

silent running

A FILM BY DOUGLAS TRUMBULL





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CAST

Bruce Dern Freeman Lowell
Cliff Potts John Keenan
Ron Rifkin Marty Barker
Jesse Vint Andy Wolf
Mark Persons Drone
Steven Brown Drone
Cheryl Sparks Drone
Larry Whisenhunt Drone

CREW

Directed by **Douglas Trumbull**
Produced by **Michael Gruskoff**
Associate Producer **Martin Hornstein**
Written by **Deric Washburn & Mike Cimino** and **Steve Bochco**
Director of Photography **Charles F. Wheeler, A.S.C.**
Film Editor **Aaron Stell**
Set Decorator **Francisco Lombardo**
Music by **Peter Schickele**
Songs Sung by **Joan Baez**

SILENT RUNNING DOUGLAS TRUMBULL'S VISIONS OF NATURE

by Barry Forshaw

There have always been film enthusiasts who look beyond the names of the actors and directors for other guarantors of quality. And for those lovers of cinema and science fiction who had been blown away by Stanley Kubrick's masterly *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) there was undoubtedly a thirst for a successor to provide other-worldly spectacle – a thirst that would be partially quenched by *Star Wars* some nine years later (on a visual level, if not intellectually). So, who made *2001* such a milestone in science fiction film? Kubrick, of course – but the actors? Keir Dullea and Gary Lockwood were perfectly adequate, but there wasn't much else in their filmography – pre- or post-*2001* – either to engage us or to make us expect anything similar. The music? Well, Richard Strauss and Johann Strauss weren't composing any more – although György Ligeti (whose atonal music had been used by Kubrick for the astonishing cosmic trip at the end of the film) was still at work, although not for the cinema. But there was one creative artist – a key talent when it came to making *2001* so impressive – who clearly had an interesting future ahead of him, and who might supply further films in the same vein: the special effects wizard who had made Kubrick's futuristic world so jaw-dropping – the youthful Douglas Trumbull.

Trumbull's work on the film had established a new gold standard in effects visuals (notably the movement of the massive-seeming spacecraft), making everything that preceded it look out of date. The space vehicles in many of the most cherished films of earlier eras now look like what they were: modest-sized models. But in utilizing very large, meticulously detailed craft, Kubrick and Trumbull had made a rod for the backs of their successors – there was no going back, although, ironically, low-budget science fiction films – notably those from Italy – continued to try to get away with dinky toy models.

But how would Trumbull follow up his work on *2001*? Stanley Kubrick would tackle science fiction again with his adaptation of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), but that was earthbound fare. So it was up to another director to employ Trumbull. However, cineastes were pleased – and slightly apprehensive – that Trumbull's next project (before returning to technical work on a variety of SF classics) would involve him not



only creating an impressive series of special effects but even directing the movie that would showcase them.

Trumbull was born in Los Angeles on April 8, 1942. He attended an architectural course at El Camino College in Torrance, California, a training that involved design and drawing, both of which were to serve him well in his future career. He had made a mark as a very young man, and, for a time, architecture seemed to be where his future lay. But Trumbull simultaneously developed a talent for illustration, which he parlayed into employment with advertising companies. There were harbingers of his later career in the animation projects he completed for NASA, including Apollo Project films for the Air Force and a film for the New York World's Fair in 1964, *To the Moon and Beyond*, which was completed when Trumbull was working for a company called Graphic Films. This was seen by Stanley Kubrick, who realized that Trumbull was the man to help him on the massive and secretive new science fiction project he was preparing. Trumbull, intrigued, flew to England to work with Kubrick. It was in the UK that Trumbull collaborated with such British technicians as Wally Veevers and Tom Howard, and began to refine many of the techniques that he used both in *2001* and in subsequent work – such as the SF film he was to direct.

The path to *Silent Running*

After working on the credits of the ill-advised film adaptation of Terry Southern's novel *Candy* in 1968, Trumbull produced more spectacular work on one of the most intelligent science fiction films of the era, Robert Wise's *The Andromeda Strain* (1971). During this, an idea for a film that would be his own personal project began to germinate: it would feature an astronaut with three robots on a spaceship that had been designed to preserve and transport forests and other botanical material through space. With the encouragement of the agent Michael Gruskoff, Trumbull expanded this slim notion into a workable screen treatment. Crucial to this early concept were the three drones and their relationship with the astronaut, and it was this idea that Trumbull developed along with Michael Cimino (prior to his alternately successful and disastrous career as a film director), Deric Washburn and Steven Bochco (before his hit TV cop show *Hill Street Blues*). What had particularly intrigued Trumbull was the notion of creating a robot that – unlike virtually all its filmic predecessors – would not look like a man in a suit. The Tod Browning movie *Freaks* (1932) had demonstrated that people with missing limbs could walk on their hands, and Trumbull realised that a robotic body might be designed to utilise this fact. In this regard Trumbull was spectacularly successful, and audiences were surprised to see credits at the end of the film with human names for the drones – most viewers had simply accepted the film's robots as machines; in other words, they were tricked by the sleight of hand just as Trumbull intended. Interestingly, the amputees who brought to life the drones managed





to give real character to the automatons they were animating, even though not an inch of human flesh was visible.

Having secured funding, Trumbull began to move the project forward in a workshop and office he had put together in Canoga Park, Los Angeles, and started to consider actors for the crucial role of the astronaut who would be left alone with the robots on the botanical spaceship. It's hard at this juncture – when the actor Bruce Dern is such an institution in both mainstream and independent American cinema – to remember when he was relatively little known, but Trumbull had seen some of Dern's earlier work and realized he was the perfect choice for the part. Apart from anything else, Dern resisted the temptation to play his character, Freeman Lowell, for easy sympathy, although audiences of the day were already receptive to the ecological message of the film as espoused by Lowell (something, ironically, that is even more apropos in the twenty-first century than when the film was made). Dern and his director (Trumbull had now decided to take up the directing reins himself) made the character short-tempered and hectoring, so that even when set against his largely unsympathetic fellow astronauts (who are perfectly happy when the order comes to destroy the flying forests and they can return home), we are only half on his side. There is, of course, the small matter of the three murders that Lowell commits in order to preserve at least a fragment of the forest to which he has devoted years of his life. In fact, it would have been a very different film if a more high-wattage, sympathetic star had been hired.

Given that the budget of the film was to be a relatively economical \$1 million, corners had to be cut in some of the production design – not least the expensive interiors of the spaceship. In this, Trumbull was fortunate in securing three weeks of filming on the aircraft carrier *USS Valley Forge*, which was on the point of being scrapped. The deck was also used for filming some scenes. The effect is very successful, as are (largely speaking) the film's other special effects, which came in at \$70,000. Without Kubrick's budget and extended shooting time, Trumbull was not able to always bring off the external impact of the spacecraft as persuasively as he had in *2001*, but (apart from in a few shots) he manages to conceal the fact that we are looking at models. Trumbull was less concerned with scientific verisimilitude than Kubrick had been. The latter overcame the drawback that there is no sound in the vacuum of space by using classical music (after dumping Alex North's orchestral score), but Trumbull decided that he wanted the dramatic effect of explosions and spacecrafts breaking apart to be accentuated by the non-scientific use of sound – it was a directorial choice that didn't worry too many viewers at the time. And Trumbull's decision was obviously supported by George Lucas when he began his own science fiction trilogy; Lucas was well aware that laser battles and spaceships travelling through hyperspace would be more impactful if the audience could hear some convincing noise.

Timeless ecology

The critical response to the finished film was mixed, but science fiction enthusiasts were generally persuaded by Trumbull's ambition and his excellent choice of leading man. There were those who were looking for the more complex and philosophical aspects of the Kubrick movie that Trumbull had worked on, but he was less interested in that than in simply telling a tale that would keep audiences transfixed while making points about how the human race is maltreating the planet. To this end, he used a score by Peter Schickele that prominently featured what are essentially protest songs about the environment, sung in a clarion voice by a woman ineluctably associated with such material: the folk singer Joan Baez. This choice, viewed today, locates the film firmly within a nature-friendly 'hippy' ethos. Similarly, although viewers might admire Trumbull's canniness in not presenting Dern's character Freeman Lowell as some kind of saintly messianic figure (although he is given to wearing robes suitable for a religious cult leader), the visions of nature, with its vegetation and happily coexisting animals, that appear throughout the film are always Arcadian. In fact, the most effective use of such imagery is in the opening scene before the audience realizes that we are on a spacecraft – although, presumably, those who went to see the film in the cinema would have been tipped the wink by the film's advertising.

The human element

One aspect of the film handled well by Trumbull and Dern is the slow realization by Lowell that he is utterly alone after murdering his fellow astronauts – and his remorse is pointed up by the way in which he anthropomorphizes the drones, even programming them so that he can play cards with them (the human/robot card-playing scene, with its dry humor, is one that viewers always remember). Trumbull also allows his drones to interact in a humorous and human way, which allows them to be more than mere machines. In fact, the valedictory scene between Lowell and his electronic helpers is surprisingly moving, given that there is only one human being on screen. That scene still works well today, as does so much else, such as Lowell realizing that he has abandoned his commitment to the forest and that his extreme behavior in attempting to preserve it is undercut by his hypocrisy. It goes without saying, of course, that the film's message remains relevant even in the 2010s.

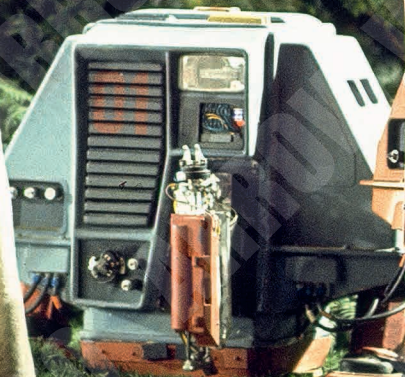
After *Silent Running*

Returning to special effects after his directorial debut, Douglas Trumbull undertook work for a Canadian TV series that was the creation of cult science fiction writer Harlan Ellison, *The Starlost* (1973). Ellison hated the result and insisted that his real name was not used on it. The show shares with *Silent Running* the notion of an ark in space, this time with

human inhabitants. However, professional redemption was to follow with special effects work for a new film that was quite as accomplished as the effects Trumbull had provided for Stanley Kubrick. Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) was designed as the apotheosis of the flying saucer movie, just as Kubrick's *2001* had been created as the ultimate voyage through space. And in that aim, Spielberg and Trumbull were phenomenally successful, with Trumbull receiving an Academy Award nomination for Best Visual Effects. The fluidity of the camera movements devised by Trumbull and Spielberg was quite breath-taking when combined with a soaring orchestral score by Spielberg's long-time collaborator, the composer John Williams.

Other projects for Trumbull were stillborn, such as the script prepared by David Zelag Goodman, *Pyramid*, but he achieved commercial success with a film designed for use in a simulator that placed the viewer in the pilot's seat of a shuttle traveling through space. *Tour of the Universe*, a coproduction with Paramount, was not taken up as a permanent exhibit by any major theme park, but the concept was to prove durable and is still in play today. Subsequent work on *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (directed by Robert Wise, 1979) followed, and Trumbull – unsurprisingly – was enthused by the technical possibilities of high-definition IMAX combined with the Showscan process that he had developed. And another classic science fiction film was to be added to his CV: Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) – for which he was again to receive an Academy Award nomination. *Brainstorm* (1983), which he directed, was not a success, but its SF notion of planting experiences directly into the brain of the viewer seems disturbingly prescient. However, even if the essential cinema experience remains simply an audience gazing at an image on the screen, there is no doubt that Douglas Trumbull is a filmmaker who has done more than most to bring this particular art to its finest and most exhilarating fruition.

Barry Forshaw has written on fiction and film for the Financial Times, The Independent, The Guardian, The Times and the 'i'. His books on cinema include BFI's The War of the Worlds, Film Noir, Italian Cinema, British Crime Film and British Gothic Cinema, along with studies on the film of The Silence of the Lambs and the Millennium Trilogy.





SILENT RUNNING BRUCE DERN'S STAR TURN AMONG THE STARS

by Peter Tonguette

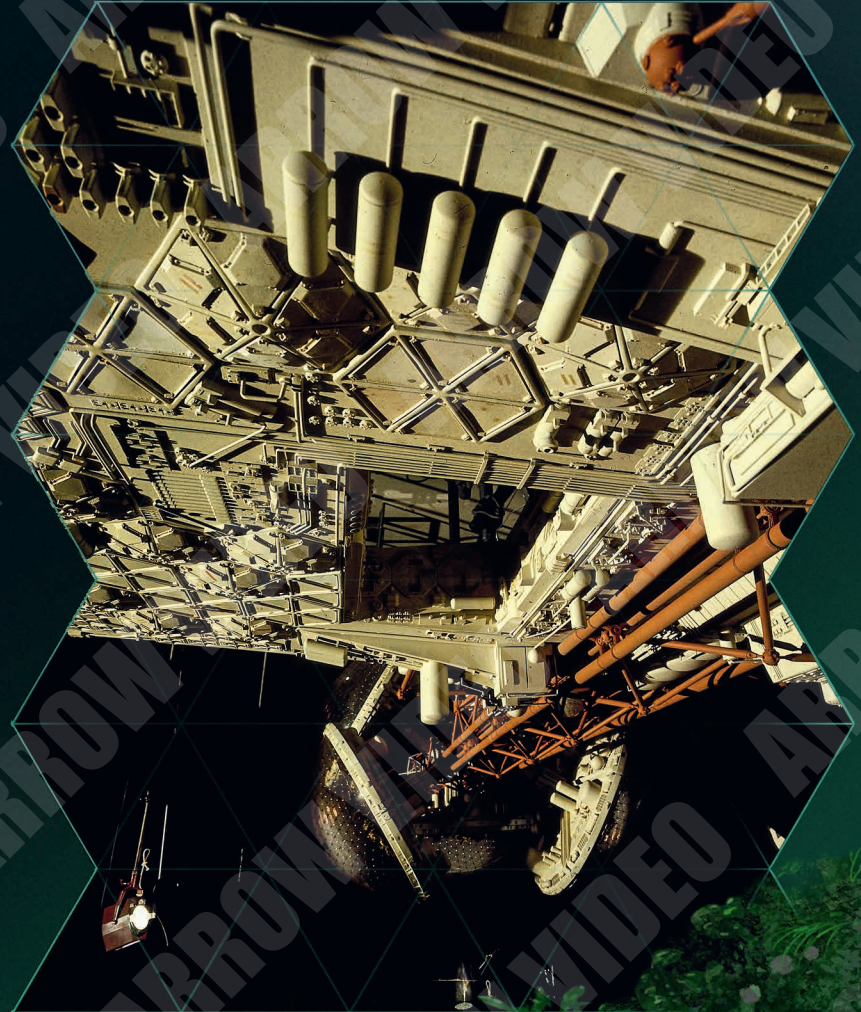
Have you ever wondered why some screen actors seem fated for stardom while others just can't catch a break?

What was it about, say, Paul Newman that rocketed him to lasting fame, while Jeffrey Hunter – his peer in so many ways – is spoken of today mainly by fans of John Ford who remember his supporting turns in *The Searchers* (1956) and other films? And why are books and documentaries still being churned out about Natalie Wood, but the name “Yvette Mimieux” is most often mentioned by connoisseurs of 1970s-era movies-of-the-week?

You get the picture. Just as much as talent, the outcomes of actors' careers depend on such unpredictable factors as fate, good instincts, and the wisdom (or lack thereof) of agents and managers. At the same time, sometimes an actor is just too interesting – too askew, too idiosyncratic, too off-kilter – for his or her own good.

Such is the case of Bruce Dern, an actor who journeyed from bit parts (1964's *Marnie*) to vigorous supporting roles (1966's *The Wild Angels*) to full-fledged leads (1977's *Black Sunday*) – before retracing his steps all the way back to bit parts, including his attention-grabbing cameo as George Spahn in Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time... in Hollywood* (2019).

Along the way, however, Dern managed to bypass the stardom enjoyed by so many of his colleagues. Forget Jack Nicholson – with whom he co-starred in the masterful *King of Marvin Gardens* (1972) – or Warren Beatty: Dern never even managed to approximate the fleeting star status of, say, Roy Scheider in that brief period from *All That Jazz* (1979) through *Blue Thunder* (1983). Not even Dern's most notable flirtation with widespread recognition – his Best Supporting Actor nomination for *Coming Home* (1978) – quite provided the necessary boost. After all, just four years after appearing in that great film, and with some failed star vehicles in between, Dern was firmly entrenched in the ensemble cast of *That Championship Season* (1982).





No, Dern, like Scheider, is something of a supporting player at heart. More often than not, he is asked not to carry the load of a full feature but to add interest to individual scenes. When he's off-camera, you want him back on. Come on: *Doesn't The 'Burbs* (1989) pick up each time a pronunciamento springs from the mouth of Dern's deranged, Cheshire-cat-grinning military retiree Rumsfeld? Remember how cool it was when he put in an appearance in the otherwise turgid *All the Pretty Horses* (2000)?

There is, however, one glorious exception to the rule that Dern was at his best when doodling in the margins. In Douglas Trumbull's *Silent Running*, Dern is not only the uncontested star, but, for most of the film's 90 minutes, is the lone human performer visible on the screen. The 1972 Universal Pictures release stars Dern as Freeman Lowell, who, at some distant date in the future, is initially among four Earthlings chosen to rocket into outer space to oversee a many-tentacled spaceship, the Valley Forge – attached to which are gargantuan geodesic domes that provide shelter to flora and fauna from home.

What, you ask, are these mini-forests doing in the outer reaches of our solar system? In the screenplay by Deric Washburn, Michael Cimino and Steven Bochco, the temperature of the Earth has reached 75° Celsius, apparently rendering it inhospitable to a wide assortment of plants and animals. A surviving sample of nature's bounty has been sent to float around in space to await a time when they can be used to replenish the Earth.

While it was produced long before climate change became an issue of widespread concern among the general public, and it never fully endorses its protagonist's extreme views on the environment, *Silent Running* undeniably regards the natural world with an uncommon tenderness. In the opening title sequence, Trumbull's camera positively lingers on extreme close-ups of everything from the dew forming on flowers to the slimy texture of a snail. It is only when the camera takes in a wider view that we realize, to our great shock at first, that the environment we are watching is far, far from the Earth's surface.

Of course, in the early going Lowell's is not a solo mission. Joining him is a small group of crewmates – played by the talented character actors Cliff Potts, Ron Rifkin, and Jesse Vint – who lack Lowell's almost maniacal commitment to his mission, but nonetheless display a kind of Hawksian professionalism about going about their job, while making time for games of pool and poker. By contrast, Lowell is among the converted: Bedecked in a brown robe as he keeps an eye on all things large and small in his forest, Lowell seems to view himself as a combination of Johnny Appleseed and Friar Tuck. (Further emphasizing the sometimes-childlike nature of Dern's performance, even Lowell's blue spacesuit looks at times like a pair of jammies.) He is more at home enticing a hungry rabbit to eat than in trading small talk with his human colleagues.

The crewmen are antsy and edgy from their long voyage in a confined space sequestered from civilization at large. In this way, *Silent Running* strikingly anticipates George A. Romero's "Living Dead" films, especially those that unfold in tight quarters, like *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985). So, when the Valley Forge is given an order to set a series of nuclear charges in the domes – the spaceship, we learn, is to be used for commercial purposes going forward – John, Marty, and Andy thrill at the idea of going home. But Lowell? He can scarcely conceal his outrage at the thought of his forest being destroyed.

As played by Dern, the character is twitchy, wild-eyed, and, at times, utterly possessed, angrily denouncing his crewmates for consuming artificial foods when they could enjoy the sweet pleasure of a forest-grown cantaloupe. He longs for a simpler, pastoral America that – we can only assume, since we never actually see life as it is currently being lived on Earth – has become the stuff of memories, or dreams. In fact, when viewed in the age of coronavirus, *Silent Running* takes on a particular poignancy and impact: In our wish to wait out the virus, to hold on just a while longer until normalcy can be regained, we find something of ourselves in Lowell's unbending determination to persist with his original mission – no matter its length or impracticality, Lowell is on board. He regards as solemn and true the Conservation Pledge tacked to his wall: *I give as my pledge as an American to save and faithfully defend from waste the natural resources of my country – its soil and minerals, its forests, waters and wildlife.*

Yet Dern is such a good actor that he resists the temptation to turn Lowell into a saintly figure – a sort of Don Quixote tilting at the windmills of environmental degradation. To the contrary, Dern is alive to the dark ironies of this most complex of characters. "You can't blow up this forest!" Lowell insists, yet human life – as opposed to plant or animal life – is seemingly low on his list of priorities: In an act of murderous subterfuge, Lowell willingly sacrifices the lives of his crewmates, leaving each for dead as he commandeers the Valley Forge. His kingdom for a tree? In transmissions to officials on the ground, Lowell lies about what's going on, presenting himself as the hapless victim of technical difficulties, albeit on a very grand scale – a perfect example of the sort of contemptuous snarkiness that Dern would later perfect in his performance as Tom Buchanan in Jack Clayton's admirable adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* (1974).

It is here that *Silent Running* most strikingly anticipates themes later developed in the directorial career of its famous co-screenwriter, Michael Cimino. Lowell's singlemindedness echoes the bullheaded obstinacy that distinguishes so many Cimino heroes or antiheroes. From the obsessively committed police officer Stanley White (Mickey Rourke) in *Year of the Dragon* (1985) to the head-in-the-clouds cancer patient (Jon Seda) in *The Sunchaser*



(1996), Cimino was repeatedly drawn to characters defined by their devotion to a cause. That career-long interest has its roots in the intractable Freeman Lowell in *Silent Running*.

Such a character, though, would be intolerable were it not for the presence of a compelling actor. And, movie star or no, few actors can command an audience's attention better than Dern. In its final stretch, *Silent Running* becomes a showpiece for the actor, as Lowell, at last alone with the emblems of nature he loves, becomes a kind of benign despot – lord of his forest, high in the sky.

Trumbull – already a legend for his extraordinary work as the special photographic effects supervisor on Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) – is to be lauded for his poetic presentation of outer space, as well as his obvious ease with the technical gadgetry seen in abundance in the film. Yet the best special effect in *Silent Running* is undoubtedly the face of Bruce Dern, whose unmistakably expressive facial features accommodate Lowell's increasingly erratic emotional state. From one moment to the next, Lowell can be lost in contemplation, scheming his next steps, or peering longingly, through a telescope, at the planet Earth – the *real* Earth, not the ersatz Earth he has attempted to nurture aboard the Valley Forge. In perhaps the film's most captivating sequence, Lowell – having injured his leg in a last-minute tussle with one of his crewmates – recruits two ambling, low-to-the-ground droids to perform an operation on him. Credibly communicating Lowell's intense pain as he passes instructions to the super-efficient droids, the scene is a tour de force for Dern.

In fact, as is foretold in the droid-conducted surgery scene, Lowell's dream quickly becomes less than he might have hoped: He slips into the habits he derided in his now-deceased crewmates. Lowell becomes sloppy, lazily preparing artificial meals rather than harvesting the real thing, and absentmindedly forgetting that his ship's distance from the sun is sure to have a deleterious effect on his forest.

In the greatest irony, Lowell finds himself missing the companionship – even if it was contentious – of the crewmates whose lives he judged expendable in his quest to protect nature. Having reprogrammed the droids to better assist him in his forest, Lowell awards them with human names: Huey and Dewey. The droids are one of the delights in *Silent Running*, but when Lowell attempts a card game with them, Dern's fast-talking, ingratiating manner suddenly seems hollow – he needs real, live humans to bounce off. Here, Trumbull is making a point that cuts against the film's basic pro-environment stance: Why save a forest if no one remains to enjoy it?

Silent Running is a beautifully made movie – the cinematography by Charles F. Wheeler captures the harsh artificial light of the spaceship, and the score by Peter Schickele, with periodic songs performed by folk superstar Joan Baez, has the tone of a sci-fi lament. But it is Dern who is given the biggest task of all: to, in a single performance, represent the virtue and the folly of humanity's best intentions. Bruce Dern only good in supporting turns? Don't believe it – just watch *Silent Running*.

Peter Tonguetta is the author of Picturing Peter Bogdanovich: My Conversations with the New Hollywood Director. He has written for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Christian Science Monitor, Sight & Sound and many other publications.



ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Silent Running has been exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with mono audio.

The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 4K resolution at EFilm, Burbank. The film was graded and restored in 2K at R3Store Studios in London. Grading was approved by Director Douglas Trumbull.

The original mono mix was remastered from the original sound negatives at NBC Universal.

Restoration supervised by James White, Arrow Films

R3Store Studios:

Gerry Gedge, Jo Griffin, Nathan Leaman-Hill, Rich Watson, Jenny Collins

EFILM:

David Morales, Jason Esquivel

NBC Universal:

Peter Schade, Tim Naderski, Jefferson Root, John Edell

This restoration of *Silent Running* has been approved by Director Douglas Trumbull.

All materials for this restoration were made available by NBC Universal.

Special thanks to Douglas Trumbull and Julia Trumbull for their generous participation on this project.





PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**

Technical Producer **James White**

Disc Production Manager **Nora Mehenni**

QC **Alan Simmons**

Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**

Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**

Design **Obviously Creative**

Artwork **Arik Roper**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Pat Bauman, Jeff Bond, James Flower, Barry Forshaw, Daniel Griffith,
David James, Mark Kermode, Jacob Milligan, Kim Newman, Jon Spira,
Peter Tonguette, Douglas Trumbull



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