

A window into the standards and mindset of a genre's past – that's what the Columbia Museum of Art presents in their *It's Alive!* exhibition. Antique print film posters of the horror and science fiction genres owned by Metallica's lead guitarist Kirk Hammett were put on display, spanning over half a century of advertisement from *Son of Frankenstein* to *Star Wars*.

This curated gallery presents its subjects' shared uniqueness but also commonalities, which vary according to their time period and origin but all ably convey that film is a medium of art which despite its commercialism and even vapidness at times, reflects the zeitgeist of its time period

Posters are not organized chronologically, but grouped loosely based on subjects or movements, with a variety of other artifacts including wax figures and original studio props peppered in between to draw the eye and break up the potentially monotonous presentation. Plaques of text supplement some of these and provide their readers with pertinent information on the context or the meaning behind some of these works.

Walking through the exhibit's halls, I found myself surprised by how much insight there was to gain from the posters, which I had before mostly just shrugged off as shallow advertisement.

Any good horror movie should be able to capitalize on the predominant fears of the audience it is produced for.

Many of the early posters shown, for instance, are from the era of the Great Depression. A time when poverty affected millions and destitution was widespread, but many trudged on nonetheless in the face of difficulty.

It's extremely commonplace, I'm painfully aware, for contemporary interpretations of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to cast the monster as the villain and not the titular doctor who created him, instead of the tragic victim of cruelty turned to vindictiveness that Shelley intended the former to be. These posters do much the same in their depiction of the monster as a hideous figure with a grimacing face, but there is an element of empathy present in the way he is drawn with a beam of light cast on him or is shown with a slight pang of sadness on his expression.

It acts as a mirror of the psyche of the time, of souls tortured by poverty and powers beyond their control like Frankenstein's monster yet optimistic, adamant in their pursuit of a better future or even just to survive as the film's victim protagonists are. There is an emulation of one's own personal adult fears, spiritual and personal, that one is meant to see in the poster, not just the childish physical fear of a grotesque vampire or mummy come to inflict terror. And that draws them to it like moths to a lamp, seeing a place for spiritual release and introspection.

Nothing plays better into this, in my opinion, than the exploitation of sexuality by many, MANY, of these posters. Countless depict scantily clad and beautiful women being seized by abhorrent monsters or aliens, oftentimes with the brave male protagonists close by looking on in horror or determination to rescue the damsel. It's an almost Freudian appeal to man's latent sexual desire for possession or control over the opposite sex.

I've seen many of these types of posters before, and I guarantee you have as well if you've ever taken interest in a movie of the two genres on display that was made before 1970, but the collection of them together made me consider their implications in a way I never had before. That, in my opinion, is the great allure of this exhibit, and the greatest thing to take away from it.

There are countless more conclusions to draw from the prints on display: Color palettes, the use of contrasts in space, etc. There aren't many entries in this collection that aren't in some way visually pleasing. Just the right amount of indication for the audience as to the subtext of these pieces is provided so as to not be overwhelming but also to be helpful.

I will say though that after walking through the gallery for a while some of the content can start to feel extraneous as themes start repeating themselves. As mentioned, one of the exhibit's strengths is its repetition of pieces with traits held in common, but it's one that it overplays a bit.

The price of admission, \$10 for adults and \$5 for youths (who honestly probably shouldn't see it because of some of the more suggestive material), was another drawback I experienced. Anyone going should plan to take full advantage of the whole experience offered by the museum and the exhibit. If musings on the history of cinema's appeal to mass audiences through artistic advertisement doesn't appeal to you, then I wouldn't recommend *It's Alive!* for the price it's billed at.

Excluding those gripes, *It's Alive!* presents a solid and well-rounded collection that inspires insight in its viewer. It opened me up to new considerations about the thematic possibilities of something as simple as film posters, and if you give it the appropriate interest, it will for you too.