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## Aesthetic Transgressions in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

*Evan Dekens*

In the current culture, Victor's creature from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is branded as a hulking green figure, stripped of all linguistic, intellectual, and physical capability, devoid of not only its original identity as a somewhat sympathetic, tragic intellectual figure, but of its individuality and personal autonomy. The character "Frankenstein" is now an archetype instead of a character, a symbol of the impure, the ramshackle and the misplaced. Bridging the disparity and tracking the path that lead to this branding starts with the original 1818 text and ends in the current era. Tracking this evolution highlights the ways that the creature has been increasingly stripped of its intellect, its empathetic nature, and its individuality in an effort to symbolize *Frankenstein's* monster as representative of the suppression of the intellectual, cultural, racial, or aesthetic "other" in society.

As distinguished from its public persona, *Frankenstein's* monster originated as a complex, intellectual, sympathetic character. Within the original text, the linguistic and the visual often interact in problematic ways for the creature, with his offensive appearance often irreconcilable with his undeniable humanistic characteristics and intellectual worth. As Denise Gigante describes it, "both the uncanny and the ugly fall under the rubric of the fearful; the crucial distinction between them is that while something may be uncanny for one person and yet not so for another, the ugly is universally offensive."<sup>1</sup> The two competing identities within the creature can be identified by their role in the interior and exterior aspects of the creature's personal identity. The autodidactic nature of the creature's intellectual enlightenment does not exclude the visual entirely, but only addresses it in the ways that the creature perceives himself as opposed to the way he is perceived by others. In these instances, the creature is not totally blind to the grotesque symbol that his body represents, despite his persistent belief that his auditory and intellectual value might in some way compensate for physical appearances. Though the creature displays vice and virtue, as well as complex inner moral conflict, even the recognition of multiple, often competing aspects of identity within a singular individual, discounts validity of the "othering" later experienced

by the creature. After his somewhat civil and fruitful encounter with the blind man living in the hovel next to him, the visual silence the creature had before enjoyed with the inhabitants of the house is broken, and the creature is immediately demonized categorically.

Whereas relationships in the novel which are expressed primarily through the use of dialogue display the creature as an incredibly articulate, sympathetic, and unfairly persecuted figure, his appearance often discounts or undermines all internal characteristics. To the periphery characters, as well as Victor, the horror of the visual is thematized by its constant connection to the violent and horrific aspects of the narrative, illustrating not only the way that visual horror produces a more deceptively potent emotional response, but also acts as one of the primary motivators of moral and psychological prejudice. The use of dramatic irony in the case of the murder of William is especially significant in this respect, as the sharp incongruity between the substance of the events which occur, and the version of the events which the characters perceive and act upon in the novel highlight the problematic aspects which visually based conclusions and judgements pose. Nearly all the moral transgressions in the novel may be categorized in a similar way. Victor's scientific crimes are based in his failure to design his creature in the image of a natural human being. Whereas by all other standards, the creature is in every respect just as distinctly human as every other character in the novel, his separateness from society is founded on his corrupted image. The initial abandonment of the creature, his rejection from society and eventual deadly rampage, the framing of the murder of Henry Clerval, and Walton's final abdication of Victor's inherited moral crusade against the creature all come as a result of the incongruity between the visually perceived truths, and the linguistic/auditory elements of the narrative.

These incongruities within *Frankenstein* establish its moral message clearly: the subjugation of individuals based on appearance of any kind is inherently wrong. The complexity introduced by the novel's subversion of traditional antagonists and protagonist makes this message all the more prescient and contextualizes the horror of the creature as perceived in the novel as entirely diegetic. However, in the public sphere, the novel's visual characteristics were interpreted much differently, with most reviewers either focusing on the monstrosity of the descriptive prose, the then ideo-

logically taboo themes which the novel explored, and attacks on the credibility of the author based on her gender and age. At the same time, audiences were intrigued with the image of the monstrous as portrayed in the novel, and the ambiguity of the novel's depictions of corrupted nature. It's likely for these reasons that the public discontent with the novel laid the groundwork for the later iterations of the creature in culture, film, and representative media.

The first filmed adaptation of *Frankenstein* in 1910 marks a dramatic turn towards the starkly visual representations of *Frankenstein's* monster seen today.<sup>2</sup> To adapt Shelley's dense novel into a short silent film, several elements of the narrative had to be stripped away in order to adapt the most essential elements of the narrative with as much efficiency as possible. The final product displays a conflict between a precocious scientist, and the demonic, immoral creature who torments him. Adapting the story of *Frankenstein* into a visual medium, Edison Studios stripped away all literary qualities of the work, leaving each character chained to their appearance and physical presence entirely. This establishes binary moral distinctions between the creature and Victor, showcasing Victor as a sympathetic intellectual, trying to preserve the sanctity of domestic on-screen space from a creature whose only agency throughout the film is rooted in either revenge or sexual deviance. The ending is especially significant in its message about class relations. Just as Victor's creature is about to physically dominate Victor in on-screen space, he glances his image in the reflection of a mirror and relents almost immediately.

Whereas in the novel, the monster's abrasive reaction to his own self-image spurns increased efforts to develop intellectually and linguistically in order to better compensate for his appearance, the creature in film adaptation is made subservient by it, rendered powerless by its own identity. The final shots, wherein the monster becomes the image he sees in the mirror, followed by Victor's appearance adjacent to the mirror in his place, and his eventual disappearance when Victor raises his hand and acknowledges the monster in the mirror, is representative of a deeply destructive process of spectatorship throughout the history of *Frankenstein's* iconography. The establishment of a frame within a frame in the film establishes the method by which the characters perceive their own identity as a purely visual process. By removing the creature from physical space

and quarantining him to the image in the mirror, he becomes virtual as opposed to material, a symbol of aesthetic corruption stripped of all desires, thoughts, or individual agency. Furthermore, Victor's relationship with the image in the mirror suggests that the creature's transition to a symbol is the only way that he can truly be defeated. By denying the material existence of the creature, Victor is able to identify the creature as a manifestation of his own identity, and his subsequent control over it afterwards allows him to remove the creature from his mind and his life effortlessly.

Here the visual is used as a method of ideological control over the problematic aesthetic mismatch between the creature's monstrous appearance and its humanistic, culturally valuable interior. A recognition of these complex characteristics in such a famously monstrous character would be an endorsement of the value of women, the poor, or the racially persecuted, as the method by which those groups are subjugated, controlled, and persecuted is by the same symbolic manipulation present in the film. The creature's characterization as a protagonist supports a revolutionary theme in the novel. By giving the creature physical dominance over not only the characters within the novel, but of the events which propel the narrative, the creature wields more power than any other character within the book. Because the thematic implications of the original text posed a threat to the social, economic, racial, and moral hierarchies of European society, the character was stripped down to the one-dimensional qualities of its aesthetic existence so that the supremacy of the rich over the poor, the intellectual over the uneducated, and the microcosm of the societal "other" might be preserved.

Since the film was created by and adapted for the screen by members of the upper class for an intended audience of the poor working class, the Edison film adaptation may serve as a projection of the upper class's perception of the lower class, as dirty, sexually deviant, and devoid of any and all intelligence, but the internal spectatorship within the film also captures the innate fascination with visual manipulation. In James A. Wefferman's view, "by forcing us to face the monster's physical repulsiveness, which he can never deny or escape and which aborts his every hope of gaining sympathy, film versions of *Frankenstein* prompt us to rethink his monstrosity in terms of visualization."<sup>3</sup> Such intentions emphasize the

1910 *Frankenstein's* conformity to vaudeville tradition, and the cinema of attractions that encapsulated much of the film of that time period. By placing emphasis on the visual manipulation of natural forms, and their dominance over the creature's identity, the film undermines the themes of racially motivated social justice, political revolution and reform, and socioeconomic inequity in favor of presenting narratives wherein the lower-class viewers root against the success of creature and by extension, root against themselves.

Similar narrative approaches to this kind of aesthetic mismatch came later on in the 20th century. David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* (1980) takes a much more nuanced approach in chronicling the aesthetic challenges met by real life historical figure Joseph Carrey Merrick as he tries to integrate himself into English society.<sup>4</sup> Merrick's character begins as a visual attraction, not unlike the creature from the original *Frankenstein* adaptation. His arc throughout the narrative succeeds in showcasing the aesthetic monstrosity of Merrick as a periphery characteristic to an otherwise autonomous and virtuous individual. In the dramatic peak of the film, Merrick is cornered at a train station dominated in the frame by a crowd of people who harass and abuse Merrick for his hideous form, unable to perceive him as a human being with human rights. When Merrick breaks the silence and declares his own humanity, the auditory identification of Merrick as a human being silences the crowd, and the violent mob quickly becomes docile and compassionate. The film concludes with Merrick as an idolized figure, a martyr and a symbol not of monstrosity, but of exemplifying virtue and optimism in spite of aesthetic monstrosity. This film marks a turn in the representation of the monstrous, and a return to the inner complexities of the original creature, as well as the strong moral message that Mary Shelley's original *Frankenstein* connotes.

The disproportionate value placed on appearance over substance in *Frankenstein* is not a problem which exists in singularity, but is representative of a complex relationship which affects the way that race, gender, and age function in the personal, cultural, and political relationships. The labelling of individuals for their aesthetic characters in film and literature is important, but the function of stories like *Elephant Man* and *Frankenstein* is to break down the process by which groups and individuals are labelled and controlled in order to emphasize their negative aspects and destruc-

tive nature.

## Notes

1. Denise Gigante, "Facing the Ugly: The Case of 'Frankenstein,'" *ELH*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2000, p. 567, [www.jstor.org/stable/30031925](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30031925).
2. J. Searle, Dawley, director. *Frankenstein*, Edison Studios, 1910.
3. James A. W. Heffernan, "Looking at the Monster: 'Frankenstein' and Film." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1997, p. 136, [www.jstor.org/stable/1344161](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344161).
4. David Lynch, director, *The Elephant Man*, 1980.

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