

## 1. Course Basics

Film Genres

MDIA 363 (3 credits) Sect. 1-CRN 34120-Spring 2026

MF 1:00-1:50PM; W 1:00-3:15PM

***Attendance and participation impact your grade big time. Late arrivals, or early exits are subject to be counted as an unexcused absence. It is your responsibility to remember to sign the attendance sheet. Please come on time. You have three excused absences, schedule personal appointments around class.***

## 2. Instructor Information

Dr. Wes Gehring

Film and Media Studies/Department of Media

Ball State University, Muncie, IN

[wesgehring@bsu.edu](mailto:wesgehring@bsu.edu)

765.285.1495

Office hours by appointment

## 3. Course Information

### Course Description

The course will familiarize students with the most fundamental critical discourse genre study -- available for evaluating film as art. This in-depth study of movie genres will be coupled with the ongoing evolution of these forms, and the ever-changing historical context which fuels the change. Genres to be examined include various forms of comedy, film noir, gangster films, horror, fantasy, science fiction, the western, problem films, the musical, art house cinema, and so on. There have always been compound genres. However, since the 1970s (often considered America's last Renaissance in film), the tendency has gone to morph speed. This was fueled, in part, by both the 1960's "French New Wave," and America's cultural upheaval during this decade, coupled with Watergate, 1970s. This has often stimulated a subtextual dark comedy element in many genres. While the text explores this development -- the class will still focus on the basic values of each genre addressed.

***Most importantly, this class will give you a genre template to be a better filmmaker and/or writer, from screenplays to novels.***

### Prerequisites

Must be a Media Major

## Course Objectives

By the end of the semester students will:

1. Write three professional quality critique papers focusing upon a pivotal genre.
2. Be able to communicate in-depth on the multi-faceted dimensions of evolving genre study.
3. Have increased their awareness of genre storytelling skills.
4. Gain an advanced understanding of cinema's most fundamental critical discourse, including all its historical ramifications.
5. Have acquired a schematic overview of genres which also offers personal insight for each individual.
6. ***As a filmmaker and/or screenwriter/novelist you will have a head start!***

## Course Modality/Structure

If a change in modality of this course is necessary because of a change in your health status, please contact the instructor as soon as possible to work through possible solutions. Instructors will do their best to work within the situation.

## 4. Course Materials

**TEXTS:** (G-1) Wes D. Gehring, *GEHRING LOST & FOUND: Selected Essays* (Orlando, Florida: BearManor Media, 2019).

(G-2) Wes D. Gehring, *GEHRING BESIDE HIMSELF: More Selected Essays* (Orlando, Florida: BearManor, 2024).

(Any author royalties will be donated to charity.)  
Office hours by appointment.)

Ball State First Day:

Students' course materials are available via Canvas and through the Ball State First Day partnership with Barnes & Noble. This program ensures students obtain all their course materials the first day of classes. Students are automatically enrolled in the program and charged the flat course material fee on their BSU eBill. Students can opt out of the program by the deadline listed on the "Course Materials" page in Canvas. Please review the program details to make the most informed decision regarding your course materials and participation in this program: Ball State First Day.

## 5. Course Assignments and Assessments

### Course Assignments

#### COURSE OVERVIEW

- WEEK 1: General Introduction/FOCUS GENRE: *Dark Comedy/Gehring Readings* from G-1: "The Many Faces of Comedy" (pp. 205-213); G-1: "Signature Scenes" (pp. 255-258); and G-2: "Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time ...*" (pp. 35-38).
- WEEK 2: FOCUS GENRE: *Populism: Readings* G-1: "McCarey vs. Capra ..." (pp. 229-244), and "The Populist Films of Robert Redford" (pp. 195-203); G-2: *Bull Durham...* (pp.35-38), and "*Capraesque...*" (pp. 87-95).
- WEEK 3: FOCUS GENRES: "Genres of the Fantastic": key on *Horror: Readings* from G-1: "Strange Fruit" (pp. 155-158), "*Psycho* Spoofed" (pp. 301-309). See essay at syllabus conclusion.
- WEEK 4: FOCUS GENRES: "Genres of the Fantastic": Sci Fi & Fantasy/ *Readings* from G-1: "*The Wizard of Oz* Spoofed" (pp. 311-315); G-2: "George Clooney's *Midnight Sky*" (228-240).
- WEEK 5: FOCUS GENRES: *Screwball Comedy vs Romantic Comedy: Readings* from G-1: "Sturges' Greatest Miracle" (pp. 215-224); G-2: "*My Man Godfrey...*" (141-150).
- WEEK 6: FOCUS GENRE: *The Western: Readings* from text: "McCarthyism & the Movies" (pp. 159-167) G-2: "*The Searchers...*" (96-106).
- WEEK 7: FOCUS GENRE: *Gangster Film/Readings* from G-1: "Movie Doors" (277-280).
- WEEK 8: FOCUS GENRE: *Film Noir/Readings*: Revisit G-1: "McCarthyism & the Movies (159-167); G-2: "*The Third Man...*" (45-53).

- WEEK 9: FOCUS GENRE: *Personality Comedian/Readings* from G-1: "Charlie Chaplin & Buster Keaton ..." (3-20), Charlie Chaplin & Steve Martin" (61-64), essays from WEEK ONE; G-2: See essays on Chaplin, Sellers, Langdon, Skelton, and Allen.
- WEEK 10: FOCUS GENRE: *Parody/Readings* from G-1: "Fields and Falstaff" (pp. 87-98); compare this parody to the satire of "Will Cuppy ..." (pp. 99-106); G-2: "Butch Cassidy and ..." (17-23).
- WEEK 11: FOCUS GENRE: *Biography/Readings* from G-1: "America's Misunderstood Patriot" (pp. 65-70), and "Reassembling the Dust ..." (pp. 225-220); G-2: "Sydney Pollack..." (191-203).
- WEEK 12: FOCUS GENRE: *The Musical/Readings* from G-1: "Bob Fosse's Jazzy Black Humor" (245-247), and "Dancing to Screwball" (249-252); G-2 "The Beatles Get Back..." (70-74).
- WEEK 13: FOCUS GENRE: *The Problem Film/Readings*: from G-1: "Vonnegut & A War ..." (pp. 119-122), "Lonesome Rhodes ..." (pp. 169-172), and revisit "Strange Fruit" (155-158); G-2: "Make Way for Tomorrow..."(29-34).
- WEEK 14: FOCUS GENRE: *The Art Film and Others/Readings* G-1: "Mr. Keaton ..." (pp. 71-74), "Lived Issues vs Raised Issues ..." (pp. 263-266), and "Prolonged Periods ..." (pp. 281-284).
- WEEK 15: FOCUS: Summing Up & Melodrama Is the Cult Film a Genre?/*Readings* G-1: The Last Ride of James Dean." (pp.125-134); G-2: Betty Davis' JEZEBEL...: (24-28) and "Lost in Paradise/Condemned to Hell" (177-190).

FINAL EXAM Last Day of Class — In Class

*Grading Starts with THREE GENRE PAPERS which KEY only 1-2 FILMS.*

1. Write your first essay on a dark comedy film. In a brief *single* opening paragraph name the movie and summarize the story — one or two sentences. Then, *without* any reference to a filmmaker, critique the film along the genre lines established in class and the readings. Also, add two pivotal scenes which arguably encapsulate the movie. (Make sure to have read the Gehring (G-1) essay on pp. 255-258.) Why is this genre considered the most brutally honest? Since no genre is stuck in amber, do you see any new component that might eventually be a norm in the dark comedy template?
2. For your second essay question, pick one film from two different genres, and examine how 2-3 divergent genre themes (such as death, love, music ...) are used in a contrasting,

manner. For example, working from these scenarios, in romantic comedies, like *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), it begins with a death, and works its way back to an individual being able to love again. Other couples reinforce these values. However, despite being comic, love is not to be mocked. And the soundtrack music reinforces that feeling. In contrast, screwball comedies mock and/or essentially parody love right down to the time the couple commit. Other couples throughout the movie suggest marriage is less than inviting. However, it stays on point, avoiding serious subjects like death. And the soundtrack, like dark comedy, ridicules said subject (in this case love). Thus, in the first *Arthur* (1981), Dudley Moore mocks love from the beginning, both by picking up a sex worker, while the soundtrack plays "Strangers in the Night."

3. Do a paper on a *single* compound genre film and examine why the two types work well together based upon characteristics/themes drawn from class. Other than a brief set up, focus on genre and not filmmaker biographies.

**DUE DATES:**  
**First Paper: February 4, Wednesday**  
**Second Paper: March 11, Wednesday**  
**Third Paper: April 8, Wednesday**

**Email to Gehring by 6PM, [wesgehring@bsu.edu](mailto:wesgehring@bsu.edu)**

Papers are 5-6 pages, and a bibliography with at least two hard copy sources. Texts can be counted. *Late Papers lose a grade* a day. Each paper keys on critiquing one or two films. References to lectures and assigned readings are expected. Ultimately, it's your perspective, but it's imported to consider many views. Even if VERY late – you will receive points.

FINAL GRADE is based on three papers, and one in class **Blue Book Essay Exam**. It will be taken on the last day of class. (Attendance and Discussion are important)

Each assignment is worth 100 points.

What follows is as close to a BSU universal grade criteria that exists: 94–100 (A+), 90-93 (A), 87-89 (B+), 84-86 (B), 80-83 (B-), 77-79 (C+), 74-76 (C), 70-73 (C-), 67-69 (D+), 64-66 (D), 60-63 (D-).

If you are on academic probation and/or have a pressing grade need – talk to me early. If you are willing to work with me, I will do everything I can to help.

**(During class all electronic devices are to be turned off.)**

## 6. University Policies and Statements

### UNIVERSITY STATEMENT

*We are committed to ensuring that all members of the community are welcome, through valuing the various experiences and worldviews represented at Ball State and among those we serve. We promote a culture of respect and civil discourse. If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, please contact the instructor of record as soon as possible. Ball State's Disability Services office coordinates services for students with disabilities; documentation of a disability needs to be on file in that office before any accommodations can be provided. Disability Services can be contacted at 765-285-5293 or [dsd@bsu.edu](mailto:dsd@bsu.edu)*

**University policies regarding student absences.** Absences will be excused for the following: funeral and bereavement leave, jury duty, late course addition, military absences, observance of religious holidays, pregnancy leave, student-athletes participating in university- or department-approved activities, and university advisories. Students may encounter other circumstances (e.g. car accidents, job interviews) that result in course absences.

### ABSENCES FOR UNIVERSITY ACTIVITIES

The University expects its departments and programs that take students away from class meetings to schedule such events in a way that will minimize hindrance of orderly completion of course requirements. Such units must provide a written statement to the students describing the activity and stating as precisely as possible the dates of the required absence. The involved students must deliver this documentation to the instructor, preferably before the absence but no event later than one week after the absence.

### ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TOOLS

As you work on and submit assignments this semester, know that using generative AI tools to complete your assignments is a violation of Ball State's Academic Ethics Policy unless the AI use is explicitly approved by the faculty member. In general, students may not submit any work generated by an AI program as their own. Doing so is plagiarism. In courses and assignments where AI use is permitted, faculty will have guidelines for that use. Work created outside of those guidelines will be considered an Academic Ethics Policy violation. If a student's grade is affected by an academic ethics violation, faculty are required to report the violation to the Office of the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs who oversees the Student Academic Ethics policy and maintains records of its violations. More information about the reporting process is available here.

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

*In this course, we are committed to fostering a learning environment that values intellectual diversity, encourages free expression, and promotes open inquiry. As members of the Ball State Community, we treat each person in the Ball State community with civility, courtesy, compassion, and dignity and respect and learn from differences in people, ideas, and opinions. Please review Ball State University's Statement on Freedom of Expression, the resources on Ball State's Freedom of Expression webpage, and Ball State's Beneficence Pledge.*

## TITLE IX

*Ball State University is committed to providing a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students. If you or someone you know has experienced sexual harassment—including sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence, or stalking, please know that you are not alone. The University offers support services and resources. For more information or to report an incident, please visit bsu.edu/titleix or contact the Title IX Coordinator at 765-285-1545 or at titleix@bsu.edu.*

***As your instructor, I am a mandatory reporter under the Title IX policy and required to report any information I receive about possible sexual harassment. This includes information shared in class discussions, assignments, or private conversations.***

***What happens after I report?*** *The Title IX Coordinator will email the person who experienced sexual harassment (complainant) and invite them to schedule a meeting. If the complainant chooses to meet with the Title IX Coordinator,*

- *Title IX Coordinator will offer supportive measures (e.g., counseling, extensions on deadlines, course-related adjustments, changes to work or class schedules, and/or*

*referrals to campus offices), review the policy, and discuss options to move forward.*

- *If a complaint is filed by the complainant or the University, an investigation will begin following University policy.*

## UNIVERSITY GRADE APPEAL POLICY

*If you believe you received a final course grade that does not reflect your performance due to fairness or a procedural issue, you have the right to file an appeal within 5 school days after final grades are posted by the Office of the Registrar. Review the [University Grade Appeal Policy and Process](#).*

## STUDENT ACADEMIC ETHICS POLICY

*Honesty, trust, and personal responsibility are fundamental attributes of the university community. Academic dishonesty and other forms of academic misconduct threaten the foundation of an institution dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and will not be tolerated. To maintain its credibility and reputation, and to equitably assign evaluations of scholastic and creative performance, Ball State University is committed to maintaining a climate that upholds and values the highest standards of academic integrity. Visit the VPAA's [academic integrity website](#) (Students tab) for resources on understanding academic integrity, citing sources properly, and avoiding inadvertent academic dishonesty. To learn about BSU's academic integrity expectations and students' rights, please read the [University Student Academic Ethics Policy](#).*

*Academic integrity violations include giving or receiving an unfair academic advantage (cheating), presenting someone else's ideas or work as your own (plagiarism), and falsifying academic records. Unless otherwise indicated, you must work independently by yourself. Check with me if you are unsure whether something constitutes academic dishonesty. Examples of academic integrity violations include but are not limited to:*

- *Using resources not authorized by the faculty member (including devices, AI tools, hidden notes, and open books)*

- *Using commercial study websites to find answers to graded assignments (Chegg, Course Hero, StudyPool, OneClass, etc.).*
- *Without the instructor's written permission, giving away, buying, or selling graded assignments class notes, exams, study guides, or other course materials to other students or to third-party vendors (Course Hero, Chegg, 24HourAnswers, etc.).*
- *Working with another person on any assignment other than authorized group projects.*
- *Sharing or allowing others to access your files, whether done with permission or not.*
- *Reusing your own work from another semester, course, or section.*
- *Sharing answers with others during exams (passing notes, texting, whispering, gesturing)*
- *Discussing exam questions and answers with students who have not taken the exam.*
- *Soliciting others to complete work for you.*

## **UNIVERSITY LAB SOFTWARE**

University labs are updated with the current versions of software at the beginning of each academic year. That version remains in place throughout the academic year. This software version is the same across campus. This allows you to move from lab to lab and continue your work.

To maintain your ability to work on projects continually between your own computer and a lab computer, your version of the software must be the same as that in the labs. Do not update to a new version or you will be unable to move seamlessly between personal and university owned computers.

## **INCLEMENT WEATHER/UNIVERSITY CLOSING STATEMENT**

If inclement weather forces the closing of the university, that information will be made available on the Ball State website. If the university closes because of weather and this class is cancelled, information on the rescheduling of any assignments, exams, presentations, etc. will be made available on the class Canvas site as soon as possible, or will be sent to you via email, or will be announced at the next regularly scheduled class period. Any makeup of a class day

cancelled because of weather will be determined by the university administration and will be announced in class or via email.

## **COPYRIGHT STATEMENT**

All materials for this class have been created for the private, non-commercial use of students enrolled in this class through Ball State University in the current semester. Any material provided to students, including, but not limited to, syllabus, lectures, class notes, PowerPoint presentations, assignments, information, quizzes, exams, or class news, is the property of the course instructor and/or Ball State University and may not be reproduced, distributed, or publicly posted without written permission of the instructor. Selling or distributing course materials may violate the Code of Student Conduct and/or the Information Technology Users' Privileges and Responsibilities policy. Violations will be reported to Dr. Mike Gillilan, Director of Student Rights and Community Standards.

(Include the word "Copyright" or the © symbol and the year materials were created or the year of the current class.)

## **ADDENDUM FOR DISCUSSION FORUMS**

Any discussion forum content shared among students for use in the course remains the property of the individual student and will not be copied, distributed, or used in any manner without written permission of the instructor and the student.

## **COURSE WITHDRAWAL**

Thursday March 19, 2026

## **STUDENT COURSE EVALUATIONS**

Evaluations will be completed sometime during the final week of the semester. Once the date is announced, please bring your laptop to class to ensure completion.

## **HELPFUL RESOURCES:**

**THE LEARNING CENTER:**

The Learning Center offers free Tutoring and Academic Coaching for many courses at Ball State. Students can make appointments for online (Zoom) or in-person (NQ 350) appointments. To make an appointment, visit [myballstate.bsu.edu](http://myballstate.bsu.edu) and click on “Navigate” in the Academic Tools section, or just go directly to [bsu.navigate.eab.com](http://bsu.navigate.eab.com).

Testing accommodations for students with disabilities are available for students who have received the appropriate documentation from Disability Services. Tests may be administered in the Learning Center. Supplemental Instruction is available in select courses. If you have an SI leader for your course, that person will provide students with information the first week of school regarding weekly study sessions. For more information about Learning Center programming, <http://bsu.edu/learningcenter> or call 765-2851006. Follow us on Instagram: BallStateLC.

### **THE WRITING CENTER:**

All writers improve with practice and feedback, so as a student in this course, you are encouraged to use the Writing Center (in Robert Bell 295 during weekdays, Bracken Library First Floor West in the evenings, or online during any of our regularly scheduled hours) to get additional feedback on your writing. The Writing Center offers free planning, feedback, and accountability sessions (in person and online) to all students composing essays, reports, reflections, research projects, web content, lesson plans, slideshows, poster presentations, resumes, and other digital or print texts. To schedule a free appointment to discuss your writing, go to [bsu.edu/writingcenter](http://bsu.edu/writingcenter). Online and in-person appointments are available; however, plan ahead because appointments book quickly!

### **THE BASIC NEEDS HUB:**

If you are having difficulty affording enough food, do not have a safe and reliable place to sleep, and/or experiencing an emergency or crisis, help is available through the Basic Needs Hub. The Basic Needs Hub has information, resources, and provides individualized support to students. To talk with a supportive staff member about your experience, receive one on one assistance, or learn more about resources, you can submit a [Basic Needs Assistance Form](#).

### **THE COUNSELING CENTER:**

The Ball State University Counseling Center offers free and confidential services to all students. The Counseling Center is located in Lucina Hall, Room 320. To schedule an appointment, you can contact us at 765-285-1736. Ball State also offers a 24/7 Crisis Line, which can be reached at 765-285-HOPE (4673). The Crisis Line is a mental health resource for those who are struggling with any mental health concerns, including thoughts of self-harm and/or suicide.

At the Ball State Counseling Center, we see students for a variety of reasons, some of which include homesickness, relationship concerns, anxiety, and depression. At your first appointment, you will work with a therapist to create a plan that will connect you with resources that best fit your needs. We assist students with getting connected to therapy at our Center as well as connecting students to self-help resources, other on-campus resources, and community-based resources. All Ball State students also have access to several on-demand, self-help resources through a variety of different platforms. All of these resources, including a direct link to our website, can be found [here](#).

### **THE SPEAKING CENTER:**

[The Speaking Center](#) is a free resource available to all members of the BSU community wanting to improve their public speaking abilities. We offer personalized coaching designed to help you become a more confident and effective speaker. Our trained coaches provide constructive feedback and support throughout the entire speech preparation process, whether you are in the early stages of brainstorming ideas and organizing your thoughts, or you need to practice your delivery and refine your message. The Center is in the David Letterman Communication and Media Building, room 302. To schedule an appointment, please access us through your Navigate app or use this direct link to sign up for a time. Appointments are available both in person and on Zoom. Appointments are available in person, on Zoom, and in virtual reality (VR) for those interested in practicing in an immersive speaking environment.

# Genres of the Fantastic

BY WES D. GEHRING

*"Under this provocative parasol of genres of the fantastic, the most-significant solemn literacy texts have come from horror."*

THE MOST POPULAR college class I teach is Film Genres. Each week a different type of movie is examined. Sometimes these genres are best linked under a broader umbrella. It should come as no surprise that the current university crowd favors horror, science fiction, and fantasy. These are the "genres of the fantastic."

The order is not random. Film genres simply are literacy retreats. Under this provocative parasol of genres of the fantastic, the most-significant solemn literacy texts have come from horror. Do not shoot the proverbial messenger. Take it up with Stephen King's nonfiction text *Dance Macabre* (1979). He makes a convincing argument that horror gets to go first. He bases it on the literary trilogy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

Within cinema horror, no image bests director James Whale's iconic creation of "Frankenstein" (1931), with Boris Karloff in the title role. Whale even manages to top himself with the 1935 sequel, "Bride of Frankenstein." Karloff reprises his role, joined by Elsa Lanchester's title figure. She also plays Mary Shelley in a quasi-comic prologue. In James Curtis' *James Whale: A New World of Gods and Monsters* (1998), one sees the obvious physical links between the look of the creature and a Whale sketch of a demented character he had played on the London stage in 1928's "A Man with Red Hair."

To comically demonstrate the prevalence and multifaceted storylines in which Shelley's paragon of horror has been showcased, one only has to turn to critic Leonard Maltin's yearly *Movie Guide* of nearly 16,000 pocket film overviews. Besides those just mentioned, what follows is a modest sampling of Frankenstein pictures: "Son of Frankenstein" (1939), "Ghost of Frankenstein" (1942), "Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man" (1943), "House of Frankenstein" (1944, which also includes roommates Wolf Man and Dracula), "Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein" (1948), "I Was a Teenage Frankenstein" (1957), "The Revenge of Frankenstein" (1958), "Frankenstein Conquers the World" (1965), and "Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter" (1966). The comic numbers are nothing short of the Marx Brothers trying to climb Mount Dumont.

So, what is so hypnotic about old flat-top? His nuts-and-bolts appearance seems the most magnetic of what is referenced as a "man-made



Elsa Lanchester and Boris Karloff in "Bride of Frankenstein" (1935).

monster." His closest rival would be the 16th-century Jewish folktale figure called the Golem. In yet another time of Jewish persecution, a rabbi created a clay figure to protect his people. However, as with Frankenstein, something went wrong, and a monster was the result. Before Shelley's book, Golem tales were much more prevalent. Indeed, the figure often is assumed to have been the inspiration for her creature.

Like all art and/or popular culture phenomena which does not go away, it speaks to different eras in different ways. However, the overriding message here is a religious one—man should not play God. Yet, because Shelley's mother died in childbirth, with the author almost suffering the same fate, feminists often have interpreted the story as a commentary on the horrors of 18th-century childbirth.

In later years, Whale's ongoing influence as the interpreter of Shelley's story and the architect of the creature's iconic look has been drawn into



another Frankenstein "angle of vision." Whale was one of the first openly gay Hollywood artists. In Christopher Bram's excellent Whale biography, *Father of Frankenstein* (1995), one can be persuaded that maybe the director's greater empathy for the creature was born of being an outsider, too. (This is further examined in the 1998 screen adaptation of Bram's biography, "Cocks and Monsters.") Mel Brooks certainly acknowledged this perspective in his parody "Young Frankenstein" (1974).

Moreover, art never is created in a vacuum, and Whale was a World War I veteran. Medical advances of the time managed to allow many badly disfigured soldiers to survive the conflict, which horror historians generally credit for helping fuel the genre during the post-war era. Whale saw combat and would have been cognizant of this development. Also, the period between the two world wars were plagued with Jim Crow lynchings, especially directed at returning black veterans. The mob men-



The mob searching for the monster in "Frankenstein" (1931).

tality cornerstone of so many Frankenstein movies during the early sound era often is linked subtextually to this sorry chapter in American history.

While the "don't play God" axiom can be seen as a strong reason to lead with Frankenstein, beyond his mesmerizing mug and Karloff's poignancy, I find Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* a more riveting universal tale. I have never even had a thought of creating a lovely lady, à la John Hughes' tale of nerdy teens (Robert Downey Jr. and Robert Rustler) using computers for that purpose in "Weird Science" (1985). However, I believe it all-inclusive that everyone has a dark alter ego. Through some vague liquid formula, Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll was able to unleash his Mr. Hyde.

Most people, though, do not act upon this impulse, although Alfred Hitchcock certainly included such potential thoughts and/or actions in most of his films. As John Russell Taylor wrote in *Hitch: The Life and Times of Alfred Hitchcock* (1978), though it might just as well come from Donald Spoto's *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (1983): "It is probably not stretching fantasy too far to guess at the first hint of how he latterly delighted to treat the cool, remote-seeming blond heroines of his films in the resentful dreams of a plain, pudgy fourteen-year-old watching some evidently unattainable blond girl near home . . . thinking: 'If only I had her in my power, just for a few moments. . .'"

Regardless, most artists drawn to depictions of mankind's dark side have uttered some variation upon "humanity's thin veneer of civilization."

Indeed, in H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898), he plays upon such fears in others. The catalyst for this novella was late 19th century Europe's fears about the ongoing Prussian war machine, which was just warming up for the 20th century. However, Wells wanted to break new ground. Thus, he projected such fears upon a life force from another world. In doing so, Wells also embraced science fiction. This demonstrates how the "genres of the fantastic" often are intertwined.

For instance, while the original "Alien" (1979) takes place on a commercial spacecraft, it essentially is just a haunted house in outer space. Director Ridley Scott even borrows a fantasy writing rule from C.S. Lewis' *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961) by giving Sigourney Weaver a cat. That is, when wanting to engage a reader/viewer in an outlandish situation, one introduces a universal piece of realism, like a pet. Consequently, an audience member might "buy" the idea of Weaver putting herself at risk when the cat wanders off.

Despite the intertwining of the genres of the fantastic, there are some basic differences to help separate them. For instance, horror generally keys upon fear of dying. Science fiction is more apt to be about fear of the future. Moreover, science fiction must have at least one foot in reality. In contrast, fantasy is just



Helon Chandler and Bela Lugosi in "Dracula" (1931).

not going to happen. I love "The Wizard of Oz" (1939), but witches can only fly coach like the rest of us. The same thing applies to the original "Star Wars" (1977). It is wonderful mind candy forever mislabeled as science fiction. However, one cannot have World War II style "dogfights" in outer space—too fast, and there is no sound in a vacuum. Moreover, one cannot just hop out of the space vehicle of your choice without a suit.

Returning to *Jekyll and Hyde*, this is the foundation of most modern (post-1960) cinema horror creatures—the "human fiend," starting with Norman Bates of "Psycho" (1960). Fittingly, such a "monster" often is inspired by a real person, as was Bates. Indeed, "Psycho" and British director Michael Powell's "Peeping Tom" (1960) pushed horror towards more-contemporary settings. Prior to this, the genre tended to be anchored in the European past, and often showcased creatures "back from the dead," à la Stoker's *Dracula*. This is not to say there had not been contemporary American horror films prior to 1960. Writer/producer Val Lew-

ton did a number of classic "B" horror pictures at RKO during the early 1940s. Yet, after 1960, horror was more likely to involve that nice, quiet contemporary boy living next door.

Guillermo del Toro's Spanish-Mexican production "Pan's Labyrinth" (2006) is an enthralling merging of both realistic horror and a dark fantasy. Though returning to the European past (Fascist 1944 Spain), the young girl caught in this sometime fairy tale is confronted by both a traditional fantasy monster (the "Pale Man") and a modern Fascist captain. The latter real figure easily proves to be the most frightening fiend.

Wells, meanwhile, essentially represents a one man band of quintessential stories that mix horror and science fiction: *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897), and *The War of the Worlds*.

Before examining these Wells texts, it must be stated that World War II impacted all genres, but especially those of the fantastic. Darwin had long before underlined the beastly nature



Spencer Tracy as "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" (1941).

of man's "survival of the fittest." However, concentration camps and the "Final Solution" chronicled just how horrific mankind could be. While I might be that rare liberal who believes dropping at least the first atomic bomb saved lives, nuclear war also must be added to the list of mankind's inhumanity to man.

Unlike horror's marriage to religion, with Jack the Ripper keying on London prostitutes, or the video store teen "professor" preaching that only promiscuous girls "buy the farm" in the original "Scream" (1996), science is part of the "science fiction" marquee. Of course, Wells can be a wild card. In *The Island of Doctor Morzau*, Wells' mad scientist mocks the Ten Commandments by creating his own list to keep control of his victims. Yet, in *War of the Worlds*, the Martians initially defeat Earth, but suddenly the aliens start dropping from bacteria native to the planet. One could "read" this as God having created a protective "blanket" around Earth.

Of course, for decades another science fiction perspective is to forget religion and Dar-

win and examine two basic plotlines. The first is that life on Earth was jumpstarted at various times by a superior alien life force. The second narrative is to take some current contemporary activity and project it into the future. In both cases, Stanley Kubrick provides the example. The former is best exemplified by Kubrick's movie version of the Arthur C. Clarke novel, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Clarke's 1948 short story, "The Sentinel," is the starting point for the 1968 novel.

The second pivotal modern science fiction narrative is Kubrick's 1971 adaptation of Anthony Burgess' novel, *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), which applies 1960s programs to correct anti-social behavior into the near future. The cost is the loss of free will. A variation of this occurs in the "Minority Report" (2002), in which potential harmful behavior can be anticipated and stopped even before it occurs. As with horror's failures over attempting to play God, these alternate plot lines tend to produce frightening failure, too.

Indeed, beyond these "what if?" dark attrac-

tions of science fiction, Susan Sontag was more direct. In her influential 1965 essay, "The Imagination of Disaster," she suggests the real attraction of the genre might be likened to the not-to-be-denied attraction of staring at the cosmic car wreck: "... the aesthetics of destruction—the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc." To borrow a line from "A Single Man" (2009, which is set during the Cuban Missile Crisis), "Sometimes awful things have their own kind of beauty."

Yet, recent science fiction sometimes has become problem film-like in addressing contemporary issues. These would include: backsliding towards Nazi concentration camps and South African Apartheid in "District 9" (2009, shot in and co-produced by South African filmmakers); mismanagement of the planet in Christopher Nolan's epic "Interstellar" (2014), and Del Toro's galaxy sized look at romance and diversity in the science fiction fantasy "The Shape of Water" (2017).

As "The Shape of Water" suggests, fantasy largely has left "Oz" and "Wonderland" to attack many of the above issues without the restrictions of reality. Put another way, we have entered Marvel Comic movie land. While special effects frequently get in the way of these stories, there are notable poignant exceptions, such as the groundbreaking "Black Panther" (2018). This was the first Marvel film with both a predominantly black cast and black director (Ryan Coogler). It also is on its way towards becoming a fantasy franchise. The "Star Wars" juggernaut need not worry, but the general fantasy playing field is becoming overcrowded.

The lines are increasingly blurring between the genres of the fantastic, especially with regard to science fiction and fantasy. At one time, a basic guideline helped decide. It was a fantasy if a choice of worlds was provided at the end, be it Oz vs. Kansas in "The Wizard of Oz," or Earth versus some distant planet in "Cocoon" (1985).

However, mankind's scientific and technological expertise is moving at such a pace that yesterday's fantasy is today's reality. More disturbing, however, is that science fiction exists, in part, to help us avoid "future shock." Thus, if man's technological facility is moving at morph speed past our moral and emotional development, is there going to be a time to come? Indeed, last century was the first time in which anti-utopian literature was in the forefront, such as C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938). In fact, Wells' *Time Machine* anticipated the movement. Consequently, when Wells' less-than-optimistic time traveler goes back to attempt to change the darkest of futures, it behooves us to embrace the closing words of the novel's narrator: "If that is so [the end of mankind], it remains for us to live as though it were not so..." \*

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