

Looking at the Monster: *Frankenstein* and Film

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Movies speak mainly to the eyes. Though they started talking in words some seventy years ago, what they say to our ears seldom overpowers or even matches the impact of what they show us. This does not mean that film is a medium “essentially” visual, any more than theater is. Many of the films made in the twenty-five years following the 1927 advent of the talkie crackle with dialogue worthy of the stage, which in fact is where many of them originated. Even in the visually captivating *Citizen Kane*, the single word *Rosebud* resonates just as memorably as any of its shots, and one notable film from the mid-twentieth century—Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* (1950)—has been plausibly read as an allegory of how the word contests the power of the cinematic image. But whether or not this film ultimately “confirms the triumph of the female image,” as W. J. T. Mitchell suggests,¹ or demonstrates the ironizing power of the word, it cannot help but remind us of what film and film theory alike

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1. W. J. T. Mitchell, “Going Too Far with the Sister Arts,” in *Space, Time, Image, Sign: Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts*, ed. James A. W. Heffernan (New York, 1987), p. 9.

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repeatedly privilege: the structure and sequence of images, which André Bazin calls “the language of cinema.”²

The fact that Bazin welcomed the literal language of the human voice to movies because it enhanced their realism only heightens the significance of his steady concentration on the figurative language of what movies show, what they say to our eyes.³ For Bazin, the great divide in the history of film was not a split between silents and talkies but a crack that began *within* the silent era, when expressionist directors like Griffith and Eisenstein used devices such as montage and special lighting to create meaning from images while realist directors like Flaherty and Stroheim used prolonged shots to record actions and settings that putatively spoke for themselves. For Bazin, therefore, the advent of recorded sound in movies simply reinforced the realism of films bent on recording the visible world in visual—or, more specifically, spatial—terms, preserving the unity of space in prolonged, deep-focus shots.⁴ One may object, of course, that recorded sounds lead no more surely to realism than recorded sights, for both are equally liable to manipulation.⁵ But the crucial point is that while Bazin welcomed sound to the world of film, it did nothing at all to change his concept of the language of cinema, which remained purely visual.

Since Bazin, film theory has become more explicitly linguistic but no

2. André Bazin, “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema” (1950), in *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray, 2 vols. (Berkeley, 1971), 1:28.

3. I cite Bazin precisely because he treated sound as an asset to film, unlike critics such as Rudolf Arnheim, who thought sound fundamentally alien to the art of manipulating silent images for expressive effect. See Rudolf Arnheim, “The Making of a Film” [selection from *Film as Art* (1933)], in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4th ed., ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy (New York, 1992), pp. 275–77. More recently, Stanley Cavell has argued that while movies can effectively break silence with speech, their power lies chiefly in their images, which convey “the unsayable by showing experience beyond the reach of words” (Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* [1971; Cambridge, 1979], p. 152).

4. See Bazin, “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” pp. 33–36.

5. Long before Bazin asserted that “the sound image” is “far less flexible than the visible image,” Roman Jakobson observed that sound need not be synchronously bound to images in talking films. See Bazin, “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” p. 33, and Roman Jakobson, “Is the Cinema in Decline?” (1933), in *Russian Formalist Film Theory*, ed. Herbert Eagle (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1981), p. 164.

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less committed to the principle that the language of cinema is fundamentally visual. When Christian Metz explains the semiotics of film, he treats its syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes as chains and stacks of images, not of words.⁶ When Kaja Silverman applies the linguistic concept of suture to film, she redefines suture in terms of interlocking shots.⁷ To realize that both these formulations could apply just as well to silent as to talking films is to see how tenaciously the image dominates film theory and criticism. Seventy years of sound have not really loosened its grip.

This stubborn visuality of cinema—or, rather, our habit of considering it predominantly visual—may help to explain why film versions of *Frankenstein* have drawn so little attention from academic critics of the novel. Not long after its publication, Percy Shelley asserted that language “is a more direct representation of the actions and passions of our internal being, . . . than colour, form, or motion.”⁸ Film versions of *Frankenstein* seem to confirm this axiom by showing us far less of the monster’s inner life than his long autobiographical narratives in the novel do.⁹ In the first talking film version, James Whale’s *Frankenstein* of 1931, the monster is totally silenced and thus forced—like the monster of Richard Brinsley Peake’s *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein* (1823), the first of many plays based on the novel—to make gesture and expression tell a fraction of his story, which is mutilated as well as severely abridged.¹⁰ Mary Shel-

6. See Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York, 1974), pp. 108–46.

7. See Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York, 1983), pp. 201–5.

8. Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry, or Remarks Suggested by an Essay Entitled ‘The Four Ages of Poetry’” (1821), *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York, 1977), p. 483.

9. The namelessness of the being created by Victor Frankenstein makes the very act of designating him problematic. Victor calls him a “miserable monster” from the moment he is animated—simply because of the way he appears (Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, ed. Maurice Hindle [Harmondsworth, 1992], p. 57; hereafter abbreviated *F*). Shorn of Victor’s instant prejudice against him—a prejudice shared by everyone else who sees him—he is properly Victor’s “creature,” which is what he calls himself (*F*, p. 96). Yet when he sees his own reflection for the first time, he concludes that he is “in reality [a] monster” (*F*, p. 110). Taking this cue, I call him a monster except where special conditions necessitate the term “creature.”

10. Following common practice, I refer to the 1931 Universal *Frankenstein* as James Whale’s version because he directed it. But the genesis of this film exemplifies the way filmmaking disperses the notion of authorship—a topic I cannot adequately explore in this essay. Based on an Americanized version of Peggy Webling’s 1927 London stage play of the novel, the screenplay for the 1931 *Frankenstein* was credited to Garrett Fort and Francis Edward Faragoh but shaped in part by three other writers (Robert Florey, John L. Balderston, and Richard L. Schayer), and at least one more—the young John Huston, no less—helped with the prologue. See Wheeler Winston Dixon, “The Films of *Frankenstein*,” in *Approaches to Teaching Shelley’s “Frankenstein,”* ed. Stephen C. Behrendt (New York, 1990), p. 169. See also David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (New York, 1993), p. 138. Even if we hold Whale chiefly responsible for translating a multiauthored

ley's monster leaves us with a poignant *apologia pro vita sua* delivered to Walton over the body of Victor; Whale's creature dies in a burning windmill, while Elizabeth and Victor (unaccountably named Henry) both survive to beget what Victor's father (who also survives, in perfect health) expects will be a son. The latest film version is much closer to the book but nonetheless adds its own twists. In Kenneth Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994), the creature rips out Elizabeth's heart and in so doing reenacts what filmmakers regularly do to Mary Shelley's text. They rip out *its* heart by making the creature speechless, as Whale's version did, or at the very least cutting out his narrative, as even Branagh's version does.

What then can film versions of *Frankenstein* offer to academic critics of the novel? Can they be anything more than vulgarizations or travesties of the original? To answer these questions in anything but the negative, we must consider what film can tell us—or show us—about the role of the visual in the life of the monster represented by the text. If film versions of the novel ignore or elide the inner life of the monster, they nonetheless foreground for the viewer precisely what the novel largely hides from the reader. 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: how do we see the monster, what does he see, and how does he want to be seen? To answer these questions, I will chiefly consider three of the nearly two hundred films that *Frankenstein* has spawned: Whale's version, Branagh's version, and Mel Brooks's *Young Frankenstein* (1974).¹¹

I

To learn why academic critics may need film to help answer the questions I have posed, consider two recent essays that both set out to explain the monster in terms of his body. Bette London gives a new twist to feminist readings of the novel by arguing that it makes a spectacle of stricken masculinity—of the broken, enervated, or disfigured male body—and

screenplay into the film we call his, the crucial scene in which the creature unintentionally drowns the child Maria—a scene that for at least one critic “utterly” shapes the meaning of the film as a whole film (Dixon, “The Films of *Frankenstein*,” p. 171)—embodies not so much Whale's intentions as those of Boris Karloff as shown below in section 3.

11. My source for the total number of *Frankenstein* films, including independent and privately distributed versions, is Steven Earl Forry, *Hideous Progenies: Dramatizations of “Frankenstein” from Mary Shelley to the Present* (Philadelphia, 1990), p. 127. For annotated lists of the more notable versions, see Alan G. Barbour, “The Frankenstein Films,” in Radu Florescu, *In Search of Frankenstein* (Boston, 1975), pp. 189–211, and Leonard Wolf, “A Selected Frankenstein Filmography,” in *Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein”: The Classic Tale of Terror Reborn on Film*, ed. Diana Landau (New York, 1994), pp. 186–88.

thus challenges “the singular authority of masculinity and . . . the fixity of sexual positions.”¹² Peter Brooks likewise highlights Mary Shelley’s representation of the male body, but his argument turns on the contrast between the ugliness of the creature’s body and the eloquence of his speech. Caught in the contradiction between the visual and the verbal, between—in Lacanian terms—the imaginary order of the mirror stage and the symbolic, acculturating order of language, the Monster (as Brooks calls him) is that which “exceeds the very basis of classification, language itself.”¹³

Each of these two readings aims to define the verbalized body that the text exhibits to the reader. Yet London turns the body of the not-yet-animated monster into a universalized sign of masculine vulnerability, disfigurement, and pathetic lifelessness. She thus averts her critical gaze from the sight of the monster’s *animated* body, which is anything but powerless and which appears uniquely repulsive at the very instant it is given life.¹⁴ In Brooks’s argument, the body of the monster is largely consumed by what the monster himself calls the “godlike science” of language—or, more precisely, by the Lacanian vocabulary of desire, which subordinates the body to the word (*F*, p. 108). “Love,” writes Brooks, “is in essence the demand to be *heard* by the other” (“WIM,” p. 210; emphasis mine).¹⁵ “Hear my tale,” says the creature to Victor as he covers Victor’s eyes to relieve them from “the sight of [his] detested form” (*F*, p. 98). The creature’s very turn to language as a means of “escape from a condition of ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’” is precisely the turn reenacted by critics like Brooks, who define him in essentially linguistic terms (“WIM,” p. 218).

Yet the creature’s longing to communicate in words—his desire to be heard—is no more urgent than his longing to be *looked at* with desire, with something other than fear and loathing. Just before planting in the dress of the sleeping Justine the portrait that will lead to her execution, he fleetingly imagines himself her lover: “I bent over her, and whispered, ‘Awake, fairest, thy lover is near—he who would give his life but to obtain one look of affection from thine eyes: my beloved, awake!’” (*F*, p. 139). This remarkable passage, which first appeared in the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, echoes at once the Song of Solomon (Song of Sol. 2:10–12), the words spoken by Milton’s Satan to a sleeping Eve, and—most poignantly of all, perhaps—the words spoken by Keats’s Porphyro to the

12. Bette London, “Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, and the Spectacle of Masculinity,” *PMLA* 108 (Mar. 1993): 264.

13. Peter Brooks, “What Is a Monster? (According to *Frankenstein*)” *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 218; hereafter abbreviated “WIM.”

14. “He was ugly [while unfinished],” says Victor; “but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived” (*F*, p. 57).

15. Quoting Jacques Lacan, Brooks writes: “What is finally desired by the speaker is ‘the desirer in the other,’ that is, that the speaking subject himself be ‘called to as desirable’” (“WIM,” p. 210). See Jacques Lacan, *Le Transfert*, vol. 8 of *Le Séminaire* (Paris, 1991), p. 415.

sleeping Madeline in Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes."¹⁶ Ever since Laura Mulvey's classic essay on visual pleasure, feminist criticism has sensitized us to the visual subjugation of women by the gaze of the male, and as Brooks notes, in his sole reference to film, the condition of "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" is the phrase Mulvey uses for the "traditional exhibitionist role" given to women in film.¹⁷ Yet if the creature's aversion to being seen signifies a feminine or feminist rejection of that role, as Brooks suggests, his desire to be seen *longingly*—to be looked at with affection—reminds us that the capacity to attract and hold such a look is just as often a gender-neutral source of power as a gendered target of male exploitation (see "WIM," pp. 218–19).

The doctrine that film subjugates women to the gaze of the male should also be rethought, as Silverman suggests, with the aid of Lacan's distinction between the gaze and the look. While the gaze is impersonal, ubiquitous (issuing "from all sides"), and detached, the look is the desiring act of an eye seeing from just one viewpoint.¹⁸ Such an act cannot be simply identified with male power. As Silverman notes, a film such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Beware of a Holy Whore* (1971) "not only extends desire and the look which expresses it to the female subject, but makes the male desiring look synonymous with loss of control."¹⁹

What Silverman says of Fassbinder's film might well describe the acute ambivalence with which Mary Shelley's creature looks at the sleeping Justine. Longing "to obtain one look of affection from [her] eyes," he is terrified by the thought that if she awakened to see him, she would curse and denounce him as a murderer (*F*, p. 139). Though no film known to me conveys the creature's ambivalence in this scene (Branagh's brief shot of him looming over Justine shows just his desire), Branagh's film includes a moment of the creature's tormented looking in another

16. See John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *John Milton*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford, 1991), bk. 5, ll. 38–47, p. 447; hereafter abbreviated *PL*. Like the creature, Porphyro addresses a sleeping lady with feelings of profound ambivalence, eager to awaken her—"And now, my love, my seraph fair, awake!"—yet petrified when he succeeds: "Her blue affrayed eyes wide open shone: / Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone" (John Keats, "The Eve of St. Agnes," *John Keats: Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger [Cambridge, Mass., 1982], p. 237, ll. 276, 296–97).

17. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989), p. 19. Mulvey's essay first appeared in *Screen* 16 (Autumn 1975): 6–18. See also "WIM," p. 218.

18. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York, 1978), p. 72; quoted in Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York, 1992), p. 130. Lacan's terms are *le regard* and *l'oeil*, which Silverman respectively calls the "gaze" and the "look."

19. Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, p. 131. Carol Clover likewise argues that in slasher films such as *Hell Night* (1981), the "Final Girl"—a would-be victim who survives to take revenge on a murderous male—finally assumes the gaze, "making a spectacle of the killer and a spectator of herself" (Carol J. Clover, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," *Representations*, no. 20 [Fall 1987]: 219).

scene: a close-up of his bloodshot eyes peering through a chink in the wall of the De Lacey's cottage. In the text, where the creature tells Victor that his "eye could just penetrate" the chink, the phallic intrusiveness implied by his language is belied by his vulnerability, for the sight of old De Lacey and the lovely young Agatha fills him with such "a mixture of pain and pleasure" that he shortly feels compelled to turn away (*F*, p. 104). In Branagh's film, the close-up of his peering face combines the spectacle of his mutilated features with the complex expression of his desire to see and his fear of being seen.

Since the whole episode of the monster's spying on the De Lacey's is narrated in the novel by the monster himself, the text never describes the sight of his peering face. So we might construe this shot as an example of the way film reveals what the novel hides or suppresses. Yet to identify anything as hidden or suppressed in a novel is to acknowledge or assert its presence there as something implied, something we are authorized to imagine. Elaine Scarry has recently argued that verbal arts can achieve the "vivacity" of the material world by telling us how to imagine or construct an object of perception, how to imitate the act of perceiving it.²⁰ We can be led to imagine a three-dimensional object, she says, by the description of something transparent—like film or water—passing over something solid.²¹ If Scarry is right, Mary Shelley prompts us to visualize a body when Victor describes what he saw just after animating the monster: "Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath" (*F*, p. 56). But even without such precise instruction, any description of an act of looking can lead us to imagine both the seen and the seer.²² What else could explain Branagh's conviction that the novel actually *does* describe the monster's spying face? "There's a very strong image in Shelley's book," he writes, "of the Creature peering . . . and spying on the family. We reproduced that exactly, this image of the eyes as windows of his soul."²³ For all the febleness of his cliché, Branagh unwittingly testifies to the force of the sight implied by Mary Shelley's text.

Beyond exposing such sights to the viewer's eye, film versions of *Frankenstein* implicitly remind us that filmmaking itself is a Frankensteinian exercise in artificial reproduction.²⁴ Mary Shelley's Victor is a

20. Elaine Scarry, "On Vivacity: The Difference between Daydreaming and Imagining-Under-Authorial-Instruction," *Representations*, no. 52 (Fall 1995): 1.

21. See *ibid.*, p. 9.

22. On this point, see Ellen J. Esrock, *The Reader's Eye: Visual Imaging as Reader Response* (Baltimore, 1994), p. 183.

23. Kenneth Branagh, "Frankenstein Reimagined," in *Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein,"* p. 23.

24. In film theory, as in Mary Shelley's novel, the idea of artificial reproduction has sometimes excited alarm. In 1933, Arnheim wrote that films were already approaching the "dangerous goal" of manufacturing "an image . . . which is astoundingly like some natural object" (Arnheim, "The Complete Film," [selection from *Film as Art* (1933)], in *Film Theory and Criticism*, p. 50). Declining to tell Walton just how he made the monster, Victor likewise calls such information "dangerous" (*F*, p. 52).

“Modern Prometheus” in the words of her subtitle, a figure created from the fire-stealer she found in the opening lines of Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound* and the man-making master craftsman that she found in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.²⁵ As Anne Mellor has shown, *Frankenstein* conflates the fire-stealer and the man-maker of classical antiquity in the figure of a 1790s scientist exploiting the newly discovered powers of electricity, the fire of life, the “spark of being” with which—by the flickering light of a candle that is “nearly burnt out”—he animates the creature (*F*, p. 56).²⁶ Is it mere coincidence that the earliest known *Frankenstein* movie—made in 1910—came from the film company of Thomas Edison, who had thirty years earlier invented the first commercially practical incandescent lamp and installed in New York City the world’s first central electric-light power plant? Ever since Edison, filmmakers have been reenacting what Victor calls his “animation” of “lifeless matter” (*F*, p. 53).

Mythically, as William Nestruck notes, the concept of animation in *Frankenstein* looks both backward and forward: backward to Genesis and the creation of man and woman, “which two great sexes animate the world,” and forward—chronologically at least—to the mechanical reproduction of animal movement on a screen and to the illusion of metamorphosis (*PL*, bk. 8, l. 151, p. 511).²⁷ For if Mary Shelley’s modern Prometheus originates in part from her reading of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, one of her own most telling passages anticipates what Georges Méliès discovered by accident in 1898, when his camera briefly jammed while he was filming traffic outside the Paris Opera and he then resumed cranking. When he projected the film, which had captured two discontinuous sequences of images before and after the interruption, he saw “a bus changed into a hearse, and men changed into women.”²⁸ By the end of the nineteenth century, then, film could actualize the vividly metamorphic nightmare that comes to Victor right after he animates the creature.²⁹

At the moment of animation, Victor’s admiration for the beauty of the creature’s inert form dissolves. “The beauty of the dream vanished,”

25. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Frank Justus Miller, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1921), 1:6–9 [1.1.78–88].

26. See Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York, 1988), pp. 102–7.

27. See William Nestruck, “Coming to Life: *Frankenstein* and the Nature of Film Narrative,” in *The Endurance of “Frankenstein”: Essays on Mary Shelley’s Novel*, ed. George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher (Berkeley, 1979), pp. 294–95.

28. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 291.

29. The story of this development is complicated by the fact that some pioneer filmmakers such as Louis Lumière (inventor of the Cinématographe) actually resisted “the Frankensteinian dream . . . of analogical representation, the mythology of victory over death” even as their inventions helped to realize this dream (Noël Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*, trans. and ed. Ben Brewster [Berkeley, 1990], p. 20). As Siegfried Kracauer long ago noted, Lumière aimed to reproduce the world while Méliès sought to re-create it. See Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York, 1965), pp. 30–33.

he says, "and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart" (*F*, p. 56). The nightmare reenacts this change by essentially reversing what Victor has done—bestow animation on a composite of lifeless body parts—and precisely reversing what he had hoped to do: "renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption" (*F*, p. 53). In his nightmare, Victor is surprised to see Elizabeth walking down a street in Ingolstadt, but as soon as he embraces and kisses her, she turns into the worm-ridden corpse of his mother (see *F*, p. 57). This sudden dissolving of one image into another is "supremely cinematic," as Branagh has said of *Frankenstein* as a whole.³⁰ At the same time, the passage encapsulates the greatest of all ironies in the novel, the fact that Victor's ambition to create and renew life leads only to death. We will shortly see how Branagh's film intensifies this irony by pursuing some of the implications of the nightmare—even while eliding the nightmare itself.

2

First, however, Branagh's comment on *Frankenstein* must be qualified. Mary Shelley's novel is by turns supremely cinematic and stubbornly uncinematic. Much of it—such as the creature's account of what he learned from reading Milton, Plutarch, and Goethe (see *F*, pp. 124–27)—would be numbingly static on the screen. And filmmaking itself evokes Victor's project only in a broadly figurative sense. While film is a wholly artificial product, the creature consists entirely of natural body parts, so that he is closer to an actual human being with one or more transplanted organs than he is to the mechanical men constructed by futurist designers in the 1920s or to the cyborg of present-day science fiction.³¹ Nevertheless, the visual medium of film highlights something at once crucial to the novel and virtually invisible to the reader: the repulsiveness of the creature's appearance.

In the novel, the words of the creature—especially as we read his autobiographical story—cover our eyes, and our blindness to his appearance is precisely what enables us to see his invisible nobility. Though Victor abhors the creature's looks, the novel seldom asks us even to imagine them.³² Instead it repeatedly makes us imagine what the creature sees

30. Quoted in "The Filmmakers and Their Creations," *Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein,"* p. 177. Curiously enough, neither Branagh's film nor any other film of *Frankenstein* known to me includes the nightmare.

31. See Skal, *The Monster Show*, pp. 131–33. Donna Haraway explicitly exempts the cyborg—a composite of animal and machine—from the creature's heterosexual longing for organic or Edenic wholeness. See Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York, 1991), p. 151.

32. While the novel often asks us to imagine the monster's looking, as I have already noted, the only description of his looks appears in Victor's account of his newly animated

and hears. A faithful re-creation of the novel's central narrative, in fact, would never show the monster at all—would give us only the sound of his voice over shots of what he perceives, such as the roaring crowd of torch-bearing villagers charging up a mountain after him in Whale's version. Yet no director known to me has ever even considered filming the monster's story in this way.³³ Essentially, filmmakers treat it as Phiz the illustrator treats the hero's autobiography in Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849–50).³⁴ In film versions of *Frankenstein*, as in Phiz's illustrations, the first-person narrator telling us all that he experiences—or has experienced—becomes just one more visible object.³⁵

Yet if filmmakers seem thus compelled to objectify the creature, they also compel us to face—more frankly and forthrightly than critics of the novel usually do—the problem of the creature's appearance. In the novel, Victor says that the creature was “gigantic . . . about eight feet in height, and proportionably large,” that his skin was “yellow,” that his hair was “lustrous black, and flowing,” that his teeth were “of pearly whiteness,” that the color of his “watery eyes” almost matched that of their “dun-white sockets,” that his complexion was “shrivelled,” and that his lips were “straight [and] black” (*F*, pp. 52, 56). It is hard to know just what to make of this description. The creature's size is monstrous, but except for his yellow skin, the other details suggest a face seductively sinister rather than truly repulsive, something closer to Bela Lugosi's Count in Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931) than to the mouth-distending, barbed-wire stitchery of Robert De Niro's creature in Branagh's *Frankenstein*.³⁶ Yet Bra-

form. Not even when the monster is terrified by his own reflection in a pool do we get any further instructions on how to visualize him; see *F*, pp. 56, 110.

33. This subjective camera technique has been used for parts of many films, such as Delmer Daves's *Dark Passage* (1947) and is used throughout Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* (1946), where Montgomery himself plays the hero with the camera strapped to his chest. See Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1978), p. 160.

34. In chapter 5, for instance, David recalls how he drifted in and out of sleep during breakfast with the flute-playing Master at Salem House, hearing by turns the actual strains of the flute and the imagined sounds of the coach he would soon be taking. But the drawing shows him simply as an insensate object—a boy sitting asleep on a chair. See Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (New York, 1950), pp. 79–81. My thanks to Grant Cerny for this example.

35. According to Chatman, one of the many differences between fiction and film is that while fictional narratives may operate from a generalized perspective, film is always shot from a specific point of view—the viewpoint of the camera. See Chatman, “What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)” *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Autumn 1980):132–33. Paradoxically, however, film versions of a novel *told* from the viewpoint of a single character are almost never consistently *shot* from that viewpoint.

36. On the other hand, the frontispiece to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, which depicts the moment of the monster's first stirring, shows a well muscled male nude whose only serious abnormalities—apart from his size—are an elongated right hand and the sprouting of his head from his right shoulder (reproduced as the frontispiece to *The Mary*

nagh and his collaborators ask the right question about the creature's effect on Victor: "Why, after all this time, having seen what he was putting together, should he be so repelled and then be so frightened by it?"³⁷ The question becomes even more pointed when we realize that Victor made the creature from features "*selected . . . as beautiful*" (*F*, p. 56; emphasis mine). What makes Victor's composition of such beautiful features monstrous?

In part, the answer made by Branagh's film is much like the now-familiar answer formulated by critics such as Ellen Moers, who claim that Victor's sudden loathing for the newly animated creature he has long labored to construct evokes the sense of "revulsion against newborn life" that may be felt by any new mother, as Mary Shelley knew from her own experience.³⁸ Branagh's film makes this point graphically. First, the monster lunges from a great copper sarcophagus filled with water to make it a kind of womb. After he lands sprawling in the spill tank under it, Victor lifts him up, vainly tries to show him how to walk, then ties him standing to a set of chains. But when the struggling creature is struck by a falling piece of wood and shortly goes limp, Victor concludes that he himself has killed this luckless heir to "massive birth defects," and that "this evil must be destroyed . . . forever."³⁹ Since Branagh's Victor tries to help the creature at first and seems dismayed to think that he has killed him, he is decidedly more paternal—or maternal—than the Victor of the text. But when (in the next scene) Branagh's Victor awakens in his bedroom to find the naked, stitched-up creature looming over him, he cries out "No!" and flees ("S," p. 84). Like the Victor of the text, who finds the ugliness of the creature inconceivably magnified by its acquisition of the capacity to move, Branagh's Victor is horrified by life itself—by the living sight of what he has made (see *F*, p. 57).

Branagh's answer to his own question, then, is at once visual and

Shelley Reader, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Charles E. Robinson [New York, 1990]). Staged versions of the novel include at least one beautiful monster. In the Royal Ballet version, which premiered in London on 26 July 1985, the monster was represented by an Ariel-like figure costumed and made up wholly in white. (My thanks to Linda Hughes for this information.)

37. Branagh, "Frankenstein Reimagined," p. 19.

38. Ellen Moers, "Female Gothic," in *The Endurance of "Frankenstein,"* p. 81. Mary Shelley called *Frankenstein* her "hideous progeny" (Mary Shelley, author's introduction to the standard novels edition, *F*, p. 10; hereafter abbreviated "AI"). Also, as critics often remind us, she had already endured before writing it the death of her first child, born prematurely in February 1815, who lived just twelve days. See Muriel Spark, *Mary Shelley* (New York, 1987), p. 45. In itself this hardly explains why Victor is horrified by the very animation of the creature and dismayed by its stubborn survival. But Victor's "labour" in his "workshop of filthy creation" (*F*, pp. 52, 53) may well signify the repulsiveness of child-bearing. Moers calls Frankenstein "a horror story of maternity" (Moers, "Female Gothic," p. 83).

39. Steph Lady and Frank Darabont, "The Screenplay," in *Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein,"* p. 81; hereafter abbreviated "S."

psychological. His Victor rejects the creature in part because any newborn being may disgust its begetter and in part because this one—in the film—has apparently risen twice from the dead, more “hideous” than “a mummy again endued with animation,” in the punning words of the novel, which has just described Victor’s nightmare of embracing his dead mother (*F*, p. 57). But Branagh’s Victor is also horrified by the sheer ugliness of the creature, by the barbed-wire stitches that harrow his body and distort his face. The stitching of the creature—nowhere explicitly mentioned in Mary Shelley’s text—originates in film with Jack Pierce’s makeup for Boris Karloff in the Whale *Frankenstein*, where the creature’s face and body appear discreetly sutured. But the body of De Niro’s creature in Branagh’s film is vividly, cruelly stitched, and thus reminds us that Mary Shelley’s creature was precisely *not* a reanimated corpse—something Victor had so far found “impossible” to produce (*F*, p. 53)—but a patchwork quilt of flesh cut from dead bodies, a paradoxically ugly composite of features “*selected . . . as beautiful.*”

With singular irony, Victor’s phrase evokes a leading principle of neo-classical aesthetics. Encapsulated in the story of Zeuxis, the ancient Greek artist who painted Helen of Troy by selecting and combining the loveliest parts of the most beautiful virgins of Crotona, this was the principle of what Sir Joshua Reynolds called “Ideal Beauty” in visual art: a generalized shape abstracted from the comparative study of particular human figures, a “central form . . . from which every deviation is deformity.”⁴⁰ Victor deviates from the central form, of course, by making his creature eight feet tall. But otherwise his project turns neoclassical aesthetics on its head. By applying to corpses a formula calculated to produce ideal beauty in painting and sculpture, Victor generates only deformity: the deformity of a creature artificially *assembled*.⁴¹ It is this myth of miscreation, of artistic ambition run monstrously awry, that scores of filmmakers have sought to illuminate in their own art—an art which may yet lead us to a deeper understanding of Mary Shelley’s.

40. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (New Haven, Conn., 1975), p. 45. For an account of the story of Zeuxis, see Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago, 1958), p. 14.

41. Marie-Hélène Huet suggests that the creature is monstrous because Frankenstein’s art is purely reproductive or (in Plato’s term) *eikastiken*, “without interpretation, without proportion or the necessary betrayal of the model that makes the phantastiken object unfaithful to nature but at the same time aesthetically beautiful” (Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* [Cambridge, 1993], p. 132). Yet even if we construe Victor’s act of assembling *actual* features as the reproduction of a human body, the creature is an explicitly enlarged—and thus artfully transformed—version of the model, “about eight feet in height, and *proportionably large*” (*F*, p. 52; emphasis mine).

Let us return, then, to the question posed by Peter Brooks's essay: "What Is a Monster?" Unlike Brooks's linguistic response, the answer one might expect from film is that a monster is someone visibly deformed, hideous to behold. Yet Karloff's monster in the Whale *Frankenstein* is not unequivocally ugly. Without saying a single word, without the eloquence that enables the novel's monster to make us forget his ugliness, Karloff's monster excites our sympathy. He radiates longing when he raises his arms to the light pouring through the partly open roof of the dark watchtower where he has been made, and he radiates joy when he smilingly kneels to join the little girl Maria in picking and throwing daisies into a lake. Even his throwing of Maria into the lake—censored out of the prints originally released but now restored—was scripted as an innocent gesture prompted by his assumption that she would float like a flower, and in spite of Whale's wishes, Karloff played it this way.⁴² What do such moments tell us about monstrosity? Do they confirm what Mary Poovey has written of Mary Shelley's creature—that while "it recognizes and longs to overcome its definitive monstrosity," it "is unable to disguise its essential being"?⁴³ To rephrase my earlier question, just what is the essential being of a monster?

The difficulty of answering this question—or rather the problem with assuming too quickly that we know the answer—may be illustrated by turning again to Dickens, this time to *Great Expectations*. Shortly after Magwitch reveals himself as the source of Pip's wealth and gentlemanly status, which he has come back from New South Wales to admire, Pip explicitly compares the two to Victor and his creature. "The imaginary student," writes Pip, "pursued by the misshapen creature he had impiously made, was not more wretched than I, pursued by the creature who had made me, and recoiling from him with a stronger repulsion, the more he admired me and the fonder he was of me."⁴⁴ Pip is of course not just another Victor. As a gentleman "made" by the wealth of a criminal, he is himself a creature, and perhaps a monster of snobbery and affectation as well. But his aversion to Magwitch, who now wants Pip to care for him, clearly recalls Victor's loathing of his new creature, whose infantile appeal to his maker—with "inarticulate sounds" and "a grin wrinkl[ing]"

42. See Dixon, "The Films of *Frankenstein*," p. 171. Whale ordered Karloff to raise the girl over his head and brutally cast her down; Karloff wanted to "pick her up gently and put her in the water exactly as he had done to the flower" (quoted in Donald F. Glut, *The Frankenstein Legend* [Methuen, N.J., 1973], pp. 112–13).

43. Mary Poovey, "My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley and the Feminization of Romanticism," *PMLA* 95 (May 1980): 337.

44. Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Angus Calder (1860–61; Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 354.

his cheeks”—prompts Victor to see only a “miserable monster” (*F*, p. 57). One other thing that Pip says about Magwitch also anticipates what Poovey writes of the creature. After dressing up Magwitch to pass him off in public as a prosperous farmer, Pip despairs of the effort. “To my thinking,” he says, “there was something in him that made it hopeless to attempt to disguise him. The more I dressed him and the better I dressed him, the more he looked like the slouching fugitive on the marshes. . . . From head to foot there was Convict in the very grain of the man.”⁴⁵

In Pip’s eyes, the undisguisably “essential being” of his coarse-grained creator/creature is criminal. Implicitly, Pip reads Magwitch in the light of physiognomy, the ancient art of construing external features—especially facial ones—as signs of “supposed inner essences.”⁴⁶ Revived in the later eighteenth century by the Swiss theologian Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741–1801), one of whose disciples examined the infant Mary Shelley herself at her father’s request,⁴⁷ physiognomy strongly influenced the description of characters in Dickens’s earlier novels as well as the drawings of them made by Hablot K. Browne, whose very nickname (Phiz) revealed his belief in the idea that beauty expresses virtue and ugliness vice, that facial features disclose—to an astute reader of them—one’s moral character.⁴⁸ Dickens’s later work shows some resistance to this idea. In *Great Expectations* itself, significantly unadorned by the handiwork of Phiz or any other illustrator, Pip’s physiognomic reading of Magwitch exposes his blindness to the man’s inner worth, which he eventually recognizes. But for all its blindness, Pip’s reading anticipates yet another revival of physiognomy less than three decades after *Great Expectations* first appeared. In 1887, Cesare Lombroso published the first of a series of books that established the science (or pseudoscience) of criminal anthropology, which claimed that the “born criminal” can be known from his anatomy and especially from the configuration of his skull.⁴⁹ According to Lombroso, criminals are evolutionary throwbacks, visibly atavistic reincarnations of the prehistoric savage or the ape. As Nietzsche paraphrased the theory in *Twilight of the Idols* (1889), it “tell[s] us the typical criminal is ugly: *monstrum in fronte, monstrum in animo*” (a monster in face, a monster in soul).⁵⁰

Criminal anthropology has cast its shadow backwards on Mary Shelley’s text. Though Lombroso’s theory could not have influenced Shelley

45. *Ibid.*, p. 352.

46. Michael Hollington, “Dickens, ‘Phiz,’ and Physiognomy,” *Imagination on a Long Rein: English Literature Illustrated*, ed. Joachim Möller (Marburg, 1988), p. 125.

47. See Mary Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814–1844*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1987), 1:26 n.

48. See Hollington, “Dickens, ‘Phiz,’ and Physiognomy,” p. 125.

49. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York, 1981), p. 124.

50. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in “*Twilight of the Idols*” and “*The Anti-Christ*,” trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 30.

herself, it has subtly influenced our ways of construing and representing the creature's monstrosity. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) ultimately derives from *Frankenstein's* literary sibling—John William Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819), the only other child of Byron's proposal that he and Polidori and the Shelleys should "each write a ghost story" in the summer of 1816 ("AI," p. 7). Whether or not Lombroso's theories ever directly affected the portrayal of Mary Shelley's creature on stage or screen, they certainly influenced Stoker, for as Leonard Wolf has shown, Jonathan Harker's first description of Count Dracula closely follows Lombroso's description of the criminal face.⁵¹ Likewise, most of the faces that Universal artists originally drew for the creature in the Whale *Frankenstein* were decidedly atavistic, just the sort of face Lombroso thought innately criminal.⁵² While none of these faces resembles the one that Pierce made for Karloff, Karloff's creature—in one of the many notable departures from Mary Shelley's text—gets a brain explicitly labelled "abnormal." In Waldman's words from the film, it is "the abnormal brain of the typical criminal," marked by "distinct degeneration of the frontal lobes." The film thus tries to ensure that the inner self or "essential being" of the monstrous-looking creature will likewise be monstrous, will validate the simplest notion of what a monster is: one whose malformed body proclaims the viciousness of his or her soul.

In its basic form, this notion is much older than Lombroso or Lavater. Thersites, the ugliest of all the Greeks in the *Iliad*, is also—according to Odysseus—the worst of them.⁵³ In the Book of Revelation, Satan appears as "a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns" (Rev. 12:3). Shakespeare's humpbacked Richard III is a "lump of foul deformity," at once bodily disfigured and morally corrupt.⁵⁴ In *Paradise Lost*, the ur-text of *Frankenstein*, Sin is a woman whose lower body "ended foul in many a scaly fold" and is surrounded by hellhounds uglier than Scylla and Hecate (*PL*, bk. 2, l. 651, p. 391). Few ideas are more enduring or more seductively plausible than the assumption that deformity signifies depravity.

Yet literature and life itself offer us many monsters in disguise: figures whose physical attractiveness belies the evil within. Milton's Sin is beautiful down to the waist, and the verbal picture of Fraud (*froda*) drawn

51. See Wolf, *The Annotated Dracula* (New York, 1975), p. 300. Daniel Pick aptly notes that *Dracula* should not be lumped with *Frankenstein* under the undifferentiated heading of "gothic" because the later novel reflects a major issue of the late nineteenth century. It expresses, he argues, "a vision of the bio-medical degeneration of the race in general and the metropolitan population in particular" (Daniel Pick, "'Terrors of the Night': *Dracula* and 'Degeneration' in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Critical Quarterly* 30 [Winter 1988]: 75).

52. These drawings are reprinted in Skal, *The Monster Show*, p. 133.

53. See Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (1951; Chicago, 1978), bk. 2, ll. 216, 249, p. 82.

54. William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, ed. Mark Eccles (Harmondsworth, 1988), 1.2.57, p. 41.

by Dante—whose power to conceive monsters Victor finds limited (see *F*, p. 57)—likewise combines the trunk of a serpent with “the face of a just man, so benign was its outward aspect.”⁵⁵ In realistic fiction and drama the handsome seducer is a stock figure, as in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, where the handsome Alec d’Urberville not only takes the heroine’s virginity but diabolically drives her to murder. Victor Frankenstein himself, who is at least attractive enough to win the love of Elizabeth, seems unwittingly to reveal the depravity of his own soul in the very act of expressing his wish to kill “the monstrous Image which I had endued with the mockery of a soul still more monstrous” (*F*, p. 177). And if we turn to recent, actual events, how would Doctors Lavater and Lombroso read the handsome face of the late Jeffrey Dahmer, whose actual behavior made the fictional crimes of Mary Shelley’s creature look like the misdemeanors of an Eagle Scout?⁵⁶ If ever a *monstrum in animo* was *speciosus in fronte*, Dahmer was.

Beside malformed criminals and handsome knaves, however, there is a third kind of monster much closer to the original meaning of *monstrum*—“divine portent or warning”—than either of the other two is.⁵⁷ Nietzsche’s phrases in fact refer to Socrates, a *monstrum in fronte* renowned for his admonitions, a notoriously ugly philosopher. Nietzsche argues that Socrates’ dogged promotion of “rationality at any cost” made him also a *monstrum in animo*, leader of a sickeningly repressive war against instinct.⁵⁸ But earlier in the nineteenth century, it is far more likely that Mary Shelley viewed Socrates as Alcibiades does in the *Symposium*, a dialogue Percy translated in July 1818 as *The Banquet*.⁵⁹ For Alcibiades, Socrates is a *mons-*

55. Dante, *Inferno*, in *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Charles Singleton, 3 vols. (Princeton, N.J., 1970), 1:173 (17.10–11). See also *PL*, bk. 2, l. 650, p. 391.

56. Jeffrey Dahmer killed seventeen young men and boys, had sex with some of their dead bodies, skinned and dismembered them, tried to lobotomize at least one of them, spray-painted their skulls, preserved body parts in formaldehyde so he could look at them while masturbating, kept human hearts in his freezer, and ate body parts so as to reanimate the dead within him. He was murdered in 1994 while serving a life sentence. See Edward Walsh, “Murderer Jeffrey Dahmer Beaten to Death in Prison,” *Lebanon (N.H.) Valley News*, 29 Nov. 1994, p. A1.

57. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “monster.” On the construal of monsters as portents in the sixteenth century, see Lorraine Daston, “Marvelous Facts and Miraculous Evidence in Early Modern Europe,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Autumn 1991): 93–124.

58. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 34.

59. Percy had read the *Symposium* in Greek by 7 December 1817, when he cites the speech of Agathon in a letter to William Godwin. See Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Letters*, ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1964), 1:574. Mary promptly transcribed his translation, and from it I quote the *Symposium* below. See Mary Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814–1844*, 1:220–22. See also Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Banquet: Translated from Plato*, in *Prose*, vol. 7 of *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols. (London, 1930), pp. 165–220; hereafter abbreviated *B*. William Veeder treats Plato as one of several sources for Mary’s views on androgyny, a topic central to Aristopha-

trum in fronte, deus in animo, a god of wisdom with the face of a monster. Alcibiades compares him to Marsyas, the ugly satyr whose pipe makes music that is enchantingly divine, for the ugly Socrates makes Marsyan music with his philosophic words (see *B*, pp. 210–11).

Are echoes of this music audible in the philosophic eloquence of Mary Shelley's monster? Though enchanted by the sounds of old De Lacey's guitar (see *F*, pp. 104, 113), the monster does not know the *Symposium* as he knows *Paradise Lost*. But Mary Shelley probably knew something of Plato's dialogue by the time she wrote *Frankenstein*, and what the monster says to Victor reflects—in part by a kind of desperate inversion—something of what Socrates says he has learned from Diotima about love. When the monster tells Victor that he must have a female “of the same species, and . . . the same defects” as himself (*F*, p. 139), he inverts Diotima's definition of love as the yearning not for one's other half (Aristophanes' theory) but for the good (see *B*, pp. 200–201). Love, says Diotima, “embraces those bodies which are beautiful rather than those which are deformed” (*B*, p. 204). Ironically, the monster's instincts confirm this axiom. Gazing on the miniature portrait of the “most lovely woman” that was once Victor's mother, he is filled with delight (*F*, p. 138). But knowing that he can excite in beautiful creatures only fear and loathing, he bitterly cultivates a “burning passion” for “one as deformed and horrible” as he is, someone who “would not deny herself to me” (*F*, p. 139).

Apparently, then, the monster cannot reach even the first step of the ladder that would lead from particular to “supreme beauty” in Diotima's discourse (*B*, p. 207). Yet he startlingly resembles the figure of Love that Diotima describes. Like Love, a “great Daemon” holding “an intermediate place between what is divine and what is mortal” (*B*, p. 197), Victor's creature is a “daemon” of superhuman strength and endurance (*F*, p. 161). Like Love, too, the creature is “for ever poor, . . . squalid,” and “homeless, . . . ever the companion of Want” (*B*, p. 198). In the *Symposium*, Love's poverty and squalor help to show what the seeker for love must learn: that the mind's beauty transcends the “mere beauty of the outward form” (*B*, p. 206). In *Frankenstein*, we are nowhere told that the monster seeks a beauty of mind. But if he wants Victor to “make [him] happy,” could he be satisfied by a woman who offered no more than the “same

nes' definition of love in the dialogue and to Mary's critique of the isolated, self-absorbed masculine ego. See William Veeder, *Mary Shelley and Frankenstein: The Fate of Androgyny* (Chicago, 1986), pp. 23–24. Whether or not Mary knew anything about the *Symposium* before publishing the first edition of *Frankenstein* in 1818, she uses Plato's Diotima in the framework for the first version of the next novel she wrote, *Mathilda*. See Andrea K. Henderson, *Romantic Identities: Varieties of Subjectivity, 1774–1830* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 125. In any case, the ugliness of Socrates sheds an important and generally neglected light on the kind of monstrosity the creature embodies.

defects" as his (*F*, p. 97)? Would he not also desire someone with comparable virtues, someone whose soul radiates "love and humanity," as his own once did (*F*, p. 97)? Whatever the answer to these questions, the creature's "burning passion" is much closer to Socrates' conception of love than to Victor's egotism. While Victor spurns companionship in his quest for scientific glory, the monster's whole story—right up to its final words—aims to show that life is unbearable without love.

This complex evocation of Socrates in the monster's narrative helps to explain and justify a bit of dialogue invented by the scriptwriters for the ice cave scene in the Branagh film, a drastically condensed version of the creature's narrative. The scene reminds us that even as the language of fiction can sometimes be visual, the *verbal* language of film can sometimes rival the impact of its images. Just before De Niro's monster asks for a mate, he reveals that he knows how to play the recorder, and he claims not to have learned but to have "remembered" this Marsyan skill by means of what Branagh's Victor goes on to suggest might be "trace memories in the brain, perhaps" ("S," p. 115). I will not claim that the scriptwriters were thinking of Socrates, but for anyone who can hear echoes of his voice in the novel, the film dialogue between Victor and the monster about memory and the recorder calls to mind the ugly philosopher whose theory of knowledge is based on recollection, on the silent recorder known as memory. Victor struggles to forget the monster as soon as he comes to life, but the monster compels him to remember both what he has created and what he has repressed in the very act of solitary creation: the desire that erupts in Victor's nightmare.

4

Let us now revisit this nightmare and the desire it signifies with the aid of Mel Brooks's *Young Frankenstein*, a film scripted by Gene Wilder, who also plays Friedrich Frankenstein, the eponymous hero. At the end of the film, Madeline Kahn's Elizabeth not only survives but also falls in love with the monster when he abducts her. Lulled by her own mood music (she sings "Ah! sweet mystery of life") and enchanted by his charm as he suavely lights two cigarettes and gives her one (like Paul Henreid in *Now, Voyager* [1942]), she ends up marrying him and playing tigress to his tame executive, lustily leaping into a bed where the creature sits up reading the *Wall Street Journal*. (Friedrich has selflessly traded his brain for the monster's, which is what makes the creature "normal" at the end.) What do these sophomoric pranks have to do with Mary Shelley's novel? They have, I think, quite a lot to do with one of the myths lurking just beneath the surface of its plot, the myth of Beauty and the Beast. It is powerfully implied not only by the creature's response to the sleeping Justine but

also by what he says about the miniature portrait of Caroline Beaufort that he takes from William and plants on Justine.

It was a portrait of a most lovely woman. In spite of my malignity, it softened and attracted me. For a few moments I gazed with delight on her dark eyes, fringed by deep lashes, and her lovely lips; but presently my rage returned: I remembered that I was forever deprived of the delights that such beautiful creatures could bestow; and that she whose resemblance I contemplated would, in regarding me, have changed that air of divine benignity to one expressive of disgust and affright. [*F*, p. 138]

Steeped as he is in *Paradise Lost*, the creature implicitly recalls what the beauty of Eve does in book 9 to Satan, who is so enraptured by it that he momentarily forgets his vengeful plot against her and all of humankind (see *PL*, bk. 9, ll. 455–66, pp. 534–35). But unlike Satan, who can present to Eve a “pleasing” and “lovely” shape even when he inhabits the body of a serpent (*PL*, bk. 9, ll. 503–4, p. 536), the monster knows—or at any rate presumes—that the woman whose portrait he lovingly contemplates would be horrified by the sight of him. Irresistibly attractive, Satan damns himself to the Dostoevskian hell of those who cannot love. Grotesquely repulsive, the monster *is* damned to the hell of those who cannot *be* loved. He stirs desire in no woman, beautiful or otherwise, and one woman faints at his appearance (see *F*, p. 102).

But he is nowhere actively rejected by a woman, not even by the young girl he saves from drowning and takes (admittedly “senseless”) in his arms (*F*, p. 136). In the myth of Beauty and the Beast, Beauty’s love for the Beast turns him into a prince. In a children’s book version of the story that Mary Shelley may well have known, the Beast is by his own admission “hideous” and “ugly,” but the kindness of this “Monster” makes Beauty overlook his “outward form” and eventually turns her fear of him into desire.⁶⁰ The children’s story may be read as an allegory of Mary Shelley’s fascination with what she called her “hideous” idea in the introduction to the 1831 edition (“AI,” p. 5). Lovingly portraying a monster loved by no one else, she gives him an eloquence that makes us overlook his outward form, as I have already noted, and she lets him show by his own words and deeds how “benevolent and good” he was before misery

60. Quoted in Betsy Hearne, *Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale* (Chicago, 1989), pp. 34–35. The earliest known literary version of the myth appeared in France in 1740, and in 1811 (when Mary was fourteen) an English poem attributed to Charles Lamb and titled *Beauty and the Beast: Or a Rough Outside with a Gentle Heart* appeared as a children’s book. See Hearne, *Beauty and the Beast*, pp. 2, 34. Since Lamb first met Godwin in 1805 and since Mary Shelley saw him socially at least twice in the winter and spring of 1817, when she was writing *Frankenstein*, it seems more than possible that she knew something of this book. See Mary Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814–1844*, 1:164, 172.

“made [him] a fiend” (*F*, p. 97). Nothing about the creature she presents to us is more poignant than his longing to be loved. In *Young Frankenstein*, Elizabeth gratifies this desire. Acting out—campily, to be sure—the creature’s deepest fantasy, she plays a loving Beauty to his Beast.

Wacky as it is, the monster’s marriage to Elizabeth in *Young Frankenstein* also points directly to the sexual energies that Mary Shelley’s Victor so perversely thwarts in himself and the monster alike. When Victor tears apart the monster’s mate and thus breaks his promise to furnish one, the monster grimly tells Victor, “I shall be with you on your wedding-night” (*F*, p. 163). As he later tells Walton, Victor’s decision to take a bride for himself while denying one to the monster drove the monster to kill Elizabeth (*F*, p. 212). But the killing of Elizabeth is not just an act of vengeance. It is also a vicarious expression of Victor’s misogyny and, contradictorily, a tortured expression of the creature’s desire for the woman he kills.

First of all, as the psychic son or “symbolic projection” of Victor’s imagination, in Poovey’s words, the creature vengefully reenacts Victor’s misogynistic dismemberment of the female creature, an act prompted largely—as Mellor has argued—by Victor’s fear of what an unregulated female might do.⁶¹ Having set out to preempt the generative powers of women, Victor is horrified by the spectre of rampant heterosexual reproduction, by “a race of devils [who] would be propagated upon the earth” (*F*, p. 160). This overt fear of what a pair of monsters might beget suggests a deeper fear of what *any* woman could beget, and more specifically of what his own bride might generate. For this reason, the creature’s killing of Elizabeth gratifies one of Victor’s deepest wishes.⁶² In refusing to consummate his marriage on his wedding night, in leaving Elizabeth alone in their room while he stalks the inn corridors in search of the creature, Victor unconsciously invites the creature to take her.

The taking, I submit, is sexual as well as murderous—a tortured expression of the monster’s hitherto frustrated desire. Just after Victor destroys the mate-to-be before the eyes of the monster and swears never to create one, the monster says, “You are my creator, but I am your master—obey!” (*F*, p. 162). Victor’s refusal to do so goads the creature to exercise in his own murderous way the traditional right of a *feudal* master: the *droit de seigneur*, the lord’s right to take his vassal’s bride on her wedding

61. Poovey, “My Hideous Progeny,” p. 337. See also Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, pp. 119–20.

62. Reminding us that Victor sees Elizabeth at various times as his “cousin” and “sister” and that she dissolves into his dead mother in his nightmare, James Twitchell argues that Victor unconsciously uses the monster to punish Elizabeth for exciting Victor’s incestuous desires (*F*, pp. 35, 146; see also *F*, p. 57); for Twitchell, the novel as a whole allegorizes “the male impulses and anxieties about incest as well as the female impulses and anxieties about birthing” (James B. Twitchell, “*Frankenstein* and the Anatomy of Horror,” *Georgia Review* 37 [Spring 1983]: 60; see also pp. 50–53). Twitchell’s argument is plausible as far as it goes, but does not—in my judgement—reckon sufficiently with Victor’s misogyny and the monster’s desires.

night. Whether or not this brutal custom was ever mentioned in the history course that the creature overheard Felix giving to Safie (see *F*, pp. 115–16), it is central to the plot of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* (1786), which Mary Shelley knew about well before she finished writing *Frankenstein*.⁶³ The echo of the *droit de seigneur* in the creature's wedding-night assault on Elizabeth amplifies all of the other signals pointing to rape: the creature's own fierce desire for a mate and the appearance of Elizabeth herself when, drawn by a scream from her room, Victor finds her dead body "thrown across the bed, her head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair. Every where I turn I see the same figure—her bloodless arms and relaxed form flung by the murderer on its bridal bier" (*F*, p. 189). In this vivid picture of a "relaxed" body thrown or flung across the "bridal bier" of her bed, Victor portrays the victim of a murderous rape: a complex expression of his own misogyny, of the creature's lust for revenge, and of his frustrated longing for a mate.

Victor's response to this spectacle of murderous consummation—the closest he gets to consummation of any kind—is singularly revealing. After fainting and then reviving, he says, he rushed back to the body of Elizabeth "and embraced her with ardour" (*F*, p. 189). This passionate embrace of her dead body marks the very first time he is said to touch her at all, but it vividly recalls the nightmare in which he embraces an Elizabeth who turns into his mother's corpse. Just as the monster's murder of Elizabeth reenacts Victor's dismemberment of the monster's mate, Victor's embrace of his dead bride reenacts the dream, which itself reveals Victor's oedipal obsession with his dead mother, his inability to transfer his desires to any other woman.

Branagh's film situates this necrophilia within a triangle of desire binding both Victor and the creature to Elizabeth. Branagh's Victor, first of all, is a passionate lover as well as an obsessed scientist. Besides radiating a robust vitality that scarcely recalls the wasted, emaciated figure we meet in the novel, he loves his Elizabeth far more intensely than Mary Shelley's Victor loves his; he kisses her hungrily when he leaves for the university, and though he writes her no letters for months, he joyously seizes her when he rises one day from his sickbed to find her—improbably enough—playing the piano at the far end of the garret in which he has recently manufactured the monster. But if Branagh's film makes Victor far more passionate than Mary Shelley does, it also reveals something merely implied by her text: the link between Victor's project and his mother's death. In the novel, Victor's ambition to create life is ignited by Waldman's lecture on the "new and almost unlimited powers" of mod-

63. See Mary Shelley, letter to Leigh Hunt, 3 Nov. 1823, *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. Betty T. Bennett, 3 vols. (Baltimore, 1980), 1:395–96.

ern science (*F*, p. 47); the idea of reviving the dead is just a secondary possibility, and the dead mother comes to his mind only in his nightmare (see *F*, p. 53). In the film, however, it is her death that makes him resolve "to fight . . . death itself," and even though his project goes catastrophically awry, the monster's murder of Elizabeth reanimates this urge ("S," p. 45).

Like the monster of the novel, De Niro's monster kills Elizabeth on her wedding night while Victor is out seeking him with a gun. When Branagh's Victor returns to find the monster ripping out her heart, he shoots in vain at her fleeing assailant and then takes her corpse in his arms. But unlike the Victor of the text, who simply collapses with exhaustion at this point, Branagh's Victor desperately strives to revive Elizabeth by sewing her now shaven head to the torso of Justine, who (as in the novel) has been hanged for the murder of little William. After electrically animating this composite body in the sarcophagus/womb, clothing her in a wedding dress, and thrusting a wedding ring onto her finger, he begs her to recognize him, coaxes her to stand, and then waltzes her around the room, spinning and laughing with her until he sees the monster standing by the sarcophagus. For the monster, the sight of Elizabeth's shaven head and sutured body is a Lacanian *stade du miroir*. Seeing at last a woman whose mutilated form mirrors and thus affirms the humanity of his own, he says, "She's beautiful," and claims her as his long-promised mate ("S," p. 132).⁶⁴ But when Victor's counterclaim leads them to fight over her, she recoils at once from the men and from the alien body stitched to her head, and immolates herself with a kerosene lamp.

Students of Mary Shelley's text may find all this merely grotesque or recklessly sensational. Yet even as it wrenches the plot of the novel, this sequence exfoliates some of its major themes: Victor's necrophiliac obsession with his dead mother, the contradictions embedded in what Noël Carroll calls the "overreacher" plot of his ambition to create life from dead bodies, the monster's desire for a mate, and Victor's unwitting substitution of Elizabeth for the mate he destroyed.⁶⁵ Above all, Branagh's

64. He thus reverses the process by which, according to Linda Williams, a woman is punished for looking at a monster by being made to see his freakishness as a reflection of her own. See Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks," in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Williams (Los Angeles, 1984), pp. 85–88. Strikingly enough, a real mirror is used to generate a wholly different effect in the final scenes of the Edison *Frankenstein*. When the monster enters Victor's bedroom on his wedding night, he stands before a large mirror and then gradually fades away, leaving only his reflected image to be seen by Victor when he enters, as if the mirror now showed Victor his own monstrosity. But gradually the monster's image gives way to that of Victor in his young manhood—a sign that he has purged himself of monstrosity and can now marry Elizabeth. For more on the Edison version, which has recently been rediscovered, see Dixon, "The Films of *Frankenstein*," pp. 166–69.

65. Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York, 1990), p. 118.

film evokes the oedipal conflict between Victor and his creature. In fighting over the reanimated body of Elizabeth, they remind us that Mary Shelley's Elizabeth was chosen by Victor's dying mother to be not only his mate but her successor as mother to the Frankenstein family (see *F*, p. 42). In the "beautiful" body of the sutured Elizabeth, De Niro's monster briefly finds his own mother and mate.

It is hardly news, of course, that *Frankenstein* tells the story of an oedipal conflict. But *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* helps to show how tightly the novel knits the Oedipus story to the myths of Prometheus and of Milton's Satan. Ultimately, Victor's struggle with the creature for possession of Elizabeth—their would-be mate and mother surrogate—springs from an ambition at once Promethean and Satanic: the ambition to rival the creative power of God.⁶⁶ In *Paradise Lost*, Satan defies God by claiming to be "self-begot, self-raised / By our own quickening power" (*PL*, bk. 5, ll. 860–61, p. 467), and he begets Sin all by himself, in the very act of conceiving his rebellion (see *PL*, bk. 2, ll. 748–61). When Satan's monstrous creature—literally a *monstrum*, a "sign / Portentous" (*PL*, bk. 2, ll. 760–61, p. 394)—excites his incestuous lust, he begets upon her the still more hideous monster of Death, who rapes her and thus impregnates her with the hellhounds that ceaselessly torment her (see *PL*, bk. 2, ll. 761–802, pp. 394–95). The story of this unholy trinity is reconfigured in *Frankenstein*, where Sin splits into Elizabeth and a monster who plays the role of Death. But unlike Sin, Elizabeth is *not* conceived by the Satanic Victor. On the contrary, she is a rival creator, or rather an instrument in the scheme of creation conceived by God. That is why Victor exposes her not only to rape, which Sin undergoes, but death.⁶⁷

The Branagh film reveals the implications of this point by moving one step beyond it. If Mary Shelley's Victor can embrace a woman only after she has turned into a corpse, Branagh's Victor finally seeks a woman he has created from corpses, a woman who signifies not the divine scheme of creation and reproduction but his own egomaniacal alternative to it. What he repeatedly begs of the reanimated Elizabeth is a tribute to himself: "Say my name" ("S," p. 130). In contesting Victor's claim on the woman that he believes had been promised to himself, De Niro's monster reasserts his right to be treated as God treated Adam. He reasserts, in other words, the primacy of the divine scheme, which makes mating essential to reproduction.

66. Both Victor and the creature link themselves to Milton's Satan. The creature identifies himself with "the fallen angel" and deliberately echoes his words ("Evil thenceforth became my good") (*F*, pp. 97, 212; see *PL*, bk. 4, l. 110, p. 423). Victor compares himself to "the archangel who aspired to omnipotence" (*F*, p. 204).

67. While rape can of course lead to impregnation, it can also serve as a crime against generation. In recent years, for instance, it has been reported that Bosnian Serbs have systematically raped Muslim women in order to make them unmarriageable and thus to eradicate the Muslim population.

If radical departures from the plot of the novel may sometimes sharpen our understanding of it, they may also help to illuminate our cultural relation to the nameless monster who has captivated the popular imagination for the better part of two centuries. Probably the most outrageous and certainly one of the most original cinematic departures from Mary Shelley's novel is the scene from *Young Frankenstein* in which Wilder's Friedrich Frankenstein presents Peter Boyle's monster to a theater audience. Dressed in white tie and tails, Friedrich and his creature tap dance and sing "Puttin' on the Ritz," with Friedrich singing most of the words and the monster periodically grunting out a nearly consonantless refrain, which sounds roughly like "ootin' on ah itz."

What can be learned from this bizarre spectacle of the monster as would-be Fred Astaire? On the one hand, Astaire's combination of sexual charm and urbane sophistication is about as far from Mary Shelley's repulsive giant as anything can be. On the other hand, the episode exemplifies what the creature has become in popular culture: a source of immensely popular entertainment. When Carroll writes that we enjoy horror fiction because we are fascinated "with the categorically transgressive beings that *star* in the genre," he reveals precisely what makes transgression pleasurable.⁶⁸ We are captivated not by transgression as such but by the starring performance of it. In the tap dance of *Young Frankenstein*, the creature acts out transgression for an audience, theatrically breaching the wall between savagery and sophistication.

Like so much else in *Young Frankenstein*, the scene parodies not the novel itself but earlier film versions of it, especially the Whale *Frankenstein*, which begins with a shot of Edward Van Sloan stepping out from behind a curtain to announce a film that "will thrill" and "may . . . horrify you!" Yet Van Sloan also plays Waldman, who in the novel makes comparable claims for modern chemistry. Galvanizing Victor by explaining what chemists can now do, Waldman says they "have indeed performed miracles. . . . They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows" (*F*, p. 47). Waldman's language recalls the machinery of theater even as it adumbrates the spectacles of film. In the first part of the eighteenth century, thunder effects devised by the playwright John Dennis were, he testily charged, promptly stolen for a production of *Macbeth*.⁶⁹ At the end of the twentieth century, filmmakers not only mimic thunder and earthquakes but can re-create a raging Arctic sea on a studio stage, as production designers did for Branagh's

68. Carroll, "Disgust or Fascination: A Response to Susan Feagin," *Philosophical Studies* 65 (Feb. 1992): 85; emphasis mine.

69. William S. Walsh, *Handy-Book of Literary Curiosities* (Philadelphia, 1892), p. 1052.

Frankenstein.⁷⁰ The tap dance of *Young Frankenstein* exemplifies the theatricality of science as well as of transgression. Conceived by Victor in response to a lecture that defines chemistry as miraculous mimicry, Mary Shelley's monster was made to be exhibited as the supreme specimen of mimesis, the living simulacrum of life itself. In *Young Frankenstein*, this spectacle disarms a theater audience, by turns amusing and terrifying them. Presented by the Baron (Victor's grandson) as a scientific wonder, the creature fascinates the crowd by walking on command, then dancing and singing; but when his oafish diction makes the people laugh, he turns to rage and they flee in terror. In so doing, they reenact the flight of Mary Shelley's Victor, who rushes from his lab in "breathless horror and disgust" at the first sign of animation in a creature whose "beautiful" features were chosen for display but not meant for motion beyond the control of his maker—who would, of course, also be his exhibitor.

Film versions of *Frankenstein* violate the tacit compact made between novel and reader precisely by showing us what the novel decorously hides. According to Friedrich Schelling, approvingly quoted by Freud, the uncanny or *unheimlich* "is the name for everything that ought to have remained . . . hidden and secret and has become visible."⁷¹ The uncanny springs from the return of the repressed—"nothing new or foreign," Freud writes, "but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression."⁷² At the moment he comes to life, the monster is profoundly familiar to Victor, who has been laboring for months to construct him. But because Victor has up to now seen only "the beauty of the dream," the glorious prospect of singlehandedly creating life, he has blinded himself to actual ugliness quite as much as to actual beauty. His own animation of the monster opens his eyes to an ugliness he has hitherto refused to see, and the *Heimlichkeit* of this ugliness—the fact that it erupts in his own secret workroom—is exactly what makes it so *unheimlich*. When the monster that we mentally construct from the words of the text—in the workshop of our own reading experience—suddenly erupts as a visible object on the screen, we are made to see him with something like the eyes of Victor.

In the novel, of course, the monster's ugliness of face and form blinds Victor to the beauty of his soul, which is revealed in words that Victor cannot or will not understand because they come from one who seems to him nothing but a repulsive killer. Yet while the novel thus exposes Victor's double blindness, it also shields the reader from—or blinds the reader to—the shock of what Victor sees. With one brief exception, all

70. See "The Filmmakers and Their Creations," p. 166.

71. Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'" (1919), *Collected Papers*, trans. Joan Riviere, 5 vols. (New York, 1959), 4:375. Freud quotes Schelling from Daniel Sanders's *Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (1860).

72. *Ibid.*, p. 394.

we are asked to visualize in our reading are reactions *to* the sight of the monster—not the sight itself. We might imagine a film that showed us nothing more than such reactions. But aside from breaking the promise implicitly made by all reaction shots—the promise that we will be shown what provoked them—such a film would fail to show the monster’s tortured longing to be sympathetically *seen*, to be the object of a desiring gaze.

The monster of the *Frankenstein* films, above all the Karloff monster of the Whale films, has in one sense realized this desire beyond his wildest dreams. Captivating millions, his image has been reproduced and disseminated as widely and as often as the *Mona Lisa*. But there is a vast difference between the riveting impact of his picture on a viewing audience and the repulsiveness of the figure it represents as *seen* by those around him. The monster of the screen cannot bask in universal admiration any more than he can relish the scornful laughter of a theater audience. On screen as in the novel, the monster knows the pitiless gaze of the other only as the witness to his inescapable monstrosity.

Pictures, we are told, are typically feminine objects consumed by the male gaze. Yet if a monster seems the very antithesis of a beautiful woman—whether da Vinci’s *Gioconda* or Victor’s doomed bride—he can nonetheless signify the feminine because he, like women, deviates from the normative male form.⁷³ The picture of a monster epitomizes this contradiction. Even as it displaces the picture of beauty, its radical deformity reinscribes both the feminine and the abject, which—in the words of Julia Kristeva—“disturbs identity, system, order,” and yet also “beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire.”⁷⁴ The moving picture of a talking monster is doubly monstrous, for it rends not only the lineaments of beauty but also the silence traditionally expected of women and pictures alike. In the end, what is most startling about the *Frankenstein* films is not that they make the monster visible but that in most cases they also make him audible. Subject and object, viewer and viewed, he speaks at once to our eyes and our ears.

73. “Traditionally,” writes Barbara Creed, “the male body has been viewed as norm; the female body a deviation” (Barbara Creed, “Dark Desires: Male Masochism in the Horror Film,” in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark [London, 1993], p. 118). Aristotle argued that monstrosity began with female deviation “from the generic type” (Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck [Cambridge, Mass., 1953], p. 401 [4.3.767b.9]). See also Huet, *Monstrous Imagination*, p. 3.

74. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, 1982), pp. 4, 1. Mitchell has recently argued that insofar as pictures can be personified, they embody a conflict between the desire to master the beholder and a feminine sense of abjection; pictures and women, he writes, seek a power “manifested as *lack*, not as possession” (Mitchell, “What Do Pictures Really Want?” *October*, no. 77 [Summer 1996]: 76).