



How Monstrous Is the “Monster” in Monster Movies?

RASHA JAMEEL

In the Heart of the Sea (2015) was a pretty terrifying film. No, I’m not talking about the aggressive sperm whale. I’m talking about the disturbing glee with which the sailors on screen hunted down and harpooned helpless whales. I’m talking about watching the carcasses of dead whales populate the seas while the sailor men celebrated the barbarism of such an act. The 2015 release inspired by Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* is neither the first nor the last to glorify humankind’s unprovoked battles against other species, and other crimes against the environment.

The movie business appeared to be booming in the “monster movie” sub-genre throughout the 20th century. From Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack’s *King Kong* (1933) to Ishiro Honda’s *Godzilla* (1954) to Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* (1975) and *Jurassic Park* (1993), the audience thoroughly enjoyed humanity’s predictable victories over vicious, otherworldly creatures. As a member of the audience, I’ve always viewed the T-Rex from *Jurassic Park* and the great white shark from *Jaws* as predatory “monsters”, from the perspective of the filmmakers. I imagine you, the reader, have perceived these aforementioned creatures similarly, as ferocious beasts always poised to lay waste to life around them at will. But have you ever wondered what it is that drives them to act in such a destructive manner?

About two years ago, I’d come across a fictional children’s novelist in an HBO show discussing her new book where a hunter was on the trail of a bear in a desperate bid to protect his family from the creature, whilst being completely unaware of how the bear sought to do the same for its own family. The thought may have come from a fictional TV character but that doesn’t make it any less valid as a theory which applies to the behaviour of rampaging beasts in monster movies, or those in real life even. Going back to 2015’s *Moby Dick*-inspired adaptation, the sperm whale was made to seem like a vicious monster of sorts, hellbent on wreaking havoc, whereas the crew of the merciless whaling ship were portrayed as helpless victims of the whale’s wrath. That’s not *really* how it is, is it?

Those sailors willingly chose to go out and upend the peaceful lives of whales whose only crime was existing in a greedy world overcome with consumerism. The whale was never the aggressor; she was merely protecting her home.

The long withstanding notion in monster movies seems to be that humankind’s endeavour to constantly invade wild habitats can be justified by some kind of a twisted logic, which makes any retaliation from a defensive life-form appear unwarranted. Resurrected animal species are expected to fit right into a world they know nothing about and wild animals are expected to give up their habitat for the sake of humanity’s recreational activities.

One can argue that recently-released monster movies have made an attempt to be apathetic towards these fictional “monsters”. But even those efforts fall short as half measures. Humankind’s crimes against nature might have been acknowledged by the fictional Dr. Serizawa in an ominous one-liner in the *Godzilla* reboot (2014), but Legendary Entertainment left no stone unturned when it came to demonising the kaiju throughout the film.

I ask you, again, is the monster you see on the silver screen really the demon that film studios want you to see? Or can you finally see their survival plight in a world overwhelmed by our rising demands for excessive goods?

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On the Perpetual Persecution of Productivity Anxiety

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Being a university student with your entire life unplanned is sufficiently scary to push you into a cycle of feeling worthless for not doing anything “productive” then latching on to every and all opportunity vaguely related to your field of interest. That too for the sole purpose of validating your existence by adding one more line to your resume.

This cycle of shame for not being productive enough followed by productivity fetishism is what constitutes *productivity anxiety*, a state of mind where you feel anxious if you do not resemble an ultra-efficient machine utilising your time to maximise your productive output. Especially for undergrads occupying the liminal space between a student and responsible adult, anxiety runs on an all-time high if you do not feel you are doing enough to make yourself worthy of the job you will soon be seeking.

Caught in the relentless grind, we are systematically objectified into individual production houses where our self-worth is measured by achievements and efficiency. Add the “every parent wants their child to be an overachiever” in this dehumanising mix and you get the perfect social setup to create a group of young adults who are perpetually stressed and constantly overworked. Yet they cannot seem to outrun the anxiety and subsequent self-loathing because if you are not topping your classes, publishing research papers, starting your own business, profiting from your creativity and doing five internships simultaneously, are you sure you are doing enough?

As we are quick to accept a perpet-

ually anxious student but sceptical of a constantly happy one, it is easier to believe the former to be normal. In reality, it is just a sign of having internalised the capitalist narrative which should be questioned, not worshipped. The good news is, no matter how much your surrounding wants you to believe there is no room for negotiation between an all-rounder and an utter failure, like most things in life, there is always a grey area where you can choose to be human instead.

While I will not suggest you waste your money on the newest Rupri Kaur poetry collection, her poem “Productivity Anxiety” is worth giving a read. Sadly, reading a poem will not magically solve the bouts of anxiety chasing after you but it is a start and no small solace. From there it’s consciously choosing not to compete with your peers, being selective about your side hustles and understanding that taking rest is not a sin.

The distorted tale of productivity and self-worth is not only something we have internalised but also something perpetually emphasised by our social setup, making the process of breaking free twice as hard. So, remember to take your time. And for now, let me remind you that the thinking-feeling part of your existence cannot be measured by the number of vaguely relevant internships you managed to land.

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