

EDITORIAL

MONSTROUS

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As a teenager growing up on the works of writers like Isaac Asimov, Ursula K. Le Guin, Samuel R. Delany, and Frank Herbert, I was dismayed that so many dramatizations of science fiction equated the genre with horror. More specifically, it seemed that in the early seventies, most people equated SF films with mad scientists and monster movies. There was no shortage of these sorts of old movies showing up on late-night or Saturday afternoon TV. For every rerun of *Star Trek* about a misunderstood creature like the Horta, there seemed to be dozens of movies like *It! The Terror from Beyond Space*. In this 1958 film, a monstrous alien stows aboard a human spaceship and proceeds to murder and terrorize the crew. Some people think *It!* inspired 1979's *Alien*.

Excellent movies such as *Forbidden Planet* did exist. That film was released in 1956 and includes a mad scientist, but it tries to offer a plausible explanation for his madness and for the movie's monster. And besides, it's loosely based on Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Still the monster is pretty vicious, and the movie is categorized as "techno-horror." In this subgenre, the monster/horror stems from the misuse of science and technology.

Yet, well-done SF films were vastly outnumbered by movies like my personal nightmare generator: *Konga*. Not much concerned with intellectual rigor, *Konga's* mad scientist never convincingly explains the serum that turns a cat into a leopard and a chimpanzee into a gorilla. The gorilla manages to kill a lot of people, and, once it's supersized, the giant ape does a real number on London. It's hard to think of this movie from 1961 as an example of scientific overreach, because the "science" is minimal at best.

In those days before Netflix or even the VCR, my high school science fiction club pooled all our finances to rent *Rodan*, which was the most economically priced movie in our film catalog. This is another movie from 1956. It was released in the U.S. in 1957 as *Rodan! The Flying Monster!* The flying monster in question is a prehistoric pteranodon who rampages over the Japanese island of Kyushu and destroys Fukuoka City. A paleontologist investigating Rodan speculates that the creature was awakened by a nuclear bomb test. Once I saw the movie, I was dismayed at the use of our hard-earned money.

Indeed, I was a little embarrassed. I was a strident sixteen-year-old, passionate about science fiction novels and short stories, and I didn't want others to judge the field by these preposterous movies. So many of my friends and teachers seemed to equate the books I adored with *It! The Terror from Beyond Space*. I wanted them to give Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama*, Delany's *Einstein Intersection*, or Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* a chance instead. I'll freely admit that it would be very difficult to make Clarke's novel about a scientific expedition's rendezvous with an empty alien spaceship into an exciting movie. Still, I wanted to share the awe that comes from the stunning idea. That feeling we all know as the sense of wonder. I also didn't want people to be terrified of science and technology and especially the alien. Why assume that every extraterrestrial planned to have us for dinner?

As I got older, I gained a different perspective and, perhaps, a better sense of humor. *Mystery Science Theater 3000* helped me grasp the finer points of campy movies. As I came to care less about what people like my 1970 English teachers thought about science fiction, I found I could relax and just enjoy these films. They weren't meant to be great art, but they were meant to be fun.

It also became clearer that they represented an era. There were legitimate reasons

to be terrified by the power science had unleashed. We had begun to grasp the consequences of nuclear fallout from the Second World War's atom bombs. The U.S. had detonated the first hydrogen bomb in 1952, and the Soviet Union followed with its own hydrogen bomb in 1955. The implication was that things could only get worse.

While the campy movies didn't face the horror of nuclear war in the straightforward manner of 1959's *On the Beach* and 1964's *Doctor Strangelove*, they nailed much of the same angst. Developments in science and technology were not without their dangers. There might not be a serum that could change a chimpanzee into a gorilla, or radiation that would hatch a prehistoric egg, but radiation could lead to cancer and other terrible consequences. A nuclear war could wipe out humanity almost as quickly as I could duck under my grade school desk. We might poke fun at a movie like *Rodan*, but some of that amusement is bravado akin to whistling past a graveyard.

Perhaps the darker side of these movies was the fear of the other, the alien. Treating the alien as monster meant intelligent beings were instantly dehumanized. Again, this outlook can be attributed to the anguish of surviving two world wars and the subsequent cold war, but the films also seemed to represent the human tendency to distrust the outsider, the person or people who aren't part of the group. I suppose there's a good chance that if we meet the alien they will be just as biased toward us. Yet, I prefer dramas like the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* franchises that show humans and other intelligent life forms working and living together.

I don't know how much influence the fiction I loved as a teen had on the movie industry, but I do know that the tentacles of the late fifties' and early sixties' films had long-range effects on science fiction writers. Sometimes this influence has been wry, and sometimes it leads to serious investigations of our inherent biases. Sometimes these tales of the unknown are just scary. There are at least three stories in this issue that can trace their lineage back to yesterday's movies. Each is different from the other, but they are all perfect for the annual slightly spooky September/October *Asimov's*.