Be cool: come nasce un'icona culturale
a cura di Andrea Bernardelli ed Eduardo Grillo

Frankenstein: the Disturbing Migrations of a Twentieth-century Icon

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Abstract
The article is about the presence of the Frankenstein icon in today's culture and its relevance to identifying some trends in its circulation through media. The author has tried to outline some important steps in this evolution of the icon, referring to specific examples of mediatic re-imagining of the icon, among which the most discussed are the novel *Father of Frankenstein* and, above all, its film adaptation, *Gods and Monsters*. The article tries to combine theories from different theoretical fields such as narratology, trans-medial studies and anthropology to attain a wider perspective on Frankenstein as an iconic image.

Keywords
Icon; Trans-fictional; Trans-medial; Frankenstein

Sommario/Content

Vincenzo Maggitti | *Frankenstein: the Disturbing Migrations of a Twentieth-century Icon*

1. Introduction

To become an icon, the monster in *Frankenstein* had to wait from 1818, when the novel was published for the first time, until 1931, when Universal released the first talkie adaptation from Mary Shelley's novel, directed by James Whale. In that movie, the monster – who, meaningfully, had no name, nor was the actor named in the opening credit – showed a face that perfectly dovetailed with public imagery as far as his features were concerned. Much has been written about how the creature became a modern mythical representation of the twentieth century's fear of scientific experiment, especially in connection with the warfare context of the time. Some scholars, in fact, argue that becoming a myth through the agency of cinema, portrayed in terms of a specific visual identification, could have been crucial to defining the features of *Frankenstein*'s creature once for all. The following quote points exactly at that imaginative peril:

> Myths are also susceptible to "closure", or to adaptations which constrain their further development into fixed channel. In the case of Frankenstein myth, this moment of closure arrived in 1931, in the shape of William Henry Pratt (Boris Karloff), whose rectangular face and bolt-adorned neck have fixed our idea of the monster into a universally-known image from which it is hard to see further revisions breaking free. (Baldick 1987: 32)

This article aims at demonstrating that Whale's films were not the second and ultimate 'grave' for the creature. In spite of the fact that the movie-made icon is still thriving in contemporary visual culture, its reinterpretations have moved along rather unpredictable trajectories, so many that "there are only Frankesteins, as the text is ceaselessly rewritten, reproduced, refilmed and redesigned" (O'Flinn 1983: 197). As we shall see in the next paragraph, this is the case when a character or a story become very popular and their presence keeps surfacing in different media.

Was Frankenstein iconic even before becoming an icon? As a matter of fact, his image had started haunting the coeval 'scenes' very soon after the book's publication. The 1823 stage adaptation "Presumption, or by fate of Frankenstein" gained huge popularity and commercial success, inaugurating and, therefore, enhancing the migration of the image "Frankenstein" to other media, such as newspapers and cartoons, and to other fields, among which science and medicine were the most prominent. In relation to science Frankenstein had many iconic cards up its sleeve, mostly concerning science as an act of faith rather than an experimental method, and consequently the legacy of the God-like image of the scientist in popular belief long after its philosophical dismissal. The creature depicted in the novel just after the experiment is a paradoxical combination of beautiful single items which have been assembled to create a handsome Adam-like figure of man, but whose outcome results in a horrible sight to the scientist (and the reader as well). Besides, in order to make it even more frightening than the image alone could do, Whale and his

Vincenzo Maggitti | *Frankenstein: the Disturbing Migrations of a Twentieth-century Icon*

co-screenwriters decided to make the monster speechless, using only grumblings as expressive devices, which added to its monstrousness in the 1931 movie, just two years after sound cinema had been introduced.

As a consequence, the iconic quality that Boris Karloff's make-up gave the creature of Frankenstein transcended any strictly narrative discourse, his silence being in a kind of continuity with the silent cinema where the image of the monster had already migrated while at the same time dramatically underlining the transition from word to image that characterizes any *pictorial turn*, in the meaning defined by William John Thomas Mitchell in his *Image Science*.[1] Mitchell's distinction between *picture* and *image* can be applied also to the cinematic creature. In Whale's *Frankenstein*, the creature is materially part of the motion-picture; in fact, it becomes a picture in motion when it is summoned from the lab and introduced to the public, i. e. the people close to the scientist that he calls to witness the initially successful experiment. The creature is presented through a perceptible reduction of the frame that accompanies the close-up of the monster's face creating a sudden, unpredictable intimacy with the film spectator. The scary effect is, of course, the director's principal aim, even though the rest of the scene features the creature's gradual acquaintance with the space around it, guided by the calm orders uttered by the scientist. But something visually more impactful and seminal happens in that scene.

In spite of the existence of three other film versions of the novel *Frankenstein* (actually, more based on the stage adaptation than on its literary source), the 1931 *Frankenstein* is the archetype[2] of film adaptations of Mary Shelley's creature. By introducing the monster to the 'public' in a climactic moment in the story, the movie makes its spectators witnesses of its birth as a ghostly, phantasmatic appearance that comes to light in the material support of the film, exactly as an image comes to life. This bond between the monster's birth and the image on the screen, which relying on Mitchell's vocabulary we can define a "meta-picture" (Mitchell: 18), is an iconic pattern for all the subsequent *Frankensteins* in visual media, as well as a pictorial frame for all the fields to which the icon will expand in its cultural and semiotic migrations. In the film sequence, the image of the monster gets disentangled from the picture that supports its very entrance into the audio-visual medium to become an icon, allowed an apparently free movement across historically different, re-interpretational contexts.

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1   In this collection of essays Mitchell reflects on his definition of *pictorial turn* (1992) as interacting with Gottfried Boehm's later category of *iconic turn* (1994), both meant not as simple labels for the rise of visual media, but as thought-provoking concepts which do not take for granted their apparently explicit meaning, but, quite the reverse, claim their hybrid characteristics, mostly in a struggling relation between text and image, and in a diachronic vision of their historical recurrence (Mitchell 2015: 14-16).

2   In fact, though it was conceived as an experimental title, the film became so popular as to allow the Universal Pictures to start a new genre of horror movies in their production planning, which paved the way for all the "hideous progeny" Shelley herself had foreseen after watching the theatre performance.

2. The Iconic Relevance of Frankenstein

The relative but constantly evolving freedom that the icon of Franken-stein has experienced and developed over the almost hundred years since its first sparkle of cinematic light has made the creature relevant in conceptual areas that range far from the scientifically delimited area of the novel. Being based on an experiment, whose cinematic representation in Whale's film is a breakthrough in the history of cinema as well as in the history of the icon,[3] Frankenstein is liable to be used with reference to new conquests in any scientific area, especially controversial ones that are likely to raise public concern. Lately, after gaining a special iconic status in both the scientific and the popular debate about the ethical acceptability of cloning, the creature has been metaphorically associated with the weird evolution of algorithms in computer programs.

The issue has been analyzed in *The Guardian* by Andrew Smith:

If the algorithms around us are not yet intelligent, meaning able to independently say "that calculation/course of action doesn't look right: I'll do it again", they are nonetheless starting to learn from their environments. And once an algorithm is learning, we no longer know to any degree of certainty what its rules and parameters are. At which point we can't be certain of how it will interact with other algorithms, the physical world, or us. Where the "dumb" fixed algorithms – complex, opaque and inured to real time monitoring as they can be – are in principle predictable and interrogable, these ones are not. After a time in the wild, we no longer know what they are: they have the potential to become erratic. We might be tempted to call these "frankenalgos" – though Mary Shelley couldn't have made this up.[4]

To a narratological ear, this description of virtual behaviour sounds as if it might be read through the theoretical frame of a narrative story-world, such as the one used by Thomas Pavel (1986) to outline the potential associations of his behavioural clusters in fictional characters. I have, therefore, tried to figure out possible fictional counterpoints to the ones that Smith defines as "environments".

In the passage quoted above, the journalist mentions other algorithms, which can be reasonably compared to other characters in the fictional world. This fictional world or story-world can be said to be a counterpart to the physical world that Smith assumes to be capable of having an influence on the development of algorithms and therefore, in my comparison, of characters. Finally, "us" is adjustable to cover all the people who read books, see films, play videogames and visit and contribute to blogs about one of those sto-

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3   About this connection see the essay "Since Frankenstein: Experimental Science and Experimental Film" by A. Gambis in S. Perkowitz and E. Von Mueller (eds.), *Frankenstein. How a Monster Became an Icon*, New York/London, Pegasus Book, 2018, pp. 130-142.

4   On-line article: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/aug/29/coding-algorithms-frankenalgos-program-danger>.

ry-worlds, in an ever-changing dynamics that Jenkins has successfully defined as "trans-medial storytelling" (Jenkins 2006: *passim*).

As a matter of fact, the process is seen from 'our' point of view of users as well as creators. This makes more visible the meaningful overlap between the algorithm's development towards an independent status and the freedom some fictional characters have been striving for since they were born as characters, the creature in Frankenstein being, of course, one of the most symbolic ones in the whole history of literature. If the algorithm's independence is encompassed in the article as a constant growth in a kind of post-artificial intelligence, which draws on the context (the physical world) and the computer's connection with "us", fictional characters can find a similarly viable way toward independence in their transformation into icons. Icons can be re-shaped in completely different contexts according to how well they match a new set of circumstances, providing the public with visually supportive tools to grasp the real meaning of a certain issue. In a polemic debate about the manipulation of food, a word like "Frankenfood", which has entered the Oxford English Dictionary, immediately provides the reader with a clear, though unspecified, image of the negative consequences that kind of food can have on our health.

The process of associating an iconic reference with an issue is both individual and collective, as the icon is thought to be perceived as an im-mediate and un-mediated vehicle of shared comprehension. At the same time, the icon takes on such a wide range of semantic connections and structures that distinguishing the author's choice of an icon for communicative purposes, whether in journalism or in any other media, from the iconic surfacing of a meaningful image is not an easy task. In his article, Smith hints at such a mixed space when he defines the movement of algorithms "erratic". Moreover, after coining a neologism ("frankenalgos") that literally draws on Frankenstein to name this new breed of algorithms, he brings out the name of Mary Shelley as not guilty of such an extension (Shelley, the author assumes, "couldn't have made this up"). And yet, the iconic values that the creature (as well as its progeny) has acquired on the horizon of semiotic perspective do entitle writers/authors to interpret brand-new experiences in a Frankensteinian declension, and not only when these experiences relate to a specific scientific environment.

A recent British TV series, *Frankenstein's Chronicles*, can help us focus on this iconic process in a visual medium. The series is particularly useful in our argument as it is a two-fold kind of adaptation. On one hand, it reinterprets its source – the novel *Frankenstein* –, the process through which it was created, and its themes as part of the cultural fabric of its time; on the other hand, it involves its reception in the adaptational discourse, i.e. how "we experience adaptations as palimpsests through our memory of other works" (Hutcheon 2006: 7-9). The series begins with the accidental finding of a monstrous assemblage of corpses that drives the protagonist, detective John Marlott, to investigate among the 1820s underworld of body-snatchers in London. Even in this case the writer, Mary Shelley, is not to be held responsible, as her character peremptorily declares in one of the first episodes of the TV drama. "The

monster is yours" she says to Marlott, hinting at how the future generations will cope with that disturbing presence in the back of their progressive minds, but stating, as well, the disentanglement of the creature from any authorial grip and the liberty the monster will find as an icon. The *Chronicles* sets on a parallel journey into the inconsistencies of Victorian society. On one side, the series follows the unfolding of an untold version of the story, connected with the political events of the time and the government action against the trade of corpses for surgical practice (the Chronicles as historical depiction); on the other side, and in a less narrative strain, the focus of the series is on how the figure of Frankenstein can embody both the physical and the existential metamorphoses of a corrupted body, such as Marlott's, himself doomed to become a 'Frankenstein', as his syphilis-scarred body suggests from the beginning. Consequently, the Chronicles take on a more private meaning which makes them closer to a personal record of events in a more intimate connection with a rather withdrawing character.

In this dramatic shift of perspectives for an only two-seasoned series, the narrative includes a wide range of iconic references. Among them, I will list the most meaningful ones for my argument.

– a drawing by the poet William Blake with his ultimate but unfinished illustrated work, called *The Book of Prometheus*, portraying the Monster (the word-text that we can read in the curved letters running along the illustrated creature's back), after Blake has foreshadowed Marlott's meeting the monster 'with a human face' as the only way to unravel the mystery of the disappeared children;

– Ada Lovelace's experiment in automized machinery, whose contribution to the future invention of the computer has been scientifically recognized and recorded. Her "automaton", officially presented to the authorities in one of the episodes, links the computerized composition of the human body with Frankenstein's experimental legacy in the cloning process. The automaton, though obviously absent from Mary Shelley's narration, is included in the Chronicles as one of the several artificial embodiments of Frankenstein's icon;

– the "new" Marlott, who, having gone through an experience of return from death, like the monster in *Frankenstein*, and suffered parental loss and grief, can stand up to the new challenge of re-founding an unrecognizable and desperate world, though in a less than heroic stance and trusting a woman with that revolutionary task.

The series cleverly manages to make visible the contradictions lurking behind the flag of progress, as the majority of the corpses on sale came from the poor, with the complicity of insiders of the Church of England. The iconic perspective, however, gets more focused on when the series introduces the references discussed above. The choice of these specific elements highlights, more than anything else in the series, the necessity of making the iconographic development of Frankenstein a relevant part of the adaptation, and, furthermore, of pointing out and connecting different stages of this very development in the series. Through the whole series, we are faced with the struggle

of human bodies to preserve not only their lives, but the logical and sensorial continuity that can help them overcome the tremendous blow of the contemporary reshaping of human structure. Thus, what the protagonist detective Marlott is actually doing, together with all of us, is trying to cope with the existential challenge of interpreting the icon on his own body.

In the second half of the article about algorithms, Smith extends his analysis of computer software and hardware innovation to the field of military enterprise and machinery, specifically drones. The amount of unpredictable behaviour that drones are allowed in their programming can be read through *Frankenstein* again, as far as their outcome in terms of unintentional civilian casualties is concerned. The 'monster', whatever its shape, cannot be completely controlled by the scientist.

3. Trans-medial Frankensteins

Drawing on Mitchell's definition of meta-picture, I have previously linked the moment when film audience saw the creature entering the fictional world in the 1931 movie with the birth of the icon Frankenstein, the moment in which, by detaching itself from the novel, the creature can get an iconic independence which allows for its future transformations. In this paragraph I will focus on a double transformation, which implies not only a semiotic rewriting of the creature's story, but one that takes place in a cinematic context.

The two cases which I am going to discuss in terms of semiotic occurrence of the icon are linked by a 'parental' bond: one is the novel *Father of Frankenstein* by Christopher Bram (1995) and the other is the film adaptation of Bram's novel, directed by Bill Condon (1998) whose title – *Gods and Monsters* – is actually a quotation from a line by Dr Pretorius, one of the characters in the 1931 movie.

For those unfamiliar with the literary origins of the creature and the name of the woman writer who created the story, the title *Father of Frankenstein* would sound more likely as a horror movie than as a literary work. It might be one of the films in the hugely successful series released by Universal Film Production both in the US and globally between 1931 and 1939,[5] where new members were frequently added to the monster's "family" to justify new productions. Bram has probably played on the cinematic resonance of the title, though this should not be read as a sign of the nostalgic (and commercial) attitude that Fredric Jameson (1991) has stigmatized as one of the recurring tokens of postmodernism. The novel is about the last days in the life of James Whale, the director of the 1931 *Frankenstein* and therefore his father in terms of film history: the first, as I mentioned above, to realize and provide the popular audience with a lasting image of the creature on the screen.

By focusing on *Frankenstein*'s father, the writer is implicitly claiming that the cinematic popularity of Frankenstein has disentangled the character from its literary premises and handed it out to the moviegoers. The transition of a

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5   Information about the Universal movies are taken from Barbaro (2006: 32-39).

Vincenzo Maggitti | *Frankenstein: the Disturbing Migrations of a Twentieth-century Icon*

story from one medium to another is quite common, but I would argue that the case of Frankenstein requires a different kind of interpretation, as it is through the very agency of the iconic image that Frankenstein not only trespasses the "borders" between written and visual media, but starts a definite shift from one form to another which will make movies the space for its popular reproduction. The process is involuntary and can be filed under what Marie-Laurie Ryan has called the "snowball" effect, which recurs each time "a certain story enjoys so much popularity or becomes so prominent culturally that it spontaneously generates a variety of either same-media or cross-media prequels, sequels, fan fiction and adaptations" (Ryan 2013: 363). In a novel about the director of the original Frankenstein movie, however, an accidental "snowball" effect is not an adequate explanation. Biographical elements intertwine, in Bram's novel, with strains of different adaptations, where the temporal distinction between prequel and sequel is not helpful. But in order to better understand their impact on Bram's story-world, a textual and structural analysis of the novel is necessary.

In the novel, Whale is suffering from a mental disease which scrambles his memories, letting them suddenly surface from the bottom of his unconscious, and causing fits of physical and emotional crisis that will eventually push the patient to commit suicide. His movies and their backstage are, of course, a substantial part of his memory, together with his childhood remembrance of the desolate living conditions of his family in his native England. In the weirdly sensitive revision of his past, *Frankenstein* seems to him as the only part of his "story" that is open to an intervention, where his director's work could be still useful to change the doomed course of his life, albeit just in a mental re-adjusting of the plot to his present state. In fact, in his mind he reshoots the lab scene in which the experiment is carried out, and casts himself as the creature, whose brain is being replaced with a healthy one.

In the role of the scientist there is his young gardener, Clay, who embodies the new multi-layered manifestation of the Frankenstein icon. He is an unemployed young man, who boasts about being an ex-marine and fighting the Korean war. He is quite impressed by Whale, when he finds out he used to be a movie director, and cannot realize the reason why Whale makes him feel interesting, unless the old guy is sexually aroused by his body, as Clay's acquaintances tell him at the shabby bar he regularly goes to. His name is itself quite iconic, and even without stretching back as far as the Bible, surely John Milton's Adam is a detectable reference in the choice of a name for a meaningless man who must be shaped into a meaningful creature. By moulding him into something new, the director Whale is not immediately sure which character to choose from the Frankenstein double of scientist/creature, quite often confused in popular culture as shown by the mismatched use of the name for both scientist and creature. After the early, failed dreamlike rehearsal as the scientist, Clay seems perfectly fit to play the monster in Whale's death-driven search. We will shortly come back to this turning point.

Thus, in Bram's novel the original text written by Mary Shelley undergoes a process of rewriting that can be considered as an example of trans-fiction-

ality, since it happens within the same literary medium. Even though the story stems from the biographical circumstances of James Whale's death, its structure and telling are patterned on Frankenstein's story. As I have already mentioned, the writer adds a fictional character besides the director, but he also reintroduces the film character of the housemaid and endows her with hilarious features, which counterbalance the woeful theme of the movie. These variations, however, are not ornamental; in fact, they represent what Lubomìr Doležel (1998: 206-207) calls an expansion: the story-world of the original novel is expanded in order to host new characters. Bram also modifies the original structure of the novel, locating the story in a different temporal and spatial setting, Los Angeles in the late 1950s. *Father of Frankenstein* is, therefore, a trans-fictional work that covers all three possible relations to the original novel, according to Doležel's theory (*ibidem*). As a matter of fact, it is an *expansion* of Shelley's *Frankenstein* taking place in a *modified* story-world, whose setting has been *transposed* to the twentieth century. At the same time, Bram's novel also belongs to the category of trans-medial storytelling, insofar as not only is the plot a biographical rendering of James Whale's life, but the characters in the novel are quite tangibly heirs to the characters of the Frankenstein films made by Whale.

I wrote "films" as James Whale was also the director of a sequel to his 1931 movie, *Bride of Frankenstein*, released in 1935, where the monster speaks, obviously with a limited range of vocabulary compared to its rhetorical fluency in the novel, and asks for a mate. The same request had been done in the original novel, but the film experiment for the reviving of a female creature, though resulting in a failure, is so well accomplished that it occupies a prominent place in the iconic development of Frankenstein and is almost entirely quoted in *Gods and Monsters*.

In an episode of Condon's movie, the old director is watching his *Frankenstein* sequel on TV, an indirect reference to another trans-medial situation, the commercial turn in the US media market which started in 1951, when the studios began selling the rights to broadcast their huge film libraries to television networks. It is Clay himself who, realizing that Whale is the director of *Frankenstein* movies, proudly announces to his new acquaintance that they are broadcasting his *Bride of Frankenstein* on television. In Bram's novel this domestic vision is told in two sections, one concerning Clay and his unfriendly pals at the bar, the other set in Whale's sitting room, where he shares the broadcast with his prejudiced housemaid. In Condon's film, the shots of the two different sets are edited in a parallel way, the viewer swaying between them, and the jokes and vulgar comments made in Clay's presence are counterbalanced by the housemaid's naïve judgement of the movie and Whale's remembrance of filming it.

Whale's memory is triggered by the Bride's presentation, acted by the two scientists – the literary Frankenstein supported by the new film character, Dr Pretorius – as if they were in front of a mundane public, and followed by a series of oddly angled shots of the woman-monster, in a self-aware tribute to the silent cinema the monster comes from. She is then showed uttering her

most uncompromising and primitive but sincere refusal of the mate for whom she has been created (in quite an opposite way, Frankenstein's former fiancée will show her passionate desire to be paired with the monster in Mel Brooks' 1974 parody *Young Frankenstein*). The sequence of Clay watching *Bride of Frankenstein* with the bunch of customers at the run-down bar results in the breaking up of his already loose liaison with the waitress, who is critical, during the broadcast, of what she judges to be a flaw in the movie, its inconsistency between the horror and the comedy genres. But it is exactly through the crevices of this allegedly disturbing inconsistency that Whale had turned the predictable sequel of the 1931 film into a covert camp[6] revision of the Frankenstein story, reflecting the director's relish for this kind of sensibility both in the nuanced sexual unsteadiness of characters' behaviour (Frankenstein neglecting his beloved for the creature, the Bride rejecting her mate) and in the frankly humorous contamination of film genres.

4. Which Frankenstein?

As I mentioned before, Clay undergoes a parallel evolution as a character both in the movie about James Whale, the director of *Frankenstein*, and in the mental feature that Whale is constructing in his mind to find a short-cut to his own death. Clay is initially cast as the scientist, but the idea is soon dismissed when Whale learns that Clay had joined the army to fight in the Korean War. Before becoming a potentially destructive monster in Whale's mind, Clay feels already socially 'monstrous' for being a marine who never started his service due to an urgent surgical operation. In addition to that, what makes Whale change his mind about Clay's role in his reinvented movie is the man's silhouette.

Shot in Whale's visual frame, Clay's figure makes him fit to embody the Frankenstein icon as he reminds both viewer and director of the monster, no matter how far his handsome face is from Karloff's made up Gothic countenance: he is very tall, with broad, square shoulders and his crew cut makes his head as flat as that of the monster in Whale's movie. What both Bram and Condon do, in a shared trans-medial attitude, is imagining a chance for Whale to deliberately update his icon, merging into it its subsequent transformations through its migrations across different semiotic areas. This passage is quite crucial to defining the iconic significance of Frankenstein's creature, starting from the trivial fact that, already by the time of Whale's last days, depicted in *Father of Frankenstein*, the monster had reached such an expanded range of symbolic references as to mean potentially anything. The universality of the monster is mostly the outcome of this process, developed in the US, which involved the tv broadcasting of Universal films for a composite public of old and new fans, and targeted the monster's "hideous progeny" toward a young-

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6   In his BFI essay on *Bride of Frankenstein*, Albert Manguel uses Susan Sontag's words to define Whale's camp as a "love of the unnatural, of artifice and exaggeration" (Manguel 1997: 11).

Vincenzo Maggitti | *Frankenstein: the Disturbing Migrations of a Twentieth-century Icon*

er public of consumers, making it more clownish and funnier and, more importantly, quite abruptly disconnecting him from the tormented figure that inhabited the original novel.

Among the attempts to restore the creature to its previous thought-provoking position, I will now discuss an American hybrid product, already hinting at the future convergence of media. *True Story* is a 1973 television movie, that, although replicating the atmosphere of the novel in a period setting, shows the creature of Frankenstein's experiment not as a horrible assemblage of different pieces of corpses, but quite to the contrary, as an attractive young man, whose social debut as the new stranger in town at the theatre is warmly welcomed by the community. The story, though, is meant to be true not so much to Mary Shelley's novel as to the screenwriter Christopher Isherwood's reinvention of the plot, whose cast of characters also includes Dr Polidori, actually George Byron's friend and physician, who took a fancy at joining the literary competition for the best horror story that the writers devised as a pastime for the rainy days at Villa Diodati. Like Dr Pretorius in *Bride of Frankenstein*, Polidori is a weird character who adamantly seduces Frankenstein back into his scientific commitment to the creature and its possible progeny.

Isherwood and Whale were both British gay artists who worked in the US, albeit under different circumstances, both trying to preserve some of the original creature's complexity in their works. Even if Whale, being responsible for the birth of the icon of Frankenstein, somehow began the long-termed process of merchandising Frankenstein through the agency of Universal Pictures, he was quite aware, from the very beginning, of the importance of giving a soul to his deathly pale creature. A similar concern would guide British director Kenneth Branagh in 1994, when he decided to realize a version of *Frankenstein* much closer to the original novel. Though Branagh rejected the monster's iconic image from the '30s in favour of a completely new look and new personality, he still preserved (in fact, heightened) the horrors of the creature's features, thus keeping, though unsuccessfully, the monster in the precincts of a physical, anatomical realism which had granted its more consumeristic approval.

True Story, instead, is among the 1970s films that, long before Branagh's reimagining, recognized the human factor in Whale's monster. Initially grateful to Frankenstein for having given him good-looking features, Isherwood's creature will violently react to the skin damage he sees infectiously covering his face and features, unable to understand why his closest friend and master cannot help him. The idea of re-humanising the monster is clearly detectable in Victor Erice's *El Espiritu de la colmena* (1974), where, in war-stricken Spain, a little girl, after seeing *Frankenstein* in a mobile cinema with her sister (proof of the prolonged international distribution of Universal movies), is sure the monster is hiding in an abandoned barn, where actually a republican soldier is recovering from his wounds, trying to escape Franco's troops. The iconic value of Frankenstein operates as an empathic link between the child and the soldier, allowing her to realize that the soldier is experiencing hate and persecution, just as the monster on the screen. In that same year Mel

Vincenzo Maggitti | *Frankenstein: the Disturbing Migrations of a Twentieth-century Icon*

Brooks's *Young Frankenstein* was released, an outstanding and unconventional expression of that parody which "the American monster consistently lists into" (Von Mueller: 189). The movie ends with Frankenstein and his creature switching their brains, a reversed experimental metaphor of the surfacing, irrepressible human characteristics of the monster.

In all the previous examples, the iconic circulation of the creature in the Western world is subjected to a defamiliarizing narration that, quite visibly in *El Espiritu de la colmena*, separates the iconic image of the monster from the embodiment of the same image in another character. This character, in turn, becomes much better entitled to represent the relation of the monster to the viewer's historical, social, and even existential reality.

In *Gods and Monsters*, apparently, the opposite seems to happen. Desperately wanting to die, Whale envisages the device of turning Clay into his murderer, a new monster that got used to killing people at war. Since Clay actually has not gone through the war experience, he needs to have it engrafted onto his body so as to become a clone of all the soldiers he did not manage to be: this is the aim of the disconcertingly powerful scene of Whale putting on Clay's face a gas-mask from his First World War props, providing the bolts that Clay's neck could not display and, therefore, implementing his iconic reference to the image of the monster. In order to elicit the murder instinct in Clay, Whale resorts to harassing him, just after asking him to put on the mask for fun. The hybrid combination is rejected by Clay: after hitting the old man in a fit of compulsive rage, he decides not to lend his body to a reconstruction of the monster.

This decision is quite relevant to the issue of the iconic presence of the creature. By refusing to kill, Clay indirectly rejects the merchandised version of the monster's icon, the one that stresses its inherent tendency to violence, which has become prevalent in mass culture, in absolute contempt for the other characteristics of the creature. His troubled kindness to the old, confused man, instead, is an expression of his choice to recover exactly those forgotten qualities that were originally attached to the monster's profile. Becoming an iconoclast, Clay rediscovers in the monster a kindred spirit in three different moments of the movie, each linked to a different mediatized version of the iconic Frankenstein. I have already discussed one of those moments, the different seances in front of the broadcasted *Bride* and the different attitudes towards the televised reproduction of the classic film, including the empathy, verging on identification, that Clay feels for the monster when it is made fun of by the other viewers. Before moving on to the other vision of *Bride*, almost at the end of *God and Monster*, I wish to focus on another iconic reproduction of the monster, a threshold in the pictorial definition of Frankenstein icon.

5. An Iconic Threshold

In *Gods and Monsters*, just before his warlike clash with the director, Clay is given a rare gift by Whale, his original sketch of Frankenstein's monster. The 'icon' of Frankenstein is, therefore, visually represented as a legacy passing on from the *Father of Frankenstein* (Whale) to future generations. The

Vincenzo Maggitti | *Frankenstein: the Disturbing Migrations of a Twentieth-century Icon*

drawing also conveys all the unmentioned mixture of affection and pride that Whale still feels for his creature, whose portrait is kept as if it were a departed member of his family.

Unlike Clay, who shows a childish enthusiasm for this present, we know that Whale is excited to think a new monster is soon going to be born in his own apartment. This transition is not going to take place, but its theoretical possibility opens up a space for reflection about the balance between life and death in the icon-making process: Clay's body (in the sequence he is almost naked, as they have come back home drenched from a party in the midst of a heavy shower) is the new region for the Frankenstein icon to be revived in Whale's mad project (mad like the scientists who have been cast in Frankenstein's role). But, in order to achieve this goal, the old, familiar image of the monster must be dispensed of. As spectators of the movie within the movie that has been showed in its televised context, we have witnessed the monster's death in the laboratory, shown as a suicidal act of the creature realizing there is no more chance for it in the living world. The body of the monster has thus disappeared and Whale, by using the drawn image as a testament, wants to do as much, but he needs a monster, and a living body such as Clay's, to make it happen.

The centrality of the body as a vehicle for the reproduction of icons is one of the key concepts that Hans Belting has introduced and semiotically emphasized in his contribution to image theory. Belting, however, does not refer only to the living body that intervenes in the iconic process, but also to the dead body as iconic in the history of images, namely in the photographic experience. Notwithstanding its apparent paradox, the birth of photography is linked to the portrayal of dead bodies, whose ritual function is to perpetuate the presence of the dear one in the absence of its physical appearance. Being the image of a dead come back to life, the iconic image of Frankenstein is meaningfully entwined with the use of images as substitutes for the departed. As Belting has remarked in his study of the iconic presence, pictures, or rather nineteenth-century daguerreotypes, were taken of dead bodies in order to allow them to be virtually present in our lives. This function of the artificial image is still relevant today, showing the connection between the body that communicates its absence and the body that perceives it. Belting reformulates this ideas in terms of his image theory, tracing it back to the anthropological cult of the dead, where an image was the answer to "the demand for a medium to re-establish the presence of the dead" (Belting 2011: p. 87).

Discussing the close relation between death and image, Belting remarks that the image of the dead is not to be considered a paradox. In fact, it shows the very origin of what an image actually is: a reproduction of something or someone that represents an absentee. Being an unbearable form of absence, death is the manifestation of the true meaning of an image, a way to fill up the emptiness caused by death. Doctor Frankenstein's experiment in Shelley's novel is, most of all, a death-defying act, which cinema would later bring to a more accomplished stage. When Frankenstein shouts enthusiastically that his creature is "alive", what he is doing, in terms of semiotics, is to overturn the ordinary and 'natural' process of becoming an ephemeral image of oneself,

that which every individual turns out to be, being doomed to death. So, when the creature takes life, this pattern of life (body) and death (image) gets reversed and the visual descriptions of the creature moving towards his creator are already symbolic of their iconic relevance to the cultural and anthropological mutation in the public.

The filmic surfacing of the creature in Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein* restages for the audience a similar compositional pattern, but for a fundamental feature, i.e. the medium. The breakthrough that connects the birth of cinema with the creature had already been remarked by Noël Burch (1990) when he named as "Frankenstein syndrome" the desire of the bourgeoise to become immortal through film images. But the iconic range of Frankenstein is not only limited to a class-related discourse. Through our agency as spectators, the image of the creature becomes present and its presence takes on an iconic value for each of us as we reinterpret it. In *Father of Frankenstein*, Clay is the body that perceives and personally acknowledges the iconic presence of the creature. In Whale's scheme, though, Clay becomes also the medium that conveys the image of the monster, making it 'alive' once again. The interaction, therefore, turns into a struggle, a hand-to-hand combat that Clay fights with himself and with Whale.

The iconic image of the sketch, however, will be offered again to our attention at the end of the movie. After some years have elapsed, Clay is sitting on the couch watching Whale's *Frankenstein* with his child. The close up on Clay's face as he watches the film clearly suggests all the memories he is associating with the images. At the end of the film, Clay tells his son about his friendship with the director and fetches the drawing as evidence of what he is saying. In a further act of legacy, he gives the sketch to the boy, who has appreciated the movie, probably meeting for the first time a different version of the monster from the clownish ones he has encountered as an American boy.

To tell the truth, the movie ends in the space outside the suburban house of Clay's family, where he, after throwing the garbage, starts parading the street stomping and clomping away like the creature. This act looks like a posthumous homage to Whale, whose memory has been evoked by the vision of the movie and by the sketch as well. Whale's dream of making the monster "alive" again is retrospectively fulfilled. Besides, the vision of Clay walking like the monster on his own, out in the street, and unseen by his family, also hints at a free re-appropriation of his queer experience on his own terms, without being induced to any warmongering deed. Lending his body to the iconic representation of the creature, Clay is also restating the presence of the monster's issues in contemporary life. The homage Clay pays to Frankenstein's creature *through* Whale also underlines the relevance of our perception of images and the ability of our body to become a medium for the image/icon to be reproduced.

From an iconological point of view there is something more to be said about this "new" creature resulting from the juxtaposition between the mythic Frankenstein and its reshaping in a different time period and context. Among the several references on which the figure of Clay is modelled, I have so far dealt with science only indirectly. Actually, Clay has more to do with science

than his little 'cameo' as the scientist in Whale's nightmarish re-adaptation of his *Frankenstein* would suggest. Drawing on the semiotic value of his name, where the biblical connection to John Milton's Adam resounds utterly meaningful, we can spot in his character a reference to the topical issue of clones, a rather controversial link in the scientific literature about cloning.[7]

As I discussed above, *Frankenstein* has been recurrently considered a breakthrough in the literary tradition that has foreshadowed the biological reality of the cloning process. With Clay and Whale, however, the very process undergoes a deep structural change due to its becoming sexually connoted instead of being an asexual reproduction of cells. Whale's dream of making Clay a 'clone' of the creature is based, indeed, on a falsely prejudiced decoding of Clay's human genome as a code of violence and destruction, which might have been switched on again with the right move. When Whale sets the scene for his ambush on Clay, he uses memorabilia props from his wartime experience. His suicidal project of bringing back to life Clay's dormant soldier's spirit is reminiscent of Doctor Frankenstein's experiment, if only for the thunderstorm which floods the dark laboratory-apartment with its dazzling light. However, obviously abandoning the electrical devices in order to perform the experiment, Whale tries to stir up the 'monster' hidden in Clay through a sexual ambush where the gas-mask takes on its fetish leather gay nuance while at the same time keeping its war attribute. It is actually this short-circuit between sex and death that Whale is aiming at with his final directorial performance.

As a consequence, the clone Clay refuses to become can be truly said to be a cultural-gendered variation of the Frankenstein icon. Moreover, Clay's refusal to follow Whale's direction in this extreme re-adaptation of the lab scene in *Frankenstein* takes us back to the beginning of this essay and, specifically, to the taboo-ridden question of the 'intelligence' of artificial items, such as the new-generation algorithms discussed in *The Guardian*. In his article, Smith extends his reflection to the contemporary electronic warfare, criticizing the lack of accuracy in keeping control of technological devices such as drones as a way to take military advantage of their unpredictability in terms of their resistance to sabotage. From this point of view, Whale's "military" abuse of Clay looks even more clearly like an anticipation of a future, more technological submission of an iconic image, checked by the human factor before producing a deadly outcome.

Is it possible for an icon, and an extremely pop one moreover, to become what we define as intelligent by experiencing far-reaching cultural and emotional combinations in the semiotic areas across which it has been migrating? Isn't the constant surfacing of an icon in our cultural domains a manifest sign of its having acquired a kind of autonomous ability of responding to the undercurrents and the unanswered issues of the time? And, last but not least, what about Clay's final idea of nurturing our own monster as part of our human nature, preventing it from being used for any violent purpose?

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7   As a resume of the debate, see <https://www.acsh.org/news/2002/04/11/consent-clones-and-frankenstein>.

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Bride of Frankenstein
1935   Directed by James Whale, Universal Pictures, US.

El espíritu de la colmena
1973   Directed by Victor Erice, Spain.

Frankenstein's Chronicles (TV Series)
2015   Created by Benjamin Ross and Barry Langford, London, Rainmark Films.

Gods and Monsters
1998   Directed by Bill Condon, Santa Monica, Lionsgate Films.

Young Frankenstein
1974   Directed by Mel Brooks, Los Angeles, 20th Century Fox.

The True Story (TV movie)
1973   Created by Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy, directed by Jack Smith, Los Angeles, NBC.

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