

Characteristics of the classic monster movie

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Monster movies took hold in the early 1930's as a new spin on the horror-psychological thrillers beginning to debut. The monster movie genre as a whole has taken much criticism as to its merits, but it holds its weight in the box office with nearly 15% of all movie sales (Fischhoff). And, while many things can be said about the monster movie as a genre, the monster movie can be taken apart and illuminated to pick out the three core, salient characteristics found in all movies of the genre: the type of monster, the psychological aspect of the monster, and the plot of the movie, or, more succinctly, the monster's motive.

Fundamentally, certain genres lend to certain types of story arcs. While the romantic comedy often follows a more character driven plot, where the characters find the meaning of true love, the monster movie follows a definable plot driven format. And basically, in the plot driven movie, the overall story illustrates the efficiency of a town's characters and how well they are able to stand up to the monster, before, either they are killed or the monster is finally neutralized or vanquished in a final, climax of a scene.

To be honest, the end result of the town and its people doesn't really matter, and any ending is entirely plausible. But, the intrigue that makes a good monster movie is to be competently presented with the monster, the origin of the monster, and for the audience to discover what that monster wants out of the society they are terrorizing. While the monster makes the lives of the characters in the story miserable, the audience is torn between wanting the characters to win, or actually feeling sympathy for the monster because of the conditions presented surrounding that monster's origin.

Moreover, monster movie plots have been known to fit into the plot categories and monster types to such a degree that a generator was actually created by David Neilsen. Among the other completely hilarious and surprisingly useful generators to be had, the Monster Movie Pitch allows a user to create their own monster movie pitch by filling in the required fields. Once filled in, the monster movie pitch is instantly created and a visitor can do what they want with the results.

Because this generator actually serves to illuminate the points within this paper, a short detour will be taken. With that said, the generator dictates that a male lead, female lead, and male sidekick are required, as well as a title. Then the setting must be chosen: either a dark and forbidding forest, a sleepy little town, a mental institution, at sea, or ancient ruins. Then the monster type must be selected: either the undead, extra-terrestrial, scientific abomination, creature of folklore/myth/legend, or nature gone bad. And finally, the monster motive must be defined: revenge, to feed, to protect its young, its slumber has been disturbed, or it seeks to destroy humanity.

Now, let's see what fun can be had. The selections have been made for the practice monster movie entitled, The Big Bad. The rundown: heroic Zack and best buddy Trent, live in a sleepy little town and will come across an extra-terrestrial, leading lady Emily, and who seeks to destroy humanity. Simple and sounds like a blockbuster. Plugged into the generator, here's the actual movie pitch:

Critically acclaimed Egyptian filmmaker Aslad Assop brings his nightmare back to the screen with The Big Bad. This long awaited sequel to his

international hit, Gong of Deviled Oxen, reunites aggressive shepherd Huche Ramman (Zack) with his holy guide Hammotep (Trent) in their biggest adventure yet. This time, Huche discovers messages in the entrails of his sheep and the trail leads to an extra-terrestrial temptress (Emily) who wishes to use sin to destroy all of humanity. Now the temptress is invading Huche's Sleepy Little Town of Grozer, Egypt and only Huche's faith can save the world!

Sounds better than some of the monster movies out there. Now, the purpose of the generator was not merely for amusement, though it was a bit of fun; however, it also serves to prove and illustrate the core, salient characteristics of the monster movie which are the type of monster, the psychological appeal of the monster, and the plot, or, motive of the monster.

Because Neilsen states the monster types right out, it's easy to realize, once they are presented in such a manner, that every monster movie (probably ever made) fits well into the categories, without even needing wriggle room. To be precise, Neilsen states that there are five basic types of monster.

The first type is the undead monster. Now, the undead monster movie began in the 1930's with Dracula and continued well into the freaky zombie thrillers of today like 28 Days Later and Resident Evil. The undead category is not only chilling, but is perhaps the most used of all the monster types. Even popculturerevolves around vampires, zombies, and the undead with shows like Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and Supernatural. This type of monster has the greatest impact on an audience because of the psychological aspect and appeal behind that monster.

Moreover, the second monster type is the extra-terrestrial and is evident in movies like Alien, War of the Worlds and Predator. ET actually fits this category as well, though that alien is more cute and cuddly than frightening. Now, this monster type usually has the same motive, that to destroy all of mankind, and is the least escapable of all the monster types because they take more to vanquish than simple guns and grenades. Characters in these movies die rapidly and often, and do little but to illustrate the irk of the monster.

The third monster type is known as the scientific abomination. This is an interesting monster category because it actually encompasses many different sorts of monsters, from Frankenstein, to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, to the Invisible Man. In all cases, this type of monster is created, even purposefully manufactured, and the outcome is accidental and tragic. The creator of the monster is often murdered, or lost to his darker evil side, and the characters again, serve only to be killed off as the mad scientist almost realizes his folly.

The fourth type of monster is the creature from folklore/myth/legend. This category encompasses monsters from The Mummy, to monsters in The Relic, Cerberus, and After Dark. These monsters all have the same motive, and all, actually, seem to have become a plague to the characters because of that motive: being disturbed from their slumber, which serves to kill off most of the characters in the most violent and brutal method possible.

Finally, the fifth monster type is nature gone bad. This fits the Armageddon sort of flick, where birds, bats, plague, or impending asteroids kill off a good

portion of the characters. Movies like Stephen King's *The Birds*, *Armageddon*, *10.5*, and *The Day After Tomorrow* fit this category well. The problem with this last monster type is that it differs the most dramatically from the genre because a great deal more time is spent on character growth than on the priorities of the monster, being nature, but in the end, nature usually wins out, despite how great the characterization is.

Furthermore, Stuart Fischhoff's study commented on many things monster but one conclusion was striking, that "film monsters have proven to be such unforgettable characters that in many instances they have become part of our culture." In fact, they are unforgettable to the degree that "most Americans would recognize a picture of Frankenstein, Dracula, King Kong, Godzilla or the Mummy before recognizing a Supreme Court Justice" (Fischhoff).

This conclusion is not only remarkable, it is entirely true. John Rutledge is one of the most recently discussed Supreme Court Justices, but his name means nothing unless that person has been thoroughly engrossed in the newspaper for the past two years. On the other hand, a person doesn't even have to watch *Godzilla* to know that *Godzilla* is a dinosaur-like creature that wreaks havoc on Tokyo or that *Dracula* is a vampire with unconventional vampire powers.

Additionally, the second core characteristic of monster movies is the psychological aspect and appeal of the monster. This aspect can roughly be defined as not only the type of monster, but the character of that monster and what affect that monster has on an audience. Fischhoff's study was also

to survey a group of people and conclusively determine who the “ King of Monsters” was.

Turns out Dracula wins, though not because he is the most violent, nor is he the best killer among the monsters to choose from. Freddy Krueger and Hannibal Lector obviously had the mass-slaying thing down, but they could never have the staying power that Dracula has because their nature is for violence and they lack the extreme psychological aspect that makes Dracula not only frightening, but also seductive.

Monster movies are great to watch when the monster is a monster. But, when man becomes a monster, as in the case of Hannibal Lector in *Silence of the Lambs*, for reasons pertaining to his youth and not some botched experiment, the movie experience becomes nearly transcendently frightful with the very real aspect that Hannibal could be a real person in a very real neighborhood. Same with Freddy Krueger, though he at least has that whole dream-killing thing happening which makes him, in reality, a bit less plausible, though his deeds are no less terrifying.

Fischhoff offers some insight into this phenomena, stating that “ it is believed to be the thrill of fright, the awe of the horrific, the experience of the dark and forbidden side of human behavior that lures people into the dark mouth of the theater to be spooked” (Fischhoff). Even though the man-monster takes off on a different path from the genre, hitting horror and the psychological aspect harder than ever before, people still flock to these movies in droves due to the need for fright, to experience the thrill without

living the thrill (how scary would it be if Hannibal lived down the street?).

And, the best monster movies are able to produce at least that much.

Moreover, according to Fischhoff's survey, the top ten monsters of all time, in order, are: Dracula, Freddy Krueger, Godzilla, Frankenstein, Chucky, Michael Myers (Halloween), King Kong, Hannibal Lector, Jason Voorhees (Friday 13th), and Alien. It is interesting to notice when looking at this list that the monster to man-monster ratio is an exact split between the ten. Five genuine monsters and five men-turned-monsters. When it comes to monster movies, the best monster is obviously a cross between the most horrific and the most frightening.

Furthermore, the third characteristic of monster movies is the use of plot as a device to form the movie around the monster. Like Neilsen's generator was helpful to suggest, there are five different plots that make up the monster movie genre, almost, in its entirety. And, these plots all revolve around or are centered on, the motive of the monster.

Basically, the monster can be out for revenge, need to feed, need to protect its young, their slumber has been disturbed, or they want to destroy humanity. All movies created in the early black and white era actually follow this format, the most famous of them setting up the very archetype known as monster movies today.

To begin with, Frankenstein (1931) demonstrates the classic revenge plot. Dr. Henry Frankenstein wanted to make a man out of stolen body parts and actually managed to do so. In fact, Dr. Frankenstein's monster would have

been a medical marvel if not for the criminal brain secured for his construction. Because of that tiny little fatal flaw, the monster rises with a vendetta for Dr. Frankenstein. And because Dr. Frankenstein screwed up, he becomes the obsession of his own creation.

In *Dracula* (1931), Count Dracula, something of a real estate tycoon and upwardly rich aristocrat, preys on the people he comes across in Transylvania. Dracula is different than the average monster because of his strikingly literal human nature. He also has the enhanced ability to seduce his victims beyond their control, which makes him exceptionally difficult to properly vanquish. The story also ends heroically as Van Helsing is proven right and is able to destroy Dracula. Dracula's main motive, besides amusement, is simply, to feed.

King Kong (1933) differs from many monster movies because the character relationships are vitally important for the movie to progress. There are two main relationships developed throughout, that of Ann and Jack and that of Ann and King Kong. King Kong's motive, once he falls for his new companion Ann, is to protect her from the evils in his jungle environment, and later, the evils he sees New York City. One of the final lines in the movies, "it wasn't the airplanes, it was beauty that killed the beast" strikes a cord in any heart and makes King Kong perhaps the most lovable of all movie monsters because of his human desire to protect Ann.

In *The Mummy* (1932) a priest is resurrected accidentally by an unwitting team of archeologists and sets about seeking his lost love. Bad things happen along the way, one of the archeologists is taken as a replacement for

the mummy's lost bride, but the mummy is vanquished in the end when the archeologists destroy the scroll that brought him back to life. The mummy, Im-ho-tep, basically sends his wrath out on the world and spends the movie causing mass destruction because his slumber was disturbed. Simple as that.

Finally, in Godzilla (1954), Godzilla is a monster god (more like un-extinct dinosaur) that preys on the countryside of Tokyo and fits the classic monster out to destroy humanity plot. The natives sacrifice virgins in an attempt to appease the monster, but Godzilla seems to enjoy wreaking as much destruction as possible. The monster attacks every few scenes, with the people in a panic as to how to destroy him before they are all killed. And, even though they manage to kill Godzilla in the end, the result is not joyful as the people still fear another Godzilla is just moments from rising from the sea.

Overall, all movies follow a specific formula which can be calculated and defined based upon the genre they fall in to. The monster movie is a cross between the horror film and the psychological thriller and has certain core, salient characteristics that define the monster movie as a genre. Neilsen helps to illuminate the various forms of monster and monster motives with his monster movie pitch generator, and it can be said that, categorically, monster type, psychological aspect of the monster, and motive of the monster as demonstrated in the plot combine to form the core characteristics of the monster movie.

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