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Victor Frankenstein and Hollywood's Mangled *Frankenstein* Narratives

For over a century, cinematographers have struggled to bring the Monster of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to life in the same way Victor does in the novel. Unfortunately for them, the titular character of Shelly's work never reveals exactly what provides the spark of life within his creation. This slight setback never persuaded them from their cause, as Hollywood and filmmakers around the world continue to come up with every conceivable way to transform individual story elements into a cohesive movie monster for audiences to enjoy. With each rendition of the tale of science gone wrong, however, the Monster is given new parts while others are taken away. The latest feature in Hollywood's quest to bring Mary Shelley's story to screen, the 2015 film *Victor Frankenstein*, almost discards the monster entirely, choosing instead to focus the camera lens on one of its unique creations: the assistant Igor. *Victor Frankenstein*, despite being a muddled mish-mash of plot threads that cannot bring the story any sense of vitality, does continue Hollywood's obsession with creating and recreating both the Monster of literary renown and Shelly's novel.

It is hard to imagine now that the Monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was, at one point, a being with no true description and whose true terror lay in his advanced

intellect and resilience to the elements. In fact, even now it is difficult for most to separate the title of the book with the creation that was spawned from it. Carl Freedman relates this dilemma:

I have taught *Frankenstein* more frequently than any other work of prose fiction, and I have encountered many students who were surprised to learn that the whole Frankenstein story is derived from a single literary text—not to mention a novel written in a florid style by a young Englishwoman in the early nineteenth century. They seem to have vaguely assumed that “Frankenstein” referred just to a vast collective or anonymous saga, expressed in films, television programs, comic books, and other such forums. (254)

The truth is, however, that *Frankenstein* has been famous from the start. From its publication in 1818, the anonymous work titled *Frankenstein* was met with praise and criticism. Sir Walter Scott called it “an extraordinary tale...expressed in plain and forcible English” (qtd. in Phy 21). In contrast, William Gifford declared that the work was inappropriate in “conduct, manners, or morality” (qtd. in Phy 21). Nevertheless, the public loved Shelley’s work even without knowing who wrote it.

Where in our modern day we expect to see popular books turned into films, Shelley was overjoyed that her story was being converted into a stage play. Once *Presumption!; or, The Fate of Frankenstein* by Richard Brinsley Peake began touring in 1823, Shelley announced that she, not her husband Percy Shelley or anyone else, was the author of the now famous novel, and she was noted to have enjoyed the play adaptation to some extent (Phy1). I mention *Presumption* because the play made notable alterations to the text that would later be immortalized in the James Whale film that

would be created over a century later. To begin, the play was transformed into a melodrama with numerous love triangles. Elizabeth was rewritten to be engaged with Henry Clerval while Frankenstein was given Agatha DeLacey, both of whom die in the end. Then there was the introduction of the servant Fritz, a less-than-genteel character engineered for comedic effect and ridicule. Finally, the most important change that *Presumption* made was that the Monster was rendered voiceless (Hoehn). This is the start of the trend that keeps the Monster's side of the story from being told, and it changes the narrative of Shelley's novel from one of a rogue scientist who refuses to care for his own creation to one of a mad scientist's experiment that has gone awry.

Presumption began the process of transforming the Monster from an eloquent, rational being into a silent horror, but it was James Whale's 1931 film adaptation of *Frankenstein* that immortalized it within the cultural consciousness. While not the first cinematic take on Shelly's novel—Thomas Edison's film company produced a silent film version in 1910—it was the first Hollywood version. The film took massive amounts of artistic liberty with the plot, characters, and setting of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which makes sense when one considers that the film was based not on the *novel* but a more recent *play* by Peggy Webling called *Frankenstein: An Adventure in the Macabre* (Hefferman 135). By the time the story of Victor Frankenstein and his creation reaches the silver screen, they have both become hastily assembled monsters crafted from different literary sources by a variety of writers and playwrights attempting to shock new life into the story.

James Whale's *Frankenstein* begins with a noticeable error for anyone who has read Shelley's book. The character that would be Victor Frankenstein has been renamed

Henry Frankenstein, trading names with Henry Clerval. The latter character is dubbed “Victor Mortiz.” The film also brings the tropes that have been tacked onto the narrative from past iterations, including the mute monster, the comedic assistant Fritz, and a love triangle between Henry, Victor, and Elizabeth. The plot begins when Elizabeth (Henry’s fiancé), Victor, and Dr. Waldman (a colleague of Henry’s at the university) decide to go to Henry’s laboratory in a rundown windmill. Conveniently, it happens to be the night that Henry’s experiment will come to life, and he uses a wide array of fantastical and flashy machinery to bring the Monster to life. The Monster eventually escapes the lab while Henry and the group are preparing for the wedding. After his creation accidentally kills a young girl and frightens Elizabeth, Henry leads the townspeople on a hunt for the Monster, which is eventually cornered in the windmill and presumably burned alive. The film ends with an injured Henry lying in bed while his father celebrates a future son of the Frankenstein family.

It needs to be noted that Henry Frankenstein bears little resemblance to his literary counterpart (a trend to be continued by most other *Frankenstein* films). Victor Frankenstein was a bookish, quiet, and reserved individual who worked in secret and felt ashamed the moment the Monster was born, moving from calling his creation “beautiful” to describing it as a “demoniacal corpse” (Shelley 35-36). Many feminist critics have pointed out that Victor’s depression is symptomatic of post-partum depression in mothers. Unable to bring himself to care for his “son,” Victor Frankenstein “fail[s] even to give his creation a name, a prerequisite for the creature to be treated as human” (Halpern et al 53). Theodore Ziolkowski notes, “If Victor Frankenstein had not been overcome by his initial disgust, if he had responded to his

creature with love and understanding, it might have become an instrument of good rather than evil” (43). This Frankenstein, sadly, forsook his creation and left him to fend for himself in a world that saw him as a monstrosity.

Henry Frankenstein, on the other hand, is anything but a recluse mother who abandons his creation, as he takes great pride in showcasing his technological genius. He is not overcome with fear and loathing when the Monster begins to move, as he cries out, “Oh, in the name of God! Now I know what it feels like to be God!” (Whale). He actively encourages his impromptu audience to witness the fruits of his labor, and once the Monster is born he decides to return to his normal life and to go through with the wedding. When the wedding is crashed by the monster, Henry Frankenstein himself leads the charge and enters a one-on-one brawl with his Monster. He is unsuccessful and thrown off of a windmill. The film was cut to have a very hasty happy ending applied to it by having Henry’s father make a toast to the son of Frankenstein, referring both to Henry himself and possible son through the now-married Elizabeth.

There could be any number of reasons that Whale and Universal Studios decided to transform Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein into the new Henry Frankenstein. Michael Eberle-Sinatra theorizes one such possibility, stating, “This socially active Victor prevents consequently any reading of his personal motive in his making of the creature and the possible relationship that would ensue” (188). Eberle-Sinatra’s analysis of the film and of the text finds a homosexual undercurrent present throughout the novel that was decidedly rallied against in the film. Victor Frankenstein was highly emotional, a trait often attributed to women, and the majority of his sorrows lie in the death of Henry Clerval—his best friend and a “gentle and lovely being” according to

Victor—and not his departed wife Elizabeth (Shelley 112). Victor’s creation is also attributed to a latent male desire to bypass reproduction with the female body. Without the need of women, Victor and *mankind* would be able to express themselves both in homosocial environments and in homosexual capacities. It is also interesting to note that Victor made his Monster decidedly male and expressed revulsion towards the prospect of a female variant.

This homosexual reading of Victor could also be indicated within the manuscript of *Frankenstein* itself. After Henry Clerval’s death, Victor falls into another depression. While traveling with his father, Victor receives a letter from Elizabeth, in which she expresses this thought:

“You well know, Victor, that our union had been the favourite plan of your parents ever since our infancy. We were told this when young, and taught to look forward to it as an event that would certainly take place. We were affectionate playfellows during childhood, and, I believe, dear and valued friends to one another as we grew older. But as brother and sister often entertain a lively affection towards each other, without desiring a more intimate union, may not such also be our case? Tell me, dearest Victor. Answer me, I conjure you, by our mutual happiness, with simple truth—*Do you not love another?*” (Shelley 135, emphasis mine)

The line— “Do you not love another?”—is important to distinguish, because Mary Shelley changed this line in her drafts. The line originally read as “Do you not love *as you would wish to love a wife* another?” (qtd. in Eberle-Sinatra 189, original emphasis). The original phrasing seems to specify a female lover, but the final product is gender-

neutral and more ambiguous. I cannot say whether or not Mary Shelley was alluding to the possibility that Elizabeth suspected Victor of being gay, but it is true that Victor was obsessed with this one fellow. He is tall, intelligent, strong, and shares a mutual obsession toward Victor. This man, of course, is the Monster.

Victor's possible homosexuality is a startling contrast to that of Henry Frankenstein's almost blatant heterosexuality. Where Victor was typically sequestered away from the public and preferred the company of Henry Clerval and his professors, Henry Frankenstein relished the attention that his fiancé, his friend, and his colleague give his experiment when they first arrive at his laboratory. Though it was out of town and out of sight of the public, Henry routinely sends letters to Elizabeth to let her know of his progress and his health. Even while he is away, the most suspicion that he can draw is from his father, who guesses that "there's another woman" that has kept him from returning home (Whale). Another contrast lies in the relationship between Henry Frankenstein and his Monster. Victor's engagements with his creation have always been intellectual battles of will and wit, something that Victor rarely is able to do with those around him. These encounters typically leave Victor feverish and weak, symptoms that are often associated with lovesickness. Whale's version of the Monster, however, cannot speak beyond primitive grunts, though he is capable of speech in the sequel *Bride of Frankenstein*. The Monster is coded to the audience as an innocent newborn as he reaches out to grab sunlight and throws flowers into the lake. Henry Frankenstein seems perfectly content to run basic experiments like sensitivity to light on his creation, and his disinterest in the emotional well-being of the Monster further separates the two. He

even leaves the creature alone with his colleague while he gets married to his (female) fiancé!

I have so far only discussed Victor and Henry Frankenstein while mentioning, as much as I was able, their relationships to their respective Monsters, but I would like to take a moment to discuss the Monsters themselves. Shelley only describes the original Monster once, before it was given life: “His limbs were in proportion... His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness... [and] straight black lips” (Shelley 35). While this may not sound horrendously horrifying, it is apparently enough to send Victor and every single person with eyes to see into a frenzy fueled by fear. Contrast this to the 1931 rendition of Frankenstein’s Monster, portrayed in the film by Boris Karloff. This monster is given metallic prongs, a large head, green skin, but is still larger than the average man. Like the fear-inducing grimace of Shelley’s novel, Karloff-As-Monster invokes not only terror from all around him but also pity and wonder. He is ugly and unknowing of anything, despite having the brain of a criminal stuffed into his cranium. The criminal brain is the film’s excuse for why Karloff-As-Monster is “doomed to criminality and isolation” (Picart 383). However, this creation bears no ill will towards any member of humanity, unlike Shelley’s does in the novel, and Karloff-As-Monster even plays with a small girl named Maria in one of the quieter moments of the film.

This scene between Karloff-As-Monster is especially important, as it was cut short for the film’s original syndication due to the Production Code censors. Here, Karloff-As-Monster is playfully throwing flowers into the lake alongside Maria, a complete inversion of Shelley’s Monster’s encounter with William. When there are no

more flowers, Karloff-As-Monster throws Maria into the lake, but the cut version only shows him reaching for Maria. Maria then cries out and thrashes in the water, unable to swim. Confused and frightened for Maria's safety, Karloff-As-Monster flees the scene, though whether this was to obtain help or to escape punishment is uncertain. This scene epitomizes the character of Karloff-As-Monster, as he is simply trying to learn about the world as a child would while residing in an abnormally strong adult body. Unlike Shelly's Monster, Karloff-As-Monster's "longing to communicate in words—his desire to be heard—is no more urgent than his longing to be *looked at* with desire, with something other than fear and loathing" (Hefferman 137). The two Monsters could not be more different in their temperament and in their appearance, but they share this one similarity in that they both wish to be loved by humanity.

The reason that I have spent so much time on the 1931 James Whale film is that Paul McGuigan's *Victor Frankenstein* has more in common with it than with anything in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. One would expect this result, as Hollywood, independent filmmakers, and other cinematographers have tried again and again to bring the same commercial and critical success as Whale's now-classic film. Paul O'Flynn, author of "Production and Reproduction: The Case of *Frankenstein*," explains how cinema has twisted Mary Shelley's story for almost a century, stating, "There is no such thing as *Frankenstein*, there are only *Frankensteins*, as the text is ceaselessly rewritten, reproduced, refilmed and redesigned" (O'Flynn 114). There have been recent attempts to produce a more faithful adaptation of *Frankenstein* (Kenneth Branagh's 1994 film comes to mind), but even those films take excessive artistic liberties with Shelley's work in order to make it "feel" like James Whale's film. No better indication for

this can be found in the creation sequences, since, according to Eberle-Sinatra, “Whale’s famous creation scene, with its scientific apparatus or ‘engine’ and lightning bolts, has become the standard interpretation of Shelley’s novel,” despite the fact that Shelley’s text neither describes any fancy scientific apparatuses or mentions the use of lightning in the creation of the Monster (Eberle-Sinatra 192). Each subsequent “Frankenstein” film has attempted to one-up the previous through technical improvements, set design, and special effects, and *Victor Frankenstein* is no different.

It is not hard to see why *Victor Frankenstein* was greenlit. The recent success of the two *Sherlock Holmes* films directed by Guy Ritchie has brought curiosity to older franchises based on English novels, and this can be seen in the setting for *Victor Frankenstein*. Instead of taking place in central Europe near Switzerland during the mid to late 18th century, *Victor Frankenstein* is set in Victorian-era London. There are action sequences reminiscent of Ritchie’s films, and there are slow-motion shots that could easily have been borrowed from *Sherlock Holmes*. “Borrowed” is actually a good term here, since the film is its own monster born from script clichés, references to other popular films, and actors from recent adaptations of British novels. It stars Harry Potter—excuse me, I mean Daniel Radcliffe—as Igor, the assistant of Victor Frankenstein. It does not matter that the character did not exist in the lore of *Frankenstein* until the 1939 Universal film *Son of Frankenstein* (and was known as Ygor then until the 1974 Mel Brooks film *Young Frankenstein*). The scriptwriters thought that there was an assistant named Igor and wrote him as the main character for this film. There is also a swath of actors from BBC series like *Sherlock* and *Downton Abbey*, including Andrew Scott who plays Moriarty on the four episodes of *Sherlock* that the

director McGuigan directed. Ty Burr of the Washington Post points this out and adds, “[P]erhaps that is why Igor seems oddly like this film’s Watson” (Burr). Then there is the lead actress, Jessica Brown Findlay, who is given a “barely written part” and appears to be specifically placed to inject heterosexuality into the film (Jenkins). Neither Findlay or Scott play any real role in the film other than to provide conflict for plot purposes.

James McAvoy’s performance as the titular character, on the other hand, is something to be marveled at. There were a number of ways he could have played this part; stoic, manic, depressive, looney, serious, and ironic would only name a few. McAvoy chose “manic,” and his role as Victor provides much needed levity to the film’s dull script and hackneyed plot. I still giggle when I recall McAvoy shouting, “EMBOLISMS!” as if they were the meaning of life. Radcliffe, however, was somewhat overshadowed by his wild counterpart. After all, the film is called *Victor Frankenstein* and not *Igor: The Assistant of Frankenstein*. One can tell that the actors in the film put little faith in making it a serious attempt at cinema history, so the two lead actors take different routes. Radcliffe plays it safe and does his best to at least look like he is interested while McAvoy bounces from room to room as if the Monster could be brought to life with his own electric personality.

The film even recognizes how silly it is that the audience is being shown *another* “Frankenstein” film. “You know this story,” Igor narrates in the opening seconds of *Victor Frankenstein*, “the crack of lightning, a mad genius, an unholy creation. The world, of course, remembers the monster, not the man.” It then transitions to Igor the hunchback living life as a circus freak that also conveniently doubles as the doctor for the entire operation. This film could not find a better place to start, since the circus is

chock-full of performers acting and recreating stunts to wow an audience that has likely seen the show a dozen times previously. The entire film is a performance of the same type, and *Victor Frankenstein* sets itself up as a tongue-in-cheek jab towards other films with this call-out to the nature of performance. As Igor attempts to narrate his poor life, the trapeze artist he's been fancying plummets to the ground. Igor rushes to her aid alongside a certain well-dressed medical student who just so happens to be looking in the circus for dead animal parts. The two fix up the lady, and Victor Frankenstein's name is slapped onto the screen instead of letting the bloke say his own name.

After Igor is thrown into a cage for the crime of "doing doctor things," Victor Frankenstein swings by to save him and break him out. After an escape scene filled with explosions, a dash of accidental murder, and slow-motion sequences, Victor brings Igor to his massive apartment where he asks him to strip. Apparently, Igor is "not actually a hunchback," according to Victor, but is instead suffering from a massive cyst on his back that hampered his movement. He proves this with an oddly excited voice as he hurriedly pins Igor to the wall, jabs him with a syringe, and draws out the whitish fluid after applying suction to the rubber hose attached to it. This is only the start of the slight homosexual undertones of Victor's character. After giving Igor a back brace he just happened to have lying around, Victor explains that the reason he broke him from the circus was that he needed a helper with his experiments, which are exactly what everyone already knew going into the theater: bringing dead things back to life. At this point, Victor tells the until-now unnamed former hunchback to go by his absent flatmate's name, Igor, if anyone asks.

The film then proceeds to capitalize on the “Frankenstein” films that have come before it, making whimsical references to *Young Frankenstein* and Whale’s *Frankenstein* while quipping about the logistics and difficulty of actually bestowing life to dead matter. While the film’s climax is obviously supposed to be the birth of Frankenstein’s Monster at the end, the film peaks near the middle and proceeds to plummet harder than the trapeze artist in the film’s first scene. In this pseudo-climax, Victor reveals to Igor a chimera crafted from dead animals from the circus and the zoo, one that he intends to bring to life through his invention called the Lazarus Fork. Igor watches his employer perform the experiment, and soon the rotting mass of flesh is breathing and moving. The famous line, “It’s alive,” is said by Igor and then Victor, who breaks into a grin before announcing to Igor, “From this day forward, you are to be my partner.” The word “partner” is said with such strength that it is hard to distinguish whether he means it academically or romantically at first, though if it were the latter the film would have had one more redeeming factor to it.

This brings me to the largest issue that I have with *Victor Frankenstein*: its lack of commitment. It wants to weave this grand narrative of Victor’s beginnings as the famous mad scientist, but it does so in such a stale and confusing manner. First it introduces the film as a send-up or, at least, an homage to the “Frankenstein” genre. Then, it shifts the tone to “recasting a story about gods and monsters into a buddy movie” with a vague homosexual undercurrent that would have made the film a unique addition to the canon had it been prioritized (Dargis). This feel is quickly exchanged to a thrust-in crime narrative involving a religious zealot/inspector who tries to make the

entire experiment about playing God, which is then ditched for a weird narrative about Victor bringing his brother back to life that makes absolutely zero sense at all.

Yes, the entire reason that this Victor Frankenstein is even trying to create the Monster is because he is under this misguided impression that his brother, Henry Frankenstein (an obvious callback to the 1931 film), would come back to life through his creation. This revelation not only undermines the character's focus on science relative to religion—Victor shouts at one point, “There is no Satan. No God. Only humanity. Only me!”—but also wrecks the film by attempting to go through with this hokey notion of resurrection. *Victor Frankenstein* acts at this point like Shelley's Victor who furiously tears apart the second monster in order to keep it from becoming a complete, independent being. From a literal sense, the film breaks its own logic here. However, the notion of this Victor Frankenstein attempting to resurrect the famous Henry Frankenstein from the James Whale film is an amusing thought, since that is something that every “Frankenstein” film created since has tried to do. These filmmakers want to recreate the creation of the Monster, recreate the mad creator, and recreate the success of the first film.

Unfortunately for the filmmakers, the Monster proves to be their undoing. When the Monster is finally born, it is a buff grey dude with metal bits on him and no personality traits other than he hits things hard and has two hearts. This Monster is subsequently stabbed in one heart by Igor and in the other by Victor in a very anti-climactic climax that had little purpose other than to check off the “make the Monster” checkbox on the script's requirements. After almost a century of cinema tradition of remaking the story of *Frankenstein*, one would assume that a film titled *Victor*

Frankenstein would at least try to make the Monster have a central role. It doesn't, and so the film fails on even that simple task.

Victor Frankenstein does nothing of note and comes off as little more than a patchwork monster as bland and disappointing as its own Monster. There was no overall theme here. Shelley's novel possessed numerous themes that would have been fantastic to apply to this film. The filmmakers could have expounded on Victor being "the Modern Prometheus who not only trespasses divine territory, but challenges the divinely ordained, natural procreative role of the female," but it was watered down to Inspector Turpin shouting impotently, "You'll burn in hell for what you've done" (Lehman 52, McGuigan). The film could have been about how "scientific creation is morally neutral, with a pronounced capacity—indeed, even a predisposition—for good, until it is corrupted by human society" (Ziolkowski 42). Instead, Victor is somehow condemned for using science to make a wall of angry meat after being bankrolled by a rich pup who wanted to make "an unkillable army a thousand strong" (McGuigan). The Monster, once again mute, is the equivalent of a cardboard box with a gun taped onto it. The chimpanzee that Victor and Igor bring to life almost an hour before was more interesting and dangerous than it.

There is one line of *Victor Frankenstein* that stands out from the rest of the film because of how hilariously accurate and ironic it comes across. At one point, Inspector Turpin declares to Victor, "You shall be forgotten. That's right. History will bury you, Frankenstein, and no man will remember your name." I assume the filmmakers were trying to insert dramatic irony into their script here, since the audience already knows that the name of Frankenstein will be remembered for eons to come. But, in a weird

way, Turpin was right. James McAvoy will, from now on, not be known as Victor Frankenstein. Moviegoers will conveniently forget he ever played that role. The film's shallow depth will keep it from being mentioned or recommended by anyone. Instead, anyone looking for a *Frankenstein* film will continue to go back to James Whale's 1931 film, its many sequels, or any one of the campy, B-rated productions made since then. In a few decades, no one will remember *Victor Frankenstein* ever existed. By that time, there will probably be another, better *Frankenstein* that uses some part of this film in its design. Maybe it'll actually make use of it.

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