

## Blu-Ray Review: 'Robinson Crusoe on Mars' Monkeys With Sci-Fi Genre

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on January 20, 2011 - 12:46pm

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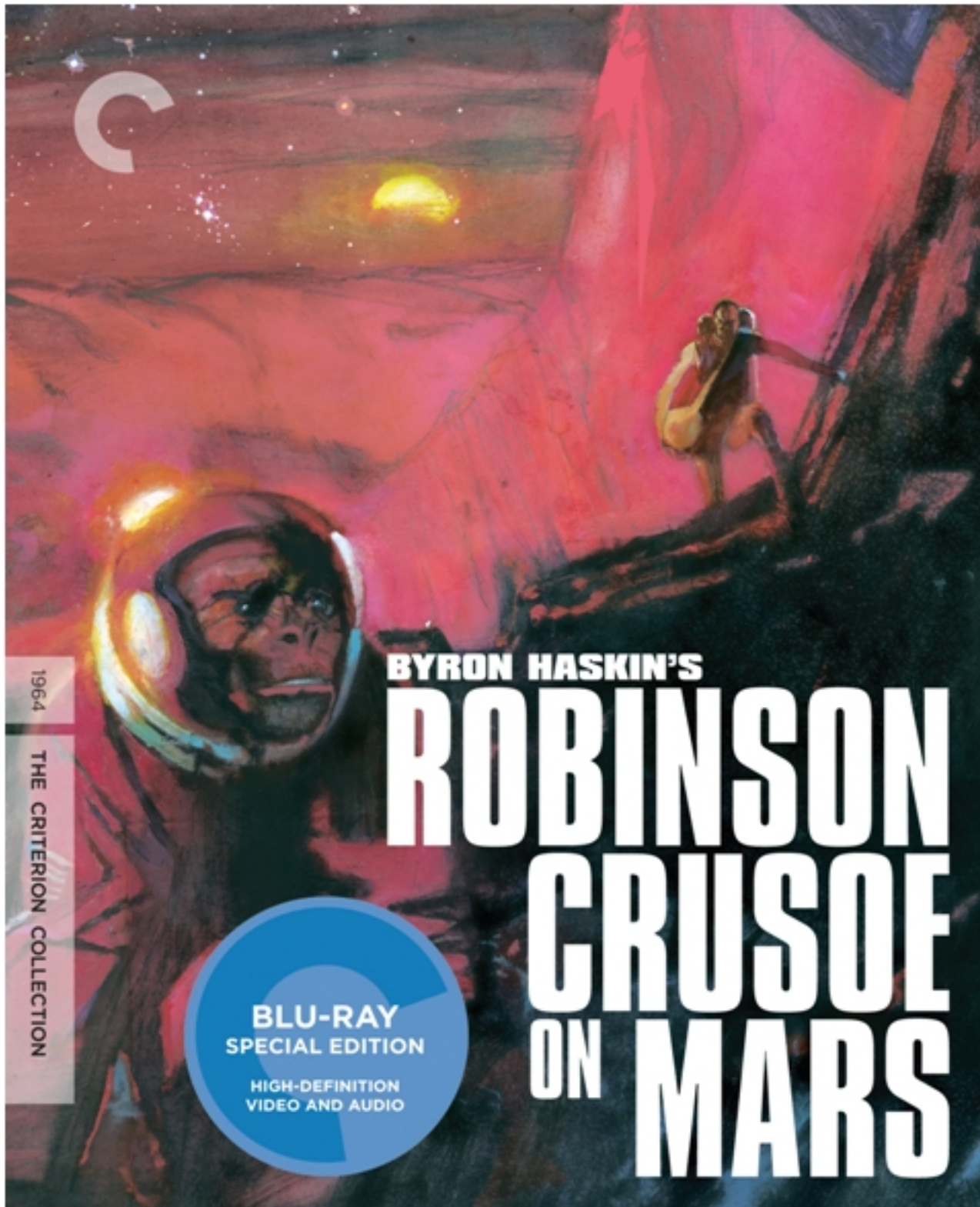
CHICAGO – A fascinating B-movie gem from 1964, “Robinson Crusoe on Mars” gives modern viewers an idea of what America’s collective imagination (concerning space travel) looked like during that brief moment in time. As an entertainment, it’s hokey and creaky beyond belief, but as a cinematic time capsule, it’s quite a trip.

The film begins with the most heartbreaking bait and switch in camp movie history. Two years before his success with “Batman,” Adam West shows up as an astronaut orbiting Mars. The deadpan earnestness of his performance is priceless right from the beginning, as he scolds a floating monkey with the line, “Listen Mona, this banana paste is meant for your survival only!” Sadly, the ship is soon forced to evacuate, killing off West and leaving only disgruntled monkey Mona and West’s crewmate, Kit, played by Paul Mantee. Seriously, it’s like being promised Keir Dullea and getting Gary Lockwood.



Blu-Ray Rating: **3.5/5.0**

Anyway, Kit and Mona soon find themselves stranded on the Red Planet, and the rest of the film chronicles their struggle to survive on foreign land. Think “Cast Away” meets “Gilligan’s Planet.” Danger comes in the form of thin oxygen and food poisoning as opposed to homicidal aliens. Since the film was made a year before the launching of the Mariner 4 spacecraft, which captured images of the cratered, desolate surface on Mars, “Crusoe” is disarmingly optimistic about the planet’s inhabitability. Once Kit discovers that the shallow air is breathable on Mars, he gradually sheds his spacesuit until he’s prancing around in a T-shirt while playing “I Wish I Was in Dixie” on a handmade bagpipe. About an hour into the picture, Kit encounters a new human companion (Victor Lundin, looking vaguely Egyptian, Native American and Chief Bromden-like) who he decides to make the “Friday” to his “Robinson Crusoe.” Together, they attempt to survive various death ray attacks by interplanetary vehicles that zip in and out of the sky with startling frequency. There are also some unintentional chuckles to be had, such as when Kit becomes fed up with the isolation and shouts, “Mr. Echo, go to hell!” Or when Friday traces out the canals on Mars and ends up drawing the universal symbol for anarchy.



Robinson Crusoe on Mars was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on Jan. 11, 2011.

*Photo credit: The Criterion Collection*

Well-directed by special effects veteran Byron Haskin ("The War of the Worlds"), this long-forgotten cult classic was made during a curious transitional period for the science fiction genre. It was released nearly seven years after Sputnik, but five years before the infamous moon landing, four years before Kubrick's game-changing "2001: A Space Odyssey" and unfortunately four years before the Beatles song, "Everybody's Got Something to Hide Except Me and My Monkey." Haskin's crew deserves credit for making their film look and feel as credible as possible. Several sequences contain an elegantly eerie beauty, leading to a memorable climax set within the polar ice caps.

"Robinson Crusoe on Mars" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio), and includes a solid group of special features recycled from its 2007 DVD release. The best extra is easily the audio commentary, which impeccably edits together interviews with Haskin, Mantee, Lundin, co-writer Ib Melchior, production designer Al Nozaki and special effects designer/"Crusoe" historian Robert Skotak.



Paul Mantee stars in Byron Haskin's Robinson Crusoe on Mars.

*Photo credit: The Criterion Collection*

Melchior had written the original draft and was set to direct the picture before he left to do "The Time Travelers." Haskin is thoroughly candid about his reaction to Melchior's script, with its colorful yet outdated gallery of monsters. "It was a conglomeration of all the crap that's ever been made," Haskin groans, before stating his belief that truly successful science fiction must get as close as possible to scientific fact. He



immediately changed Mars to a dying planet, and utilized the upper ridges in Death Valley that hadn't been explored by the countless westerns that were previously shot there. Melchior is later heard articulating his sadness and surprise over Haskin's drastic changes. The biggest charmer on the commentary track is the self-deprecating Mantee, who admits his initial dislike of the title when it was first uttered to him by his agent. He also expresses his discomfort during scenes when Kit begins treating Friday like a slave (Mantee apparently asked for a rewrite, but was overruled). He's also the first to admit that the picture did not do well during its initial release, perhaps because it was the back half of a double feature headlined by Jerry Lewis.

An enlightening still gallery includes various fragments of Melchior's original vision for the project, which includes an entire numerical system to be utilized by Friday, who was originally going to have three fingers outfitted with suction cups. There are also some intriguing storyboards that illustrate plans for a more epic escape sequence from Kit's cave. Space historian Michael Lennick's 19-minute "Destination Mars" featurette dissects the science of "Crusoe," and uncovers a surprising amount of information that the film managed to get right simply by sticking to the facts and hypotheses of the time. Some accurate elements in the film include the crimson sky of Mars as well as the astronauts' use of a reaction control system to steer their ship up and down. Author Arthur T. Sawyer suggests that humans may in fact be able to inhabit Mars if they found a way to deliberately invoke a greenhouse effect on the planet (calling all oil companies!). Rounding out the extras are a music video for Lundin's affectionate song, "Robinson Crusoe on Mars," and a theatrical trailer that's preceded by a badge declaring: "This film is scientifically authentic. It is only one step ahead of present reality."

*'Robinson Crusoe on Mars' is released by The Criterion Collection and stars Paul Mantee, Victor Lundin, Adam West and The Wooley Monkey. It was written by John C. Higgins and Ib Melchior and directed by Byron Haskin. It was released on Jan. 11, 2011. It is not rated.*



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By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [14]

Staff Writer

[HollywoodChicago.com](http://HollywoodChicago.com)[matt@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:matt@hollywoodchicago.com) [13]**Source URL (retrieved on Apr 23 2024 - 6:00am):**<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/13148/blu-ray-review-robinson-crusoe-on-mars-monkeys-with-sci-fi-genre>**Links:**

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