

# Psychological Appeal of Movie Monsters

## An Exploration of Possibility Space

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### ABSTRACT

As the popularity of monster movies kept rising in recent decades, the significance of this specific movie genre starts to reveal. This paper addresses the distal cause that underlies the psychological appeal of movie monsters. The cultural connection and realistic reflection of monster movies were investigated through surveying 36 subjects from a film history class and interviewing 10 representative samples selected from the survey subjects. The conclusion of this study is monster movies, resembling chase play, are a form of pretended predation. Engaging in such activities gives humans the ability to explore possibility spaces, predict future threats, and prepare creatively for possible dangers they can face in reality, allowing them to passively learn strategies to deal with dangerous situations in a controlled environment, increasing the survivability of individual or group while facing threats. This study found a positive correlation between how accurately monster movies reflect the audiences' realistic concerns and the level of enjoyment reported by the audiences. As a direct representation of predation, the visual impacts of monster movies exceed other forms of pretense, evoking the audiences' emotional reactions more effectively and possessing a higher level of appeal. This study provides evidence to the theory of evolutionary pedagogy and provides insights into the essence of entertainment as an economic and cultural pillar of human civilization.

**Keywords:** Entertainment, Monster movies, Pretense, Communication, Media

## 1. INTRODUCTION

From a 1931 science fiction movie "Frankenstein" earning a global box office of \$12,001,420 [1], to "Resident Evil: The Final Chapter" achieving a box office of \$314,101,190 [2], the trend of the rising popularity of monster movies starts to take over the market as the public are attaching greater interest in such a movie genre. Most audiences of monster movies, when being asked about the underlying reasons for the preference of monster movies, merely have simple answers. It is because they are interesting, thrilling, or fun to watch. Apparently, such subjective answers are far from enough to support the significance of monster movies and entertainment as a whole concept.

As a million-dollar industry, other more objective reasons must exist to explain the pivotal role monster movies play as an economic pillar and cultural icon in contemporary human civilization. Why are monster movies attractive to audiences? Does the popularity of monster movies link to the essence of entertainment? Similar to eating and sleeping, entertainment is an

instinctual need of human beings. Except for satisfying proximal causes such as eliminating the negative feeling of hunger and tiredness, food provides energy for bodies to function normally, and sleeping helps cognitive health, preventing brains from overload. Can entertainment have similar functions that benefit humans somehow?

Aiming to find the benefits of monster movies and the source of its psychological appeal, this research contributes to the field by revealing links between the psychological appeal of movie monsters and possible social concerns reflected by the content of such movies, providing evidence for the theory of entertainment's pedagogical value through passive learning.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The report titled "Favorite Movie Monster and Their Psychological Appeal" by Fischhoff, Dimopoulos, Nguyen, and Gordon was published in April 2002 [3]. The study conducted to investigate the attraction of movie monsters selected 1,166 demographically representative samples and surveyed them on their favorite movie monster and the reasons underlying. The result of this

study shows that males and females are attracted by approximately the same type of monsters, while age plays a role in the disparity of preferences. As younger audiences prefer violent monsters, elder subjects reported a preference for non-slasher monsters such as Frankenstein. Overall, monster movies as a whole are appealing to audiences for their unique “ability to (safely) show us the dark side of human, nature” [3]. The sample of this study was representative, and the methods of study were appropriate. Being one of the few articles addressing the topic of movie monsters, this study is significant for it discovered the monster movies’ general source of attraction, highly harmonious with the claim of my study, monster movies are capable of showing possible danger (or dark side) in a controlled, simulated environment where audiences are able to engage in pretended situations involving dangers.

Another piece of literature guiding this study is “Godzilla and the Atomic Bomb Controversy Roars Back after Sixty Years in Hollywood’s Closet” by Dr. Bruce Chadwick of Rutgers University, published in 2014 on History News Network [4]. The article recounts the factors inspiring the production of Godzilla, initially named “Gojira” in the earliest Japanese version of 1954. As one of the most well-known movie monsters in film history, its original creation was nourished by a fear of atomic energy after the forced surrender in World War II of Japan, after the United States dropped an atomic bomb in the city of Hiroshima and Nagasaki [5]. Chadwick notes that in the original version of Gojira in 1954, American scientists were depicted as responsible for the creation of Gojira due to its atomic bombing in two Japanese cities and nuclear trial in the Marshall Islands [6]. Beyond that, the movie was filled with anti-American dialogues, reflecting a cultural connection between the movie monster itself to political factors, post-war historical backgrounds, and concerns regarding new powerful technological advancements. From a comprehensive historical point of view, this article pointed the direction for my study: the degree of reflecting realistic concerns can be a decisive factor for the psychological appeal of monster movies.

### **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Alien, a 1979 horror monster movie setting scenes in outer space [7], linked with the Cold War and criticism of competitive space exploration with the USSR, while the Resident Evil series, making one of the most popular zombie icons in the twenty-first century, reflected on the fear of biological weapons and genetic engineering. The specific character of monster movies making protagonists and audience facing and being chased by monsters provide an insight into the essence of entertainment. Monster movies granted the audiences the freedom to explore possibility spaces, simulated spaces of possible outcomes based on known conditions [8], of dangerous

situations in a safe, controlled environment, teaching solutions while facing fatal threats from monsters. Journalist Aja Romano notes “The best horror movies are almost always pulling double duty, serving up scares that also illuminate the anxieties that lie below the surface of our collective cultural norms. [7]” This aspect of monster movies resembles chase play, a common behavior in human society. Individuals, usually kids, pretend to be chased by a monster acted by another person, and the subjects experience joy in this process. A theory explaining this phenomenon takes human history back to the age of Megafauna when humans used to face threats from gigantic animals and fierce wild predators [8]. Evolution’s Pedagogy, a dissertation on entertainment and media notes that “Chase play is a form of pretend predation” and engaging in such play is “intrinsically rewarding” [9]. Engaging in play is an evolutionary adoption mammals make to increase survivability in predation while retaining safety under parental care. Since play is exclusive to mammals, some consider this evolutionary legacy as a privilege of mammals to gain tactical advantages over other animals. Play gives mammals abilities to make predictions to possible future and make arrangements according to predictions, which helps gain resources, avoid predation, and build mating advantages in primitive environments. The rewarding nature of play ensures its participation as pedagogy, teaching the essential skills to survive in danger. The monster movies, abundant chasing and catching scenes such as Godzilla ruining the city and overwhelming clusters of zombie chasing after the protagonists, fits the characteristics of chase play perfectly. Furthermore, monster movies are more precise and direct representations of predation, contributing to the psychological appeal thereof. However, humans are only able to realize the proximal cause instead of the distal cause of entertainment, for the most part, meaning one can only know monster movies lead to excitement and joy, but not is aware of the practical function thereof. In cognitive science, this phenomenon is described as “cognitive impenetrability”, which sets a limiting barrier in human cognition [10]. This barrier exists to protect humans’ delicate brain and cognition. Pretense is a powerful tool as a pedagogy, but it can cause cognitive disorders as well. Some are experienced as false memories, such as confusing reality with a movie scene or dream scene, while other more serious symptoms are described as mental illness. The cognitive impenetrability ensures a state of passive learning, ensuring the knowledge and skills to be successfully delivered, protecting the disorientation of human’s cognitive paths. To conclude, monster movies are a modern form of chase play, enabling the audience to face simulated predation and explore the possible future. The rewarding nature of play contributes largely to the psychological appeal of movie monsters as an evolutionary heritage, which connects to human ancestry in the age of Megafauna.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted both quantitative and qualitative research methods. In order to investigate the connection between favorite movie monsters and their level of reflecting realistic concerns, a highly focused representative sample of 36 students from a film history elective was selected. A survey was passed out with four questions, including:

- 1) Select your favorite type of movie monster
- 2) Name a movie of your choice in question 1
- 3) From 0-100, how would you describe the rate of selected movie accurately representing your realistic fear (lab virus leak, alien invasion, nuclear war, etc.)?
- 4) From 0 being not related and 5 being strongly related, how would you describe how the rate of representation of your realistic concerns contribute to your level of enjoyment?

In addition, interviews consisted of six in-depth questions based on the survey results were conducted with a stratified random sample of 10 subjects selected according to gender. The gender ratio of males and females is 1:1. Questions include what is the favorite movie scene, what is learned from the movies, and what is the most appealing setting in terms of background story, character, and the interrelationships between characters.

The interview focused on personal experiences and takeaways from favorite monster movies. Examples of favorite scenes include:

- 1) Resident Evil: Protagonists chased by zombies and escaped from the sewer.
  - 2) Venom: Venom bites the head off of the antagonist.
- Strategies learned from monster movies while facing danger includes:
- 1) How to treat corrupted morality in the apocalypse(Resident Evil)
  - 2) Unite all countries and their technology to fight alien invaders(Pacific Rim)
  - 3) Sacrifice oneself for the survival of the greater population(Train to Busan)

#### 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The proportion in the percentage of favorite movie monsters selected by sample subjects. Gigantic monsters such as Godzilla and dinosaurs in Jurassic Park occupy 36.11%, being the most popular movie monster. Zombie is the second most popular type of monster, occupying 25% of all subjects. Aliens ranked at the third most popular monster movie, with a percentage of 22.22%, only 2.78% less than zombies. Vampires, which ranked at the fourth, occupy 11.11% of the total votes. Subjects

selecting other types of favorite monsters specify them as legendary creatures, such as Pan and dragons, contributing 5.56% of total data. As shown in Figure 1.

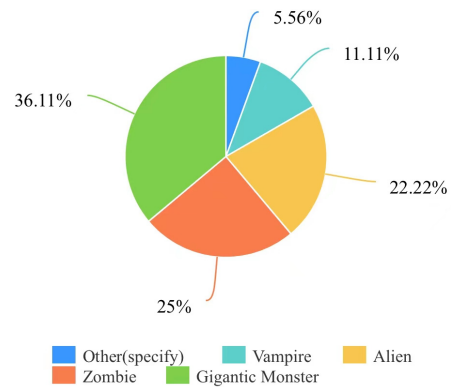


Figure 1 Proportion of Different Types of Favorite

The relative frequency of each choice describes how positively related are concerns of the audiences reflected by movies and the level of enjoyment while watching movies. The response of “not related” counts as one point, and the response of “strongly related” counts as 5 points. The result shows that 38.89% of total subjects selected “somewhat related,” while 25% selected “strongly related.” Of all the subjects, 19.44% selected “not related at all” and 8.33% selected “few relations.” Still, the average score of this test is 3.42, which exceeds the intermediate score of 3, showing a positive connection between accurately reflecting audiences’ realistic fears and a higher level of enjoyment. As shown in Figure 2.

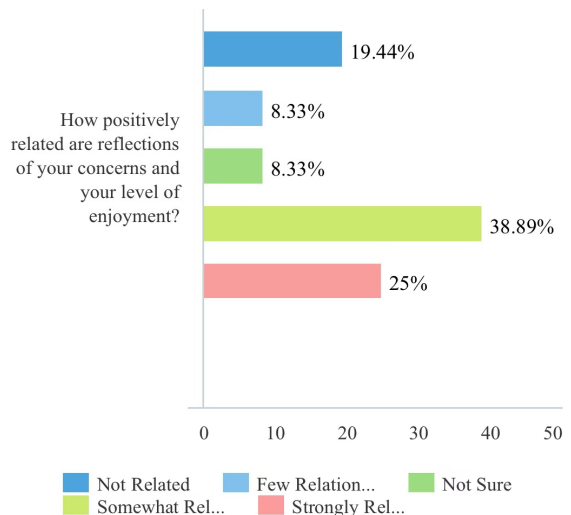
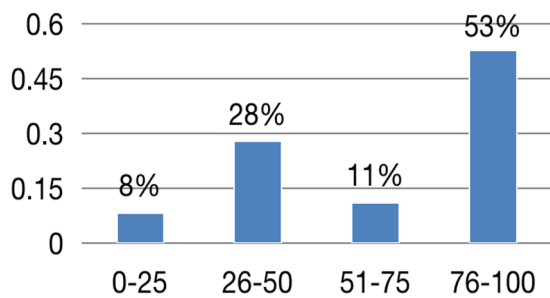


Figure 2 Rating of Relations between Realistic Concerns and Enjoyment

How subjects describe the accuracy of their favorite monster movies reflecting realistic fear from the range of 0 to 100. As shown in the figure, 52.8% of total subjects rated over 76 (including), 11.1% of the subjects rated between 51 to 75. Among those who rated below 50

points, 27.8% rated between 26 and 50, while 8.3% rated between 0 to 25 points. The average score of this test is 59.06, which displays a positive role of reflection of realistic fear in gaining popularity. As shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3** Rate of Accurate Representation of Realistic Concern

The examples of favorite movie scenes provide evidence for the monster movie’s characteristics resembling predation. As all 10 subjects report positively to have learned strategies while facing dangerous situations, this interview supports the theory of entertainment being pedagogy, increasing their survivability while facing such dangers in reality.

From the data analysis, a basic positive connection between the ability of monster movies to show realistic concerns and their psychological appeal is made. Questions from the survey show that audiences are more likely to enjoy movies reflecting their concerned situations in real life. As most subjects of the interview did not report actively sought for solutions or strategies dealing with such situations, all ten subjects reported learning from their favorite monster movies. The result adds credibility to the theory that humans learn passively from pretense and plays, for the subjects did not actively engage in an activity they contend to be a learning process. Instead, the exploration of possibilities itself took place throughout the whole process of engagement. As all 10 subjects reported having learned a variety of strategies while facing different possible threats, the pedagogical value of monster movies is evident.

A possible explanation of why people prefer monster movies over common chase play or pretense is, monster movies is a more direct and accurate representation of predation, as Steen & Owens notes that when participants were chased by other animals, such as their pets, they tended to experience a higher level of joy [9]. The accurately projected predation on screen provides the audiences with immersive and more enjoyable experiences, advancing the level of engagement of participants. Compared to the indirect representation of predation such as chase play (considered awkward in some cases), monster movies can trigger the evolutionary heritage of humans more effectively. Furthermore, monster movies presented through multimedia provide various elements, which compose tremendous possibility spaces of combinatorics free for the audiences to explore.

With the employment of CGI special effects and sound effects, the watching experience of monster movies is multi-dimensional especially in cinemas, making the audiences confront the predators, referring back to the age of Megafauna when such instincts and strategies to fight or escape powerful predators were imperatively needed. Thus, monster movies cause the audiences to have stronger emotional reactions and they appeal to people more effectively than some other simpler, implicit activities resembling predation.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Monster movies are closely connected to realistic concerns and cultural elements, while its accurate representation of predation appeals to audiences largely as well. The intrinsic rewarding nature of monster movies paves way for the rising popularity of monster movies today. Resembling an evolutionary heritage of chase play, monster movies give humans the freedom to explore possible dangers in a safe, controlled environment, helping the formation of the ability to predict, prepare, and eventually be creative in resolving dangers, giving humans advantages in terms of survivability over other non-intellectual species.

The limitations of this study include relatively small sample size and lack of equipment support in discovering the neurological activities while watching monster movies. While cognitive impenetrability preventing human brains to recognize the distal cause of an action can interfere with the responses of the subjects, objective and quantitative studies relying on professional devices can be helpful. Overall, with appropriate guidance, the results gained from the survey subjects and interviews are valid and representative, and the statistics provide evidence for a positive result of the proposed theories. The future direction of this study will focus on revealing the process and mechanism of passive learning by wiring subjects’ brains to collect data of their neurological activity. The study of media, especially monster movies, can provide an insight into the trajectory of human evolution and cognition, enhancing the further extrapolation of human civilization’s future development, serving as a window to the essence of human nature.

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