

Frankenstein: Mary Shelley's narrative on screen / *Frankenstein: a narrativa de Mary Shelley no cinema*

*Francisco Romário Nunes**

*Francisco Carlos Carvalho da Silva***

ABSTRACT

This article presents a brief overview of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein or, the Modern Prometheus* film adaptations. First published in 1818, the narrative continues to exert influence in various media, especially in cinema. Victor Frankenstein, the story's central character, develops experiments to generate life in a monstrous creature. However, the creation escapes from Frankenstein's control and affects him by a series of tragic crimes. Based on some theoretical discussions about film adaptation as translation (LEFEVERE, 2007; HUTCHEON, 2013), we investigate how Mary Shelley's novel continues to be rewritten on screen and what traits can be observed in the following adaptations: *Frankenstein* (1931), directed by James Whale; and *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994), directed by Kenneth Branagh. The films, produced in different moments, address two distinguishable interpretations of the author's story. We assume that both films re-signify the literary work according to different contexts, creating new images of Mary Shelley's centenary story.

KEYWORDS: Frankenstein; Literature; Cinema; Film Adaptation.

RESUMO

O presente artigo traça um breve panorama das adaptações fílmicas da obra *Frankenstein or, the modern Prometheus*, de Mary Shelley. Publicado pela primeira vez em 1818, a narrativa continua a exercer influência nas diversas mídias, especialmente no cinema. Victor Frankenstein, personagem protagonista, desenvolve experimentos para dar vida a uma criatura monstruosa. Contudo, a criação escapa do controle de Frankenstein, que é acometido por uma série de crimes trágicos. A partir de algumas discussões sobre adaptação fílmica como tradução (LEFEVERE, 2007; HUTCHEON, 2013), investigamos de que modo o romance de Mary Shelley continua sendo reescrito nas telas e quais traços podem ser observados nas seguintes adaptações: *Frankenstein* (1931), com direção de James Whale; e *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994), dirigido por Kenneth Branagh. Os filmes, produzidos em períodos distintos, propiciam leituras distintas do romance da escritora inglesa. Partimos do pressuposto que as narrativas fílmicas ressignificam a obra literária a partir dos seus diferentes contextos de produção, contribuindo para criar novas imagens da história centenária de Mary Shelley.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: Frankenstein; Literatura; Cinema; Adaptação Fílmica.

1 Introduction

This paper aims at a critical-descriptive analysis of two adaptations of the novel *Frankenstein*, by the English author Mary Shelley: *Frankenstein* (1931), directed by James Whale; and *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994), directed by Kenneth Branagh. The text seeks to trace the ways in which each film rewrites Mary Shelley's novel in relation to the different production contexts. In this sense, we may ask: how does

* Doctorate student in Literature and Culture at Federal University of Bahia – UFBA, Salvador – BA, Brazil; rom.infor@gmail.com.

** Professor (PhD) at Ceará State University – UECE, Quixadá – CE, Brazil; carlos.oak@hotmail.com.br.

cinema rewrite Mary Shelley's narrative? Have the films contributed to popularize *Frankenstein*? What differences can be observed in the film adaptations?

The theoretical framework briefly explores some aspects of film adaptation studies supported by the following authors: Lefevere (2007), Hutcheon (2010), and Stam (2008). Next, we present the novel in relation to the myth of Prometheus, in which the story is rooted. And, finally, we analyze the films in their different contexts, pointing out variations and narrative constructions of cinema.

We assume that the film adaptations re-signify the literary text through different perspectives, whose transformations in both language and culture contribute to create new images of Mary Shelley's centennial story. As an example, in James Whale's film, we see a shift in the narrative to generate a happy ending to the public, who lived in the context of World War II. Kenneth Branagh's adaptation, on the other hand, uses violence both to impact and to produce greater drama.

In a way, cinema inherited a famous story in the literary milieu; however, the adaptations reverberate other ideas in comparison with the source text.

2 The art of cinema and film adaptation

At the end of the 19th century, in 1895, for the first time in history, pictures were photographed in motion. The French brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière were responsible for the creation of the *Cinématographe* which initially reproduced pictures at sixteen frames per second. Cinema, during those early years, was little more than forty second films, which generally depicted the movement of bourgeois life in European cities during the *belle époque*. From that time, we can highlight *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de la Ciotat*, from 1895, still remembered to this day as the film that started cinematic illusionism.

In order to popularize cinema, the first filmmakers – most notably the American D.W. Griffith – began to adapt classic literature books. D. W. Griffith, for instance, appropriated from literature, especially using Charles Dickens's eighteenth-century novels, to produce linear films and develop the point of view (MACHADO, 2011). Soon after, film companies and directors interested in making cinema a fine art, sensed they should direct camera lenses to pages of literary works. The literary prestige would

give greater credibility to the moving image, since the audience would be curious to review the classics represented in the projection rooms. In addition to ensuring a good financial return from an audience eager for novelty, which at that time the invention of cinema could provide in the art field.

With the growth of this practice throughout the twentieth century, some scholars (CATTRYSSSE, 1992; STAM, 2008; HUTCHEON, 2013) have focused their studies on film adaptations based on literary texts, aiming at investigating how a literary narrative is transformed since cinema produces new meanings, often having to rewrite the source text to suit the receiving system.

Lefevere, in *Tradução, reescrita e manipulação da fama literária* (2007), elaborates the concept of rewriting in the field of literary translation to understand how a work is modified according to ideological, poetic and cultural interests. The author brings relevant contributions regarding how translations, understood as rewriting, are part of the literary system, thus creating

[...] images of a writer, a work, a period, a genre, sometimes even a whole literature. These images existed side by side with the realities they competed with, but the images always tended to reach more people than the corresponding realities did, and they most certainly do so now. (LEFEVERE, 2007, p. 18-19).

In this sense, a film adaptation can also be thought of as a type of rewriting/translation, since it generates other images of a certain literary work in the cinematographic system. Nevertheless, audience expansion is another characteristic observed in this phenomenon, since cinema condenses stories and incorporates various stimuli (sound and imagery), popularizing them in the movie theaters in different countries at the same time.

Understood as a new text, a rewriting, the adapted work transforms the previous text and provides another kind of interaction with the intended audience. It is no longer a written text only, but it depends on the film plane, framing, movement, sound, costumes, acting, light, and all the elements that make up the filmic image. This combination of traits, which can even be used as an analogy to Mary Shelley's own monster, also brings forth a kind of pleasure. At this point, the pleasure connects with the possibility of experiencing the same story in a different medium, which makes the viewer to have another kind of engagement with the ongoing narrative.

Hutcheon argues (2013, p. 25) that “[...] part of this pleasure comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise.” The adaptation, this other work, like the creature that comes to life by Frankenstein skills, escapes from the creative genius. Its power generates other boundaries as we interact and produce our own interpretations and experience.

In this sense, a film, according to Stam (2008, p.21), “involves collaboration”, and as such “total originality, therefore, is neither possible nor desirable.” Therefore, one way of understanding this artistic combination which produces a film is through intertextual readings of media, in this case, literature and cinema. As Stam (2008, 22) points out, “film adaptations fall into the continuous whirlwind of intertextual transformations and references, from texts that generate other texts [...]”, and, depending on the production contexts, interventions and appropriations may vary in order to ensure a certain poetics and ideology for a specific audience.

The stories, therefore, told through the cinema, repeat aspects of literature, but create variations according to the film language. Directors may explore the narrative potentialities offered by the source text to a greater degree or may remove some traits. It is worth shedding light on ideology and / or economic context which can also interfere on the level of narrative transformations.

3 The Birth of Frankenstein, by Mary Shelley

In 1818, the literary universe welcomed *Frankenstein or, the modern Prometheus*, written by the English author Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. A tragic narrative was born, which would mark generations of readers through a peculiar plot: a scientist named Victor Frankenstein, driven by the desire to unravel the mystery of life, develops philosophical and chemical studies on the subject. The scientist selects materials and dissects corpses to extract parts that could be used to produce a new human body. At the end of the work, however, the creature constructed by Frankenstein presents gigantic proportions compared to an ordinary man, and all the employment given to the arduous task of generating life in that being ends up resulting in a sequence of tragic events in the life of the scientist.

In a preface written in 1831, published in an edition of Penguin Books in 1994, the author explains the circumstances in which she wrote the story. She and her husband, the romantic poet P. B. Shelley, who had visited Switzerland in the summer of 1816, were neighbors of another important writer of the time, the poet Lord Byron. The weather, however, did not please due to the constant rains, which meant that the three remained confined for several days at home. With no other activity, the writers spent their time reading stories, mostly about ghosts, when Lord Byron proposed everyone to write a similar story. From then on, Mary Shelley reports that she began to think about a narrative; asked the next morning if she had started to write, the author responded negatively. For Mary Shelley (1994, p.8), inventing is not simply creating something out of emptiness, but from chaos. Materials should, first of all, be designed. The invention consists, according to the author, in the ability to grasp the potentialities of a subject; and in the power of shaping and carving the ideas suggested by the theme.

Influenced by the scientific advances of her time, especially the experiments of Charles Darwin, Mary Shelley at last came up with a story. She envisioned a student working on something that looked like a machine, with a ghostly-looking creature at her side showing some vital signs. With some written pages, P. B. Shelley, her husband, advised her to develop the idea. Two years later, the modern Prometheus came to life in the form of a novel.

To better understand the narrative, one must understand its reference to the Greek myth of Prometheus. In Greek mythology, Prometheus is one of the Titans, a giant race, who inhabited the earth before the creation of man. Prometheus and his brother, Epimetheus, were given the mission of making man and providing him and all other animals with the faculties needed for their preservation. Thus, Epimetheus distributed different abilities to the other animals, but in the man's turn, no gift remained. With this, he seeks Prometheus's help, who, aided by Minerva, rises to the heavens and lights a torch in the sunlight. With fire, man could build weapons and tools to cultivate, heat their homes, and also produce the arts and invent money used to sell the products. However, as a form of punishment for the theft of the gods' fire, Jupiter condemns Prometheus. As a punishment, the Titan is chained on a rocky mountain called Mount Caucasus, where a vulture devours his liver every day. Because he is

immortal, Prometheus heals quickly, but the next day the vulture returns, being his eternal state of torment (BULFINCH, 2000).

The myth of Prometheus is a recurring theme in literature, be it among poets, or among playwrights and novelists. According to Bulfinch (2000), Prometheus's representation as being cordial to man places him as a symbol of resistance against oppression. In addition to Mary Shelley, some writers quoted or rewrote the myth in their works as in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, and *Paradise Lost*, by John Milton. The poet Lord Byron, also, used the theme in his lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound*, from 1820.

Thus, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* embodies traces of a classic myth praised in the history of western civilization. The English author, therefore, produces a text in which, unlike Prometheus, the protagonist of the story, Victor Frankenstein, imposes himself the mission to discover the secret of life. In this sense, there is a renewal of the myth through the romantic style, in which the character has the desire to dominate life and human creation based on rational science.

Michael Alexander (2013) argues that *Frankenstein* addresses important reflections on culture, morality, philosophy, and psychology. It would be, in the author's view, a sensitive critique of Victorian intelligence, a period of great inventions in the field of science, but with certain recoil concerning social and moral aspects.

In a certain way, entering the universe of the supernatural, the novel innovates in creating subterfuges to portray the society of the time. In this context, Ronald Carter and John McRae (1997) point out that the narrative follows the Gothic tradition established by the writer William Godwin in the late eighteenth century. According to the authors,

In the context of the Romantic period of literature, 'Gothic' writers are central insofar as they continue a tradition which challenges the emphasis on reason, control and order which characterizes early eighteenth-century literature. Gothic novels such as *Frankenstein* explore the deepest recesses of human psychology, always stressing the macabre, the unusual and the fantastic and preferring the realities of the subjective imagination. *Frankenstein* underlines a shift in sensibility and a movement towards the uncanny, the marvellous, the rationally uncontrollable and the psychological disjunctive. Such a shift also has political repercussions in that the worlds depicted represent a clear challenge to the existing order and to rational modes of thought and of social organization. (1997, p. 265-266).

Such traits form a literary tradition observable throughout the nineteenth century in authors like Charles Dickens and the Brontë sisters in England, and Edgar Allan Poe in the United States. In addition, Mary Shelley is singled out as one of the earliest writers to produce science fiction books, who also published *The Last Man* in 1826, a story about the destruction of the human race. The novel *Frankenstein* can also be characterized as the precursor of postmodern narratives explored in the twentieth-century literature, since the human is portrayed as a kind of collage and/or fragments of identity. Such themes have been extensively portrayed in futuristic or science fiction novels, dealing with the creation of artificial intelligence such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931); *I, Robot* (1950) by Isaac Asimov; and *Do Androids Dream of Electronic Sheep?* (1968) by Philip K. Dick, all adapted to cinema, reinforcing the historical relationship between the film art and literature, always building up new meanings and images of works and authors.

4 *Frankenstein* on screen

Frankenstein's film adaptations date back to the early 1900s, when, for example, one of the first adaptations of *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, signed by Thomas Edison's company, was shot in 1910. Throughout the last century, the narrative was rewritten on screen with various titles, broadening the imaginary horizon of the text for both readers and audience. In this way, film style corroborated the creation of new images of Shelley's story, and of the Victorian writer.

For case studies, we used in the present paper, two adaptations of Shelley's work: *Frankenstein* (1931), directed by James Whale; and *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994), directed by Kenneth Branagh. As a method of study, we will analyze the adaptations based on contextual readings to investigate how each film rewrites the novel into film language.

Cinema, therefore, represents a link with literature from the earliest years of its invention and development as art. Two hundred years after its first publication, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is another work transformed by film language that has been adapted in different periods and cultures since the advent of cinema. Due to dozens of

adaptations, it was necessary to confine the analysis considering two films produced at different times – James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931); and Kenneth Branagh’s *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* (1994), with the aim of pointing out how each production context rewrites Mary Shelley’s work, as well as investigating which narrative traits cinema have changed, added or extinguished compared to the narrative of 1818, such as characters, scenes and space.

The films, therefore, have distinct contexts of production, both temporally and technically, since the technical devices for filming in the 1930s were less advanced compared to the 1990s. In addition, the analysis takes into account cultural and specific poetics of the moment of each adaptation, traits which can determine how the directors built their films.

Frankenstein (1931), directed by James Whale and produced by Universal Pictures of the United States, is one of the main produced films of film industry based on Mary Shelley’s novel. The photography indicates an approach to the aesthetics of film noir, very common in the period, a feature of black and white films produced in the 1930s and 1940s, which explored investigative narratives set in a gloomy setting. Whale’s film, on the other hand, fits into the horror genre. The narrative changes names of characters: Victor is Henry Frankenstein (played by Colin Clive), and his friend Clerval is called Victor Moritz (played by John Boles); Mae Clarke plays Elizabeth. And finally, the monster is played by Boris Karloff (see fig. 1, below), one of the most iconic actors in horror movies at the time. His image as Frankenstein’s monster is a reference in the history of cinema.

Fig. 1 – Frankenstein’s Monster



The film presents some significant changes compared to the source text. At first, an actor presents the plot of the film, informing the audience what the story is about. Then the film shows a doctor stealing a corpse from a graveyard shortly after a funeral. Throughout the duration of the film, Henry Frankenstein is characterized by highly madness, obsessed by his scientific experiment. In summary, the doctor is expelled from medical school for developing illegal medical practices; thus, Henry secludes himself in an abandoned mansion far from the city where he builds his laboratory. The scientist has an assistant named Fritz – this character is added in the story – who is responsible for stealing a brain from the college where Henry studied. The brain used in the experiment, however, belonged to a criminal, and that is what makes the monster, when built, develop a violent personality.

During the time the monster is held captive, it murders Fritz, but it is controlled again by Frankenstein and his former teacher, Dr. Waldman, who gives an injection to kill the monster. However, while Frankenstein returns to his residence in Switzerland where the preparations for his wedding to Elizabeth were being organized, Dr. Waldman does some experiments in the sleeping creature, which recovers its consciousness and kills the doctor. Afterwards, the monster shows itself to Frankenstein at his wedding. Finally, the climax of the story happens when Frankenstein is led by the monster to a mill. There, the two wrestle, Frankenstein is thrown to the ground, and the monster is set on fire by the men who chased him (see fig. 2).

Fig. 2 – Burning Mill



Unlike the literary plot, the film ends with Frankenstein and Elizabeth alive, thus rewriting Mary Shelley's story. We may assume this construction is lined up with a common film practice of the time which looked for happy endings as a style to please

the audience, besides trying to provide a kind of mitigation in the early 1930s, a period still under the effects of the Great Economic Depression of 1929 in the United States. Thus, cinema would function as a medium capable of generating a feeling of relaxation and/or hope in the face of life's issues. Therefore, the political and historical context at stake at the time influenced the type of rewriting observed in the film, producing different images of the novel published in the previous century.

The production context of *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* by filmmaker, actor and screenwriter Kenneth Branagh, on the other hand, is completely different from James Whale's adaptation context. Besides updated equipment, the 1990s had different aesthetic concerns, especially because cinema audiences had another maturity. The political-ideological concerns were also different, and there was no need to generate any kind of cathartic function among the spectators.

The 1994 film is starred by Kenneth Branagh himself who plays Victor Frankenstein; Robert de Niro as the monster; and Helena Carter who plays Elizabeth. Branagh's film follows a storyline similar to that presented in Mary Shelley's book, especially the way the story unfolds, with Victor Frankenstein being found at the North Pole by Captain Robert Walton, where he tells his story from the beginning. We understand that the writer's own name in the film title suggests an explicit intertext with the novel, or even a tribute to the writer. However, the director makes some important shifts throughout the narrative, generating a certain level of drama and emphasizing violence, characteristic of contemporary cinema, with a public eager for action and drama. Casting choice can also influence the type of interaction required to broaden the audience.

At first, Victor Frankenstein is presented as a young scholar. However, his mother's death in the birth of his younger brother creates a motive for the character to desire eternal life and put an end to human suffering. In medical school he meets Professor Krempe, with whom he shares electromagnetic experiences aiming at generating life in dead matter. After Krempe's death, Victor inherits the task of continuing his studies and builds a machine capable of fulfilling his wish.

Even after being unadvised by his friend Henry Clerval (played by Tom Hulce), Victor is dedicated to the mission of discovering the secret of life. He makes a creature from different parts of corpses and uses Professor Krempe's own brain to complete his

work. With a successful experiment, Victor realizes that his creation, however, consisted of an error, a defect that could never be put into practice. After the birth of the monster, Victor believed it would be dead, then returns to Geneva where, finally, would marry Elizabeth. Hence, the film explores the Gothic atmosphere portrayed in Mary Shelley's book while building a psychological narrative in which both Victor and the creature are involved.

The monster's madness is enhanced as it wanders through the streets and is expelled by the villagers. Fleeing from Victor's lab, the creature carries the diary used throughout its making process, and the object is used to link both characters back into the rest of the film. The monster spends a period in the outskirts of a hut in the forest where a family resides. There he learns to read and to communicate. In this aspect, one observes a narrow relation with Mary Shelley's novel. At the time, the monster perceives its real physiognomy and disgusting appearance, thus scaring the family out of the place. This is an important transitional moment in the narrative, when the monster decides to take revenge on its creator (see fig. 3).

Fig. 3 – The monster swears revenge against Frankenstein



The events are marked by extreme violence, which creates greater drama to the film. We highlight the deaths of Victor's little brother committed by the monster, and Justine's death on the gallows, unjustly accused of murdering the child. It is worth mentioning that, aesthetically, the narrative has frames with little duration in seconds, as well as rapid shifts of scenes which gives more importance to movement and characters' actions. This filmic construction – accelerated montage – permeates the whole narrative,

along with the soundtrack and frontal planes of the characters' faces, especially the monster's, which define the tone of the film in the generation of a violent drama.

One of the most striking moments of the narrative is the encounter of Victor Frankenstein and his creation in the icy mountains of Geneva. The creature demonstrates the desire to have a mate and orders Victor to build a female one. Apparently, the scientist decides to proceed with the plan, but gets rid of the idea when he sees the body of Justine being given by the creature so Victor could return her to life. From then on, the narrative highlights the monster's fiendish appearance, especially when it enters Elizabeth's bedroom, rips out her heart and shows it to Frankenstein as a price for revenge (fig. 4).

Fig. 4 – The monster kills Elizabeth



In despair, Victor takes Elizabeth's body to his laboratory and tries to revive her. Frankenstein manages to bring her back using Justine's body; however, terrified by her appearance, Elizabeth fires her own body and throws herself out of the building. This construction represents a novelty in comparison to the novel *Frankenstein*. This episode in the film also differs from other adaptations and Mary Shelley's own story, since the film of Branagh modifies the plot with the intention of creating, in the audience, greater visual appeal, as well as an extra conflict in regard to dramatization.

Finally, the narrative ends up in the North Pole, where Victor had been found by Captain Walton. Victor dies soon after finishing telling his story. The monster, in turn, mourns the loss of his 'father.' The final sequence of the film presents the creature with the body of its creator in the arms, while the flames consume both.

Fig. 5 – The monster holds Frankenstein's body in flames



The fire here plays a different role than the 1931 adaptation, in which the monster shows fear and dies alone in the windmill. In *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, however, creator and creature perish together. Hereupon, the story remains open, creating new images in relation to Mary Shelley's story and other film adaptations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both Branagh's and Whale's adaptations amplify Frankenstein's imaginary world, especially for consolidating a literary story in the film system at different times, which places the novel as a kind of source text for cinema.

Whale rewrites Mary Shelley's narrative on screen and portrays the main characters in order to represent a narrative shape as a likely response to the 1930s audiences in the United States. Branagh, on the other hand, translates the work reinforcing traces of violence and psychological conflicts, characteristics of the contemporary cinema. Thus, different interpretations occurred in the process of film adaptation. Cultural contexts of production influence the way each film narrative is constructed and, therefore, it becomes necessary to investigate them to understand the works, their different readings and meanings.

In such a way, cinema, through various adaptations/translations throughout its history, and in particular the films analyzed here, transformed a literary character into an icon of film art, and it will certainly continue to be rewritten and revived on the screen as long as there is human imaginary.

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