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The Attack of Mystery Science Theater and Moral Imagination (in Color)

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Your Experiment this Week:

The Attack of *Mystery Science Theater* and Moral Imagination (in Color)

John Venecek

I was recently involved in a conversation with a group of friends about how we seem to be slowly turning into our parents, part of an ongoing discussion we have been having for the past several years. The tone was quirky and lighthearted at first. I noted, for example, that I have become increasingly picky about where I get seated at restaurants and think nothing of asking to be moved to a better table, or even of leaving—one of my father’s signature traits that I have now made my own. However, things took a more serious tone as the conversation turned from a discussion of mere quirks to deeper issues that we continue to grapple with in our adult years. At one point, a fellow English major and movie buff turned to me and said one word: “Affliction.” Without having to ask, I knew exactly to what he was referring—Russell Banks’s powerful novel (and later movie) about a man struggling to overcome the influence of his abusive father. While none of us were dealing with anything quite that intense, the allusion is nonetheless apt. References such as these have had a place in our conversations for years, as if the lessons learned from books and movies have been stored away for instant recall when we encounter an appropriate real-life situation.

This anecdote exemplifies the concept of moral imagination. Although not strictly relegated to the realm of literature (it is also commonly applied to business, legal, and medical ethics), literary works help shape our world views by exposing us to a wider array of possibilities for dealing with the moral and ethical dilemmas that we may encounter in our own lives. When we actively engage with a work of literature, we are provided the opportunity to try out different roles by immersing ourselves in their fictional worlds. In the case of Banks’s novel, we have a
situation that most readers can relate to at some level: people trying to deal with dysfunctional families and overcome the scars of their past. While the main character in the novel (Wade Whitehouse) ultimately fails tragically, he succeeds insofar as his actions serve as a model for readers who will (hopefully) be better prepared to cope with similar situations in their own lives. His limitations, in effect, serve as a source of moral knowledge by instilling in us new levels of understanding of our own drives and limitations.

While I am hardly the only person prone to pepper conversations with allusions to a favorite book or movie, my filmic imagination includes a surprisingly vast array of references to the world of B-movies—more specifically, B-movies as viewed through the lens of Mystery Science Theater 3000. My imagination has, in essence, been shaped as profoundly by movies like Pod People, Zombie Nightmare, and The Brain that Wouldn’t Die as it has by the great authors I absorbed in college. In fact, when someone references a novel like Affliction, I’m just as likely to recall I Accuse My Parents, a low budget 1940s movie about a kid named Jimmy who unwittingly gets involved with a group of gangsters in an ill-fated attempt to impress a girl.2 When Jimmy goes on trial for murder, he accuses his self-involved alcoholic parents of not spending enough quality time with him when he was young. The movie ends with a finger-wagging judge proclaiming that Jimmy’s story should serve as a reminder to parents everywhere: don’t let what happened to him happen to you! Such simplistic, hackneyed moralizing is commonplace in B-movies. If they were more successful in their delivery, they could be considered classic morality play. However, as I will discuss throughout this essay, the flaws that act as barriers to serious examination can, in fact, provide an opportunity, if not a challenge, for audiences to make sense of the carnage created by these poorly executed movies. In effect, they do us the unintentional favor of defamiliarizing traditional storylines and, as a result, they
provide an opportunity to re-evaluate the relevance of the themes we might otherwise take for
granted. I will examine how Mystery Science Theater3000 takes on this challenge and, in so
doing, highlights not only the strangeness of these movies, but also the humanity and complexity
at the core of these classic, often archetypal storylines.

What is Moral Imagination?

Bruce Janz defines moral imagination as “the recognition that better moral decisions are
made when we both have better knowledge and also when we are able to see a set of possibilities
of reconfiguring that knowledge. So the moral stance which insists that there are only two
options (you’re either with us or against us, for example) is not evidence of a better moral
calculus or higher ideals, but of a lack of moral imagination.” Our moral judgments are
culturally conditioned and rooted in intuition. However, “a greater moral imagination recognizes
the conflicted nature of some of our intuitions, and the role that adequate knowledge, and
reasoning about that knowledge, can play in forming action.” While we typically base our
judgments on knowledge that informs how we respond to given situations, Janz points out that
“Our knowledge is often superficial, driven by insufficiently examined questions.” Further,
“The Enlightenment dream of total rational mastery is an illusion—there is always something in
our peripheral range, and the more deliberately we try to rationally comprehend the world, the
more that slips into peripherality.” Put simply, if our imagination is under-developed, or
insufficiently nuanced, we imagine that there are fewer options available to us, and the stronger
we attempt to rationalize our choices, the fewer alternatives we are likely to consider: “One’s
moral universe is imagined, not simply given, in the sense that moral options are made available
or realistic partly through our ability to imagine them.” The role of moral imagination, then, is
"to try to change one's habits, or ask oneself weird questions, to try in some way to place oneself in a different perspective so as to regard events from another point of view."7

Literary works provide effective venues in which to examine moral imagination because they play on complex character relations and themes while simultaneously questioning common beliefs and societal norms. Noel Carroll emphasizes this point when he asserts that, “Art and literature, by destabilizing reigning ideas, often elicit social debate by functioning as counter-examples, undercutting, subverting and disconfirming common belief by designing thought experiments, like *The Third Man*, whose possibility the reader recognized, upon reflection, refutes prevailing opinion.”8 Literature, he argues, enters public discourse “at the level of ordinary experience” and is not typically “directed at moral philosophers, but plain readers who deliberate about living problems by consulting maxims derived from what passes as commonplace wisdom.”9 This point recalls Janz’s claim that the illusion of “rational mastery” can actually stunt one’s ability to think creatively about real-life problems by forcing one’s responses to conform to a specific system of thought. Reason is guided by constructs that dictate how we *ought* to act in certain situations, but no single system can take into account the entire range of responses to a given situation. Rather, the versatility of a well cultivated imagination helps us think outside the realm of societal norms by encouraging us to consider outside perspectives in a compassionate and contemplative manner. When we are fully engaged with a work of literature, we enhance our moral sensibilities by assuming the role of the Other, thereby opening ourselves to a wider array of possibilities.

In Carroll’s view, works of literature serve as thought experiments that confront audiences with the limitations of their world views and, in so doing, encourage them to think creatively about possibilities they may not have otherwise considered or even been aware of—
those that, to use Janz’s analogy, lie just outside our peripheral vision. Thought experiments need not have a cohesive argument or provide a solution to a specific problem; to claim they do would be counter to the assertion that works of literature derive much of their value from their ability to counter common beliefs and arguments. Rather, they “promote reflection” and “energize thought” by throwing one back on one’s cognitive resources, probing them, and eliciting a conclusion.” Much of this occurs during “the reflective afterlife” of the work, a concept Carroll borrows from Peter Kivy who also talks about literature in terms of thought experiments. In his conception, the literary experience is not a neat, clean, systematic process. Rather, it is a “gappy, sloppy sort of thing.” In other words, appreciation of literature is not “self-contained.” Most novels, for example, cannot be read and fully digested in a single sitting. Readers are accustomed to starting and stopping as they read and can do so without breaking fictional time. Kivy does not use the terms “gappy” and “sloppy” in a negative sense, as in lazy or uncritical. Rather they are essential characteristics that create spaces (or gaps) for reflection that occurs in what he terms the “afterlife” of the work. While it is debatable whether we experience other art forms and performances in quite this same way, I would suggest that the sloppiness Kivy speaks of is pertinent to film in general and to the way audiences experience Mystery Science Theater 3000 in particular.

What Do B-Movies Do?

Up to this point, we have been examining moral imagination with respect to classic or “good” works of literature. However, the question now becomes, does this theory apply to bad works, especially the types of “cheesy” movies featured on Mystery Science Theater 3000? In her seminal essay “Notes On Camp,” Susan Sontag states:
The pure examples of camp are unintentional; they are dead serious… the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails. Of course, not all seriousness that fails can be redeemed as Camp. Only that which has the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve… the hallmark of camp is the spirit of extravagance.14

She further adds that, “things are campy, not when they become old—but when we become less involved with them, and can enjoy, instead of be frustrated by, the failure of the attempt.15 There is a direct correlation between Sontag’s descriptions of Camp and how the creators of Mystery Science Theater 3000 chose movies to feature on the show. They did not choose films that were poorly made for the simple amusement of making a bad movie; they chose works that were not only bad, but that made serious attempts to be good and, in some cases, even great.16 Trace Beaulieu, who played Crow T. Robot and Dr. Clayton Forrester, has said, “The movies that work best for our show are the ones that straightforwardly proclaim, ‘this is the best movie you’re ever going to see’—though they are clearly not.”17 This pretense of making a great movie is in keeping with the “spirit of extravagance” that Sontag describes above, and which is so apparent in many of the films featured on Mystery Science Theater 3000.

Serious fans of MST3K would maintain that there is more to the show’s appeal than the simple joy of watching late night TV and poking fun at bad movies. In fact, much of the show’s allure is based on the often satirical nature of the jokes as well as the rapid-fire riffs that contained obscure cultural references and “callbacks” to earlier episodes. This is, in fact, one of the keys to the show’s success: not only does the seemingly spontaneous nature encourage multiple viewings, but, to some extent, the show can be personalized by each viewer who feels a sense of fulfillment when she “gets” an obscure reference. As Trace Beaulieu notes, it’s about
finding your joke, “and your joke is in there somewhere.” Much of the early criticism of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* has focused on its satirical slant. Marion Long, for example, states that *MST3K*’s “special quality has something to do with candor and truth. You might call it a kind of—video verite.” Sean Griffin adds that, “MST uses its structure to acknowledge marginal readings of the films by non-mainstream audiences, as well as to critique the sexist and racist assumptions of the films.” Further, Joel and the ‘bots “often root for the ‘wrong’ side—such as mourning and protesting the death of lions or tigers that are killed by Hercules.” In instances such as these, the opposition expressed by the crew “often goes beyond comic heckling to a more consciously political subversion of the implied subject position.” In a similar vein, Joel Hodgson has said, “We handle violence with boredom. We punch a hole in the reality that the films were made in. People find that pretty liberating.” Jim Mallon, one of the show’s producers who also played the role of Gypsy, notes that the writers:

practice a sweet form of satire—gentle, but with an edge,” and that “the show mirrors the human condition—that, as Joel and the bots are forced to watch these terrible movies, we are all sort of forced to take life as it is on this planet; we have to watch terrible ‘productions’ that we can’t control. And the way we survive is through our freedom to comment on what’s happening around us and our ability to find some humor in it.

While the writers were aware that they were creating a glorified puppet show, they were also unwilling to play dumb, so to speak, and realized that they were writing for an audience that “doesn’t want to be drowned by the manipulation art of TV and other media.” Kevin Murphy, who Hodgson says, “has the mind of a boy who stays up late and reads *The World Book Encyclopedia* and remembers everything,” has always been a close reader of literature, an
approach he applied to his work on MST3K in order to, as he says, “get a lot closer—inside the movie.” While their deconstruction of the movies may be perceived as cynical by some, the writers never strove to be cruel or to offend, and when they did push the boundaries, they could get away with it because the audience knew their heart was in the right place: “The robots are somewhere between savants and really sort of moronic children,” Murphy says, “They’re a driftnet not only for the culture but for the idiosyncrasies of everybody’s life.”

Paul Chaplin further notes that the attitude of the cast and writers was to encourage viewers to recognize that these movies were labors of love and their creators “put their heart and souls” into them. “I hope everybody involved with these movies understands that we just really love them for having made these movies.” However, my focus is less on the content of the jokes—satirical or not—and more on how Mystery Science Theater 3000 returns a sense of moral relevance to films that are frequently dismissed as Camp or cheese by reminding us of the strangeness, complexity, and humanity that exists at the heart of these movies.

In addition to the “spirit of extravagance” noted above, Sontag also claims that Camp cannot be moral: “Time,” she says, liberates the work of art from moral relevance, delivering it over to the Camp sensibility… time contracts the sphere of banality. Many of the films featured on MST3K, outlandish as they may be, are based on classic, even archetypal, storylines. Such examples include the sword and sandal movies (the Hercules series, Cave Dwellers, Deathstalker); the space operas (12 to the Moon, Manhunt in Space, Phantom Planet); remakes of classic fairy tales (The Day the Earth Froze, Jack Frost, The Magic Voyage of Sinbad); and, of course, the myriad of giant insect, monster, and alien movies that became Mystery Science Theater 3000 staples (The Giant Gila Monster, Werewolf, Attack of the Eye Creatures). In Sontag’s conception, as failed works of art, these films have lost whatever moral relevance they
once had and, therefore, have been reduced to the realm of Camp where any pleasure in viewing them is derived from how spectacularly they fail. It is my contention, however, that by botching them so badly, their creators have provided audiences an opportunity to consider them anew and, in keeping with Janz’s conception of moral imagination, “to ask [themselves] weird questions, to try in some way to place oneself in a different perspective so as to regard events from another point of view.”

Likewise, David Foster Wallace, a self-proclaimed TV junkie, has stated that, while television rarely challenges viewers, the role of literature is “to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable… to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves.”

Further, “We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy’s impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters’ pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own.” Wallace refers to the virtues of literature as “redemptive” and “nourishing” and claims that one of the benefits of engaging with serious literature is that it forces the reader “to work hard to access its pleasures, the same way that in real life true pleasure is usually a by-product of hard work and discontent.”

Finally, echoing Janz, “It’s almost like we need fiction writers to restore strange things’ ineluctable strangeness, to defamiliarize stuff.”

While I am not suggesting that B-movies should be considered serious literature, I am claiming that, when viewed through the filter of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, they accomplish some of what Wallace claims is the role of good literature: they challenge audiences by shaking things up, by making familiar stories strange again. Where the sloppy production values—stale acting, cheap costumes, washed-out colors, and bad dubbing—typically act as barriers to serious examination, within the context of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, these flaws are critical entry points through which viewers start to reconsider the stories’ classic themes and generate new
interpretations. James J. Clauss discusses this point in his analysis of *Hercules Unchained*, which stars former bodybuilder Steve Reeves and was one of the many Hercules movies featured on *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. Clauss notes that the movie is actually based on the classic Greek dramas *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Seven Against Thebes*. However, the “wooden acting and thought-defying dialog” place it in the realm of the surreal where, rather than ignore or dismiss the disconnect between subject and mode of presentation, we can experience the resulting discord and ask, “What can this mean?” He adds that, “This conflict between the epic and the cartoon, the mythic and the banal, the heroic and the stupid in *Hercules Unchained* creates a dynamic tension that, like the production of Dadaist and Surrealist artists, problematizes our perception of what is serious and what nonsensical by inviting us to observe, evaluate, and critique our response to the irreconcilable.”

Forcing viewers to ask “what can this mean?” is an important step in engaging moral imagination that is stressed by Wallace: “TV and the commercial-art-culture’s trained [today’s readership] to be sort of lazy and childish in its expectations. But it makes trying to encourage today’s readers both imaginatively and intellectually unprecedentedly hard.” Despite his fascination with contemporary television culture, Wallace asserts that “audiences are still hungry for something commercial art can’t provide.” While B-movies may be able to feed part of this hunger, it is doubtful that they can completely satisfy it on their own. Returning to Clauss’s analysis of *Hercules Unchained*, he notes how it both “invites us to emulate Hercules in ultimately choosing heroic identities and goals in life but, at the same time, alienates us by representing this universal, though also intensely personal, quest as a mythological travesty acted out by a former Mr. Universe, scantily clad bimbos, and a cast of fifth-rate actors, from whom we are further distanced by poor dubbing.” While the surreal nature of these movies may
succeed in engaging viewers and encouraging them to start asking “weird” questions, many of the same barriers discussed above persist in preventing full engagement and serious analysis.

*Mystery Science Theater 3000,* however, helps fill the void by adding a much-needed human element to the experience, which allows audiences to become more fully involved with the featured films. This authentic human experience is, of course, a key factor in any work of art and is generally what is missing from works that we dismiss as mere Camp or cheese. Even in dark times, Wallace notes, “the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what’s human and magical that still live and glow despite the time’s darkness.” Good literature,” he continues, “could have as dark a world view as it wished, but it’d find a way both to depict this dark world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it.”

The role of art, then, is not to provide solutions for the problems we face in dark times, or even to point out what specifically is wrong with the culture we live in. The point, for Wallace, is to show what it means to be human: “If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction’s job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still are human beings, now. Or can be.”

In a similar vein, Martha Nussbaum maintains that literary narratives allow readers to contemplate humanity more extensively than rational moral theory alone. Literature, she maintains, encourages us “to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person who might, given changes in circumstance, be ourselves or one’s loved ones.” Good literature, she continues, “is disturbing in a way that history and social science writing frequently is not. Because it summons powerful emotions, it disconcerts and puzzles. It inspires distrust of conventional pieties and exacts a frequently painful confrontation with one’s own thoughts and intuitions.”
Well-crafted narratives, then, confront audiences with the limitations of their own world views and encourage them to question what passes for common wisdom. These narratives engage both emotions and the imagination while affording audiences an approximation to an authentic experience that they would not otherwise be likely to have. Such experiences, vicarious as they are, provide insight into the lives and times of others and, in turn, help illustrate how our thinking has been shaped by cultural norms.

Tracking how this would work on a large scale would be a difficult, if not impossible, task. Just as every viewer of MST3K has the opportunity to “find their own joke,” they also have the ability to personalize their viewing experience by applying those jokes to their own lives. However, Sue William Silverman provides interesting insight into how the process might work in her personal essay, “I Was a Prisoner on the Satellite of Love.”

Organized as a drama complete with a cast of characters, Silverman’s essay shows how Mystery Science Theater 3000 helped her through one of the most traumatic periods of her life: a move with her husband from her native Atlanta to Michigan. Along the way, she recounts her experience with light hearted observations about some of the superficial differences between Michigan and Atlanta, but she does so by interjecting the voice of Crow into her descriptions:

During the drive to the coast I notice many trees still bare [‘Enjoy our bleak landscape,’ I hear Crow say.], whereas in Georgia spring rains are funneling toward summer.

And upon arriving at her new house:

Inside, the carpet is electric green. Pepto-Bismol pink paint drenches walls clogged with sad clown paintings. [‘When knickknacks ruled the world.’ Crow]
The kitchen is decorated in a heart-and-duck motif. [Sue, sotto voce: ‘Country-psychedelic Victorian on crack.’].

As her essay moves into more serious territory, specifically her abusive childhood and the cracks that are starting to appear in her marriage, Silverman notes that “the Bad movies on MST3K are emblematic of dysfunctional families everywhere.” She focuses specifically on *It Conquered the World*, a 1956 science fiction “thriller” that is notable for featuring three actors who would go on to bigger and better things: Peter Graves, Lee Van Cleef, and Beverly Garland. The movie also includes one of the all-time great movie monsters, a refuge from Venus that stands about two feet tall and has an enormous head that looks like “a giant Vlasic pickle with horns.” The movie is, of course, a disaster, but as is the case with most of the movies featured on MST3K, “the actors play it straight, as truth. No one winks, no one (except Joel and the ‘bots, of course) inserts even a touch of irony into the film. No actors groan or smirk at the inconsistencies. No one shatters the facades.” There is perhaps no better example of this lack of irony than Graves’ monologue in the film’s final scene:

> He learned almost too late that Man is a feeling creature. And because of it, the greatest in the universe [music soars]. There can't be any gift of perfection outside themselves. And when men seek such perfection they find only death, fire, loss, disillusionment. Men have always sought an end to toil and misery. It can't be given. It has to be achieved. There is hope, but it has to come from inside.

This speech is replayed during the final host segment, this time back in the Satellite of Love with the crew basking in the warm glow of a portable TV, the ‘bots in their robes, and Joel eating (appropriately) a TV dinner. As the scene rolls, the ‘bots focus intently on the TV while Joel, in a nurturing manner, shares a bite of his dinner with each of them. Joel nods in agreement as
Graves utters the lines, “There is hope, but it has to come from inside.” Then, looking somewhat overwhelmed, Joel says “hea-VY” as he cuts back to the Mads who are also watching the scene at their dinner table, Dr. Forrester almost sobbing and Frank so focused that he can barely lift his fork.46

In another context, scenes such as this would be roundly dismissed as pure Camp by modern audiences—just another bad sci-fi flick with a cheesy monster and a heavy-handed, tacked-on message. However, as Silverman points out, the treatment this final scene is given on MST3K strips it of its Campiness and makes it relevant in a very real way: “I see no irony at this moment between a human and two robots—with a sentimental voiceover from a grade-B movie—it’s the most loving moment I’ve witnessed on television. This is the true American family.”47 While it may be tempting to dismiss Silverman’s fixation with the show as mere escapism, the extent to which these movies—complete with their goofy monsters and unremarkable superheroes—have colored how she views the world encapsulates many of the key components of moral imagination. The humanity that is teased out of them through their treatment on MST3K strips them of their banality, thereby restoring in them a sense of moral relevance that, in Sontag’s conception, had previously reduced them to the realm of Camp. To help illustrate this point further, we can turn to the end of “Mitchell,” a classic episode that is given further significance as the show where the torch was passed from Joel to Mike. The transition is handled as a play on the final scene of The Wizard of Oz with Joel being projected back to Earth in an escape pod rather than returned to Kansas in a hot air balloon. As he jettisons into space, aimlessly working the controls just as so many movie astronauts have before him in their cardboard spaceships with their invisible space shields, the ‘bots plead for him to come back: “What’re we supposed to do without you? Who’s going to teach us about what it is to be
human and stuff?” But Joel has taught them all he can: “At this point, you guys know as much about it as I do… Be strong and true. I love you!”

Conclusion

To what extent literature can serve as a source of moral knowledge has long been a point of contention. One of the common criticisms levied against such claims is that literature is not typically thesis-based and, therefore, does not contain sustained arguments that strive toward general or implied truths. Carroll notes that the “no-argument argument” works in two ways:

The first is that artworks, where they contain or suggest general truths, do not argue in their behalf; at best they merely assert or imply them. The second point is that the critical discourse that greets artworks does not typically lavish attention on arguing for or against the truths allegedly disclosed in the artwork.

Conversely, when a work of literature does advance a thesis, the story exists primarily to support the argument and is “cooked from the get-go.” In other words, “The story cannot confirm or authenticate its thesis, where it has one. So the fiction, when it is underwritten by some general truth, cannot afford genuine knowledge, since however true its claims may be, they are never justified.” While a full analysis of this argument is beyond the scope of this essay, I want to reiterate a point made earlier: As thought experiments, the goal of literature is not to provide evidence for and confirmation of existing views, but rather to shake up the audiences’ beliefs by encouraging them to question established ideas. This is accomplished by engaging with the works we encounter in a thoughtful and reflective manner so as to cultivate imagination and expand the scope of our moral thinking. Again, in Wallace’s view, the role of literature “is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative
access to other selves.” The myriad of bad movies presented as weekly “experiments” during MST3K’s ten seasons provide a sort of bizarre overview of the human (and in many cases, non-human) condition. While most of the movies are completely vapid and cliché-ridden, the strange array of Puma Men, Pod People, Giant Gila Monsters, Crawling Eyes, and Crazy Mixed up Zombies turn out to be particularly effective in revitalizing our imaginations and in rejuvenating the way we think about our place in the world—or, to take a final point from Silverman’s analysis, all those weekly experiments and countless hours spent with the MST3K crew amounted to one long lesson in how to live without hypocrisy.

In his discussion of monsters and moral imagination, Stephen Asma states that, “The monster is a virtual sparring partner for our imagination.” I would extend this analogy to include the whole spectrum of movies featured on Mystery Science Theater 3000. The show often resembles a sparring match with the crew returning to the satellite after a particularly brutal movie looking like they barely survived twelve rounds in the ring. Asma goes on to note that, “We use the imagination in order to establish our own agency in chaotic and uncontrollable situations.” This point echoes one made earlier: that the MST3K “experiments” are, in fact, challenges to the audience to make sense of the carnage left in the wake of these bad movies. Rather than starting with a well-wrought work of literature where we can reflect on the stories themes, symbols, and characters, we are left to do the heavy lifting ourselves: “Our ethical convictions,” Asma claims, “do not spring fully grown from our heads but must be developed in the context of real and imagined challenges. In order to discover our values, we have to face trials and tribulation, and monsters help us imaginatively rehearse.” But why monsters—or giant insects, leeches, or aliens for that matter? Because, when it comes right down to it, we are as flawed as these movies and the characters in them. Monsters remind us of our own flaws and
vulnerability while “showing us examples of dignity and depravity without preaching or proselytizing.” We have been trying to kill monsters in literature at least since the Enlightenment when it was believed that “Rationality will pour its light into the dark corners and reveal the monsters to be merely chimeric.” However, recalling Janz one last time, this drive toward rational mastery is a dead end, as is the belief that, once we embrace difference, monsters will cease to be relevant in the modern world. While it is true that we need to embrace difference in order to become more aware of and sensitive to other selves, we need not destroy all monsters. We will always be flawed and, therefore, our imaginations will always need sparring partners—and who better to have in your corner than the crew from the Satellite of Love?
Notes


4. Janz, “‘Thinking Like a Mountain’: Ethics and Place as Travelling Concepts,” 191.

5. Janz, “‘Thinking Like a Mountain’: Ethics and Place as Travelling Concepts,” 192.


10. Janz, “‘Thinking Like a Mountain’: Ethics and Place as Travelling Concepts,” 192.


13. Throughout this essay, I use the terms “cheese” and “Camp” more or less interchangeably while acknowledging that they could have different theoretical connotations. Many of these are discussed in Sontag’s essay, but since a full discussion of those variations is outside the scope of this essay, I feel it is safe to use them interchangeably in a very general way.


16. On this point, Rick Sloane, director of *Hobgoblins*, subject of one of the more notorious late *MST3K* episodes, has said that he originally offered one of his earlier movies—*The Visitants*—but *MST3K* turned it down because “it was too intentionally campy and not bad enough.” Robert G. Weiner and Shelley E. Barba, eds., *In the Peanut Gallery with Mystery Science Theater 3000: Essays on Film, Fandom, Technology, and the Culture of Riffing* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011).


19. Long, "Behind The Screen at *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*."


24. Long, "Behind The Screen at Mystery Science Theatre 3000."


27. “Santa Claus,” *Mystery Science Theater 3000*.


33. McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," 140.


http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/arethusa/v041/41.1clauss.pdf.

(Clauss 64).


42. Silverman, “I Was a Prisoner on the Satellite of Love,” 68.
52. McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," 127.
54. Asma, "Monsters and the Moral Imagination."
55. Asma, "Monsters and the Moral Imagination."

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