

Monster Movie Theology

There are monster movie fans. There are monster movie fanatics. My expertise is well beyond that. I am a monster film theologian.

As with all creeds, there is dogma involved here....in this case, a right way and a wrong way to do things.... monster liturgy, so to speak.

The best monster movie of all time is unquestionably, Boris Karloff's *Frankenstein*. This film and its sequel, *Bride of Frankenstein* played by Elsa Lancaster of all people, are the basis of the holy scripture of monster movies as it were. They establish certain unalterable commandments of monster behavior and protocol. Jacobs Ladders, zap...zap...zap. Vandergraph machines, whirr...whirr...whirr. Medieval castles. colossal lightening storms....crackle, Ka-boooooom....crackle, Ka-booooooom.

Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman would be one of the best monster movies of all time too, except Bela Lugosi plays the part of the monster. Unlike the multifaceted Karloff creature, Lugosi can't help playing the monster as if it were a vampire in drag. A leering, drunken Frankenstein with lipstick and fangs cannot be considered completely kosher....but at least this falls into the category of dubious acting, not bad monster science.

I saw *Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman* when I was in the first grade. I couldn't read so I had no idea what I was about to see. I went to the Tower theater one afternoon, paid my fourteen cents and sat, as was my custom, in the front row, bag of popcorn in hand, the giant screen squarely on top of me.

As the movie opens, picture the mist hugging the graveyard, tombstones everywhere. Graveyard music plays in the background as the credits are shown. Two grave robbers sneak into the huge crypt of the Talbot family. They jimmy open the door and lift the cover from the coffin of recently deceased Lawrence Talbot (accidentally "killed" by his father in an earlier movie) played by Lon Chaney Jr. One of them tries to pry a ring off the corpse. The scene shifts to the barred window. A cloud passes revealing a full moon. The music changes gradually to a "something-dreadful-is-about-to-happen" cadence.

As the grave robber is struggling to get the tight fitting ring off poor old dead Lawrence Talbot's presumed lifeless hand, it begins to move slightly, hair begins to grow out of the appendage, gradually becoming a paw. It grabs the

robber's arm who screams, scaring the hell out of the other guy who runs like hell, leaving his former grave robbing colleague to the tender mercies of a really nasty wolf person, still pissed about what happened to him in the previous movie. While not explicit, we know the unlucky one, his shrieks abruptly silenced, has had his throat ripped to shreds by a very hairy, fang infested beast. Great stuff!

I watched the movie from beginning to end, saw it again several times over the next few years. Lon Chaney jr. was to wolfmen as Karloff was to monsters. He gave the Frankenstein creature all he could handle at the end, bounding up on a refrigerator, trying to tear the leering, quasi-vampire monster's throat out to no avail while the village burgher blows up the dam behind the castle.

Understand that without a doubt, the most important theological part of *Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman* is that it faithfully obeys the unbending, sacred doctrine of monster creation: electricity.

In the movie, the frantic young doctor who was trying to help poor Lon Cheney Jr. out of his full moon metamorphosis, found Dr. Frankenstein's original document left in a secret drawer in the ruins of the castle after the sad ending of *Bride of Frankenstein*. The monster was resurrected and juiced up again in a legitimate lightening storm with refurbished Vandergraph generators and Jacobs Ladders whizzing and whirring and zapping as of old. Bad dramatic portrayal of the monster, perhaps, but very sound creation liturgy.

I was hooked. I saw every Frankenstein and wolfman movie ever made from then on. Some dozens of times. Even *Abbot and Costello meet Frankenstein* conformed completely with orthodox monster dogma: he was perfectly birthed by electrical apparatus and lightening.

I liked the Dracula movies okay, but an overacting, leering, bad Transylvanian accented Bela Lagosi was no match for Boris Karloff and the sad faced Lon Chaney Jr. Poor Larry Talbot just had the bad luck to get bitten by another werewolf. It's not his fault he wants to rip the throat out of every human being he encounters every full moon. The wolf poem says it all: "Even a man who's pure of heart, and says his prayers by night, may become a wolf when the wolfbane blooms, and the moon is full and bright." Awoooooooooooooooooo!

And Frankenstein's monster...The poor bastard had the atrocious fate to have his brain stolen by Igor who couldn't read. Instead of the brilliant, humane brain his creator intended to use, the brain of a criminally insane psychopath

was purloined. So it is perfectly sensible Dr. Frankenstein's creation wants to strangle every person he sees including...maybe especially... his manic scientist creator.

I loved these guys.

Twenty years passed. One afternoon on the way home from a college chemistry lab, I saw on the marquee of the local movie theater a double header. A Frankenstein AND a Tarzan movie. While I am not quite as adept a Tarzan theologian as I am a monster expert, I nevertheless saw Johnnie Weissmuller movies, all of them, and I know a good Tarzan when I see him. I screeched to a halt, hurriedly parked the car, ran to the box office, got some popcorn and hustled to the front row, huge screen above me....proper decorum for a monster movie theologian of any age.

I'm not sure how to convey my profound disappointment to the reader. This experience bordered on suddenly losing one's religious faith. This film was monster dogma sacrilege. The so-called monster, this imitation Frankenstein's monster, this lifelong monster buddy of mine, didn't have a flat head with bolts in his neck and scars which looked as if they were made by a bad seamstress with a giant Singer sewing machine. Yes, this one was ugly. Yes, he had scars. But to this day I weep when I think of the supreme violation of monsterology: this one was brought to life while lying in some glass goldfish tub by bubbling some stupid chemical liquid around the badly contrived corpse pieces.

Pleeeeeease!!! Everybody knows you can't raise a monster from dead body parts with bubbling chemicals. You need a huge electrical storm and neck bolts. It is an absolute, unquestioned prerequisite. It was in the book Dr. Frankenstein himself left in the burned down castle, a step by step blueprint, a self help instruction manuscript. Any fool who could hook up the proper polarities could make a legitimate monster from Dr. Frankenstein's "Monster Making for Dummies" document. No stupid chemical liquid could possibly activate a legitimate monster. This was a damn bubble bath! Why not candlelight, soft music and champagne, for God's sake???

Outraged, I almost walked out of the movie at that point, but I finally decided to stay to see Tarzan kick the crap out of some pith helmeted evildoers. We are all familiar with Johnnie Weissmuller Tarzans, the only legitimate Lord Greystoke of the jungle, He has The Yell. He has The Chimp. He has Boy and Jane. He can swim like a fish. He is invincible. All other Tarzans are pretenders to the throne.

This movie opens up with Tarzan wandering down a path in the jungle, whistling some tune. Tarzan does not whistle tunes. He screams a yodel or else he basically shuts up or grunts answers. There was no Cheetah in this travesty of Tarzanmanship. Suddenly, two fat English blighters with pith helmets jump out of the bushes and knocks Tarzan cold with a blackjack, tie him up and drag him away.

No one....I mean NO ONE...can sneak up on the ape guy in his own territory and NO ONE knocks Tarzan out with a puny little club. It takes a small army of thugs to subdue Tarzan...and then only after a superhuman fight against insurmountable odds while he lets go with his blood curdling yodel for help, every living creature in the jungle from elephants to cockroaches stampeding to his aid.

I was infuriated. I had been cheated twice. Frankenstein monsters do not get birthed with life in a tub of bubbling chemicals. Tarzan of the Apes gets creamed by a couple of pudgy bad guys? I leapt from my seat and stalked up the aisle, full of righteous anger, to the movie theater manager's office, indignantly demanding my money back.

He sized me up. "I see your point, sir," he informed me seriously. "Of course no self respecting monster would be created by dousing him in a chemical bubble machine. My sincerest apologies. And Tarzan? Well Mr. Weissmuller is probably spinning in his grave. Hopefully no one with your discriminating taste in monsters and super heroes will see these dreadful abominations." As I was anticipating a full refund, my hand extended, he continued, "...and don't let the door hit you on the ass on the way out."

So I am now an apostate. I will never see another monster or Tarzan movie again.

Unless, of course, I drag out my ancient VCR of *Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman* and watch it in secret, in my office, doors locked, microwaved popcorn in hand, anticipating the creature with the flat head, bolts in his neck, staggering around, but only after his liturgically proper creation at the top of the castle, kite flying, Jacobs Ladders and Vandergraph generators spitting, the storm building in intensity, the scientist twisting dials, hair maniacally disheveled.....