



FROM TEXT TO SCREEN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MARY SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN* AND ITS MAJOR FILM ADAPTATIONS

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Abstract

This study examines the adaptation of *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley in three screen versions, namely, *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), and *Mary Shelley Frankenstein* (1994). Despite the numerous retellings that have been inspired by the novel, there is scanty academic effort to compare how these movies adapt the novel's themes, characters and narrative patterns. The present study utilizes a qualitative comparative approach based on Adaptation Theory, especially the models of Hutcheon, Stam, Sanders, and McFarlane as a way of discussing the textual and filial elements. The results indicate that all adaptations represent the cultural fears of the period: technological modernity and mechanization in the 1930s, post-war violence and bodily horror in the 1950s, and bioethical concerns on genetic manipulation in the 1990s. The paper concludes that the film versions of *Frankenstein* are not direct reproductions, but rather cultural reinterpretations; in that the film versions reformulate the philosophical and moral issues of Shelley in the evolving social, technological and industrial environments.

Keywords: *Frankenstein*, *Film Adaptations*, *Scientific Ethics*, *Monstrosity*, *Cultural Anxieties*.

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1. Introduction

The novel Frankenstein or, The Modern Prometheus (1818; rev. 1831), by Mary Shelley is a stable part of Gothic literature and early science fiction. The novel was written in the Romantic period and it covers the themes of scientific ambition, ethics of creation, human responsibility and the social constitution of monstrosity. The interrelationship of the tragic Victor Frankenstein and his Creature asks eternal philosophical questions about what is meant by humanity, how scientific advancement can be limited, or how what is created is ethical (Shelley, 1818, revised edition 1831).

Frankenstein has been one of the most adapted literary works in the world of cinema due to its rich thematic complexity. The tale has been filmed in silent versions, Hollywood classics, British Gothic, high-end literary versions, parody films, and new versions. Nevertheless, a cultural prominence of three movies in the history of cinema Frankenstein (Whale, 1931) The Curse of Frankenstein (Fisher, 1957), and Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (Branagh, 1994) has influenced the mainstream visual and narrative interpretation of the Frankenstein myth in popular culture despite all the history of adaptation.

Nevertheless, cinematic renditions are quite far apart in the literary original, in terms of plot, as well as characterization, thematic focus and structure of the story. Such changes cannot be neglected as artistic freedoms, instead, it can show the cultural fears of scientific experimentation, technological modernity, identity and moral responsibility (Hutcheon & Stam, 2006, 2005). The socio-political atmosphere of the stories is reflected in each adaptation: the fascination and fear of technological strength in the early 1930s, the fears in the 1950s of the Cold War and violence of science, the fear of biotechnology and trauma in the 1990s.

The paper dwells on three film adaptations namely, Frankenstein (1931), The Curse of Frankenstein (1957) and Mary Shelley Frankenstein (1994). These three adaptations of the text have a unique way of re-telling the story of Frankenstein: the iconic visual language of Frankenstein had been created in 1931 by Universal movie-makers; the narrative was re-told in 1957 by Hammer Films within the context of post-war Gothic; and in 1994 Branagh tried to recreate the philosophic and emotional depth of the original novel. Comparing these movies to the text by Shelley, this research is an examination of how the myth of Frankenstein is influenced to adapt with various cultural environments.

1.1. Research Questions

- In what ways do screen versions replay significant motifs of Frankenstein?

- What are the similarities and differences in the characterization of Victor Frankenstein and the Creature in the novel and the selected movies?
- What are the shifts in narrative techniques such as plot structure, point-of-view, pacing, and framing in the process of transitioning to the screen?
- What do such changes imply of cultural anxieties in the times of production of these films?

1.2. Significance of the Study

The proposed study is valuable as it will benefit various academic disciplines as it provides a narrow comparative study of three largest film adaptations of the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. By demonstrating how the moral and philosophical issues of the novel are reproduced, modified, or eliminated on the screen, it enriches the study of the novel itself, and develops Adaptation Studies by demonstrating that films are not slavish imitations but cultural reworking. Adaptation analysis is also a contribution to Film Studies because it puts each adaptation into its context of industry and history and demonstrates how genre conventions and production pressures affected the choices made in the narrative.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Critical Studies of the *Frankenstein* of Mary Shelley

The study of *Frankenstein* has a long history, dating back more than 200 years, and this indicates the cultural and intellectual timelessness of the novel. The novel itself was frequently regarded as a Gothic curiosity or sensationalist story by the early nineteenth century critics (Mellor, 1988). However, the scholarship of the twentieth and twenty-first century has made *Frankenstein* a significant piece of literature that provokes far-reaching philosophical and ethical issues concerning humanity, science and society.

2.2. *Frankenstein* as a criticism of scientific ambition

The prevailing academic school of thought views *Frankenstein* as an attack on unregulated scientific ambition and the Enlightenment endeavor of commanding nature. According to Mellor (1988), the novel by Shelley is a caution against the perils of seeking knowledge irresponsibly. The worry about galvanism, early medical experimentation and rapid scientific progression is a common factor that Shelley brings up as a key theme. According to Baldick (1987), the transgressive act of creating a being was what Baldick refers to as the hubristic desire of modernity, to control life itself.

2.3. The Creature as a moral and a philosophical subject

Contemporary criticism usually stresses the expressive and emotionally multidimensional character of the Creature. Unlike the mute monster of popular culture, the Creature created by Shelley tells his own tale, is able to reason in a morally sound manner, and has to wonder why he was not accorded the same treatment as other humans. According to Levine (1973), the eloquence of the Creature can be compared to other Romantic heroes who need to understand the world and find their place in it. Embedded narration is another device that Shelley employs to make the Creature more human because it gives him the power of narration (Castle, 2015).

The tripartite frame of the novel, the letters of Walton, the narrative of Victor and the story inscribed in the Creature, has not been overlooked by scholars. According to Joseph (1993), this structure produces a stratified narrative in which truth has become subjective and perspectival and subjects the reader to challenge the concept of monstrosity and guilt. Besides, authors like Botting (1991) consider the reinforcement of Gothic conventions of uncertainty and fragmentation by narrative layering.

These important thoughts, combined, help to highlight the fact that Frankenstein is not just a horror novel but a complex debate about the scientific, ethical, and existential problems.

2.4. Film Adaptations Scholarship

2.4.1. James Whale's Frankenstein (1931)

The movie by Whale is considered to be the cinematic representation of the Frankenstein legend. The critics observe that adaptation is greatly different with the novel as the Creature becomes a childish, mute character (Schor, 2006). The reason Jancovich (2016) puts the changes on the studio restrictions and censorship efforts which emphasized spectacle and emotional clarity over philosophical details nuances. According to LaValley (1979), Victor is restructured as a sympathetic, though ambitious scientist, in which blame is taken off his morals.

2.4.2. The Curse of Frankenstein by Hammer Films (1957)

The adaptation by Hammer adds to it colour and graphic violence as well as Gothic melodrama. Hutchings (1993) underlines how Victor grows to be a morally corrupt man of noble lineage and Pirie (1977) points out the brutality of the Creature who is almost mindless. Caputi (1993) has understood the film as a case of Cold War paranoia about scientific experimentation and the violation of the body.

2.4.3. Mary Shelley Frankenstein (1994) of Branagh

The adaptation by Branagh is said to be the most faithful in terms of text. Restoration of such narrative elements as the frame story of the Arctic and the articulate voice of the Creature are highly praised by Gelder (1998). Simmons (2001) laments the melodramatic visuality approach, yet he recognizes the fact that the film is getting involved in philosophical issues. According to Williams (2000), one of the indications of the cultural issues of the 1990s that the film centers on is biotechnology and genetic ethics.

2.5. Themes and cultural issues in Frankenstein

2.5.1. The Responsibility and Creation

According to Hogle (2002), monstrosity is created by Shelley as a result of neglect and rejection by society. Cultural anxieties have been reshaped into a film version reinterpreting this theme: technological spectacle in 1931, moral corruption and bodily horror in 1957 and bioethical dilemmas in 1994.

2.5.2. Science, Technology, and Ethics

Haynes (2003) also places Frankenstein at the forefront of contemporary ethical dilemmas arising out of artificial intelligence, genetic engineering and scientific responsibility.

2.5.3. Monstrosity and the Other

Cohen (1996) perceives the Creature as an image of social and cultural phobia of marginalized bodies. Numerous film adaptations simplify the Creature to fit the horror tropes, supporting the cultural fears of otherness.

2.5.4. Frankenstein: A Cultural Myth

According to Baldick (1987) and Weselinski (2018), *Frankenstein* is a contemporary myth that is exceptionally versatile. The story continues to thrive since it constantly engulfs the modern worries over scientific advancement, identity and power.

3. Adaptation Studies

According to Hutcheon (2006), adaptation has been imagined as reinterpretation and not as replication. Stam (2005) focuses on the intertextuality and the ideological restructuring of the film narratives. Sanders (2006) contrasts adaptation with

appropriation, however, there are certain reinterpretation types that border on developing completely new meanings like the one Hammer has.

These theories inform the comparative method in this paper.

4.Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Adaptation Theory to show how Frankenstein in movies evolves through film mediums. Adaptations in the model of Hutcheon are considered to be creative contextualization that are influenced by medium-specific constraints; the dialogic approach of Stam in the model takes into consideration the influence of intertextual and ideological forces; the difference between adaptation and appropriation provided by Sanders makes it possible to interpret the drastic changes in the narrative. The transfer vs. transformation model by McFarlane helps us to understand what to expect in terms of narrative elements that may be translated directly, and what should be invented. Collectively, the theories shed light on the way in which the films remake the narrative presented by Shelley to address cultural requirements.

5.Methodology

The research is based on qualitative, comparative research method that presupposes close textual analysis of the novel and step-by-step analysis of the three selected films. The collection of data was conducted through annotated readings, repeat readings, and thematic coding through the use of categories like creation, ethics, monstrosity, characterization, and narrative structure.

Data Analysis Methods:

- Thematic analysis in order to find recurring motifs.
- Victor and the Creature Character Analysis.
- Comparative analysis of narratives in order to detect changes.
- Cinematic criticism of mise-en-scène, sound, lighting and genre convention.

This is a method that allows systematic comparison of text and film.

6.Analysis And Discussion

6.1. Shelley's Novel

The novel by Shelley presents the process of creating as a scientific and moral responsibility. Victor is an ambivalent Romantic character whose ambition is tragic.

Creature is articulate, morally, emotionally – characteristics that most film versions do not have.

6.2. Frankenstein (1931)

The adaptation by Whale lays more stress on the spectacle of technology, making the creation of a theatrical experiment in the laboratory. The Monster turns iconic and a mute in his appearance as the face of the era paranoia over mechanization. Complexity in narrative is eliminated and philosophical themes are kept to a minimum.

6.3. The Curse of Frankenstein (1957)

In Hammer's adaptation, Victor is mean and ethically depraved. The Creature turns into a bloodthirsty monster without psychology. The graphic style of the movie reflects the Cold War paranoia about the weakness of the body, scientific and social insanity.

6.4. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1994)

Branagh recreates the Creature voice, the frame story and emotionality. The movie highlights the issues of trauma, loss and bioethical issues, which corresponded with late 20th -century discussions of genetic engineering and medical experimentation.

7. Comparative Findings

7.1. Victor Frankenstein Cross Adaptations.

- Novel: intellectually disoriented man.
- 1931: aspiring yet uncomplicated scientist.
- 1957: sadistic aristocrat.
- 1994: emotionally tortured Romantic character.

7.2. The Monster Crosses Adaptations.

- Novel: eloquent, philosophic, tragic.
- 1931: mute and iconic.
- 1957: violent and mindless.
- 1994: regained emotional complexities.

7.3. Themes Across Texts

Theme	Novel	1931	1957	1994
Creation	Ethical burden	Spectacle	Corruption	Trauma & bioethics
Monstrosity	Socially produced	Physical	Violent	Emotional
Responsibility	Central	Minimal	Absent	Strong

Each adaptation reshapes Shelley's concerns according to its cultural moment.

7.4. Assuring Reliability and validity

7.4.1. Triangulation

The research involves theoretical triangulation (Hutcheon, Stam, Sanders) and data triangulation (novel, three film adaptations, scholarly sources). This makes it more interpretive and less subjective.

7.4.2. Reflexivity

Since qualitative interpretation depends on researcher view, reflection notes were maintained in order to be aware of:

- Personal assumptions.
- Interpretive tendencies.

Inferred meanings

7.4.3. Thick Description

Textual and cinematic descriptions are very detailed and make sure that the interpretations are backed by evident material, which allows readers to evaluate the soundness of the analytical statements (Geertz 1973).

8. Conclusion

This study has shown that selected film adaptations of the novel *Frankenstein* are cultural reconceptualization influenced by technological opportunities, historical fears, and industrial needs. The 1931 adaptation makes the contemporary fears in the form of spectacle; the 1957 movie reacts to the post-war anxieties about violence and physical

injuries; the 1994 film is connected to the bioethical discussions of that time. Throughout these metamorphoses, the fundamental questions that Shelley posed regarding creation, responsibility and identity are timeless and thus affirm Frankenstein continues to be a flexible and timeless cultural myth.

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