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THE CULTURAL LEGACY OF MARY SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN*

Summary

Shortly after the publication of Mary Shelley's novel, its eponymous character, Victor Frankenstein, and the unnamed creature, often referred to as "Frankenstein", gained iconic status. Initially, the Creature and his Creator became thriving figures of popular culture through the many theatrical versions produced in the 19th century. The advent of film in the 20th century contributed enormously to the circulation of Frankenstein as a cultural icon, in general, and the dissemination of the myth of a mad scientist, in particular. The aim of this paper is to explore the many representative manifestations and the development of one of the enduring icons of modern culture.

Key words: *Frankenstein*, *Frankenstein Unbound*, Gothic fiction, horror films, Mary Shelley, science fiction, stage adaptations.

Many critics have noted that science, its theories and effects, is often given a horrifying, gothic aspect when incorporated in Gothic fiction and film. To take just a few examples, Fred Botting in his seminal book *Gothic Romanced* observes that the introduction of science into Gothic fiction creates ample opportunity for the unleashing of "demonic energies or the broaching of sacred and supernatural mysteries" (Botting 2008, p. 140). Botting emphasizes that when science fiction and Gothic fiction combine, their coupling delivers "monstrosities of unprecedented dimensions" because both genres share a fascination in repeated encounters with science: "In the multiple crossings between the genres, the zones of intersection tend to be dark and disturbing regions, populated by terrors and horrors that knowledge has failed to penetrate or control" (Botting 2008, p. 131).

Taking a broad view of the relationship between literature and science, Dianne F. Sadoff argues that monsters and vampires were introduced in nineteenth-century Gothic novels and tales because they addressed problems associated with distributed maternity and paternity, and the possibility of scientific body engineering and artificial procreation: "These anomalous figures were deployed to imagine solutions to the problems of body replication, technological emergence and reproduction, and transnational flows of bodies, blood, illness, and mortality" (Sadoff 2010, p. xix). She maintains that famous nineteenth-century Gothic novels, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), present disenchanting readings of their scientific-technological imaginings and that *Frankenstein*, published two centuries ago, heralds the coming of biotechnology, because the monster is born from laboratory instrumentation's reanimation of fragmented corpses. In

Shelley's novel, biotechnological anomaly is a metaphor for "scientific creativity gone awry, misprized evolution let loose on earth, perhaps to reproduce or replicate a race to threaten the world's peoples" (Sadoff 2010, p. 105).

Discussing the relationship between the development of science fiction and *Frankenstein*, Brian Aldiss, the famous science fiction author who has also written a critical history of science fiction *Trillion Year Spree*, contends that science fiction began with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* which ushered in "an inescapably new perception of mankind's capabilities" (Aldiss 1973, p. 18). In *Trillion Year Spree* the critic remarks that the very fact of scientific creation is sufficient for Shelley's novel to be declared the inaugural work of science fiction which has diversified the Gothic tale of terror in such a way as "to encompass these fears generated by change and technological advances which are the chief agents of change" (Aldiss 1973, p. 53). As the inaugural work of science fiction which combines social criticism with new scientific ideas, Shelley's novel set the pattern for other writers, such as H. G. Wells, who adopted some of Shelley's methods in his "scientific romances" written in the last decade of the 19th century, such as *The Invisible Man* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. It is worth noting that Aldiss has authored one of the most famous of the many re-writings of Shelley's novel by contemporary writers (*Frankenstein Unbound*, 1973).

In her Introduction to the revised edition of *Frankenstein* (1831) Mary Shelley writes that her Gothic novel came about by chance. Her husband, the famous poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, urged her to obtain literary reputation: "[He] was, from the first, very anxious that I should prove myself worthy of my parentage, and enrol myself on the page of fame" (Shelley 2001, p. 196). She adds, in explanation, that she is the daughter of two persons of "distinguished literary celebrity", that is, the feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft and the philosopher and novelist William Godwin. In 1816 Lord Byron invited the Shelleys to spend a summer idyll with him at his Villa Diodati on the shores of Lake Geneva. The summer of 1816 in Switzerland was unseasonably cold and rainy, so that Byron and his friends were often confined for days to the villa. On one occasion, Byron, William Polidori (Byron's physician and writer), Mary Shelley, and her husband, engaged in a ghost-story contest:

'We will each write a ghost story,' said Lord Byron (...). I busied myself *to think of a story* (...). My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me (...). I saw the pale student of unhalloved arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion. (...) supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the World. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handiwork, horror-stricken. He would hope that the slight spark of life which he had communicated would fade; that this thing, which had received such imperfect animation, would subside into dead matter..." (Shelley 2001, pp. 198-199).

At first, Mary Shelley thought of writing only a short tale, but her husband encouraged her to develop the idea at greater length. *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* was published anonymously two years later to mixed reviews. Shortly after the publication of the novel, its eponymous character Victor Frankenstein and the unnamed Creature, often referred to as “Frankenstein”, took life as powerful icons in drama, science, and popular culture. An important source of inspiration for *Frankenstein* was the “vitalist controversy” which had raged between John Abernethy, the President of the Royal College of Surgeons, and his former student William Lawrence, an anatomist and biologist, appointed as professor at the College in 1815. Lawrence was the Shelleys’ physician and London neighbour. He was an exponent of materialist science and contested Abernethy’s “spiritual vitalism”. In his lectures Lawrence made an attack on Abernethy, ridiculing his argument that something “analogous to electricity” could do duty for the soul. The publication of Lawrence’s *Lectures on Physiology, Zoology and the Natural History of Man* (1819) led to a public outcry with a result that he was suspended by the Royal College of Surgeons. He was also forced to withdraw his book in order to keep his post because his views were considered to be “hostile to natural and revealed religion” (Punter and Byron 2004).

It deserves mentioning in passing that contrary to popular belief, the Romantics were not opposed to scientific discovery and progress. In fact, most writers of the Romantic period, including the Shelleys, were deeply interested in the latest scientific ideas and theories. As Peter J. Kitson rightly insists, it was not so much science as such that the Romantic poets were suspicious of, but a narrow utilitarian and empirical application of science: “It was the Newtonian orthodoxy which they opposed as materialist and reductive. What Newton effectively did was to banish the divine from nature and empty the world of its mystery. It was this demystification of nature that they resented. (...) The Romantics preferred a notion of matter which was active and alive and not passive” (Kitson 2008, pp. 358-359).

It should be added that many scientists in the 18th- and the 19th centuries were engaged in the questions concerning life and death, attempting to settle the issue of whether the soul was separate from the body, whether the soul could be lodged in even a “monstrous body”. Electricity was often brought into those issues with a result that the idea of electricity as a living fire, a reanimating force, became a common theme in the literature of the period (Golinski 1992; Mellor 1988). There is biographical evidence that Mary Shelley and her husband read the works of the Bolognese physiologist Luigi Galvani who had laid foundations of such disciplines as electrolysis and electrogenesis, and from whom the term “galvanism” comes. It is no coincidence that Shelley’s novel took shape during or shortly after a long series of scientific debates and demonstrations, such as Galvani and Aldini’s experiments, which were reported in the popular press. In 1802 Galvani and his nephew Aldini “reanimated” an ox-head, and in the next year they applied electricity and caused movement in the corpse of a recently hanged murderer. In her Introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* Shelley writes that during many conversations with Lord Byron and her husband, various

philosophical doctrines were discussed, and among others the nature of the principle of life. They also talked of the experiments of Dr Erasmus Darwin, a botanist and inventor (not to be confused with his more famous grandson Charles Darwin): "Perhaps a corpse would be reanimated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth" (Shelley 2001, p. 198).

The views of the Shelley circle on the nature and source of life were reflected in *Frankenstein*, which is widely considered to be a critique of Enlightenment scientific aspiration. However, as Peter Kitson cautiously notes, Shelley's novel can be seen as much "an engagement with the substantial body of scientific thought that had arisen from debates within the Enlightenment as a rejection of it" (Kitson 2008, p. 360). As mentioned before, Shelley's novel took its inspiration in large part from the "vitalist" controversy between Abernethy and Lawrence. It is often claimed that the author's goal was to propound Abernethy's quasi-religious proposition that an invisible element "analogous to electricity" was necessary to furnish the spark of life in all animate matter. To some extent, this is true, but one should bear in mind that the novelist framed the "vitalist" debate in the broader context of contemporary science in order to explore the moral and philosophical implications of electrochemical experiments. The use of electricity as technology also serves the purpose of differentiating moral scientists such as Aldini, who sought to "restore" life to the just dead, from the immoral ones. The experiment of Victor Frankenstein, a false "modern Prometheus" who seeks to create life from dead matter, has a disastrous result: instead of creating a superman, he has produced an eight foot tall monster, from whom he runs in revulsion.

There exists biographical evidence that Mary Shelley was familiar with the interventionist views of Humphry Davy, a prominent scientific figure of the period. She read his book *Elements of Chemical Philosophy* while finishing her manuscript in 1816. There are echoes of Davy's ideas in the lecture given by Professor Waldman whom Victor Frankenstein encounters at the University of Ingolstadt. According to Ann Mellor, Professor Waldman bears an important relation to Davy, especially in his "concept of the nature and utility of chemistry", and the idea that "a scientist can and not only should interrogate nature in order understand her operations", but also should "master" nature, that is, "modify and change the beings surrounding him" (Mellor 1988, p. 91).

Mellor and some other critics have argued for Shelley taking a stance for quiet Darwinian gradualism against eighteenth-century interventionist science which created and often displayed various "monstrosities", such as the monstrous human models which consisted of flayed corpses to show the musculature as well as the vascular and lymphatic systems. In his erudite essay Peter Vernon points, in particular, to the work of Honoré Fragonard and Carlo Calenzuoli, both of whom enjoyed an immense popularity at the turn of the eighteenth century. Vernon surmises that the Shelleys could have seen these models at the Fragonard museum during their visits to Paris in 1814 and 1816 (Vernon 1996, p. 228). There is a strik-

ing similarity between the Fragonard exhibits and Shelley's description of the monster in her novel:

I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. (...) His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips (Shelley 2001, p. 40).

Although many critics perceive *Frankenstein* as being a critique of interventionist science, nevertheless the creation of the monster constitutes a tremendous achievement. When Victor Frankenstein bids Captain Walton a final farewell, he shows considerable ambivalence about his own scientific achievement. In the last chapter, Frankenstein urges Walton to seek "happiness in tranquility" and also to "avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries". After a moment's hesitation, he reflects wryly: "Yet why do I say this ? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed" (Shelley 2001, p. 187). Of course, the protagonist's ambivalent attitude to science complicates interpretation. No attentive reader can fail to notice that the actual science is glossed over expeditiously, so the author can focus on moral and social dilemma instead. There is no mention of scientific theory or innovation except that "the secret of life" is taken from nature. In Shelley's Introduction to the 1831 edition one can find only a brief reference to galvanism, electricity, and "some powerful engine", which is probably some great battery invented by Alessandro Volta.

The ambivalent attitude to science is, in part, the consequence of the author's decision to revise her novel for republication, resulting from the enormous success of the theatrical production of *Frankenstein* in 1823. Her book was first adapted by Richard Brinsley Peake, the staff writer at the English Opera House at the Lyceum Theatre in London, as *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein*. The plot of the novel was reduced to its barest essentials and presented as a cautionary tale warning of the dangers of scientific secularism. The stage version included a number of major revisions which would become a staple in the later adaptations of *Frankenstein*: songs were added and comic relief was provided by the romantic entanglements of the servants, usually presented as fearful and foolish. Such was the success of the first stage adaptation of Shelley's novel that some other writers attempted to capitalize on the rapt attention to her story. Steven E. Forry in his book on dramatizations of *Frankenstein* writes that between 1823 and 1826 at least fifteen dramas had utilized characters and themes from Shelley's novel: "Whether in burlesque or melodrama, things Frankensteinian were all

the rage on the stages in England and France. (...) To date, over ninety dramatization of the novel have been undertaken. And the count is still rising" (Forry 1990, p. 34).

Forry remarks that the early Frankenstein productions, in keeping with the theatre of the period, were "melodramatizations" which focused on the supernatural elements of the story and highlighted action over philosophical meditation and any real concern with science. The critic also argues that three early Gothic melodramas, that is, Richard Peake's *Presumption*, Henry Milner's *Frankenstein; or, the Man and the Monster* (1826), and Jean-Toussaint Merle and Béraud Antony's adaptation which opened in Paris as *Le Monstre et le Magicien* [The Monster and the Magician] in 1826, share the responsibility for shaping "the destiny of popular conceptions of the novel". And he goes on to explain that what all these versions share is a battle between Creature and Creator, the former hamstrung by an inability to speak. On the other hand, in the early stage productions each Creature is different: "Marked by some interchangeable characteristics, like a taste for wine music, and women, each Creature (...) earns a different measure of sympathy, reflects a different level of monstrosity, and is shaped by a different degree of abandonment, cruelty, and social rejection" (Forry 1990, p. 4).

Mary Shelley attended a performance of *Presumption* in London soon after the opening on July 29, 1823, in the company of her father William Godwin. Shelley noted her mixed reaction in a letter to her friend, in which she bemoans the alterations to the original story as having been "not well managed". Nevertheless, she is greatly delighted to see that the stage version of her novel has evoked an enthusiastic response from the audience: "I found myself famous! – Frankenstein had prodigious success as a drama (...). I was much amused, and it appeared to excite a breathless eagerness in the audience ..." (quoted in Fisch 2009, p. 91).

Being aware of the great success of Peake's *Presumption* and many other theatrical productions of *Frankenstein*, Shelley chose to revise her novel extensively for the 1831 edition. In order to bring her story in line with the expectations of theatre audiences, the eponymous hero was given a more religious sensibility and a less contentious scientific education. Frankenstein's heretical zeal has been diluted, whereas his schooling received at the University of Ingolstadt was made the main cause of his "crime against nature". It is worthy of notice that the University of Ingolstadt acquired a bad reputation as the place where the Order of the Illuminati was founded (in 1775), and where the French Revolution was commonly believed to have germinated. To avoid any accusations of the protagonist's incestuous love for Elizabeth Lavenza, the character of Elizabeth was changed from a cousin to an orphan who was adopted by the Frankenstein family.

It is perhaps ironical that in 1831, when the revised edition was published, the story of Frankenstein was no longer confined to the pages of a novel. Scholars of the text of *Frankenstein* often emphasize that Shelley's novel has been ceaselessly rewritten, reproduced and reshaped by popular culture. As noted before, thanks to the popularity of Peake's

Presumption and many later stage adaptations, Frankenstein became a thriving figure of popular culture. Shelley's novel inspired by the "vitalist controversy" was turned into a religionist fable on the consequences of trespassing on the domain of God. In the process of adaptation, the Frankenstein name has been made interchangeable between creator and created, while Victor Frankenstein has become a baron. Tracing the evolution of the Creature, Audrey Fisch comments that he spans the gamut from evil murderer to "harmless hobgoblin", whose existence seems to arouse both sympathy and indignation. Thus in the Victorian period, the Creature appears as a diverse and sometimes ludicrous character who thrives as an "articulate, if slapstick and sometimes ludicrous figure" of the burlesque-extravaganza, which was the popular theatrical genre of the period. Those stage adaptations restore the Creature's ability to speak and "daringly suggest that he is both unthreatening and able to be assimilated into Victorian society" (Fisch 2009, p. 131). In contrast to his appearance in Victorian comic drama, in Victorian narratives, the Creature is commonly depicted as a soulless monster who is neither threatening nor fully human. Meanwhile, in the world of Victorian political cartooning, the Creature is utilized as an image for social satire and imminent political dangers. Numerous cartoonists made use of the Creature to conjure up some disturbing images of a violent, dangerous monster embodying the potent threats to the British Empire, such as discontent in Ireland or Russia (Baldick 1987).

In the first decades of the twentieth century Frankenstein and his Creature continue to thrive in comedy, drama and, with the advance of technology, silent and sound film. The first motion picture based on Shelley's novel was produced by Edison Studios in 1910. The central point of the sixteen-minute movie is the "creation scene" in which the monster is brought to life by a chemical reaction. The audience watches the creature coming to life in a large container of boiling fluid through the peephole into the laboratory. To Frankenstein's horror, the creature who emerges from the laboratory is a ghastly, abhorrent monster. *The Edison Kinetogram*, a publicity document, emphasizes the moral rather than horrifying purpose of the film and insists that the Edison Company has carefully tried to eliminate "all the actually repulsive situations and to concentrate its endeavours upon the mystic and psychological problems that are to be found in this weird tale". Should the audience fail to get the message, *The Edison Kinetogram* readily explains that the creation of the monster was only possible because "Frankenstein had allowed his normal mind to be overcome by evil and unnatural thoughts" (quoted in Fisch 2009, p. 152).

The novel was adapted to feature-length for the first time in 1915. For some unknown reason it was retitled *Life Without Soul*, but the film was quite faithful to its source text. In the opening sequence a physician discovers a life-giving fluid and then falls asleep while reading a copy of Shelley's novel. The story then unfolds as a dream in which the doctor, his fiancée and friends have been transformed into the corresponding characters from the novel. The soulless creature, called the Brute Man, goes on a murder spree after Frankenstein has refused to give him a mate. The creature is finally killed by his creator who, in his dream,

dies from exhaustion. In the final scene, the doctor awakens and destroys his life-giving fluid. The contemporary reviewer of the film comments favourably on the representation of the Creature, stressing that his embodiment of the man without soul “adequately” conveys the author’s intent: “He is awe-inspiring, but never grotesque, and indicates the gradual unfolding of the creature’s senses and understanding (...) he actually awakens sympathy for the monster’s condition – cut off, as he is, from all human companionship” (quoted in Fisch 2009, p. 154).

With the advent of sound, Shelley’s novel generated an entire genre of “Frankenstein” films. It is generally claimed that there are two major film traditions for Frankenstein: first, the Universal Studios series (1931-1945), and second, the Hammer Films series (1957-1974). Among the most remarkable films produced by the Universal Studios were *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), both directed by James Whale. It is widely held that the artistic and commercial success of Whale’s screen adaptations spawned a new genre, that is, the horror film and that the influence of Whale’s films is evident in subsequent adaptations of Shelley’s novel. The renowned filmmaker John Landis voices an opinion that the collaboration of director James Whale and actor Boris Karloff created “one of the key icons of the twentieth century” and that the image of Karloff’s monster is “deeply ingrained in the popular imagination” (Landis 2011, p. 84). Bruce Hallenbeck, in turn, observes that the film director introduced the spectacular laboratory constructed for the focal “creation” sequence, thus updating the novel’s period to modern times. The laboratory set, replete with electrical coils, bubbling beakers, operating tables and sparking floor effects, would set the standard for all “mad labs” to come. More importantly, the monster who cites Milton’s *Paradise Lost* as a fundamental of his own education, represents his creator’s moral conscience, whereas his dialogues with Victor Frankenstein are fictional extrapolations of the arguments that raged between Percy Shelly and his contemporaries about the human condition and existence, or non-existence of the soul. Therefore, the real hero of the story is its “New Age ‘Adam’, cast out of Frankenstein’s technological Eden through no fault of his own – a notion seized upon by director James Whale” (Hallenbeck 2013, p. 23).

Alert to the phenomenal success of Whale’s movies, the Universal Studios produced a new Frankenstein sequel, *Son of Frankenstein* (1939), starring Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi, which began a whole series of Frankenstein films such as: *The Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942), *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943), and *House of Frankenstein* (1944). After the Second World War, when the more immediate threats of nuclear war and invasions of alien forces from outer space captured public attention, science-fiction movies temporarily diverted the attention of American audiences away from escapist horror films.

The year 1957 turned out to be a watershed as the *zeitgeist* switched from science fiction to horror. The monster reappeared in a whole series of Frankenstein films produced by Hammer Films, a British production company, starting with *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), starring Peter Cushing as Victor Frankenstein and Christopher Lee as the Creature.

The Curse of Frankenstein, which made international stars of both actors, ranks among the biggest grossing films in the history of the British cinema. Contemporary film critics insist that *The Curse of Frankenstein* changed the face of horror cinema forever because, as Heidi Kaye argues, the emphasis here is on “a mad scientist plot where invention and discovery, unrestrained by moral considerations, are the main threats”. And she stresses that Frankenstein is motivated by ambition alone, “with no positive goals for helping society”, while the Creature, “a grunting, violent beast, with no signs of intelligence or potential benevolence”, is as anti-social as his creator “with no desires for love or companionship” (Kaye 2001, p.187). For Paul O’Flinn, the film represents a significant break in the “Frankenstein” tradition, in part because it was made at a unique and overdetermined conjuncture in world history when, for the first time, both the technology [i.e. nuclear weapons] and international crises existed to threaten the very survival of the planet. He points out that once again Shelley’s novel was pulled off the shelf and ransacked for “the terms of articulate cultural hysteria. At a time of genuine and multilayered public fears (...) *The Curse of Frankenstein* locates the source of anxiety in a deranged individual, focuses it down to the point where its basis is seen as one man’s psychological problem” (quoted in Fisch 2009, pp. 195-196).

It should be added that after the success of *The Curse of Frankenstein*, Hammer Films was in the vanguard of a world-wide Gothic horror renaissance. For the fifteen years following its first Frankenstein movie, the company continued the series with such sequels as: *The Revenge of Frankenstein* (1958), *The Evil of Frankenstein* (1963), *Frankenstein Created Woman* (1966), *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed* (1969), *The Horror of Frankenstein* (1970), *Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell* (1972). The filmmakers succeeded in creating a lush of Gothic world full of mist-filled graveyards, spectacular laboratories, Technicolor blood and gore. The financial gains of those movies often proved in inverse proportion to the critics’ scorn. In *Trillion Year Spree*, Brian Aldiss ironically comments on the Whale and Hammer films in which the monster “has spawned Sons, Daughters, Ghosts”, “has taken on Brides and created Woman”, “has enjoyed Evil, Horror and Revenge”, and also “has met the Monster from Hell” (Aldiss 1986, p. 45). But he admits that all those films gave a new lease of life to Shelley’s novel and helped enormously to disseminate the myth of Frankenstein.

As noted earlier, *The Curse of Frankenstein* had a strong impact on the subsequent Frankenstein movies produced by Hammer Films. What all these later films have in common is the deranged scientist who dominates the story: while the monster is created and, in turn, destroyed, the scientist keeps returning. Contemporary critics often complain about the pervasive stereotype of the mad scientist created in numerous screen versions of *Frankenstein* which are responsible for the diminution of the complexity and multiplicity of Shelley’s novel. Her story and characters are regularly invoked as part of the process of public debate on science and scientists which continues throughout the twentieth century. In the 1920 and 1930s the debate about ectogenesis emerged within a matrix of discourses such as eugenics and alongside fears of degeneration and European reproductive decline after the First World

War. The popular press and scholarly journals publicized discussions about the future of motherhood, reproductive biotechnology, and eugenics. Ion Turney notes that in newspapers accounts the “noxious” images of the Frankenstein monster and his life-producing maker were often invoked and that Shelley’s novel in popular culture “shaped the governing myth of modern biology” (Turney 1998, pp. 3, 85). The possibility of biological mutation and ectogenesis also captured the attention of filmmakers and serious writers such as Aldous Huxley, who in his dystopian novel *Brave New World* (1932) painted a disturbing picture of a world in which technologically assisted reproduction separates childbearing from bodily functions and childrearing.

The ectogenesis debate reemerged in the last decades of the twentieth century, after the birth of the first “test-tube baby” in 1978. In 1987, the British Government released a White Paper which was meant to serve as a framework for legislation related to embryo research and new reproductive technology (NRT). Three years later, the Embryology Act was passed. During the parliamentary debate, the public expressed its “longstanding cultural ambivalence” in general and concerns about biotechnology, in particular. In the initial media reaction to the White Paper, the Frankenstein mythology provided a narrative framework stressing the threat of “scientific villainy”. However, the deployment of the Frankenstein mythology became more complex when both sides in the public debate made repeated use of Frankensteinian imagery to support their own arguments against or in favour of research on human embryos and new reproductive technologies (Fisch 2009; Sadoff 2010).

Meanwhile, the millennial debate in Britain and the United States on cloning and embryonic stem-cell research animated a new series of films based on *Frankenstein*, such as Kenneth Branagh’s *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* (1994) and Roger Corman’s *Frankenstein Unbound* (1990). Since Branagh’s and Corman’s movies have received extensive critical treatment elsewhere (for instance, Sadoff 2010; Weselinski 2016), I will give both screen adaptations only short shrift. Kenneth Branagh mediates and spoofs a cultural problem through a classic Gothic tale and a film genealogy, replacing his predecessors’ electrical apparatus for reanimating morselized corpse with ectogenesis. The procreation sequence in his film represents the link between nature and culture that gets disrupted by the intervention of assisted conception. As Sadoff has put it, the celluloid monster is “a remediated natural/cultural being”, a cinematic metaphor for the “technologically produced disruption of nature/culture and so of the socially constituted kinship relations that govern biological facts” (Sadoff 2010, pp. 139-140).

Roger Corman’s film, based on Brian Aldiss’s postmodern rewriting of Shelley’s novel, pictures the monster as a space-age cyborg. The movie features the adventures of Joseph Buchanan, a contemporary scientist who is zapped back into the world of Mary Shelley and Lord Byron in Geneva as a result of the time-and-space slip caused by the use of nuclear weapons. Having seduced Mary Shelley, the as-yet unpublished author (the action takes place in 1817), Buchanan confesses that he has read her novel. He also meets Victor Frankenstein, whom he informs that 20th-century scientists have made “far greater monsters

than yours". Later on, Buchanan's monster blows up the city of Geneva with the use of laser technology. In the closing sequence, the cyborg reappears in Buchanan's 20th-century laboratory, booming out: "You think you have killed me, but I am with you forever, I'm unbound". Corman's movie echoes a pessimistic message of Aldiss's novel: the unleashed forces of modern technology, especially biotechnology and various forms of artificial intelligence, cannot be reversed or undone. Sadoff argues convincingly that the film director links together electric technology and narrative in the historical moment (1817), cyborg subjectivity, and virtual reality in an as-yet unrepresented future in which "laboratory feedback loops allow deviations spontaneously to emerge" and aliveness can be separated from "embodied materiality, although not from all matter" (Sadoff 2010, p. 145).

In the twenty first century, Frankenstein and his monster continue to appear on the big and small screen, featuring in some diverse stories such as Steven Sommer's *Van Helsing* (2004), a phantasmagoria of computer-generated monsters, and Tim Burton's feature-length *Frankenweenie*, released shortly before Halloween in 2012, which is a remake of his animated short film produced in 1984. Meanwhile, Frankenstein and his creature turned up again, in iconic form, in contemporary theatrical productions, for instance, in Danny Boyle's *Frankenstein* which caused a sensation on the London stage in 2012, and in Nick Dear's play *Frankenstein*, premiered at the Syrena Theatre in Warsaw in 2016 (dir. B. Linda).

For some critics, most of the screen and stage versions of Shelley's novel simplify the significance of the myth of Frankenstein, whereas for other critics, the cultural resonance and mutability of the Frankenstein cinematic and theatrical tradition is one of the most interesting aspects of the Frankenstein mythology. Whatever judgment critics make about those adaptations, they reflect back on Shelley's original story, now two hundred years old. The point here is, as some contemporary critics rightly insist, not to bemoan the distortion of the source-text and astonishing departures from the literary original (Aldiss 1986; Fisch 2009). The Frankenstein story we know today has morphed into many forms over time, place, and genre, with each version of the story giving birth to different creatures, some of them lasting longer than others. In her Introduction to the 1831 edition of the novel, Mary Shelley bids farewell to her "hideous progeny": "And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper" (p. 199). All things considered, there is little doubt that the Creature and his cinematic and literary descendants have gone forth and prospered as the enduring icons of modern culture.

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Dziedzictwo kulturowe powieści Mary Shelley *Frankenstein*

Streszczenie

Tytułowa postać powieści Mary Shelley – Wiktor Frankenstein – oraz postać bezimiennego potwora, określanego w potocznym obiegu również jako „Frankenstein”, uzyskały status ikony kulturowej wkrótce po ukazaniu się powieści drukiem (1818). Początkowo, obydwie postaci zdobyły popularność dzięki dziewiętnastowiecznym adaptacjom teatralnym. W XX wieku, liczne ekranizacje powieści przyczyniły się do rozpowszechnienia mitu Frankensteina jako szaleńca-naukowca. Celem artykułu jest zbadanie kulturowej spuścizny powieści i funkcjonowanie mitu kulturowego Frankensteina we współczesnym świecie.

Słowa kluczowe: adaptacje sceniczne, film grozy, *Frankenstein*, *Frankenstein wyzwolony*, Mary Shelley, powieść gotycka, *science fiction*.

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