Genre Bending and Genre Blending in Quatermass and the Pit

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One of the explanations offered by Karl Stiles in his quest to accurately define the Scientific Method is, “Scientific Method may be defined as the ability to think straight and the habit of seeking proof at its source” (Stiles). This simplification of the process by which we investigate phenomena, acquire new knowledge, and correct previous knowledge is particularly apt when applied to Roy Ward Baker’s Quatermass and the Pit (1967) as it serves as the single and most important detail to consider when attempting to determine the film’s genre (Whether or not genre determination is essential to the academic study of or the general enjoyment of cinema is beyond the scope of this analysis). To simplify myself, without the drive for scientific inquiry through the character of Professor Bernard Quatermass (Andrew Keir), Quatermass and the Pit might be more accurately categorized as a horror film.

Much of the narrative of Quatermass and the Pit occurs in the London underground, a dilapidated tube station at Hobb’s End, where reconstruction work uncovers strange skeletal remains in the thick clay. It is explained that Hobb is an antiquated reference to the devil, immediately forcing associations with and allusions to the horrific realm of the demonic. Visual cues of recognizable, earthly landscapes, city streets, housing structures, and subways as well as identifiable human figures in military uniforms and authoritative suits firmly ground the film in a confirmable reality. The look and feel of these known visual surfaces, what Vivian Sobchack calls “the visual function” of the film, is decidedly horror as it involves horror based iconography of skulls, the devil, dark, viscous, and confined spaces, and reports of ghostly and demonic apparitions terrorizing the now
abandoned apartments as evident by monstrous claw markings climbing the decaying interior walls (Sobchack 87). The imagery is familiar to even the newest of horror fans.

The military mindset and response to the discovery of the alien craft establishes a narrative that is generically horror. Colonel Breen’s (Julian Glover) response is reactionary and immediate. He maintains a brazen overconfidence and establishes an atmosphere of physical tension. Cowardice is ridiculed. Reason is ignored. Safety is underestimated. A level of suspense is generated through Colonel Breen’s refusal of all scientific rationale coupled with his misidentification of the potential threat of this discovery leads to attacks on the individual. The machinist running the drill returns to the underground site to retrieve his tools and is overcome by a sort of telekinetic torture. In this sense, the military’s lack of observation and analysis, steps essential to the Scientific Method, cause a sort of alien possession of the human mind and body, a plotline straight out of Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) and repeated later in The Thing (1982).

Kyle Anderson, staff writer for Nerdist, a website devoted to a variety of science fiction media, suggests, “Good science fiction is about ideas and the action or terror comes from them, not the other way around” (Anderson). Colonel Breen definitely establishes an actions first precedence in the narrative structure, but the character of Professor Quatermass interjects an ideas first opposition. Professor Quatermass’ response is steeped in scientific observation, experimentation, analysis, and explanation. Through his ideas, the atmospheric tension emanates from curiosity rather than fear and suspense. He introduces the iconic laboratory equipment, and otherworldliness of the alien craft. He, more accurately suggests, the threat represented by this alien force is in fact a threat to all
humanity, effectively grounding the narrative in scientific methodology and within the science fiction realm.
Works Cited

