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Designer Lives: Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, a film by Francis Ford Coppola and Kenneth Branagh, starring Kenneth Branagh, Robert De Niro, Helena Bonham Carter.

Francis Ford Coppola and Kenneth Branagh have attempted in this film to reanimate the old Hollywood classic by going back to the source, Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, for their inspiration. Gone are the Gothic castles and hunch-backed assistants, gone the mad scientist brandishing his foaming test-tubes, gone too the evil monster of Boris Karloff fame, square-headed, flinty-eyed, with bolts protruding from his neck. The two monsters of the film (played by Robert De Niro, and briefly Helena Bonham Carter) now look like stitched-together beefsteaks, and have an endearingly human habit of scratching their scars at stressful moments in the narrative. Nonetheless, De Niro’s monster is a gentle, sensitive and misunderstood creature who succeeds in capturing the moral nuance of Mary Shelley’s original. But it’s hard to challenge entrenched cultural stereotypes, and I predict that it will be Boris Karloff’s malevolent *Frankenstein* rather than De Niro’s (true to the novel, this monster hasn’t even got a name) which will continue to haunt the imaginations of cinema-going posterity.

The trouble is, the film really falls between two stools, in striving to be at once an «art film» and a box-office success. In the latter respect, it has already failed (as its poor reception in High Street cinemas in Britain and the USA attests), and it’s hard to predict much more success for it in the role of «highbrow cinema.» This is partly a result of the film’s muddled conception (as I will go on to argue below), but also of the uneven performance of its highly-respectable cast of actors. Unfortunately De Niro’s achievement in the role of the monster isn’t matched by the other characters. The acting is in general weak; moreover, despite painstaking efforts to reconstruct Victor’s

laboratory in late 18th century style, the general historical and literary effect of the film is also rather thin. A more serious problem (to which I will return below) is that the complexities of Mary Shelley's plot are too often traded for cheapish sentiment. The directors try to have their cake and eat it too. However, suspending further fault-finding with respect to the film as film, I want to consider its successes and failures as «literary» cinema, on the grounds of its titular claim to be *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*.

The film turns its back on the Hollywood tradition and returns to the novel in three important respects. Firstly it reinstates Captain Walton's voyage in search of the North-West Passage as the frame-narrative of Victor's story. The obsessive English explorer, driving his men on to probable death in the frozen Arctic wastes in pursuit of his cherished dream of discovery, becomes a type of Victor's desire to discover and create life (or, in the words of the at-times «yuppyish» screen-play, to «design a life»). The opening scenes of Walton's frozen crew battling against the elements gives a dramatic, *Tempest*-like feel to the beginning of the film. Walton becomes the at-first incredulous recipient of Victor's narrative, and at the end witnesses (with the rest of his crew) the monster's tearful farewell to his dead master and his self-immolation on Victor's funeral pyre. Secondly, the film evokes Victor's Genevan background and his love for his «sister» Elizabeth Lavenza as a domestic idyll upon which he turns his back to pursue his lonely obsession in a dirty attic laboratory in the German university town of Ingolstadt. Unfortunately this part of the film is marred by historical and literary inaccuracy, sentimentalism (an obvious temptation for a director in pursuit of box-office appeal), as well as by Helena Bonham Carter's endless prancing and over-acting. Thirdly, the film returns to Mary's conception of the monster: «I am benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, I shall again be virtuous,» as the creature has it in the novel. His education in the De Lacy's pigsty (no thanks to Victor his creator) and his «conversation» with Victor in the Alpine cavern restore to the monster his narrative—his ability to speak, read Milton, Plutarch and Goethe and reflect upon his condition is central to Mary's novel. His sensibility also permits him to suffer deeply the negligence of his creator and his rejection by human society.

These three important emphases apart, however, the story's claim to be «Mary Shelley's» is rather deceptive. Coppola and Branagh actually make free not only with numerous details of the story but also with the plot itself. Sometimes these changes do seem to be justified in relation to the film's unity of action (as in the decision to jettison the whole British and Irish episode in the novel), but at other times they seem gratuitous. Mary Shelley may only have been 18 when she began elaborating her nightmare vision of the «modern Prometheus» but the final result was a tightly-structured and complex unity

in which details, setting and characterisation were closely related to larger symbolic themes. Why not respect her artistry, particularly when invoking her name in the title?

Some examples of this gratuitous swerving from Mary's story. The film badly misjudges the purpose of the Genevan setting in granting it merely sentimental importance for Victor. Geneva the birthplace of Calvin and Rousseau is cast as a cross between Mozart's Vienna and Casanova's Venice. The austere republicanism of the Shelley's Geneva—source of many of the leading ideas of the French Revolution—is entirely lost in the film's evocation of a rococo world of dances and gaiety; a crucifix is also prominently displayed in the Frankenstein family chapel (a small, but fatally inaccurate detail!). The pregnant historical allegory of the novel in which the monster represents the French Revolution, abandoned by its «enlightened» creators and savagely mistreated by a suspicious world (as such transformed into a force of malevolence and destruction) is entirely lost sight of. Moreover the film has glossed over many significant details of the Frankenstein domestic coterie. Elizabeth's origin as the daughter of an Italian republican patriot imprisoned by Austrian tyranny is dropped, and we learn instead that her parents have died of scarlet fever. Far from being a doctor anxious for his son's advancement in the family profession (as the film has it), Frankenstein senior in the novel is an austere Genevan statesman with little or no sympathy for his son's scientific fixations. In the film Victor's mother Caroline dies during her son's early manhood in childbirth, (isn't she rather old to be having babies?) rather than of fever contracted whilst nursing the sick Elizabeth. Victor's desire to bring his mother back to life anticipates his reanimation of his murdered bride Elizabeth (in the film's most startling deviation from the original plot), thus grounding his transgressive will to create life upon private desire rather than upon misconceived political idealism which he has inherited from his Genevan background. Justine, in the novel an honest but obsessively Catholic servant-girl, is in the film cast as the Frankenstein's social peer, who cherishes a secret and unrequited love for Victor. What's the point of this totally gratuitous alteration?

The Ingolstadt scenes are on the whole better managed than the Genevan, although the decision to introduce Henri Clerval (played by Tom Hulse, of «Amadeus» fame) as a recent student acquaintance of Victor's rather than boyhood confidante loses Mary's point of tracing the parallel growth of the two friends to manhood, contrasting Clerval's romantic generosity with Victor's overreaching egotism. It's hard for viewers familiar with *Monty Python's Flying Circus* to avoid laughing when famous British comic John Cleese appears in the saturnine role of Dr. Waldman, Victor's scientific mentor. Waldman (there's actually no warrant for any of this in the novel) has anticipated Victor in his hubristic quest of «designing a life,» with a little assistance

from Chinese medicine! Waldman warns Victor of the dangers of this sort of biological engineering, but his restraining influence is put to an end when he is murdered by a pauper whilst administering vaccinations against the Cholera epidemic which has meanwhile broken out in Ingolstadt (another Cop-pola/Branagh invention). The hanged body of the murderer comes in handy as raw material for Victor's project, whilst Waldman's brain serves the monster with top-quality cerebral equipment. (This passage—wildly deviating from Mary Shelley's plot—shows the durability of the old James Whale classic. It will be remembered how Whale's hunch-backed assistant substituted the brain of a psychopath for that of a genius, thereby undermining his master's whole project. This of course entirely missed the philosophical point of Mary's novel, in which, true to her father William Godwin's necessitarian philosophy, she presented the monster as determined by his social environment rather than hereditary factors. In this respect at least, the new film is a great improvement, much nearer the spirit of the original.)

The presence of Clerval—and later Elizabeth—in Ingolstadt in the film (not the novel) detracts from the symbolic importance of Victor's social isolation, downplaying his extreme scientific egotism. However, the careful reconstruction of the laboratory (credit must go to the historians of science who acted as consultants here) and the dramatic scenes of the monster's «birth» are highpoints of the film. The half-naked Victor wrestles with his monstrous progeny in the spilt amniotic fluid of the copper birth tub/coffin, evoking both a homoerotic struggle and male parturition. But the result seems to the unmaternal Victor to be an abomination; he notes in his diary «Birth defects and greatly enhanced strength; malfunctional and pitiful and dead.» No wonder that the monster (who is none of these things, although none too easy on the eye) feels hard-done-by when he's finally instructed enough to read Victor's journal!

Whilst the monster escapes to make his own way in a hostile world, Victor buries his disappointment in plans to return to Geneva and marry Elizabeth. The scenes depicting the betrothed couple's happiness (why won't Bonham Carter stop running around like an electric hare?) are cut with the pathos of the neglected monster's voyeuristic «education» in the De Lacy's cottage. The film turns the exiled De Lacy father/daughter/son into a happy—though hungry—family, omitting (perhaps understandably enough) the whole oriental episode of Safie, Felix's Turkish lover. Another case though of the director's blindness to the fact that all the families in Mary's novel are motherless and broken, a point made much of by recent feminist scholars like Anne Mellor and Mary Poovey. In this respect, the fact that in the novel little William Frankenstein is carrying a locket depicting his mother Caroline and the «motherless» monster, having throttled the boy, goes on to use this image of

the mother to «frame» Justine as the murderer is richly ironic. In the film Caroline's miniature portrait in the locket is replaced by that of Victor, presumably so that the monster can easily recognise William as the brother of his creator, but thereby losing the whole symbolic resonance of this episode in the novel. Also in the novel Justine is tried and actually confesses to the murder (she perjures herself from a misguided desire to receive absolution) rather than being lynched as in the film; for Mary Shelley Justine is thus as much a victim of her religious superstition as of the monster's vengeful ingenuity.

The final forty-five minutes of the film represent a pretty thorough departure from Mary's novel. The meeting between Victor and the monster on the Mar-de-Glace is well managed and sticks fairly close to the original (the monster's sudden appearance is very dramatic), although the dialogue, shorn of its Miltonic and metaphysical allusions, has been considerably simplified. «There's something at work in my soul which I do not understand» says Victor—a memorable line, although one actually spoken by Walton in the novel. The monster, more cognisant of his lonely soul-stirrings than his egotistical creator, demands that Victor create a female companion to ease his solitude. Replacing the expedition to Britain and finally the Orkney islands where Victor sets about his ghoulish task with a more manageable laboratory in the attic of the Frankenstein mansion in Geneva, the film has the monster actually assisting Victor in collecting the human debris for his new creation (actually the exhumed corpse of Justine). But Victor's scruples and his final decision to abandon the project are here shown to be the result of the competing love of Elizabeth. The couple are reconciled in the Frankenstein family chapel (beneath the un-Genevan crucifix!) and the monster darkly swears vengeance «I will be with you on your wedding night!» In the novel, by contrast, Victor shows no such emotional generosity (to at least one of his dependants) in his motive for abandoning the project of the female monster; it is a cold-blooded utilitarian (or Godwinian) calculation of moral consequences: «In a fit of enthusiastic madness I created a rational creature, and was bound towards him, to assure, as far as was in my power, his happiness and well-being. That was my duty; but there was another still more paramount to that. My duties towards the beings of my own species had greater claims on my attention, because they included a greater proportion of happiness or misery. Urged by this view, I refused, and I did right in refusing, to create a companion for the first creature.» Here is a clear example of the temptation of sentimental satisfaction—in cinematic terms—outweighing fidelity to the novel's philosophic message.

Victor and Elizabeth are married beside Frankenstein senior's sickbed and head off—now as «husband and wife» rather than «brother and sister»—to consummate their marriage in a hotel on the lakeside. Hanging over Victor (Elizabeth is as yet ignorant of the whole secret) is the monster's threat to visit

him on his wedding night. But the monster is a step ahead of his self-blinded creator, as usual. Infiltrating the Frankenstein mansion he murders Victor's father in his sickbed (in the novel it is Clerval who is his first victim after Victor's refusal to honour his promise to the creature) and then closes the circle of destruction by following the couple and murdering Elizabeth (and not Victor, as the latter had presumed with his customary egotism) in the connubial bed.

The monster actually interrupts a rather obligatory love-making scene in which Branagh's pectorals are shown off (as usual) to advantage; while Victor searches for his mortal foe in the garden, the monster breaks in, drools over Elizabeth's beauty, and then rips her heart out with Aztec-style precision (a piece of gratuitous violence which is of course not in the novel). However, desperate to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, Victor carries Elizabeth back to his laboratory and attempts her reanimation (as far as one can see, by fixing her badly disfigured head onto Justine's body!). As soon as Victor implausibly begins to make love to the female monster (far such she has become), enter monster number one to claim his bride! What's left of Elizabeth presciently puts an end to this absurd love-triangle by pouring the contents of a paraffin lamp over her head and immolating not only herself but also the Frankenstein mansion. All this is of course a departure from Mary's story; were the directors attempting to tie up what they considered to be the novel's loose ends? One can't help thinking that the change was motivated by a love of cinematic special effects rather than any profound reflection on Mary's plot; there's no denying that the cropped, half-blinded and scarred Elizabeth is something of a *coup de cinéma*. The closing scenes then return to the Polar wastes and Walton's incredulous reception of Victor's narrative as noted above. At least Walton ends by taking a lesson here—as in the novel—from the tragic consequences of Victor's self-centred obsession, ordering his grateful crew to steer homeward and abandoning the chimerical quest for the North West passage. The film ends dramatically with the blazing funeral-pyre of Victor and his creature amidst the desolate Arctic wastes, an apt destination for the sterile and asocial idealism which has tragically marked the monster's conception.

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein ends up achieving neither of its goals. It doesn't work as Hollywood epic because it tries to be as clever as the novel (or rather more clever); but neither does it work as «art cinema» because of uneven acting and banal moments in the screenplay, too often opting for sentimental satisfaction rather than moral complexity. One thinks by contrast of Werner Herzog's haunting *Nosferatu*, which also makes free with the novel it's based on (Bram Stoker's *Dracula*), but at least achieves a brilliant, strange and even a times ironical cinematic effect. Why couldn't Herzog have made

a *Frankenstein*; imagine Klaus Kinsky (may his soul rest in peace) as Victor?! But I'll end on a positive note; it is to be hoped that the inclusion of Mary Shelley's name in the title will inspire a whole generation of non-literary movie-goers (who may not have even known that the monster's ultimate creator was a nineteen year old English girl) to get hold of the novel. At least the film's not bad enough to put them off completely.

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