

Creature from the Black Lagoon (US 1954)

This famous monster movie was created and released at a precise moment in Hollywood history that meant that it was enjoyed in cinemas and later became a beloved cult film for many TV viewers in the US and around the world. In 1953 the Hollywood studios were attempting to hold on to a cinema audience threatened by the growing attractions of TV. Two of their technological weapons were new 'widescreen' projection ideas and the first attempts at 3D cinema. Creature from the Black Lagoon was originally released as a 3D film in 1954 but soon became a 'flat' widescreen film as the attraction of 3D waned. Ironically it then became a TV favourite during the 1960s.

The 'creature' soon gained the alternative name of 'Gill-man', partly for licensing reasons. Gill-man became recognised as the final classic monster produced by Universal. One of the oldest studios, Universal struggled in the 1930s and 1940s because it didn't own a cinema chain and was reliant on persuading the major studios to screen its films. It survived partly because of its success in creating horror characters, a process referred to today as 'franchising'. Dracula, Frankenstein, The Mummy and The Wolf Man were associated with particular actors such as Bela Lugosi, Lon Chaney Jr and Boris Karloff. The success of each film led to numerous sequels, 'spin-offs' and even attempts to place two of the 'monsters' together in the same film. In the 1950s and 1960s these films were sold in packages to TV and later they were remade with modern special effects in the 2000s. As a 1950s feature Creature from the Black Lagoon stood out for its superior production values and effects, seamlessly mixing studio work in Universal's Hollywood tank and location work in Florida to create the remote Amazonian lagoon where American scientists discover the creature.

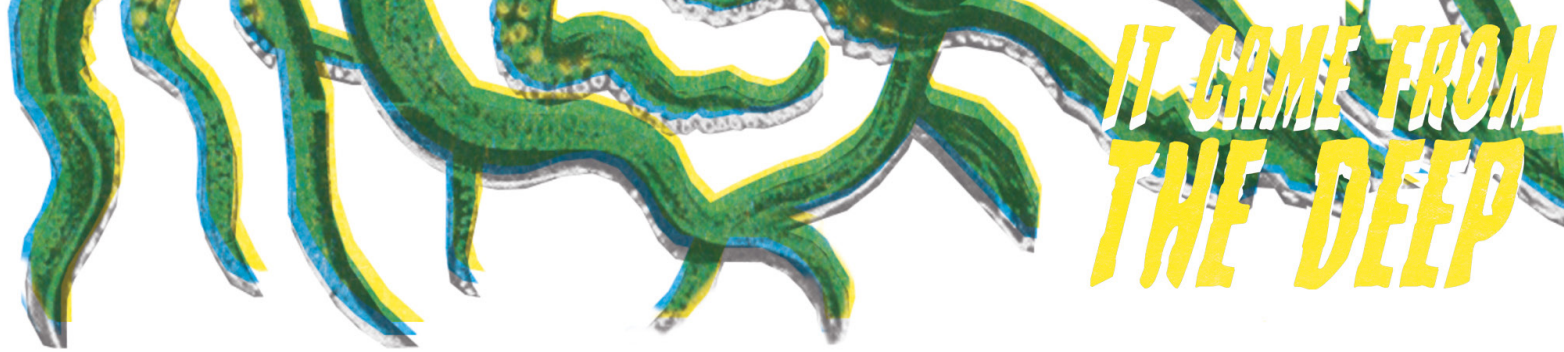
The idea for the story dates back to a 1940s dinner party at which the great Mexican cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa recalled a folk tale about humanoid aquatic creatures in the Amazon for the guests who included the actress Delores del Rio, then in a relationship with Orson Welles. Producer William Alland was at the dinner and wrote notes which ten years later became the basis for a screenplay in part also inspired by recollections of Beauty and the Beast. Another clear link is to the main story line of King Kong (1933) in which the giant primate is attracted to Fay Wray. The Gill-man is equally enamoured of Julie Adams as Kay Lawrence, one of the ichthyologists on the steamer 'Rita' who find the creature in the Black Lagoon. In truth, Ms Adams does little more than scream loudly whenever the creature appears and parade around the boat in shorts and a white swimsuit. But there is no denying the thrill many teenage boys got from watching her swimming in the tank with the Gill-man matching her a few feet below. These underwater shots have also been linked to similar images from Steven Spielberg's Jaws (US 1975). Another of those watching was a young Guillermo del Toro who would see his childhood memories lead to the conclusion he wanted in The Shape of Water (US 2017) in which he could make the romance blossom.

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Creature from the Black Lagoon does have some familiar themes, including the tension between the scientists, with one concerned more with the potential income the group might earn and the others with the scientific discovery alone. This is a 1950s Hollywood film and the ones who suffer most on the expedition are the local indigenous people working for the scientist who first finds a fossilised hand of a Gill-man. The idea of the story also fits into the cycle of 1950s films in which Hollywood went 'on safari' or on other adventures taking crews on location in Africa, Asia or Latin America. As at least one reviewer remarked, the Rita could well be the African Queen (US-UK 1952) nosing up the Amazon. The underwater sequences were often an attraction in the 1950s with interest fuelled by TV series featuring Jacques Cousteau or Hans and Lotte Has (who had two BBC series in the 1950s). Finally, though the success of the film rests with the monster design or rather the costume worn by the two actors, one on land and the other underwater, requiring a professional diver who could hold his breath for relatively long takes. The appearance of the monster is distinctive and clearly thought through unlike many of the aliens and monsters in 1950s drive-in movies. Interestingly, this appears to be another #MeToo moment because the role of the Disney animator Millicent Patrick as the designer was downplayed until 2003 with sole credit being given to the make-up artist Bud Westmore.

Creature from the Black Lagoon was followed by two sequels, Revenge of the Creature (1955) and The Creature Walks Among Us (1956). There have been several attempts by Universal to re-make the film and the latest is dated as being at the script stage in 2017. The film has also been referenced or spoofed in literally dozens of films and TV programmes since 1954. The film's director was Jack Arnold who made several science fiction films in the 1950s, the best-known being The Incredible Shrinking Man (US 1957), adapted by Richard Matheson from his own novel.

Roy Stafford 9/11/22

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