3D AND POP CULTURE FANDOM:
AN INTERVIEW WITH CONRAD VERNON AND ROB LETTERMAN,
DIRECTORS OF MONSTERS VS. ALIENS

ROWENA ROBERTSON
Did you genuinely think that using 3D on this movie was the best way to tell this story? Was it about more than the fact that this movie was just the next one to go into production when the technology became available?

CV: Absolutely, yeah. That’s the way we’re looking at it. 3D was a great addition [and helped] with how we wanted to tell this story.

RL: When we first started we were lucky; because it’s a monsters versus aliens theme it was really, really appropriate to use 3D because of the scales that we’re dealing with – we’re rendering fifty foot-tall robots and monsters and a 49’11” tall female hero, plus regular people. We’re dealing with these vast scales and 3D made it so much easier to do it.

CV: It was great to look from Ginormica’s point of view (down) and get that depth from 49’11” inches up.

RL: Really early on, when the movie wasn’t green lit and we were just conceiving it and we weren’t conceiving it for 3D at the time, it was already going to be this wildly complicated visual effects movie without the 3D. So then the 3D came in and made it harder, but better.

How much did you have to change your way of working, and the plotline?

RL: It was three times more complicated [laughs].

CV: It was more like we were putting an extra thing on the list of things we had to do. We didn’t have to go in there and do the math and everything; we had people who were figuring that out for us, but for instance when you go into animation dailies in the morning to look at the animation, you’ll be talking about how the characters walk and talk and act and everything, then on top of that, say, you also need to move the 3D around, because the animators can actually put on the glasses and check the 3D before they bring it in.

RL: You can’t cheat – that was the first lesson we learned. Filmmaking is all cheats – it’s just a big magic trick and you’re cheating the entire time. [For example, with something like] map paintings, things are manipulated and skewed because all that matters is that one perception on the screen. At first dailies we had characters that weren’t even looking at each other, so everything had to get adjusted. And we couldn’t put map paintings in the background; they had to become 3D. The world has to exist inside the computer otherwise it doesn’t work, so it was things like that.

CV: So you know you see those backdrops ... suddenly you were seeing the edges of the backdrops.

RL: And atmosphere – we wanted the atmosphere. The fog had to be real ‘fogometric’ fog simulation so that the characters could move through that in 3D.

The technology existed in the past but in 2D you wouldn’t use it because you could cheat. This was very complicated rendering to make it work in 3D, because the eye can see the difference.

CV: [In the past] you could probably just put one thin layer of fog in front of everything and make it look like fog. In 3D it looks like someone just put a glass wall full of fog in front of them and then they were standing behind it. So we weren’t able to do that anymore.
Has 3D changed the way you shot the film, in terms of not being able to do quick cuts, or did you have to think about where you were putting people in the frame?

CV: Not necessarily the way we composed the frame or anything like that, but really this is where the tools that they have developed for us came in handy. We didn’t want to have to slow everything down in an action scene; we wanted to be able to still keep those quick cuts and keep the energy up. So they came up with this blending tool where you can go from one shot to the next, and what they do is instead of taking the depth like this and slamming it into this really fast, they actually blend it. So we didn’t really have to slow down the cuts that much because we’d just blend in and out and your eye would be comfortable focusing with it.

RL: we shot it differently. The difference is [that in the past] you’re ‘walking’ round a set and you’re looking for shots and you’re looking through a viewfinder and everything’s kind of flat. In our version our viewfinder wasn’t flat; we were literally walking round a set and saying, ‘oh wow, we could shoot it like this and this cup is a foreground element.’ So it directly influenced how we shot the film because it’s a different medium and we were looking for different ways to share that storytelling. It would have been a different looking-film if we’d only been doing it in 2D.

CV: And you also find places where normally you’d have two characters standing there, like for instance we have a guy on a jet pack exploding out in front of Ginormica, and instead of just keeping it like that, we thought it would be great if he came way out in the audience and she went way back in and now she really looks a lot bigger. So now you can perceive depth and space.

RL: The technology is just so much better; it’s incredible the stuff we had access to. The camera we had access to is amazing. And we can go back in and keep shaping a shot. The animation of that War Room sequence, of the guy walking down the stairs ... it gets blocked out in animation and we’ll go to the camera and watch that happen, like being on set, and move the camera around and go ‘oh, it’d be interesting to go down with the guy over his shoulder’. We just couldn’t do anything like that before. It’s really incredible.

So you created things in the same way you would have before?

RL: It might have been *House of Wax* [André De Toth, 1953].

CV: I think it was *Creature from the Black Lagoon* [Jack Arnold, 1954], and they had it on TV and you went to 7-Eleven and you bought a Slurpee and the glasses were stuck to the side of the cup, and you went home and you put them on. The build-up was so great – you were thinking the creature from the Black Lagoon was just going to pop out; I imagined him in my living room walking around and I looked at it and I was sorely disappointed.

Why do you think it is still important to create cinema experiences in the twenty-first century?

RL: This is a personal thing, but it’s so much better to watch a movie in a movie theatre with hundreds of people; it’s just a better experience. Laughing with a group of people … that communal experience is really fantastic. And in a way it’s a shame that the technology in the home is advancing so fast, with high definition screens and Blu-ray players and Dolby surround sound … there’s not as much of a drive to go to the theatre, so people aren’t experiencing the movies the same way. This is what’s great about the 3D thing – it’s an opportunity to bring people back into the theatre. Because these movies are meant to be watched in the cinema.

CV: It’s huge, and there are always times when total strangers will laugh at something on the screen and then look at each other, and that’s the experience.

RL: I think movies arefunnier, scarier, sadder in a movie theatre with a group of people than by yourself.

You have said that *Monsters vs. Aliens* was influenced by the monster films of the 1950s. Are there any other cinematic or print-based influences?

RL: Oh yeah, there’s a ton. All Spielberg movies, all Kubrick movies, all Cameron movies …

CV: 1970s car chase films, *Bullitt* …

**NAME: CONRAD VERNON**

**POWER: THE DIRECTOR**

**ORIGIN: DREAMWORKS PICTURE**

**CAPTURED: LONG AGO**

**DESTRUCTIVE POTENTIAL: TO PRODUCE AN AWESOME 3D ANIMATION**

**ABOVE: CO-DIRECTOR CONRAD VERNON**
RL: … which is the Steve McQueen thing; the whole car thing in San Francisco.

CV: It’s like we’ve got these libraries in our heads of all these favourite moments and everything and we go ‘here’s what we can we can do here’, ‘this moment is like this moment in Star Wars’ and ‘we need to recreate this moment in Dr Strangelove’ … so, you know, it’s unique, and our own thing, but we have a lot of influences that we draw from.

Can you tell me a bit about the character design for Monsters vs. Aliens?

RL: Well, the character design Conrad can talk about … it’s all caricature.

CV: The concept of the character design and the look of the characters … we were doing this kind of post-war 1950s throwback to B-movies, and so we were going to satirise that. So I thought, ‘What was the satirisation of the day?’ and it was MAD magazine. We were both huge fans of MAD magazine … we all knew the artists by name. There’s Al Jaffee, there’s Jack Davis, there’s Don Martin, there’s Mort Drucker. And so Jack Davis had done MAD magazine but had also done this great comic strip for Playboy called Little Annie Fanny and we were just looking at the way he caricatured people, and he’d done some movie posters in the 1960s where the people looked pretty realistic, but they had bigger hands and bigger feet and longer skinnier legs, and the proportions were

‘This is what’s great about the 3D thing – it’s an opportunity to bring people back into the theatre. Because these movies are meant to be watched in the cinema.’ – Rob Letterman
just really pleasing to look at, without looking grotesque. So we took that style guide and said ‘let’s start here – not only is it good to do humans this way, but it also speaks to the throwback to the 1950s.’ Because MAD magazine was big in the 1950s. So we kind of looked at that design sense and said ‘let’s do the humans like this.’

RL: And it’s really important with computer-generated movies to do humans caricatured and not human-looking. It’s really creepy. The closer you get to real life the farther away you actually are. Because you know what real life looks like, and all the imperfections really stand out. So that caricature thing is really important; just exaggerate it, you know. Stretch it and pull it and do all those things. And that’s the heart of animation in the first place.

CV: It’s like – you can tell when a live action person is acting badly on screen because of just the way they talk sometimes. There are very subtle things that the human brain can pick up about real people. And when you try to imitate that in 3D it’s like a bullhorn – it looks like someone is shopping a dead corpse around. So we wanted to stretch the heads and make the hands big because no-one knows what a character like Monger or the President would look like in real life, therefore you’re willing to accept more caricatured movements and blinks and stuff like that.

How did you choose the voice actors?

RL: Besides always wanting to work with those guys … Reese [Witherspoon] we met when Jeffrey [Katzenberg, CEO of DreamWorks Animation] introduced us. We were just in the early stages of developing the story, and we had the basic concept that this movie would be told through the point of view of the female hero, which no one really does anymore in animated movies, and that was really interesting. So he brought Reese by just to check the place out and show her what was in development and see if she responded to anything, and she walked in and we gave her the big pitch and we basically said, ‘Here’s Ginormica, and she’s gonna go from being this normal, small-town girl to being the most powerful woman in the world, saving the earth from an alien invasion and she’s kind of the lead in this monster ensemble.’ and she said, ‘that’s so great, I’m so sick of the girls always being the sage advisors or sidekicks.’ And it just sparked. And it’s also funny that it’s Reese Witherspoon playing the giant woman.

And everyone else … Seth Rogen’s just the funniest guy ever, and it was just choosing those guys down. Stephen Colbert … it was just like ‘who’d be the perfect guy to play the president?’ We flew out to meet him and he was the nicest guy in the world. He told us the story of the whole George Bush roast thing he did, which we’d loved … we thought ‘you’re our guy’ because of that.

There’s a real luxury doing these movies where you really can get whoever you want; it’s kind of awesome.

Is Monsters vs. Aliens just for fun or are there important messages for young viewers?

RL: There’s a handful that all kind of relate to … well, for the Susan character it’s that you don’t need anyone else to be amazing; you can be amazing in who you are. And that ties into the monsters theme, in that people treat them like monsters because they assume, based on how they look, that they are, but when you actually look at these guys they’re anything but that. There’s a line in there that says something like ‘how many times do you have to save the world before people stop treating you like monsters?’ At the heart of it they’re really looking for acceptance.

There’s a lot of stuff that I always love in movies; the whole underdog thing. The guys that you put down, that you put in prison, are the guys that, despite all the hardships they were put through, still step up to the plate and do the right thing and save everybody. Those are really endearing things.

CV: The same passion that put them in prison in the first place is the same passion they draw on to save the world, so to speak. And it’s that difference that helped them save the world. You shouldn’t be ashamed of the differences between you and other people.
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