'THE 'FANTASTIC' BEASTS OF POPULAR VISUALITY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE REPRESENTATION OF THE FANTASTIC IN WESTERN POPULAR CINEMA IN DISNEY'S *THE PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN*'

Liju Jacob Kuriakose & SmrutisiktaMishrab

Research Scholar, Department of English, NIT Puducherry, Karaikal, Tamil Nadu, India

ABSTRACT

Disney's The Pirates of the Caribbean presents a remarkable fusion of the real with the unreal, the historic, the mythical through the dominant ecological imagery and the objective versus the fabulous creatures to the modern visual space. The portrayal of monsters and the fantastic in the western cinema underwent drastic changes over the course of cinema history. The paper endeavors' to evaluate the history of monsters in cinema and categorize them into three distinct yet historically overlapping phases in the genre of monster cinema. The paper also strives to showcase how the Pirates of the Caribbean series figures in the third category of the classification.

KEYWORDS: *Popular Culture, Cinema, Monsters, Humour*

INTRODUCTION

The sea has always been an insurmountable adversary for humanity ever since the prehistoric era. Supernatural spirits and mythical beasts filled the void of the unknown, as the sea was for them a space of the unknowable and hostility.

Disney's The Pirates of the Caribbean Series is one among the most highly successful movie franchises of Hollywood, where the narrative juxtaposes the seemingly antithetical elements of mythic, the fantastic, and the historic, keeping the "sea" as the centripetal symbol. Sea, being a complex space with unpredictable conditions must have led to the development of an immense pantheon of Gods and monsters that play a large role in how the sea roaming human beings fared.

Sea thus became a space that was inhabited by supernatural beings, friendly and antagonistic, all around the world. Throughout the religious lores, we find Gods like Varuna, Poseidon who posses absolute control over the waters and for whom the sailor's must present prayers and gift lest they express their displeasure. In certain religious narratives, sea also take the form of the much revered mother goddess, whose rules one must obey or they face adversities in the seas. Apart from the God figures, mythical creatures such as Lanka Lakshmi of the Ramayana,and Leviathan of the Bible presented formidable figures who disrupted the voyages of the protagonists.

The myths and mythical creatures of the sea have captured the interest of humankind since ages. Maritime adventure meant a voyage into the unknowable and ever changing spaces where the oceans presents an environment of perennial hostility. Steven Mentz argues that "the oceans figure the boundaries of human transgression; they function symbolically as places in

the world into which mortal bodies cannot safely go" (1003). In the modern times, we had however, replaced the fear of the fantastic monsters with modern monsters of the sea, which is evident in the success of movies such as Steven Spielberg's Jaws andAlexandre Aja's Piranha 3D.

As art has always expressed mankind's greatest fears in the most expressive forms possible as we see in the fearsome descriptions of mythical sea creatures in the early Greek epics. Homer's Odyssey presents for its audience a plethora of monsters adversely affecting the fate of Odysseus who is lost at sea and must return home to Ithaca.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following studies are a cross section of the works already done on monsters in cinema. These studies have mostly conformed to the psychoanalytical or anthropological framework and have ventured into the making of monsters and the reason for the popularity of the genre. The dearth of specialized studies on sea monsters in cinema is evident except in the context of Godzilla. However, the studies on myths and monsters in cinema are applicable in the context of sea monsters as well.

"Myth and Monster Cinema"by David H. Styemesit explores the possibility of using monster movies as a source of contemporary myths. He posits, through the example of King Kong, that various modern monster films exhibit all the characteristics of a classical myth. Monsters in the movies represent the various adversities, natural and man-made and by overcoming these aspects the narratives reaffirm its faith in the modern life and the supremacy of human intelligence (401).

"Nightmare and the Horror Film" by Noel Carroll sketches out an outline of the development of monster cinemas in Hollywood and provides a psychoanalytical reading of various monsters in cinema such as the Frankensteinor Dracula as portrayed in the numerous adaptation of their tales. The essay explores the various sexual undertones in several horror films such as the Exorcist which is linked to the self-hatred imagery shown by the films as well. Monsters and the possessed become the source of both repulsion and attraction (17-19).

Monsters and Monstrosity from the Fin de Siècle to the Millenniumby Sharla Hutchison and Rebecca A. Brown traces the evolution of the monsters in Cinema. The work focuses on a wide range of figures collectively referred to as monsters ranging from animals blown out of proportion to denote monstrosity such asbears to mentally deranged individuals (125).

The Three Phases of Monsters in Cinema

With the advent of visual media, especially cinema, monsters were transported from the verbal and imaginary spaces into the popular visuality. Early monsters of cinema were mostly visual representations of the mythical creatures that had filled the imaginary terrains of humanity from time immemorial. Thus, Godzilla, King Kong, Kraken,andaliens figured prominently in the cinemas of pre-1970 period.

There are three historically overlapping phases which divides monster film genre. Firstly, the monsters served the role of that of scary figures used to incite fear in the viewers. This was the early period of the genre when it was almost

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synonymous with horror cinema, where the prime aim of the monster was to entertain the audience through inciting fear. Here, the monster stood in stark opposition to the modern man, perhaps reflecting an antithetical clash between the modern and the mythical.

When the genre of science fiction cinema grew out of horror film genre, the monsters of it became scientific possibilities like a clone or ‘an experiment gone awry’ instead of the usual supernatural figuresand they stood to symbolize the technological advancements of modern civilization.

Finally, there is the phase where the monster and the fantastic works to incite humour.The third phase, can be seen as a development that at once critiques the illogical nature of positing monsters as an actual possibility and also, enables the succession of monster lore into the contemporary era.

The three phases are overlapping in nature but a distinct difference can be marked as the popularity of each type of cinema rose and fell during different periods.

The same phases can be observed in the latest adaptations of superheroes as well, as seen in the latestiterations of Marvel and DC cinematic universes. The superheroes are routinely seen to be cracking jokes and even a sub-genre of comical superhero films have emerged with movies like the Ironman series, Deadpool series, Shazametc.

Monster Cinema as Modern Mythologies

The paradigm shift began with the rise of modern science and a better understanding of the natural world, led to a decline in the popularity of mythical creatures and remained limited to the tales told to children. As cinema moved on from mythical monsters to quasi-scientific monsters including genetically modified creatures, cloned Dinosaurs, and killer sharks, the fantastic creatures went into the oblivion. They formed the modern mythology of Hollywood cinema.

The series of movies where monsters that scared the audiences were not atleast theoretically unreal, became the cinematic trend of the 1990’s as opposed to the wide reception that the unreal monster movies that came in the previous decades. Movies such as Steven Spielberg’s Jaws (1975) creates the modern myth of a monster in sharks, whose attacks on humans were exaggerated and rates blown out of proportions inciting scare in the viewer(Sowa). They replaced the void that was created in the minds of the viewer created by the lack of fear in monsters who were deemed irrational by the modern audience. The shark, therefore, became a real animal that is yet so misunderstood for the advantage of the said myth. An overabundance of similar movies with actual creatures filling of void for mythical creaturescame out in the next two decades following similar tropes and themes. Thus, an entire cinematic mythology of genetically modified sharks, anacondas, piranhas was created out of a market that demanded monsters that were unreal but plausible.

Even, readings of monster movies of the previous decades came into the foray linking them to modern technological possibilities. The most prominent example is that of the Godzilla, a Japanese movie franchise that first appeared in 1954, who became a symbol of the nuclear attack of 1945 that destroyed 2 major towns of Japan. Here, the monster became the signifier for the great tragedy (Rafferty).

Cohabiting Humour with the Supernatural

In the third phase of cinema, Humour was infused with the mythical creatures to amuse the adult audiences instead of scaring them as it was done in the previous centuries. Such characterizations belonged to two broad categories. One was that of children's movies, such as Monsters Inc. and the other comprises of similar movies aimed at adult audiences, such as of course the Pirates of the Caribbean series and the Scary Movie series.

The major differences between the two are not limited to the audiences which each of them cater to. The former, removes the monsters from their scary contexts and are placed in an unrealistically created situations with characters of the same mould. The latter however, works within their original spaces with same historical and social background, where humour permeates by creating situations where the unreal reacts with the real.

The whole plot of the Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl (2006) where a ship full of ghost pirates try to return stolen Gold of Hernan Cortez, a historical figure who led to the fall of the Aztec Empire and the rise of the Spanish Colonial Empire in the Americas in order to come back to life, plays out in a humorous and ironic manner as as the captain of the ship comes back alive only to be killed the very next moment (VerbinskiThe Curse).

Captain Jack Sparrow, for example, is reminiscent of the umpteen pirate figures described in the diaries of travelers such as William Kidd, with the signature pirate hat, unrestrained drinking habit and a complete disregard for rules and authority. The character however do not work to create fear in the viewer.Instead, humour is produced through a conscious overplay of witty dialogues and slapstick falls of the characters, who have supernatural powers or are ghosts.

The second movie of the series, Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest presents further supernatural elements from the pirates lore, including The Flying Dutchmen the cursed ship than cannot land and Kraken, a octopus-like monster that destroys ships (VerbinskiDead Man's Chest). These figures are based on actual pirate lore in which they are terrible monsters that are believed to wreak havoc upon the ships. While they do the same in the movies, the context and the characters responding to these figures and their attacks elicit humour, downplaying the monstrosity of these figures.

CONCLUSIONS

The Pirates of the Caribbean series represents a phase in cinema history, when monsters have become synonymous with visual amusement than cruelty or fear. The paper argues that this represents the third phases of the evolution of monster movies, which loosely figures within the post-2000 period, when horror film genre saw the development of a subgenre where humour becomes the end result of the films. This is a result of the development of positivist attitudes in the reader and the inability to create willing suspension of disbelief in the viewers as it was possible in the previous decades. Hence, cinema continues to amaze through filling the gaps of disbelief with humour.

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