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## EVOLUTION OF ICONIC FILMS

### The Films and Franchises of Sci-Fi Horror

by S.P. Wright

For centuries numerous tales of excitement and adventure have tantalized the minds of the world within the genres of both science fiction and horror. It is generally agreed upon that the first true instance of the two merging in any successful manner was when Mary Shelley penned *Frankenstein*. This story has survived the test of time and has been adapted in numerous variations within the film industry. However, most of these adaptations stray from the sci-fi arena into more controversial paranormal or spiritual avenues. For this reason, the various adaptations of Earth's favorite man-made monster will not be appearing on this list.

The next entry to be generally recognized within this venue is the *War of the Worlds*, penned by H.G. Wells. Yes, this is the story that was first adapted to radio prior to any of its onscreen iterations. It is this story which placed the nation (U.S.A.) into a fright. It was told in such a way and acted so believably that listeners across the land truly thought that the invasion had arrived. It is that very power of the stories within this genre, as demonstrated by the above referenced radio drama which thrust them into the path of film evolution, and thus make them (and their franchises) iconic in the world of cinematography.

### Alien

1979 - Ridley Scott

The first entry on this list is one which will be recognized by all. Similar to other science fiction entries (such as *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and *Dr. Who*) the name of the film, storyline, and even the creature itself will be widely recognized by both die-hard fans, as well as those who have never seen the film.

This story finds the crew of the *Nostromo* awakening from Hyper-sleep to discover that they are far from home. They were brought out of hibernation to respond to a distress call emanating from a nearby planet. The crew investigate and find a derelict alien vessel. Inside, the structure is filled with strange, organic egg objects. One of which opens and attaches itself to a crew member - who the characters then bring onboard ship while ignoring the standard bio-hazard containment protocols. What could possibly go wrong when a crab-like creature with a snake tail is wrapped around your fellow crewmates face and neck?

The creature itself was inspired in part by Lovecraftian design (as was the ship they were discovered on) and as such resembles nothing seen on screen before. Adding to the mystery of the creature's anatomy, and the feeling of dread behind their movement is the fact that Scott intentionally left the creatures full design largely to the imagination. He achieved this monumental feat by leaving the environments dark and by filming in such a way that the alien was never fully revealed beneath the light. This technique was extremely effective and was continued in the next film (with the exception of the Queen) and allowed for some design elements to be refined and defined beyond their original version.

This film (and its expanding franchise) is iconic within the genre as it redefined what could be done by the production studios. It took the ideas of alien invaders, claustrophobia, and body horror and combined them in a manner which gave birth to something completely original that still felt true to the lineage which came before it.

## Cube

1997 - Natali Vincenzo

This next film is a rather unique entry on the list in that like most of its peers, it too exists within a franchise; unfortunately, it does not fit with its sister films. This film again capitalizes on claustrophobia to help move its plot along, but it is done in a very different manner. It is also interesting to note that the entire first film was shot in a single set with different colored lights denoting the various 'rooms'.

Within this telling we encounter seven strangers; each of whom awaken within a cube shaped room. It is soon revealed that each room is connected to thousands ( $26^3$  or 17,576) of identical rooms each identified only by the color of their lighting (red, blue, green, orange, and white respectively). Most of these rooms are trapped in some way, and the traps are all fatal in nature as demonstrated within the opening sequence of the film. How does one navigate through a strange environment, filled with deadly traps, surrounded by strangers with no discernable skills (at first), without knowing the rules of the game?

This first film in the franchise is iconic as it proved that many of the standard tropes of the industry were expendable. Character backstories are interesting, but anything beyond the general information is expository and unneeded. Character development is essential to the overall growth of the narrative, however it is important to remember to do so organically. Finally, it helped prove that understanding the meaning behind an event is quite beneficial; but like the backstory itself is not necessary.

For each character we are given the most barebones history there can be. "Hello, I am a man. I was a cop. I can be leader." or "Hi, I am a young woman. I am in college. I like math. Oh look, I got to keep my glasses, Yay!" The story never gives the viewer enough information to know if they would care about these characters beyond the confines of this film, and it works brilliantly. Similarly, the organization behind the encounter is also kept vague and buried in intrigue. The motivation behind having people in the cube seems to be something along the lines of "because we can". As one of the victims points out, "if it isn't used, than building it was pointless."

For most fans of this film it would be easier if its follow-up features never existed. This series is a prime example of the "less is more" theory. The first film is powerful, haunting,

distressing, and singularly unsettling simply because nothing is ever clarified. The next two entries try (and fail) to correct the 'error' of not explaining the world around the cube. There is no overarching theology behind the development of the cubes, the selection process for those chosen to wander their ever-shifting interiors, or anything else.

## **Event Horizon**

1997 - Paul W. S. Anderson

Event Horizon is an entity unto itself within both the horror, and the science fiction universes. This film borrows heavily from the paranormal spectrum of storytelling by having alternate realities (Hell), and a haunted house motif (the Event Horizon herself). This film looks and feels like nothing else in existence. As does the titular ship which was designed in such a way that the primary hull looks like a human skull under the proper lighting.

We encounter another story where the crew of a ship are pulled from Hyper-Sleep to respond to a distress call. This time however, the call is automated and coming from an experimental craft that we (humans) created. It uses a new singularity drive to create an artificial wormhole which would allow for nearly instant transport from one end of the galaxy to the other. The ship vanished on her maiden voyage, and was presumed destroyed until the distress call came in. After nearly twenty years it is time to discover what happened, and if there were any survivors.

The film could have taken the typical twist to this type of story with the ship being pulled into another region of space and being modified by the beings found there. However, they opted instead to take a right turn into crazy town and have the ship rip a whole in the universe therein falling through into a lower plane of existence (Hell). Once there the entire crew descends into madness and eventually maim, torture, and kill one another. The ship itself becomes possessed, not only by the energy of the realm in which it now exists, but also by the energy radiating from its crew as they perish. This gives the ship an intelligence, and a purpose as it endeavors to recreate this event.

This shows us how far a conventional haunted house story can go, if given the ability to transcend its origins. That is what makes this film iconic within the cinematic world. It knows what it is, as well as what has come before, but it does not allow those limitations to control what it can be.

## **War of the Worlds**

2005 - Steven Spielberg

It was mentioned above that War of the Worlds is one of the first creations within this hybrid genre to be successfully adapted while remaining true to its origin story. Above was one such example, done so successfully that the audience at the time did not realize that it was a dramatization. While no other entry on this list receives that honor (for obvious reasons) this was not the only successful variation on the story to make it to market. Most within the Baby Boomer, Gen X, and some Millennials will recognize the title from the 1950's film of the same name featuring flying machines of war firing green rays at the lowly humans.

Most of the current generations (Millennials and Gen Z) however, will know the title from the 2005 film starring Tom Cruise. This adaptation has alien tripods, buried ages ago beneath the surface of the planet, reactivated via some distant alien intelligence. The event which activates these alien devices also decimates most earthly technology. This leaves the populace in a state of panic - unable to communicate with one another, and unclear on the true scope of the problem. When the machines first appear, they simply extinguish any and all life; however, later they begin scooping up humans and collecting them within the tripods. They seem to be using our own genetic structures in conjunction with terraforming techniques to make the planet more hospitable for their needs. Unfortunately, (for them) they forgot to account for the microbes, germs, and other contaminants in our atmosphere and all perished due to infection their immune systems could not fight.

The aliens themselves are only seen a handful of times. In earlier adaptations (as well as a B-movie alternative also released in 2005) the aliens are perceived to be Martians. However, here they are themselves three-legged like their machines, and seem to be (visually and creatively) a hybrid between the Xenomorphs from the Alien franchise, and the Collectors seen in the Independence Day films (without the encounter suits). This film's iconic nature stems from its source material and its reinterpretation of such. There are, however, enough elements contained within the story itself to elevate it above many of its contemporary peers.

## **Cloverfield Paradox**

2018 - Julius Onah

The final and most recent film on this list is Cloverfield Paradox. Nearly all films within the joint category of Sci-Fi/Horror are experiments. However, none are more so than Paradox, which itself concludes (for the moment) the franchise that is the Cloververse. The Cloververse as a whole is experimental in that none of the films within it were originally meant to be monster flicks or connected to one-another in any way. Each has been adapted from its original version and manipulated in such a way as to make a collaborative whole. For Paradox specifically, the experiment was twofold. Not only is it the first of this sub-genre to be released via Video on Demand (VOD), but it is also the first within the genre to be released with zero buildup. It was announced during commercials of the Superbowl and released via Netflix immediately following the sporting event.

The film follows the crew of an experimental space station orbiting Earth. They endeavor to get a particle accelerator functioning which can aid in the world's energy crisis which currently sees the entire planet enduring scheduled rolling blackouts. After nearly two years in orbit they finally succeed! As they celebrate the accelerator overloads causing an incredible amount of damage to the station and thrusting it far beyond its prescribed orbit. The characters eventually discover another (previously unknown) crew member in one of the walls, as well as the fact that they have somehow transported into another reality similar (but not the same) to their own.

This story again shows how an experimental technology being used aboard a spaceship can blow a hole in reality. Unlike Event Horizon, here that hole remains intact once created and extends both forward and backward in time across multiple realities. It is implied that it is this

act which retroactively created the event experienced in the original Cloverfield, and it is through this very rift that that monster (and others) came. This is in essence an origin story.

## Conclusion

The joint genre of Science Fiction and Horror has given the world numerous tales to thrill the senses. The fusion of these narrative techniques allow the creators to explore avenues which would normally be closed to them. The idea of a haunted house, or even of a possessed ship has been done; however, by including elements of sci-fi we were introduced to the most sinister version of this idea yet expressed. Similarly, being kidnapped and thrown into a house of horrors has been done before, but never inside a creation such as the cube which seems to almost be semi-sentient (even though it clearly has no intelligence of any kind) and has no reason to exist beyond sheer hubris.

The nature of both the horror and sci-fi genres is built upon and dependent on collusion with other types of narratives in order to work properly. Above are examples which show what can happen when these two combine. There are numerous other examples which could have been used. The ones chosen were selected because they each represent a potential shift in the structure of stories. Alien showed the potential for films of this nature and introduced a way of designing and shooting a creature which outside of that franchise has yet to be fully duplicated. Event Horizon and Cube each went beyond the boundaries of their predecessors and told stories greater than would have been previously possible. War of the Worlds demonstrated that the older or 'classic' tales within this subgenre could be reimagined for today's cinematography. Finally, the Cloververse shows a possible experiment that goes beyond any prior established boundaries for either genre.

This subgenre is unique in that it allows for larger and stronger stories. However, it also invariably crosses with other genres and subgenres of note such as: thriller, suspense, action-adventure, kaiju, slasher, found-footage, and many others. Only time will tell where this medium will take us next, or what the next experiment will be.

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