

Visioning Frankenstein: Rebirth and Reanimation

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Caroline Joan ("Kay") S. Picart. *The Cinematic Rebirths of Frankenstein: Universal, Hammer, and Beyond*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002. xiv + 224 pages. Bibliography and index. \$67.95.

Caroline Joan ("Kay") S. Picart, Frank Smoot, and Jayne Blodgett. *The Frankenstein Film Sourcebook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2001. xviii + 346 pages. \$94.95.

Perhaps no other narrative has been so often revisited by film as the Frankenstein myth. From James Whale's classic films to spoofs such as *Young Frankenstein*, Tim Burton's gently-rendered *Edward Scissorhands*, the *Terminator* films, *The Matrix*, and the peculiar Kubrick/Spielberg concoction, *A.I.*, the basic outlines of the story seem to present a nearly inexhaustible inventional resource. Perhaps, as Kay Picart points out both in the epigraph that begins her first chapter and in her final chapter, this is because the production of films is itself a rather Frankensteinian activity. As a result, people who are drawn to the making of films could also be particularly drawn to the self-reflexive potentials of the Frankenstein myth. Or perhaps more importantly, a cautionary tale about the dangerous powers that can accrue to someone skilled in the art of stitching together coherence out of chaos resonates particularly strongly with film audiences. Such a narrative may be soothing or ameliorative, because the ultimate comeuppance usually reserved for either Frankenstein or his monster, or both, serves to contain these potential powers and thus reaffirms the distance and difference between the filmic world and the real world. In other words, filmic visions of the Frankenstein myth both emphasize and help to assuage some of the ambivalence with which audiences experience the power of film.

In *The Cinematic Rebirths of Frankenstein*, Kay Picart provides a thorough and provocative exploration of some of the questions regarding the relationships

between a culture and its films. In particular, she explains, she is interested in illustrating the ways in which Frankenstein films “have become the repository of [a] mythic unfolding,” hiding and revealing the tension between “patriarchal and matriarchal mythemes ... despite the overt dominance of patriarchal myths over matriarchal myths” (14). Her argument unfolds in two stages. First, she delineates the central Frankensteinian theme of parthenogenesis, or male self-birth, through the ancient mythic forms of the narratives of Prometheus, Dionysus, and Baubo. She then engages in an admirably close reading of, by my count, some 15 different Frankenstein films, tracing the manifestations and permutations of these myths. Her analyses are an important resource for film scholars, for rhetoricians interested in mediated texts, for cultural critics interested in the ways that mythic materials thrive in a mediated culture, and for anyone who enjoys thoughtful and articulate scholarly critique.

Picart’s exploration of the competing patriarchal and matriarchal themes throughout these films is itself a sort of reanimation, rebirthing these films into a fresh theoretical and interpretive context. For criticism, like filmmaking, is a rather Frankensteinian endeavor. The critic’s task always involves a dissection and reassembly of the object of study. This is perhaps especially true of film criticism, which involves translation across media, from an audiovisual text to a written one. The film critic, and particularly the film critic whose aim it is to produce the fine-grained analysis that Picart has delivered here, must dismantle the original filmic text, rearrange its parts, transport it into the new medium, and then reanimate it through argument. Like Frankenstein’s monster, reanimated texts do not mean quite the same thing as the original—they are both more complex and more ambivalent.

But unlike that monster, Picart’s reanimations do not seem destined either to stumble into a misty arctic wasteland or to be chased out of town by a torch-carrying mob. Rather, her work provides an exemplar of the contribution that sustained textual analysis might make. Picart outlines her intentions in this regard in her introduction, promising not merely to unearth previously unknown historical details about the production of the films, or to use the films merely as a means through which to discuss competing ideologies, nor to judge the relative literary merits of the films against Mary Shelley’s novel. As her argument unfolds, Professor Picart skillfully does at least a little of all of these things, but her focus remains upon seeing these texts as sites wherein some of the myths that permeate our culture become animated and problematized.

One of the more interesting insights in this book concerns the way that translation can affect this mythic animation. Picart repeatedly refers to differences between the novel and the films, or between the written script and the finished movie, calling this element of her critical methodology a “genealogy.”

For example, when discussing the first of the Hammer Studios films, 1957's *The Curse of Frankenstein*, Picart notes that in the script, "Victor is far from his egocentric and self-assured filmic counterpart," and indeed animates the creature "by accident." The film, however, reinforces his masculinity through "a series of subplots that further defer the awakening of the creature and emphasize Frankenstein's unassailable and irresistible masculinity" (106). The relationship between creator and created is both simplified and implicated in a normative heterosexuality that, in turn, subjugates the feminine. "Once again," Picart concludes, "the repression-domestication of the feminine shadow is the movement that parallels the hyperbolization of the parthenogenetic myth" (106). And in her discussion of a more recent rendition of the Frankenstein myth, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, Picart notes that Kenneth Branagh attempted to develop the character of Elizabeth more fully, making her "Victor's genuine intellectual and spiritual complement" (169). Although this does create a stronger female character even than in Mary Shelley's original novel, the film again simplifies the character of Victor Frankenstein, removing the homoerotic undercurrents that governed his relationship with Henry Clerval and further buttressing his own masculinity.

This sort of genealogy is highly suggestive. Far from merely a behind-the-scenes exposé of the often unintentionally collaborative process of making films, Picart's work suggests that the process itself may privilege certain motifs and their associated ideologies. One of the implications of her analysis, which Picart does not comment upon, is that there may be something inherent in the translation from written prose to visualized filmic narrative that privileges patriarchal myths. Perhaps because the making of a film is itself a sort of Frankensteinian act—to return to a theme that underpins much of the book—it also is a parthenogenetic one, and as such is inclined toward patriarchal reification.

Along these lines, there is a secondary theme that seems to be closely associated with the genealogical shifts that Picart points out—the recurrent theme of sight or eyesight. One of the most curious, striking, and often remarked upon elements of Mary Shelley's novel is the fact that Victor Frankenstein, moments after seeing signs of life in the creature that he has labored for years to craft, goes to sleep. It is as if Victor believes that by refusing to gaze upon the creature he might forget about it, or indeed that it might cease to exist altogether. These interrelated themes of sight, insight, and eyesight have permeated subsequent iterations of the Frankenstein myth, symbolic of the reluctance of human beings to countenance the effects of their technological innovations.

Picart points out many such sight moments in the films she studies, but

does not remark upon the fact that she often presents them as being closely connected to genealogical narrative shifts that have occurred through translation. In discussing *The Curse of Frankenstein*, for example, Picart points out that in the script Victor is unsure of himself, compelled to justify his actions to Krempe, his tutor in the dark arts of reanimation. In the film, however, Victor's "every move is calculated, cool, and elegantly confident" (105). She illustrates the transformation by describing a scene in which Victor dispassionately removes and disposes of the head of a corpse once he finds that its eyes have been destroyed. A few pages later the connection is explicit, as "we become jarringly aware of the camera as an eye that itself peers with the same clinical efficiency as Frankenstein does at his harvested eyes" (107).

This theme is also connected to the suppression of the feminine, as Professor Picart points out in her discussion of 1958's *Frankenstein 1970*. Here, Victor "intends to transplant his servant's eyes into the monster" but "accidentally drops the glass container, rendering the harvested eyes unusable." The new set of eyes is taken from Judy, a woman who is "ambiguously both sexually accepting and rejecting" (163), both a jealous rival of, and a maternal figure for, other women in the film. In this case, the quest for monstrous sight results in the death of a female figure possessing potentials for insight.

A filmmaker, of course, embarks on the same sort of quest. The necessity of the visual, which in Frankenstein films is manifest in the desire to present the monster, means that the films must put the audience inescapably into the position that Victor Frankenstein originally tried to avoid; where he turned away, a Frankenstein film cannot. The visual imperative of film as a medium demands that our gaze cannot be averted. So whereas in Shelley's novel Victor continually denies and avoids the creature, and thus denies his own complicity in the creature's birth, the films cannot provide their audiences with that same degree of denial or avoidance.

If we, like Victor in the novel, could simply look away, willing the monster back onto the slab, the repression would be complete and unambiguous and the monstrous feminine would be merely effaced. But that is not possible in films, where the mythic competition between patriarchal and matriarchal myths is brought vividly before our eyes. The resulting tension is fundamental to Frankenstein films; as Picart points out, the "degree of strain required to uphold the repression of Baubo's *ana-suromai* ironically unveils what the Frankensteinian myth aims to hide: that masculinity and the Ego are not stable and pure essences" (191). "Frankensteinian films," she concludes, "ironically undercut the exaggeration of the parthenogenetic narrative" (192). Perhaps their inherent visuality contributes to this undercutting. Certainly, Professor Picart's thorough and perceptive analyses do so.

The Frankenstein Film Sourcebook is a companion volume to *Cinematic Rebirths*. Listed at number eight in Greenwood's *Bibliographies and Indexes in Popular Culture*, this *Sourcebook* consists primarily of an alphabetical listing, by title, of Frankenstein movies. The films listed range from the seminal texts, such as James Whale's classics, to films that refigure the central themes, such as *Alien* and *Metropolis*, to films in which the monster makes merely a brief appearance, such as *Yellow Submarine*. Each entry includes date and nationality of original release, and the names of the writers, producers, directors, and principal cast members. For films that focus on the Frankenstein story, a plot summary is provided; for films in which the monster or various monstrous themes make only a relatively brief appearance, this "monster bit" is described. Where applicable, primary sources such as scripts and secondary sources such as magazine articles and academic essays are cited.

The alphabetical listings are broken up by three short essays called "Spotlight" features: "Hammer and Universal Films" by Picart; "Key Players in Frankenstein Films" by Blodgett and Smoot; and "Women in Frankenstein Films," again by Picart. The third Spotlight is of particular interest, as here Picart reviews succinctly some of the Frankensteinian gender politics that inform her *Cinematic Rebirths*. This *Sourcebook* also contains three appendices: "General Sources on Frankenstein Films" is a bibliography; and "'Body Parts Films'" and "'Re-Animation Films'" list films tangentially related to the Frankenstein myth. A keyword index begins to trace some motifs across multiple films.

Together, these volumes provide a window onto the current state of both the Frankenstein film and Frankenstein film scholarship, an invaluable resource for scholars interested in contributing to this burgeoning conversation, and an exemplary contribution based on close analysis of filmic texts. The two volumes complement one another, but each book also serves a distinct purpose for the researcher and, thus, is useful as a standalone resource. They each should, in different ways, assist scholars interested in the process of animating their own critical work.

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