

Monstrous Reinvention

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Since the film industry began, audiences have gone to monster movies to be thrilled and terrified. Today, directors are remaking classic monster movies like *The Mummy* and *King Kong* into violent action-adventures full of stunning special effects. But too often, in these flashy effects extravaganzas, the true art that made the original movies so successful is lost. Modern audiences are too quick to disregard the old versions of these films with the words 'bad special effects, black and white, old', when they have so much entertainment to offer, and can teach us a lot about successful and clever film-making.

The old monster movie was generally closer to horror than action, and showed very little violence. Instead, it made use of suspense and the power of the audience's imagination to create fear and get a reaction. There was an *art* to how the original directors skillfully used more subtle suggestion to create tension.

The Mummy, released in 1932, was originally a horror movie. In 1999, when it was remade, it had become an adventure romp in the style of 'Indiana Jones'. There is nothing wrong with that, and both films achieved exactly what they were intended to achieve. However, it is interesting to compare the films, and see how, although they are based on the same story, they are very different. The most noticeable difference between the two films is the lack of obvious special effects in the 1932 version. But effects were not necessary to create the desired feeling. Take, for example, the awakening scene, in which the mummy is raised from the dead. The 1999 mummy is a gooey, half-rotten corpse, and its first actions are to rip a man's eyes out, roar, and attack people with extraordinarily agility. It is exciting, adventurous, horrifying—but not *terrifying*. There is a difference. In the 1932 scene the set is dimly lit. The mummy is well preserved and still definitely human, automatically making the scene eerier. It is scarier when a monster looks human, as it makes it harder for the audience to dismiss it as mere fantasy. Once the mummy wakes, all that is seen is its hand as it takes a document from the table, and a trail of bandage going out the door. The archaeologist in the room with it sees, screams, and declines into insanity, his mad laughter the sound on which the scene exits. No violence or elaborate special effects were needed to make this scene work. Playing on most people's fear of insanity was more than enough to make the scene truly terrifying, and automatically makes the audience start to tense in preparation for what might come next. It is this continued use of the psychological factor—the mummy bringing on heart attacks with its powers, and seducing and hypnotizing (not kidnapping) the heroine—that makes the film exude the power of the supernatural. Normal violence and gore can be created by any human—killing by getting inside another's mind cannot.

Similarly, the effects used in *King Kong* of 1933 were cutting-edge in their time, but compared to today's technical marvels, remain unconvincing. The makers needed to rely on suspense and a long and tense build-up to the moment Kong appears. One of the most effective scenes that does this is when Carl Denham (the director in the film) is getting the heroine to rehearse on the ship. Only he knows that Kong is going to be on the island, and what Kong might be—none of the other characters (or the audience) knows yet. But Denham makes the heroine practice looking up and screaming. It is very chilling, and builds audience tension for the moment Kong appears. Once on screen, his actual appearance is not as scary as his actions and his obvious enjoyment of inflicting pain: stepping on people on purpose and smiling as he grinds them into the ground; picking them up and throwing them; pulling down train lines and rattling trains full of

screaming people, peering inside to see how hard they scream. Unlike the modern movie in which this display seems to be mainly caused by an anger like that of a wounded animal, the 1933 version suggests more than a little hate, spite, and intelligent brutality. It is scarier because it appears more calculated, less passionate—in other words, more human. And as was said about the mummy, human looks or characteristics in a monster are far more terrifying. Very little actual violence and gore is shown in the 1933 movie, rather it is suggested, leaving the audience to imagine the details for themselves, according to what frightens them most. It is a clever and highly effective way of creating suspense and tension.

From these examples, it can be seen that in both the original movies, it was the clever understanding of human psychology that went towards the creation of monsters the audience can relate to. Like good art in any form, the audience is encouraged to engage more deeply with the movie when this technique is used, thus is more affected by it. This same level of impact is not achieved through flashy effects and excessive violence.

I am not suggesting that we should completely disregard new movies and only watch the originals of every filmed story. On the contrary, modern monster movies are magnificent showcases of effects, acting, directorial and cinematographic talent. They are exciting and are highly entertaining to watch. But the original monster movies are also suspenseful, scary and entertaining, despite lacking colour, modern effects and gory violence. Which goes to show that these things are not necessary to making a good movie after all. There is an art to making a good, thrilling monster movie; one that can last through the decades and still draw you in eighty years after it was first made. If you do not believe it, go home and watch the original versions of *The Mummy* and *King Kong*. You might be surprised.