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Investigating Classic Horror Cinema via Data Mining, or the “Frankenstein Complex”:

Video Essay Transcript

I present to you, “Investigating Classic Horror Cinema via Data Mining, or the ‘Frankenstein Complex,’” a digital humanities project involving an intriguing investigation on classic horror cinema, monsters, and film spectatorship!

You may be wondering, “Why would anyone investigate classic horror cinema and monsters?” Well, when Universal Pictures revealed that the *Universal Classic Monsters: Complete 30-Film Collection* would be released on Blu-Ray, Tianyu Jiang had a *bloodcurdling* epiphany. These classic monsters from almost one hundred years ago are still so notable in the late 2010s and early 2020s, and she started to question *why.* She believes that these classic monstrous figures are notable within pop culture today, surpassing beyond their origins and introductory films. But, why were these classic horror films so notable in the 30s and 40s? And, why is classic horror cinema so significant, and how was this branch of cinema impacted by history?

Let’s talk about the “Frankenstein Complex” and digital humanities. Jiang references Isaac Asimov’s term, the “Frankenstein Complex,” defined as the human fear of “mechanical men,” or enhanced technology made at the hands of humans. There is a sense of a dichotomy between digitalization and the humanities, but Jiang’s investigation aims to create a bridge between the two disciplines, demonstrating the relationship they can have within the digital humanities.

Jiang focuses on using digital archives and cinema studies and film history research to answer various questions. Through this project, Jiang aims to investigate film spectatorship, hoping to expand the existing model of queer spectatorship while investigating film theorists’ works regarding the relationship between monsters and the marginalized. Now, let’s explore.

But, what is the theorized relationship between classic horror cinema and queer spectatorship?Upon discussing early gay literature, James Jenkins of *Valancourt Books* states that LGBT characters and themes within horror fiction can be traced back to the late 1700s (Healey). According to Jenkins, “the traditional explanation for the gay/horror connection is that it was impossible for [LGBT authors] to write openly about gay themes back then, so they expressed them in more acceptable forms, using the medium of a transgressive genre like horror fiction” (Healey).

How does this impact classic horror cinema from the 1930s/1940s though? Well, in 1943, the “Hays Code” was implemented, which included a strict set of rules regarding what was appropriate for filmmakers to show on screen. Despite not being allowed onscreen, LGBT characters and themes were ever present in classic horror cinema through implicit themes and subtext. Despite this visibility, it helped to popularize harmful stereotypes involving sexual perversion and queerness, that impacted the way LGBT people were viewed, and ultimately, these stereotypes still impact LGBT representation in media today.

How is Jiang going to investigate this though? Let’s go into the Media History Digital Library and what that’s all about. Founded in 2009, the MHDL allows historians to find materials related to their research through the digitization of classic film and public access to media-related journals, trade papers, and fan magazines on the site (Jiang 17).

Throughout this process, they launched a search engine called “Lantern” allowing for “the search and visualization of nearly two million pages of digitalized books and magazines from the histories of film, broadcasting, and recorded sound” (“Media History Digital Library”).

Later, they added “Project Arclight,” which allows users to create graphs based on their Lantern searches in order to analyze trends in media history, which ultimately will provide Jiang with a digital means to investigate the relationship between classic horror cinema and historical events involving cinema (“Media History Digital Library”).

In order to perform a meta-inquiry, Jiang aims to utilize “[an] analytical and interpretive method named Scaled Entity Search (SES)” to mobilize the MHDL’s collection (Jiang 21). Sounds complex, huh? Let’s try to understand this *scary* method!

Data discovery methods should help with modeling a topic or visualizing a network, and a keyword search in a search engine could be necessary, but how does one interpret and pick from the results, especially if it is a large amount of data? Here is where Scaled Entity Search (SES) *lurks* in! SES is described as an “interpretive framework,” working to be a “humanistic method” of big data analysis (Jiang 22). This may sound contradictory, but essentially, SES intends to use someone’s interpretations to find related data, which is useful for one doing research or investigating a question, and it makes sense.

By using SES and distant reading, Jiang initially attempts to depict a horror movie-going scene during the 1930s or 1940s (Jiang 39). Jiang describes the process of determining her searches for Lantern: “I asked myself ‘why do *these people* like *this horror* in *this place* at *this particular time*?’ and accordingly designed the search entities draft into four categories: *these people*, *this horror*, *this place*, and *this particular* time” (Jiang 41).In addition, she also decides on the keyword “monster” instead of “horror,” and the word “queer” instead of “gay,” to improve the precision and readability of the visual patterns supplied by Arclight.

Jiang’s first search utilizes MHDL’s entire collection of digitalized journals, and she later decides to narrow down the results during the second search by filtering for journals only from the *Motion Picture Herald* (Jiang 46-7). In her second search, she states that there seems to be more correlation between the nodes involving “monster,” “queer,” and “production code,” once the data was narrowed down (Jiang 47). However, in order to attain more accuracy, she states that the patterns should be further “cross-examined by filtering the journals, adding complementary entities, and a closer survey of particular nodes that might lead to useful primary materials if a further explanation of the observed pattern is in question” (Jiang 49).

What’s the future of the “Frankenstein Complex” and digital humanities? Jiang outwardly acknowledges the intrigue behind the digital humanities, stating that there is a “puzzling yet strong complexity binding the humanities and digitalization” (Jiang 60). Via MHDL by utilizing Scaled Entity Search (SES) and distant reading, she retrieved some information relating monster cinema and queer spectatorship to each other, demonstrating the significance of Project Arclight and MHDL, as long as the search entities are well designed. Upon the question of whether or not digital methods can be utilized in the future to learn more about classic horror cinema, and just cinema in general, Jiang states that she “believe[s] that the meta-inquiry has provided a positive answer” (Jiang 61). Ultimately, discourse on humanities subjects can be further explored through usage of digital humanities, leading to a future for the “Frankenstein Complex” and *shocking* revelations.