

# UNIVERSAL MONSTERS THE EARLY POSTHUMAN CULTURAL ICONS

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## Abstract

In the early decades of cinema, spanning from the 1920s until the late 1950s, Universal Studios became the home of monsters, releasing numerous original films, as well as sequels and spin-offs featuring monster characters, including *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Mummy*, *The Invisible Man*, *Bride of Frankenstein*, *The Wolf Man* and *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. These films set the standards for a new horror genre that soon became a blockbuster and turn the different, the uncanny, the monstrous into the favourite characters of the audience. In this paper, we explore the Universal Monsters as the early cinematic depictions of the posthuman; “hybrid figures that blur the boundaries among humans, animals and machines”, creatures of “partial identities and contradictory standpoints”. More specifically, we explore in which way, each of the Monsters acts as an iconic figure of the post-anthropocentric model and defines the cultural impact of these “organic monsters” on comprehending the paradox of difference, synthesizing both “taboo and desire” of the posthuman future.

**Keywords:** *posthumanism, Universal Monsters, Universal Studios, film, cinema*

## Introduction

**monster, n., adv., and adj.**

*A mythical creature which is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two or more animal forms, and is frequently of great size and ferocious appearance. Later, more generally: any imaginary creature that is large, ugly, and frightening (Oxford English Dictionary).*

In medieval times, the hybrid figure bearing diverse biological, botanical and racial features, without fully assimilating them was highly correlated with monstrosity; “monstrum” bore two meanings: “that which warns” (monere) and “that which reveals” (demonstrare) (Young, 2006). However, the word “monster”, according to Haraway (1991), “shares more than its root with the word, to demonstrate. Monsters signify”. Monsters are boundary creatures; symians, cyborgs and women, acting as a destabilizing force to the great Western narratives (Haraway, 1991).

Every monster human imagination created and depicted within tales, myths and

legends represents the menace and insecurity threatening individuals' identities; according to Foucault, as the history of knowledge changes, so does the form of the monsters, who are always "on the prowl", ghosting society's norms related to identification (Kearney, 2005). Supernatural entities and monsters, real or imaginary allies and enemies, all inhabiting at the lands of the dead and the unknown; they do belong to the "others", a fusion of myth, history, biology and imagination. These "others", different and distant to social norms, are used as a boundary to define licit social characteristics and individual identities (Hiller, 2006).

Therefore, monsters represent the opportunities of the posthuman future, shifting the anthropocentric, humanist perception of the classical ideal man, perfectly depicted at Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, towards the forge of non-unitary identities and multiple allegiances between human and the "others": anthropomorphic, zoo-morphic, organic and earth others (Braidotti, 2013b). For this reason, monsters are not to be considered as harbingers of cultural decadence, rather as "the unfolding of virtual possibilities that point to positive alternatives for us all" (Braidotti, 2000).

In horror, thriller and sci-fi films, the portrayal of monsters has got them "stuck in an ambivalent spectacle of fascination and horror, norm and deviance" (Volkart, 1997). Braidotti argues that since "the genre of science fiction horror movies is based on the disturbance of cultural norms, it is then ideally placed to represent states of crisis and change and to express the widespread anxiety of our times. As such this genre is as unstoppable as the transformations it mirrors" (Braidotti, 2013a).

In this paper we explore the Universal Monsters, as the cultural depiction of the transcendental fusion of species, the "hopeful monsters"; the things born "before their time", unbeknownst to the world if it is ready for them" (Mosley, 1990). Universal Monsters, crossing the boundaries of monstrosity, illustrated what Freud called the culture's "unease" towards the embodiment of projected difference. They were the early posthuman icons, embodying the human "historical, identitarian and technological anxieties" (Herbrechter, 2013).

### **Universal's Monsters**

Since the mid-twenties, until the late fifties, Universal's creative minds, based often on popular novels, had given life to its iconic monsters, including hybrids of humans and animals (*The Wolf Man*, *Creature from the Blue Lagoon*, *Captive Wild Woman*), hybrids of humans and machines (*Frankenstein*, *Bride of Frankenstein*), disembodied entities (*The Invisible Man*), as well as a number of mythical creatures (*Count Dracula*, *The Mummy*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*). Although Universal had already released six films featuring monsters during 1920s, it was in 1931 that Carl Laemmle Jr., Universal Studios founder's son, an avid reader of classic literature, took the initiative to bring to life *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* in two films that became overnight success and defined the legacy of Universal to the shaping of horror cinema. Since then, Universal Studios became the home of monsters, releasing numerous original films, sequels and spin-offs, setting the standards for a new horror genre that soon became a blockbuster and turn the different, the uncanny, the monstrous into the favourite characters of the audience. Universal Monsters gave the early cinematic glimpses of the post-anthropocentric

model, aligning to the three-phase process described by Braidotti, in order to keep *zoe*, the “dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself” at the centre, by eliminating the core role of *anthropos* (Braidotti, 2013b) in the cultural and societal and ecological structures. More specifically, we explore in which way, the Monsters act as iconic figures of the “becoming-animal, becoming-earth and becoming- machine” processes (Braidotti, 2013b) and define the cultural impact of these “organic monsters” being neither total strangers nor a completely familiar (Braidotti, 1999), “awful and awful” at the same time, on comprehending the paradox of difference, synthesizing both “taboo and desire” of the posthuman future (Graham, 2002).

### **becoming-animal**

According to Braidotti, the “dialectics of otherness” has for long perpetuated human exceptionalism patterns of power and rule both onto “anthropomorphic others” and non human species. By eliminating the idea of anthropocentrism, the emergence of sympoietic and symbiotic practices fostered between human and non human species are allowed and reinforced, displacing humans from the hierarchical position they have assumed among other species. (Braidotti, 2013b). In the same manner, Haraway highlights the potential collaborative practices between species, which mark the beginning of a new epoch, namely Cthulucene, and the companion species; different species mutually affecting each other, coexisting and cofunctioning in ecologies devoid of known spatial and temporal limits (Haraway, 2016). The term companion species is primarily used to describe the emergence of animals as “part of a very particular historical relationship” with humans as well as the developing coevolutionary relationships between these post-cyborg entities, other species and technologies. In the material-semiotic paradigm, the inhabitants of Cthulucene are products of sympoiesis, without proper genealogy, devoid of genre, gender and any other conventional characteristics of human exceptionalism.

Braidotti (2013b) suggests, that in order to eliminate species-ism, it is crucial to re-evaluate the bodies of species in the course of human – animal interaction; though such representations entail imagining them as creatures of mixed characteristics and hybrid formations. In 1935, Universal Studios released *Werewolf of London*, the first moving picture focusing fully on the werewolf legend; the hybrid of animal and man and one of the earliest cinematic depictions of the becoming- animal process. The film was directed by Stuart Walker, and starring Henry Hull as Dr. Wilfred Glendon, a botanist turns into the titular werewolf; the film exhibits several transformation scenes, offering innovative depictions of the “human–animal continuum”. Lycanthropy is narrated as an infectious condition between the species, marking a distinction between folklore and the cinematic monster. Moreover, contrary to the werewolf tales, where a man transmutes completely into a wolf, Dr. Glendon turns into a hybrid creature, bearing the features of both species and retaining the intelligence of the human.

Although the *Werewolf of London* established the cinematic lycanthropic mythos, it remains to this day in the shadow of the *Wolf Man*, the second film of Universal dealing with the werewolf legend. The *Wolf Man* was released six years later, becoming Lon Chaney’s Jr. signature role, one that he would reprise four more times in respective sequels (*Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943), *House of Frankenstein* (1944), *House*

of *Dracula* (1945), *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948)). The film, written by Curt Siodmak, produced and directed by George Waggner, was a milestone to the genre and influenced all subsequent cinematic depictions of the lycanthrope, turning the Gothic Monster into a familiar, likeable creature, breeding sympathy to the audience for the uncanny, the threatening forces of normality.

The werewolf mythos manifested in one more Universal film, *She-Wolf of London*, released in 1946, though without the introduction of another monster. However, two iconic monsters, fusion of animal and man, celebrated the transpecies solidarity in six more Universal films; Gill-Man (the Creature) and Ape Woman. Gill-Man, the main character featured in *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, directed by Jack Arnold in 1954, and two sequels, namely *Revenge of the Creature* (1955) and *The Creature Walks Among Us* (1956), part-human and part-fish, powerful yet emotional, amphibious and photophobic, represented the evolutionary link between human and sea animals dating back to the Devonian period. *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, considered to be a crown achievement of Universal Studios, was one of one the first 3D stereoscopic films, and remains among the most memorable horror films of all time, introducing one audience's favourite monsters.

Similarly, Paula, the Ape Woman, one of the few female Universal Monsters, depicted either as zoomorphic or as anthropomorphic other (dark skinned female) was introduced in *Captive Wild Woman* (1943) and returned in two sequels, *Jungle Woman* (1944) and *The Jungle Captive* (1945). The monsters, as well as the non-human others, eg. the animals in the *Captive Wild Woman* film were often portrayed as being subject to human exceptionalism, highlighting the prevailing morals and aesthetics of Western society, marginalizing the abnormal, the deviant, the monster, the beast, which is perceived as unfit to the paradigm of the Vitruvian Man. Monsters culturally represented the imminent undermining force towards the grand Western narratives, paving the way for the ideas of post-anthropocentric model.

### **becoming-earth**

In Braidotti's becoming-earth concept, the parameters of environmental and ecological sustainability are highlighted, in a larger scale than the becoming-animal process; the relationship between human species and nature needs to be redefined and reassessed, since earth is the common ground upon which human, non human species and technology display the symbiotic relationship of mutualism. The profound impact of humankind on Earth has resulted in significant climate changes, disruption of ecosystems, extinction of species, as well as overexploitation of natural resources amongst others. Anthropocene, having been proposed as a formal subdivision of geological time scale, has emerged as a trending concept across different disciplines, including science, art, literature and philosophy, in order to describe the epoch, wherein collective human activity has strongly influenced the planet. Becoming-earth emerges therefore as a crucial process in shaping the posthuman subject, which encompasses the human, the animal and the earth as a whole (Braidotti, 2013b). Even though Anthropocene mirrors the contemporary zeitgeist, Haraway already challenges the term, stripping it from its epoch aspect, rather

viewing it as a “boundary event” due to the discontinuities it signifies; Anthropocene, she suggests, should be rapidly overcome (Haraway, 2016). Becoming-earth introduces the ways of surpassing Anthropocene times, focusing on two main themes: the development of a sustainable, self-organizing materiality and the expansion of subjectivity of post-anthropocentric relations towards non human entities, denying man his exclusive prerogative. And although human species take pride in harnessing other species and taming nature, monsters signify the shifting subjectivity; the “abnormalities” man has failed to understand, the forces that strike with no prior warning or no physical continuity, being depicted as zoomorphic, hybrid or embodied versions of natural phenomena and disasters.

These monsters constitute the cultural portrayal of the becoming-earth axis and Universal Studios has pioneered in capturing them in film many decades ago. Gill-Man, the Ape Woman, the giant spider of *Tarantula* (1955), the deadly snakes of the *Cult of the Cobra* (1955), the praying mantis of *The Deadly Mantis* (1957), the caveman of *Monster on the Campus* (1958) and the black meteorite fragments of *The Monolith Monsters* (1957) belong amongst the earliest cinematic posthuman icons, questing the anthropocentric hierarchical relations, representing the nature–culture continuum and ghosting the margins between manmade world and nature. In *Curucu, Beast of the Amazon*, directed and written by Curt Siodmak and released in 1956, Tom Payne impersonating the birdlike monster, is protecting nature and the aboriginal people from the western civilization ways and abuse, in an attempt to reverse the role of humans from geological agents to biological ones, shifting audience’s view to the zoe-centered perspective.

### **becoming-machine**

The becoming-machine axis refers to the “biotechnologically mediated relations” developing as the foundation of the posthuman subject, implying intimate relationships between humans and machines, getting involved in mutual modification practices (Braidotti, 2013b). The posthumanist environment becomes technologically mediated, conditioning the relationships between humans, non human others and nature. The role of the machine is not deterministic, rather enabling the transformation and becoming (Braidotti, 2013b), as cyborgs become equally important to humans in the social, economic and political aspects. Cyborgs and organic creatures are inextricably intertwined; attacking one component of this alliance would lead to the destruction of the other as well (Haraway, 2008). This transpecies interdependence requires the comprehension of the emerging ethics that permeate the consolidated posthuman ecology or “eco-sophy” in Braidotti’s terminology.

One of the cyborgian monsters that shaped western culture has undeniably been Victor Frankenstein’s sapient creation in Mary Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, published in 1818. The Creature, epitomizing all the fears and hopes of emerging technologies blurs the boundaries between man and machine, human and non human, birth and creation, death and life, natural and artificial, inhabiting the reader’s imagination as a composite monstrosity, bearing hybrid features that challenge normality (Graham, 2002). The monster, robotic yet of human flesh is, according to

Holmes (2008), “the most articulate person in the whole novel”, while Victor, his human maker, assumes the role of a modern Prometheus, in his attempt to banish disease and death from humanity. The emerging relationship between Victor and the Creature, as well as between the Creature and other humans demands deidentification from the humanistic morality and rationale, in the vein of Braidotti’s “post-anthropocentric posthumanism” and the shift towards intricate practices of mutual becoming with the cyborg. Yet it is the man who fails in the becoming-machine process, marginalizing the Creature and failing the “praxis”; the grounded shared project he has tried to build with the cyborg.

Universal Studios offered one of the first cinematic adaptations of *Frankenstein*, in 1931, with Boris Karloff portraying the Creature in one of the most iconic roles of horror cinema. Directed by James Whale, and featuring the make-up work of Jack Pierce, who has also been responsible for the look of the greatest Universal Monsters (including *Dracula*, *Wolf Man* and the *Mummy*) the film reflected the German expressionistic style and ruminated on the nature of man’s destructive hierarchical quest. Yet, the Creature’s yearning for cultivating bonds with the human, as well certain humans’ effort to connect socially and emotionally with the Creature in an equal relationship (eg. Maria, the farmer’s young daughter) portray the opportunities of the becoming-machine axis. Universal made horror movie history by changing the novel’s original ending in order to allow for sequels, including *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), *Son of Frankenstein* (1939), *The Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942), *Frankenstein meets the Wolf Man* (1943), *House of Frankenstein* (1944), *House of Dracula* (1945) and *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948).

The *Bride of Frankenstein*, the first sequel of *Frankenstein*, featuring Elsa Lancaster both in the role of Mary Shelley and the Monster’s Mate, portrays the female cyborg both monstrous and beautiful, in one of the most charming depictions of the monster in cinema. The Monster’s Mate, as the female cyborg exploits the themes of beauty beyond the fear of deceptiveness, as well as the indistinct borderline of human and machine within the female body (Halberstam, 1991). Moreover, the film is one of the first cinematic narratives allowing for queering readings, with main expression the character of Doctor Pretorius, who does not abide to the social conventions and social norms about gender and sexuality of the times, in the posthumanist vein.

### **the inhuman: life beyond death**

Art taps into transcendental ideas beyond natural laws, social norms and bound identities, giving names and bodies to what is feared, hoped and imagined, to monsters, liminal creatures, sublime entities and transgressive characters. Through art all forms of organic and inorganic entities, human and non human become interconnected and life’s infinite possibilities are explored; in this sense art becomes inhuman. Moreover, art is of posthuman nature, as it crosses the limits of embodiment and quests beyond the limits of life beyond death (Braidotti, 2013b).

Apart from *Frankenstein* and its sequels, arguing the very essence of life and death, *Dracula* (1931), directed by Tod Browning and starring Bela Lugosi as Count Dracula, is a monumental film capturing the visions of immortality. Count Dracula, a

shapeshifter of different embodied forms, human and non human, acts as an icon of modern cinematic culture and becomes merely inhuman, connecting harmoniously with a fabric of non human others (animals, insects, etc). The film also explores the inhuman other residing within, when the ego does not “wholly sovereign”, in the Lucy Weston-Vampire paradigm (Graham, 2002). Universal Studios released four sequels to the original film, including *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), *Son of Dracula* (1943), *House of Frankenstein* (1944), and *House of Dracula* (1945).

Similarly, the inhuman subject is animated in *The Mummy* (1932), directed by Karl Freund and starring Boris Karloff as Ardath Bay, Imhotep and the Mummy. The ancient Egyptian monster inspires the dreams of immortality, through the powers of the occult, in an early allegory of modern technology. The Mummy was followed by five sequels: *The Mummy's Hand* (1940), *The Mummy's Tomb* (1942), *The Mummy's Ghost* (1944), *The Mummy's Curse* (1944) and *Abbott and Costello Meet The Mummy* (1955). The theme of life beyond death perpetuates in more Universal Monsters films, including *Life Returns* (1935), *Night Life of the Gods* (1935), *Black Friday* (1940), *The Mad Ghoul* (1943), *The Mole People* (1956), *The Thing that Couldn't Die* (1958), *Curse of the Undead* (1959) and *The Leech Woman* (1960).

## Conclusions

Since the release of one of the greatest films of the silent era, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, the horror and science fiction genres have introduced the posthuman subjectivities that surpass human rationale and species, building on a body of relationships between the human, the non-human and the hybrid, confronting the “ontological hygiene” of Western modernity (Graham, 2002).

The monster, as a single living organism that does not comply with the rules of any certain species, albeit having its roots at least at one, distinguishes itself from the other living beings by demonstrating “an excess of monstrosity rather than an infra-monstrosity”. Human beings are “redundant monsters”; biological monsters that aspire to become cultural monsters, aiming to cultural mutations and “meta-monsters”; monsters that create monsters and monsters who quest for human traits outside human species (Lestel, 2012).

In times where human exceptionalism is rejected, ecologies are at least trifold, according to Haraway, including human and non human living species and technologies, developing coevolutionary relationships and collaborative practices (Williams, 2018). This compost of multispecies, infectious to one another, human and non human, get mutually involved in sympoietic and symbiotic practices within systems of unspecified temporal and spatial boundaries (Haraway, 2016).

Since the boundaries between science fiction and social reality is an “optical illusion”, the cinematically illustrated “transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities” abide to the Haraway's “cyborg myth”, exploring the cyborg as the cinematic monster; in “social and bodily realities” where humans harmoniously coexist with animals and machines, and where humans are “not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (Haraway, 1991).

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