

Monstrous Transformations! : The Success & Failure of Multi-Genre Mixing in
Modern Monster Movies

Throughout the history of cinema genres have been defined, redefined, forgotten and praised, from Cowboy movies to Teenage Romances, cinema has produced countless films categorizing them under an umbrella term of 'genre'. However within this essay I shall be focusing on one sub-genre in particular that being, '*The Monster Movie*'. This sub-genre has played a pivotal role within the Horror Genre by establishing conventions which we still see to this day in modern horror movies, however throughout the 21st Century there has been a shift in quality with a large number of monster movies due to filmmakers mixing far too many genres into one movie hoping to appeal to current audiences but unfortunately hear "What in the hell were the makers of this monstrosity thinking? (Clarke, 2015). Within this essay I shall be researching what makes a monster, is it their appearance or their actions and how has that influenced prior highly acclaimed classic monster movies? I shall further my research by critically analysing opinions of scholars and researchers in relation to whether they believe genre as a historically used film term is able to be flexible and mix with other genres or should be fixed within their genre and stick to their own conventions, to see if there opinions apply in practice I shall be carrying out a case study of four films including a chosen genre they have mixed with the Monster Movie sub-genre to see which ones were successful and which weren't and why.

Defining a Monster & The Flexibility of Genre

The image of a monster has been identifiable for decades, if one were to ask someone to describe a monster, they might use adjectives such as slimy, disfigured and grotesque, the usage of these descriptions could be due to Mary Shelley's science fiction novel '*Frankenstein*'. Shelley (2013) describes Frankenstein's monster as intending to be beautiful yet the monster possess yellow skin, yellow watery eyes, black lips and long dark lustrous hair, the sheer horror of such a being sends Victor Frankenstein away to his room stating that "now that i had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. This iconic image of Frankenstein's monster would forever linger throughout literary and cinematic history and would be the iconic base image for all creature features. However author Gillian Mclever states:

In 'Two Followers of Cadmus Devoured by a Dragon' by Cornelius van Haarlem, the emphasis is less on the violence of the dragon's attack on the men. The horror of the painting lies in the way the dragon is sinking its teeth into the face of one man and digging its claws into the other man's nude flesh. (Mclever. 2016. p 146)

Although discussing a painting and not a depiction of Frankenstein, the image of a monster is still present within this painting as the Dragon. Mclever states that we as the audience of van Haarlems painting must put aside the initial and surface value reading of the artwork and search for deeper meaning. As Mclever explains that the appearance of the Dragon is not the main message of this piece, rather its actions. The dragon is painted a dark grey colour camouflaging it into the background therefore bringing our attention to the bright red of the blood seeping from the man in the foreground thus making us acknowledge the actions of the Dragon, not its appearance. Mclever effectively communicates the importance of how appearance should not factor into defining something monstrous but its actions.

Understanding Mcleever's definition of a monster it does pose the question of how does a monster come to be? Are monsters born without emotion or are there certain factors that mold a monster into being? In a journal article by Fernando Simão Vugman he states:

One can observe a tendency to intensify the male character of the world in which they were generated. Thus, though all of them appear in societies dominated by men, one should note that while Caliban does have a mother, Frankenstein's monster is motherless, and Mr. Hyde is born within the very body and soul of a man in an environment almost completely devoid of female characters. Besides, while Caliban and Frankenstein's creature show a desire for a female companion, Mr. Hyde never gives a thought to that possibility. So there is also a sexual element related to the modeling of monsters. (Fernando Simão Vugman (2001))

Vugman presents us with an interesting interpretation of the world of a monster and how a society and individual devoid of female presence can become monstrous. Vugman builds an image of why a monster acts the way they do, and implies that without a women within their lives men will behave aggressively and with strong sexual desires thus making them monstrous. This viewpoint can be read as outdated and can be contested due to research being conducted with women and men measuring their aggression toward opponents, "In addition, simple effects of opponent's emotional display, separately for women and men, indicated that men displayed similar levels of aggression across the four conditions" (Arriaga, P. and Aguiar, C. (2019)) analysing the data it displays mens aggression levels would remain at similar level against any opponent therefore contesting Vugmans implication that without women men would act monstrous.

Genre can be defined as a "particular style or category of works of art; esp. a type of literary work characterized by a particular form, style, or purpose" Oxford English Dictornary. (2000). Every one of us can identify similar characteristics within such genres as; Westerns, Romance and Gothic. Across the

centuries we have been unintentionally merging genres together to make more compelling narratives. For example Prasad states:

We are aware of the historicity of genres—the decline of some, the rise of others—in the career of popular cinema. But this remains at the level of an awareness of flux, of the judgment of time, rather than a grasp of material processes of immanent change. The mortality of genres seems here a function of their organic constitution, a congenital ephemerality. Another explanation is that social change renders them obsolete and new ones come to take their place, which merely suggests that death is hastened by extraneous factors. (Prasad. 2011. p72-73)

By focusing on specifically chosen words by Prasad such as ‘Flux’ and ‘Mortality’ in relation to social rendering genre absolute, it therefore can be understood that genre has a life cycle and due to social change, specific genres are axed or are mutated to fit the culture and attitude of the time. Evidently Prasads argument conveys that genre is not a fixed structure or rule that is not malleable, however is a tool to which is constantly evolving and takes on shapes that correlates to society at that current time and reflect real world emotions. Prasads argument can reinforced due to Media Scholar John Fiske, with him stating that:

Conventions are the structural elements of genre that are shared between producers and audiences. They embody the crucial ideological concerns of the time in which they are popular and are central to the pleasures a genre offers its audience. Conventions are social and ideological. A formula, on the other hand, is an industrial and economic translation of conventions that is essential to the efficient production of popular cultural commodities and should not be evaluated by aesthetic criteria that dismiss it as mere lack of imagination. (Fiske. 1987. p110)

John Fiske effectively dissects the difference between conventions and genre as a formula therefore reinforcing Prasad's idea that genre is a societal and cultural tool which is able to take on various forms, it is however companies that take on these conventions (stated by Fiske) and make money off them by making products such as films, books, plays etc. These two sources which determine genres flexibility and position within society are highly important within this assignment due to the identification of what makes a monster movie.

The Good, the Bad and the Whacky!

This section will be centred around four monster movies, each of them utilising genre mixing within their films however with research I shall display how two of these monster films have been received poorly whilst the remaining two are beloved by audiences. As a Director and Writer I shall be focusing on three key areas; Narrative, Cinematography and Performance, I have chosen these because all three areas of filmmaking are important to my creative style of working and I always regard these as the highest priority when it comes to my own filmmaking.

Dracula Untold (2014)

Dracula Untold (*dir, Gary Shore. 2014*) is an origin story film for the iconic Universal Monster, Dracula. The narrative of the film links the horror icon with his real world counterpart Vlad The Impaler, with IMDB detailing the story:

As his kingdom is being threatened by the Turks, young prince Vlad Tepes must become a monster feared by his own people in order to obtain the power needed to protect his own family, and the families of his kingdom. (IMDB. 2014. 'Dracula Untold')

The narrative of the movie clearly utilises genre mixing, one of the main genres of the movie is War, examples of these are seen throughout the movie with scenes of militaristic planning of both armies, the several battle sequences and political conversations. Another key genre within this movie is Horror, which can be seen via scenes including Vlad becoming a vampire, quiet, tense scenes of Vlad hunting soldiers in order to feed, and the conventional low key lighting. However the film struggles to balance the pair, “The film’s attempts to make its subject’s mass murderer a heroic, tragic figure succeed only in a misapplication of style and intent” (Brian Eggert, 2022, critic reviews). From this review and many more it can be perceived that audience response to the usage of genre mixing was unsuccessful, if we refer back to Gillian Mclevers description of what makes a monster:

In ‘Two Followers of Cadmus Devoured by a Dragon’ by Cornelius van Haarlem, the emphasis is less on the violence of the dragon's attack on the men. The horror of the painting lies in the way the dragon is sinking its teeth into the face of one man and digging its claws into the other man's nude flesh. (McIver. 2016. p 146)

We can apply the idea the intent of action and not the appearance is what makes a monster, with Eggerts comments on making a murderer heroic, fails the intended style of the movie we can tell that Vlags actions throughout the film cannot be deemed monstrous as time and time again we are shown he is being violent to protect his family and his people in a caring manner and not one out of egocentric survival.

The Cinematography of the movie blends conventions of both genres for their specific scenes which can be argued makes the film feel disjointed. When the movie has scenes where Vlad is a vampire or specifically when Vlad meets Charles Dances ‘Master Vampire’ character the scene takes place within a cave, the film successfully uses horror visual conventions which effectively communicate the horror genre, the main effective element being used throughout is chiaroscuro:

“Derived from the Italian words *chiaro* (light) and *scuro* (dark), the term chiaroscuro refers to the use of strong contrasts between light and dark in a composition. In horror films, the effect can make the viewer feel incredibly anxious about what is lurking in those shadows.” (*Media-Studies.com*)

However when the film changes back into being a War movie it has been stated that cinematography makes the film feel very videogame like, “Most of the time, I found myself feeling like I was waiting for a turn with the gaming controls” (*Wesley Morris, 2014, critic reviews*), from this review the film can be viewed as unrealistic and unengaging as the stakes of the film which is presented through the battle sequences and flight scenes are felt weightless therefore making the audience uninvested in the outcome for the characters.

Finally many agree the performance by Luke Evans as Vlad The Impaler is the most engaging part of the movie with Critic Siobhan Synnot stating: “Luke Evans gives his Vlad the Impaler a brooding intensity”. This works well for the characters current position in life that of being a general, however consensus is that he doesn’t portray the character who will soon to be Dracula believably “Evans lacks the lasting charismatic presence for this kind of role, but works hard to ground every silly moment he's given with turbulent gravity.” (*Aaron Yap, 2014, critic reviews*). This association with Dracula's charisma is synonymous with the character ever since his iconic appearance in *Dracula* (*dir. Tod Browning, 1931*) this is due to Bela Lugosi's performance which:

At the height of his popularity, he received as many letters as any romantic screen idol, 97’ per cent of which, he announced to the press in 1935, came from women. Quite effective too was Lugosi’s mellifluous, Hungarian-accent, which helped create a barrier of unfamiliarity (and something to ambiguous to be charmed) (*Clarens. 1997 p. 62*)

This display of attraction due to ambiguity and unfamiliarity confirms to us that Dracula is inherently a sexual icon which carries the long lasting theme of lust which can be connected to the idea of the apple of Eden. Reviewing the film and critics opinions on Evans performance of Dracula it can be read that he wasn't able to attract the audience effectively and convincingly as prior actors have been able to.

The Mummy (2017)

The Mummy (dir. Alex Kurtzman. 2017) is an action & horror movie featuring Tom Cruise as the lead character Nick Morton and Sofia Boutella as *The Mummy* (*Ahmanet*), with this film being the first in a lineup of interconnected monster movies all set within one universe (aking to the Marvel Cinematic Universe) called The Dark Universe. However due to this films poor reception not only from critics but audiences, this new cinematic universe failed to come to flourishion. One of the main criticisms of the movie is to do with the it's narrative. IMDB description of the narrative reads:

“Though safely entombed in a crypt deep beneath the unforgiving desert, an ancient princess, whose destiny was unjustly taken from her, is awakened in the current day bringing with her malevolence grown over millennia and terrors that defy human comprehension.” (IMDB. 2017. ‘The Mummy’)

However many feel this to be a slightly misleading description of *The Mummy* as from IMDB's synopsis implies the film is a gothic, supernatural, intense experience when in actuality due to the inclusion of multiple writers and Tom Cruise the film, it was widely agreed that “*The film can't decide what it wants to be other than a Tom Cruise vehicle. (Kermode. M. 2018. Critic Review)*”. Subsequently due to amount of A-list actors, sudden shifts between poorly executed genres and the need to be the first film in a cinematic universe people felt that “*The Mummy wants to be a horror movie, an action movie, and kick*

off an entire universe at the time same - and accomplishes none of those things.” (Booth. K. 2019. Critic Review). Consistently one of the major criticisms for the movie’s poor reception is its eagerness to establish an interconnected world of narratives in the aim to build excitement for the next series of films. For some time now the blame for this has been attributed to Marvel Studios due to their own successful cinematic universe.

I think cinema is in a very bad way. I think it's lost its place because of, partly, the grandiose element between Marvel, DC and all of that. And I think it's beginning to implode. You're kind of losing the plot... So it's just become a party time for certain actors to do this stuff (Cox. B 2024)

In terms of cinematography, *The Mummy* does however contain clear and effective evidence of classic monster movie conventions, these being low key lighting, with harsh brighter lights on certain objects or characters in order to draw attention toward it, this is often described as Chiaroscuro lighting:

Derived from the Italian words *chiaro* (light) and *scuro* (dark), the term chiaroscuro refers to the use of strong contrasts between light and dark in a composition. In horror films, the effect can make the viewer feel incredibly anxious about what is lurking in those shadows. (*Media-Studies.com*)

This technique can be seen within the church scene and when Ahmanet escapes from the plane crash. The usage of chiaroscuro is effective because it evokes a sense of anxiety and claustrophobia which both scenes utilize well, in the church scene Ahmanet is on top of Jenney Halsey (played by Annabelle Wallis) and the scene takes place at night, this scene uses chiaroscuro to its advantage as it adds to the tense feeling Jenny would be feeling within this scene. Similarly when Ahmanet escapes the plane crash, she attacks the research team, using chiaroscuro the scene feels mysterious and tense due to Ahmanet hiding within the shadows and only attacking in the brief streaks of light the moon gives off. Both of these scenes display an effective usage of chiaroscuro as it not only utilises the technique to hide the monster to raise

the anxiety of the characters but also the audience but also utilises the technique to enhance Ahmanet's power over the characters. Unfortunately, the film does however continue the trope of being a *Mission Impossible* styled action film, "*The film can't decide what it wants to be other than a Tom Cruise vehicle. (Kermode. M. 2018. Critic Review)*" using extreme dutch angles, hero shots and extreme wide shots to display Tom Cruise's impressive stunts. The unfortunate merge of these two styles of cinematography gives the audience a jarring experience with a feeling that two completely separate movies have been merged together to try and compromise for the other in order to appeal to audiences.

Finally the performance by Sophia Boutella as Ahmanet is highly effective at making the audience feel uneasy and untrustworthy of her character. Throughout the movie we are shown multiple flashbacks to Ahmanet in Ancient Egypt making the audience feel sympathetic for her, however in the modern day when Ahmanet is released Sophia Boutella crawls and moves in very jarring and twitchy movements which makes the audience feel unfamiliar and unable to see her in a humanistic way:

This is a psychological experience known as 'the uncanny', where something is familiar, but strange enough to become unsettling... And it is the unnatural and exaggerated movement of clowns which also contributes to this. (Cox. A. 2020)

This sense of '*the uncanny*' makes Ahmanet feel more monstrous as she appears human but due to her movements she feels almost non-human which makes the audience feel on edge and never be able to be fully sympathetic toward her, making her actions throughout the film feel more monstrous.

The Shape of Water (2017)

The Shape of Water (dir. Guillermo Del Toro. 2017) is a romance and fantasy movie set in 1960s Baltimore, with IMDB synopsis reading “*At a top secret research facility in the 1960s, a lonely janitor forms a unique relationship with an amphibious creature that is being held in captivity.*” (IMDB. 2017. ‘*The Shape of Water*’) However many have described this movie as a “*A what-if story... What if The Creature from the Black Lagoon found love? What if Beauty and the Beast were set in Cold War USA?*” (Tuner. A. 2021. Critic Review)” This summarisation of the narrative is humorous, it is however incredibly accurate, Guillermo Del Toro took the story of the Creature of the Black Lagoon which he was fascinated by and wished for the creature to not be the villain as Del Toro felt bad for him.

However, while The Creature from the Black Lagoon was darker, in *The Shape of Water* he is a more humanized and warm being, here he is the victim and not a threat. (Pieniazek. 2023. Critic Review)

Guillermo humanized the fish man by highlighting the isolation that a confined prisoner would feel, with the human characters treating the fishman like a hazard that is to be contained and studied, it is this loneliness that leads Elisa to interact with the fishman and show him compassion, “*Guillermo del Toro’s The Shape of Water is a beautiful and fully realized film about loneliness and our desire for love.*” (Duran. 2024. Critic Review) this theme of a desire for love due to isolation is similar to *The Bride of Frankenstein* (dir. James Whale. 1935) where after being hunted by a mob The Monster pleads Victor Frankenstein to give him a bride as he feels alienated from society due to his appearance and actions. Guillermo Del Toro successfully combines the two genres of monster movie and romance together beautifully by showing the audience how the scientists and military see The Fish Man and then by following Elisa we see the Fish Man's true personality which is gentle and compassionate much like the Monster in *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1933).

The Shape of Water also effectively uses traditional monster movie cinematography techniques but in a new and unique way. Utilising Chiaroscuro which is defined as:

Derived from the Italian words *chiaro* (light) and *scuro* (dark), the term chiaroscuro refers to the use of strong contrasts between light and dark in a composition. In horror films, the effect can make the viewer feel incredibly anxious about what is lurking in those shadows. (*Media-Studies.com*)

Cinematographer Dan Lausten uses shadows and low key lighting on The Fish Man (*played by Doug Jones*) in the beginning of the movie in order to enhance the creatures monstrous appearance and spoke of nature, it is however when Elisa (*played by Sally Hawkins*) meets The Fish Man that the cinematography changes, we shift from harsh shadows to warm lighting which reflects the pairs growing relationship. Interestingly from examining the male characters who work at Occam Aerospace Research Centre the opposite happens. When we are first introduced to the male scientists and military personnel largely lead by Strickland (*played by Michael Shannon*) the characters are shot in a warm lighting and are very visible it is however when the flip happens for Elisa and The Fish Man that we begin to see Strickland, the scientists and military personnel are shot in low key lighting, scenes that demonstrate this is when Dr. Robert Hoffsstetler (*played by Michael Stuhlbarg*) meets up with KGB agents and is shot with only a car's headlights. This decision to reverse the cinematography on the main sets of characters display the recurring theme within monster movies of how man is the monster and not the creature itself.

Finally, when we first meet The Fish Man, Doug Jones portrays the creature in a violent and aggressive manner as it cuts Strickland's fingers off and attacks scientists, however through Elis connection with The Fish Man we are shown that he is actually is a calm and compassionate creature, this can be seen through his interaction with Giles mending his wounds and restoring his hair. Therefore we can assume

that The Fish Man was only acting aggressive due to its prolonged time of being tortured by the scientists, once again reinforcing the idea from Gillian Mcleever:

In 'Two Followers of Cadmus Devoured by a Dragon' by Cornelius van Haarlem, the emphasis is less on the violence of the dragon's attack on the men. The horror of the painting lies in the way the dragon is sinking its teeth into the face of one man and digging its claws into the other man's nude flesh. (McIver. 2016. p 146)

Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit (2005)

Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit (dir. Nick Park & Steve Box. 2005) is the first feature film that the iconic British duo received. With the comedic pair already covering the genres of Adventure, Thriller and Romance it was only a matter of time until the two yorkshire residents had a horror on their hands, this comes in the form of a Were-Rabbit. IMDB summarizes the movie's plot as: "*Wallace and his loyal dog, Gromit, set out to discover the mystery behind the garden sabotage that plagues their village and threatens the annual giant vegetable growing contest*" (IMDB. 2005. 'Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit'), with the movie following a "Were-Wolf" styled monster movie approach, Wallace happens to be the individual cursed into becoming a 7ft rabbit, the filmmakers knowing the audience will sympathise with the rabbit as it is Wallace used the familiar theme of 'Man is the Monster' effectively, this theme on one account can be seen deriving from *Frankenstein*: "*You accuse me of murder; and yet you would, with a satisfied conscience, destroy your own creature. Oh, praise the eternal justice of man!*" (Shelley, M. 2013. p,103-104) this exclamation from the creature (speaking to Victor Frankenstein) implies that humanity is the true monster not him due to their carefree violent nature toward things they do not understand, The Curse of the Were-Rabbit utilises this effectively as we are frequently shown the townspeople be opposed to the Rabbit who is stealing their food and actively allow Victor Quatermaine

(played by Ralph Fiennes) to inhumanly kill the rabbit without even trying to understand why the rabbit is stealing everyone's vegetation, the humans simply want "the beast" gone as they are all consumed with greed and egocentricity in order to win a competition.

The film effectively utilises monster/horror movie cinematography convention exceedingly well, with constant usage of chiaroscuro to intensify the anxious and eerie atmosphere the characters feel toward the beast, but the film also uses POV (point of view) shots, the usage of these shots "*instill that sense of fear and tension that every horror viewer craves. (Coffeen. F. Horror Homeroom. 2020)* it is this usage of POV that makes such scenes as when we are in the first person perspective of the rabbit heading toward the church feel so tense and fearful, as we are not able to see what the Were-Rabbit looks like, only it's munching and belching until we as the Were-Rabbit stand up towering over Reverend Clement Hedges (played by Nicholas Smith). This is a great usage of monster/horror cinematography as it not only allows the audience to experience a fearful emotion without any escape but also progresses the story by informing us of the sheer size and horror this Were-Rabbit can instil upon people.

Finally this film successfully grounds itself as a monster movie due to its performances from the puppeteers and voice actors bringing archetypal monster movie characters to life. Reverend Clement Hedges appears slightly mad due to his encounter with the Were-Rabbit but also has insight on the creature due to his religious background, topped with his over dramatic and crazed performance by Nicholas Smith successfully embodies the archetype of the Mad religious character who had deep knowledge of the monster of the movie, examples of these can be seen within *Nosferatu* (dir. Robert Eggers. 2024) with the performance of Willem Dafoe as Prof. Albin Eberhart von Franz and Edward Van Sloan's performance of Van Helsing in *Dracula* (dir. Tod Browning. 1931).

Conclusion

For this essay my goal was to research and discover if multi-genre mixing is effective in conjunction with modern monster movies and detail why some have succeeded at blending two genres and others have failed in critic and audience opinion. From researching I have discovered that multi-genre mixing is an effective and integral element within cinema and is a necessity when making any movie due to its financial and cultural impacts. I have also discovered what makes a monster movie, these being the visual and personal elements, not only does a monster movie have a specific look but also a lot of successful monster movies make the creature the victim of their own tale and frame the humans as the monsters. I have also successfully differentiated how two specific monster movies have failed due to the pair of them trying to follow recent trends and not being able to balance two genres effectively, whilst then displaying two other monster movies which have been successful due to being able to pay homage to prior monster movies and utilise conventions and effectively apply them to a genre mix that feels balanced due to the director, writer and cinematographer understanding how to make each genre weave perfectly together and of course understanding that the monster isn't a evil being from the beginning but is the victim of their story and acts out of defense not offence. The implications of this research has helped me as a director and writer further understand what it takes to make a monster movie, it's not just throwing a latex mask on with dark shadows and being evil that makes a movie like this, there is a whole personal element to the story which helps us connect to the monster and sends a message of needing to understand and care for those unlike us. In conclusion I have effectively displayed research into what makes a monster movie and how mixing genres is an effective tool for movies and I have successfully shown through multiple sources how a monster movie can fail and succeed in trying to appeal to audiences.

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