire. He did not work well with Smith & Jones through post-production; they did not trust, or perhaps understand his comedic judgement or cinematic visual satire and the film became far more broad than he had intended. The final indignity being the change of title. The film Hodges had signed on to make was called *Illegal Aliens*.

But it wasn't long before Hodges was talking affectionately about the project, about the joy of skewering what he described as the sentimental 'Spielbergian vision of the world' and a fair percentage of our own society, who he saw as 'thick, insensitive, violent and 'orrible'.

By the time we'd spent the best part of half an hour discussing it, my enthusiasm and knowledge of it in turn baffling and gratifying, he said he was really going to have to sit down and watch it again.

As much as I'd love to proclaim *Morons from Outer Space* as an overlooked classic, I'm aware that it's a compromised film. Ultimately, it has become just one of many examples of British TV stars making a failed transition to the big screen.

It's destined to sit forever among the slurry of Ant & Dec's *Alien Autopsy* (2006), Kenny Everett's *Bloodbath at the House of Death* (1984), Rik Mayall and Adrian Edmondson's *Guest House Paradiso* (1999) and whatever those Keith Lemon and Mrs Brown abominations that I've successfully avoided in recent years are. I tried showing it to a group of pals a couple of years ago and found myself having to explain to them why it was good. So maybe it isn't. But I love it.

Jon Spira, bfi.org.uk

World in Action: The Flipside

World in Action was a hard-nosed investigative programme. This episode takes a look at the dodgy practices of the 1960s pop-music world, with a cast of characters worthy of Dickens.

WORLD IN ACTION: THE FLIPSIDE

(screening on Wed 18 May only)

Director: Mike Hodges

ITV tx 1964

25 mins

MORONS FROM OUTER SPACE

Directed by: Mike Hodges

©: Thorn EMI Film Finance plc

Made by: Thorn EMI Film Productions Ltd.

Executive Producer: Verity Lambert

Produced by: Barry Hanson

Production Executive: Graham Easton

Production Manager: Peter Price

Production Supervisor: David Ball

Production Co-ordinator: Lorraine Goodman

Production Accountant: Clair McCoy

Location Manager: Rufus Andrews

Assistant Directors: Jake Wright, Marcia Gay, Russell Lodge

Script Supervisor: Diana Dill

Casting: Debbie McWilliams

Screenplay by: Mel Smith, Griff Rhys Jones

Developed by: Bob Mercer

Director of Photography: Philip Meheux

Camera Operator: Bernie Ford

Focus Puller: Bruce Barraclough

Gaffer: Harry Woodley

Grip: Dennis Lloyd

Stills Photographer: David James

Visual Effects Supervisor: David Speed

Special Effects: Jeff Luff

Special Effects Editor: Dennis McTaggart

TV and Computer Effects: Ira Curtis Coleman

Model Unit Supervisor: David Speed

Model Maker: Peter Aston

Film Editor: Peter Boyle

Production Designer: Brian Eatwell

Art Directors: Terry Gough, Bert Davey

Set Dresser: Derek Nice

Property Buyer: Sid Palmer

Property Master: Brian Palmer

Construction Manager: Bill Surridge

Costume Designer: May Routh

Assistant Costume Designer: Doreen Watkinson

Wardrobe Supervisor: Keith Denny

Chief Make-up: George Frost

Make-up Consultant: Sara Raeburn

Chief Hairdresser: Joan Carpenter

Titles: Optical Film Effects

Music Composed by: Peter Brewis

Orchestra Conducted by: John Cameron

Sound Mixer: Chris Munro

Boom Operator: Ian Munro

Dubbing Mixer: John Hayward

Sound Editor: Peter Best

Stunt Co-ordinator: Paul Weston

Cast

Mel Smith (*Bernard*)

Griff Rhys Jones (*Graham Sweetley*)

Joanne Pearce (*Sandra Brock*)

Jimmy Nail (*Desmond Brock*)

Paul Bown (*Julian Tope*)

James B. Sikking (*Colonel Larabee*)

Dinsdale Landen (*Commander Matteson*)

Tristram Jellinek (*Simpson*)

George Innes (*Stanley Benson*)

John Joyce (*Chief Inspector Miller*)

Mark Jones (*Godfrey*)

Leonard Fenton (*commissionaire*)

André Maranne (*Trousseaux*)

Joanna Dickens (*lady farmer*)

R.J. Bell (*Klutz*)

Peter Whitman (*Friborg*)

Olivier Pierre (*Jabowski*)

Edward Wiley (*Larabee's aide*)

Robert Austin (*newscaster*)

John Barcroft (*McKenzie*)

Bill Stewart (*Walters*)

Joss Buckley (*TV presenter*)

Roger Hammond (*soundman*)

Des Webb (*Eskimo chief*)

Derek Deadman (*man in car*)

Angela Crow (*woman in car*)

Jimmy Mulville (*motorway policeman*)

Lesley Grantham (*motorway policeman's assistant*)

Barbara Hicks (*stenographer*)

Tim Barker (*mathematician*)

Graham Fellows (*cipher*)

Robert Sessions (*TV presenter, USA*)

Shane Rimmer (*redneck*)

Diana Ricardo (*redneck's wife*)

Miriam Margolyes (*lady scientist*)

Ian East (*1st scientist*)

Michael J. Jackson (*2nd scientist*)

James Taylor (*minister*)

Christopher Northey (*Whitehall flunkey*)

Jo Ross (*lady in dining room*)

Susan Denaker (*1st nurse*)

Lesa Lockford (*2nd nurse*)

Edward Arthur (*chat show host*)

Shelley Thompson (*Nurse Perce*)

John Clamp (*Bobby*)

Richenda Carey (*Countess Gretel*)

David Haig (*flunkey*)

Robert Henderson (*diner customer*)

Karen Lancaster (*Stanley's assistant*)

Ronnie Stevens (*hotel manager*)

Pamela Mandell (*Mary*)

David James (*policeman*)

Thick Wilson (*cop*)

Dave Whittaker (*deputy*)

John O'Toole (*security guard*)

Peter Straker (*choir lead singer*)

Robin Driscoll (*space pilot*)

UK 1985©

86 mins

Mike Hodges interviewed by The British Entertainment History Project:

<https://historyproject.org.uk/interview/mike-hodges>

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