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Frankenstein as Enduring Cinemyth

The dark cavern of the cinema is reminiscent of a ceremonial sweat lodge, an initiation pit, the dark soul of the night, the belly of the fish, the alchemical grave, or the wilderness of the night journey.

—Geoffrey Hill,
*Illuminating Shadows:
The Mythic Power of Film*

The origins of this book date back to the 1980s, when I realized that the Frankensteinian cinemyth¹ had spawned far more than classic horror renditions, producing, among others, comedic and science fiction variants. It occurred to me that these “hideous progeny” were an unruly lot, often defying classification, ranging in a continuum across horror and laughter. This ability to elicit a complex range of reactions—from fear, terror, and awe to laughter, ridicule, ironic sympathy, and distance—has fascinated me; these form the heart of this inquiry. I was drawn to how the Invisible Man’s dark laughter that “closes” *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* leaves the nature of what laughter signifies, at the end of what had appeared as a standard comedy, disturbingly unsettled. I was ambivalent about how Elizabeth’s (Madeline Kahn) ecstatic and melodious, “Ah, sweet mystery of life, at last I have found you,” as she and the creature engage in an implied rape-turned-seduction, elicits laughter rather than terror. In addition, the attractive-repulsive magnetism of the transgressive sexuality of Dr. Frank-N-Furter’s transvestite mad scientist in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* cries out for further examination.

Prior work I have done on the cinematic retellings of the Frankenstein narrative have remained limited, for the purpose of clarity, to films that do not blur the genre boundaries of “straight” or “classic” horror.² This work diffuses beyond the traditional cinematic depiction of the evolving Frankenstein narrative with an eye to clarifying the relationships binding comedy to horror that are made manifest in comedic versions, such as *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*; science fiction versions, such as *Alien*; and iterations in which horror and comedy hang in a tight, oscillating balance, such as *The Terminator* and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*.

Two elements bind my previous work to this project: (1) the emphasis on parthenogenetic births (male self-births, such as Frankenstein’s birthing of his creature), and (2) the focus on the third shadow, or representations of the female monster and the feminine-as-monstrous, as a crucial site of ambivalence revelatory of tensions regarding gender, power, and technology. Briefly sketched, what I found in prior work is that traditional Frankenstein films in the horror genre generally attempt to excise, or severely delimit, the novel’s embedded critique of the Romantic politics of gender, as hiding a politics of masculine domination and narcissism. In place of the novel’s complex characterization of the monster, these straight horror films often substitute a grotesque creation doomed to criminality and isolation; in place of the ambivalent relationships binding Victor to his mother and his bride-surrogate mother, these films obliterate the M/Other, and establish a more conventional love triangle between male figures, such as Henry Frankenstein and Victor Clerval, who seem monstrously cobbled together from fragments of Mary Shelley’s novelistic characterization of them.

Yet this severe repression backfires. At the center of these horror films is a retelling of an exaggerated myth of male self-birthing—a myth whose classic analogue may be glimpsed in the story of the birth of Dionysus from the thigh of Zeus. I argue that contemporary Frankensteinian films draw from a hybrid heritage of pre-Socratic and Romantic narratives, both of which mythically configure the natural world as one of strife, in which gendered antagonisms comprise a crucial component. Pre-Socratic myths, as Nietzsche tells us, are narratives “beyond good and evil,” whose “morality” derives from an unadulterated expression of the will-to-power. Romantic myths, as the novel shows us, can constitute a masked and murderous domination of nature, woman, the Other, done in the name of the pursuit of Scientific Truth or Artistic Creativity. Although pre-Socratic myths give evidence of a tense and creative agonism between matriarchal and patriarchal myths, Romantic

myths (and straight horror film renditions of the Frankenstein story) have a predominantly patriarchal cast in which manifestations of the feminine or M/Other are severely delimited and disciplined, often with a great deal of narrative strain. Ironically, this immense narrative strain conjures up something other than a simple victimizer (male)/victim (female) model. Rather, what we occasionally glimpse are the outlines of the feminized/tortured male body, which requires, to sustain the borders of masculinity versus femininity, a radical repression of the powerful female body, negatively reenvisioned as what I call the *third shadow*—embodied typically in the female monster (as in the female creature in *Bride of Frankenstein*) or the feminine-as-monstrous (for example, the ambitious and seductive Justine in *The Curse of Frankenstein*).³ Yet this repression, even as it gains an uneasy victory, attests, in the vehemence of its negation, to its dark underside. As Deborah Wilson writes: “Victor never quite makes maternity *exclusively* male; the womb may be displaced, the maternal body reinscribed, but it will not remain subsumed.”⁴ This strain on the intertwined patriarchal myths of parthenogenesis and of science as an unambiguous guarantor of progress is even more obvious in comedic, science fiction, and horror-comedic film versions of the evolving Frankenstein myth.

Stated differently, these more contemporary offshoots of the Frankenstein narrative allow a fuller emergence of what Janice Rushing and Thomas Frenz⁵ call the *dystopian aspects* of the Frankensteinian complex. In comparison with their horror film counterparts, which strive to stamp out any hint of sexual ambiguity and to create traditionally “happy” endings, these more contemporary renditions, which range across comedy and horror, tend to unleash these problematic elements (for example, gender blurring and not-quite-so-happy endings)—at least for a longer time, and in a more overt fashion, than their classic horror counterparts. Even in these more subversive and open-ended narratives, when some form of conventional closure is reached, this closure is unstable. For example, Frank-N-Furter is savagely sentenced to death because his “lifestyle is too extreme” in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*; nevertheless, the full-blooded romp this larger-than-life transvestite has wreaked on traditional gender categories has not been negated. Although Janet, Brad, and Dr. Scott survive their adventures in Frank-N-Furter’s castle, no traditional conclusion of the narrative is achieved. The last shot in which we see them does not show Brad and Janet getting married; nor is the professor shown safely ensconced in a laboratory setting, his masculinity reinstated. Rather, we have an extreme high-angle shot, which looks down from the point of view of Frank-N-Furter’s castle blasting off, revealing how tiny their figures are, amidst

the rubble and gaping hole; the professor's stockinged leg sticks out from the rubble—an absurd and laughable spectacle defying conventional closure.

Thus, I carry on this genealogy of the transformations of the Frankensteinian myth into its more contemporary renditions, and more important, into selected examples of its comedic, science fiction, and hybrid progeny, which constitute horror-comedy. Once again, the guiding question is what these transformations reveal about the evolving depictions of “masculinity” and “femininity,” particularly when the revisioning of the Frankenstein narrative shifts from straight horror to comedy, science fiction, or horror-comedy. Unlike their horror counterparts, where Mary Shelley's critique of patriarchal politics is predominantly silenced (although not without tension), I argue that more contemporary comedic, science fiction, and horror-comedy offshoots effectively unleash, at least for a time, the transgressive powers of the parthenogenetic birth's twin myth, the story of Baubo's *anasuromai* (Baubo's lifting of her skirts to reveal her genitalia and belly as a defiant act celebrating female reproduction and sexual desire). In taking this position, I argue that Rhona Berenstein's position on classic horror is actually more apropos for describing the comedic, science fiction, and horror-comedy offshoots of the Frankenstein narrative. “. . . What I do not argue is that classic horror is transgressive from a larger ideological perspective. . . . To claim that the genre is *either* politically progressive or conservative oversimplifies one of its most important qualities; namely its function as a site of ideological contradiction and negotiation.”⁶

Given my hypothesis that particularly the hybrid offshoots of the Frankenstein horror cinemyth draw from contradictory and competing meaning systems—as evidenced in the perpetual war between ideologically progressive and conservative forces—I approach these hybrid films with multiple sources of evidence. Among the texts I examine are the evolving scripts compared with the released or “final” film versions, and when available, the analysis of publicity campaigns, censorship files, and reviews. In drawing from diverse sources, I avoid a simplistic and linear interpretation of what monstrosity in such movies entails, and instead explore the dynamic and contradictory relationships rooted in social, institutional, economic, and creative discourses and contexts that are reflected in, and constitutive of, such hybrid genres.

I also show that, even more so than their horror counterparts, these genre departures from straight horror disrupt the following canonical assumptions concerning horror spectatorship: (1) that the sadistic male viewer is the genre's ideal implied spectator; (2) that all women in films

are necessarily terrorized, passive objects and the archetypal female patron is incapable of sharing the Mulveyan “male gaze”; and (3) that classic horror’s stories are principally about heterosexual, even if monstrous, desire.

In so doing, I draw from Noël Carroll’s explorations into the nature of the monstrous in relation to humor. In his *Philosophy of Horror*, Carroll observes that monsters “are beings or creatures that specialize in formlessness, incompleteness, categorical interstitiality, and categorical contradictoriness. . . . Horrific monsters often involve the mixture of what is normally distinct.”⁷ In a more recent piece, Carroll turns to affinities binding humor and horror as conventionally configured antitheses to beauty.⁸ He notes that both horror and humor root themselves in the terrain of the ugly⁹ (that is, the not-beautiful clown and not-quite-human monster) and in category violations for creatures of horror (for example, simultaneously alive and dead; animate and inanimate; human and animal), and conceptual incongruity for humor. An example of a category violation Carroll cites to illustrate how humor operates is how the word *test* means “experiment” and “exam” in the joke: “Why did the moron stay up all night? He was studying for his blood test.”¹⁰ In addition, Carroll’s comments on the unseen political effects of seemingly value-free aesthetic pronouncements are instructive: “If beauty—the perfect realization of the concept of the human—rhetorically implies goodness, [then] ugliness and category violation encourage the suspicion of evil and moral defectiveness. Where beauty can be used to valorize, horror and humor can be used to dehumanize and vilify and, for that reason, they are diabolically effective levers of ethnic and racial hatred—ones that operate pretty close to our nerve endings.”¹¹ Although Carroll is right to point out the similarities and differences between comedy and horror based on category violation and its political import, he makes essentially the same assumption that Zakiya Hanafi does in *The Monster in the Machine*.¹² Briefly characterized, a major equivocation is at the heart of Hanafi’s characterization of what constitutes the “monstrous.” She repeatedly characterizes the monster by negation from the very beginning—“A monster is whatever we are *not*”;¹³ “what is monstrous is simply radically other, nothing more than ‘nonhuman,’”¹⁴ until her Afterword: “. . . the monster is a concept that we need in order to tell ourselves what we are *not*.”¹⁵ Carroll states a similar view, based on a radical opposition between what the human/normal is versus the monstrous, when he writes: “Horror, at least in popular fictions, is a compound emotional response. It is made up of two components: fear and disgust.”¹⁶

Both Hanafi and Carroll voice sentiments similar to those other theorists hold. Robin Wood draws from Freudian and materialist theories to claim that the monster is the “repressed,” generally understood from the point of view of a monogamous, patriarchal, bourgeois, heterosexual, and capitalist society. Thus, the real plot of traditional horror is the repressed-oppressed struggle for recognition and its subsequent vanquishing, which constitutes the return of the “normal” order.¹⁷ Steven Neale uses the lens of gender to point out that the monster either exceeds masculinity or femininity or dangerously mixes them (as opposed to the homogenously “pure” masculine and feminine entities the monster imperils), thus unsettling the boundaries between sexual identity and difference.¹⁸

Although these analyses are highly insightful, they constitute only a partial explanation of monstrosity. This characterization of the monster as a “not-I” would explain the fear and suspicion with which monsters have been increasingly treated as their sacred origins have been sundered, but it does not adequately explain the continuing fascination with, and ambivalent admiration of, monsters. Hanafi observes in her Afterword: “Our favorite contemporary monster of all—the extraterrestrial—always arrives in a spaceship born from a superior technology. More often than not, we envy their superior advancement. Perhaps the truth is that we all secretly yearn to be aliens.”¹⁹ I argue that monsters are the liminal point of not only what we are not, but also what we are; they reveal and conceal not only what we fear, but also what we hope for, and they allow us imaginatively to excavate the depths of not only who we could be in relation to nature and divinity, but also who we are in relation to the demons that lurk within. This continuum of attraction/repulsion, same/otherness, fear/awe-ridicule is clearly seen in hybrid genres, such as the comedic, science fiction, and horror-comedic offshoots of the Frankenstein cinemyth. Both humor and horror have progressive and regressive political tendencies. Humor and horror destabilize and problematize—through comic explosion, numinous rupture, and fluctuations—only to fall back, many times, but not all the time, on some iteration of a conventional “ending.” Nevertheless, this traditional “conclusion” undercuts itself as a final closure, signaling the eternal return of comedy and horror as alternating with conventional “closure” as a never-ending spiral.

The term *monster* has at least two etymological roots: *monere* (to warn) and *monstrare* (to demonstrate).²⁰ Yet Virginia Jewiss points out other dimensions to the characterization of monstrosity: “Exegetes of the Vulgate followed the Ciceronian understanding of the term as an omen, a sign of things to come, while common usage, derived from Aris-

tote's observations in the *Generation of Animals*, held that the monstrous was anything deviating from the natural order."²¹ This etymological hybridity is apropos because the "essence" of monstrosity appears to be hybridization. "By their very nature monsters escape classification, frustrate the possibility of linguistic precision, embody an ontological ambivalence, and make visible the process of mutation."²² Yet this slippage is not only threatening, but also potentially liberating because as Donna Haraway points out, if our postmodern way of being in the world is cyborgian (that is, multiply hybrid), then monstrosity (understood as pluralistic category violation) is a way out of a maze of dualisms that somehow seem inadequate to describe the chiaroscuro of lived (and culturally imagined) existence: "A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end . . . it takes *irony* for granted"²³ [italics mine].

This emphasis on plural hybridity is crucial to my analysis of how horror is configured in relation to comedy, as instantiated particularly in the horror comedies, science fiction-horror, and comedic-science fiction-horror offshoots of the Frankensteinian cinematic saga. To explain this, I borrow from Arthur Koestler's notion of the continuum binding the ha-ha experience (comedy) and the aha instance (artistic creation and scientific discovery). Briefly sketched, the psychological "mechanics" of comedy are essentially the same as other "creative" acts: these mechanics involve the sudden clash between two mutually exclusive codes of rules, or associative contexts, which are suddenly juxtaposed. What results is "bisociation"—a condition that compels us to interpret the situation in "two self-consistent but incompatible frames of reference at the same time; it makes us function simultaneously on two different wave-lengths."²⁴ The tension caused by bisociation is purged either through laughter, scientific fusion, or artistic confrontation. As Koestler writes: "The conscious or unconscious processes underlying creativity are essentially combinatorial activities—the bringing together of previously separate ideas of knowledge and experience. The scientist's purpose is to achieve *synthesis*; the artist aims at a *juxtaposition* of the familiar and the eternal; the humorist's game is to contrive a *collision*."²⁵ Instead of the continuum binding humor (the ha-ha experience), scientific discovery (the aha experience) and artistic creation (the "ah" experience), I substitute a continuum in which horror-comedy, comedic-science fiction-horror, and science fiction-horror blur into each other. Yet the continuum I construct has a slightly different configuration. Koestler briefly tabulates some of the essential characteristics of his continuum in the following fashion.²⁶

<i>Ha-Ha</i>	<i>Aha</i>	<i>Ab . . .</i>
comic simile	hidden analogy	metaphor
caricature	diagram	stylization
impersonation	empathy	illusion
pun	word games	rhyme
collision	synthesis	juxtaposition
coincidences	serendipity	deus ex machina
self-assertive	self-assertive/ self-transcending	self-transcending

Adopting selected features of his schema, my own tabulated summary looks like this:

<i>Ha-Ha</i>	<i>Ab/Oob-Ha</i>	<i>Ab/Oob</i>
comedy-horror	comedic-science fiction-horror	science fiction-horror
humor/ridicule/ fascination	humor/ridicule/ fascination-fear/terror/ disgust/awe/fascination	fear/terror/disgust/awe/ fascination
verbal and musical puns	menacing and sudden shocks, alternating with verbal and musical puns	menacing silences and sudden shocks
fast-talking dames, croners, and transsexuals	female monsters; monstrous females; androgynous monsters	hypermasculinized or hyperfeminized aliens and cyborgs
politically progressive and conservative	politically progressive and conservative	politically progressive and conservative

Thus, my principal argument is that at one end of the spectrum, in films such as *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*, *Young Frankenstein*, and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the juxtaposition between comedic elements, such as the practical joke or slapstick (*Abbott and Costello*), impersonation (Fronkonsteen in *Young Frankenstein*) and parody (Frank-N-Furter, Rocky, Janet, Brad, and Dr. Scott in *Rocky Horror*), and elements of horror, such as the deformed, ugly, and menacing monster, create a hybrid genre that allows for a simultaneous destabilization of the boundaries of power, gender, and sexuality. At the other end of the spectrum, films such as *Alien*, *Aliens*, *Alien³*, and *Blade Runner* involve a fusion of science fiction narrative elements (futuristic dystopias) with “horror” and “terror”²⁷ narrative techniques (for example, the predatory, stalking gaze the audience implicitly sees from the perspective of the unseen alien; the unexpected resurrections of the Ter-

minator).²⁸ Such films, I argue, are not simply sensationalist and sado-masochistic splatter films set within a futuristic context, but repositories of Rudolf Otto's notion of the "numinous" as intersecting with Tzvetan Todorov's notion of the "fantastic." Briefly outlined, Otto describes a primitive "demonic dread" to which one becomes prey when one encounters the "unheimlich"—the uncanny, weird, eerie, mysterious, incomprehensible—that is: "‘wholly other,’ that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which . . . falls quite outside the limits of the ‘canny’ and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment."²⁹ Such a demonic dread is "numinous" and "irreducible," and intersects with Todorov's characterization of the fantastic as entailing a "hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event."³⁰ Both Otto's numinous experience and Todorov's encounter with the fantastic entail wonder, astonishment, and awe (alongside fear, terror, and disgust), which can serve to unfix commonsensical demarcations of gender, power, and humanness. However, these elements of the uncanny and marvelous are sustained only by the indeterminacy of the phenomenon and the uncertainty of the viewer; once the phenomenon has become classifiable or explainable via traditional categories, the potential for destabilization becomes harnessed, resulting in a semblance of conventional closure.

Finally, the intermediate category of comedic-science fiction-horror is instantiated in films such as *The Terminator*, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, and *Alien: Resurrection*. Precisely because the monsters (the queen in *Alien* and the T-800) have long been "explained" through semiscientific discourse and have been rendered visible through precursor films, sustaining the element of the numinous principally through these characters is no longer possible. New monsters have to be spawned: Ripley is reborn as a hybrid cloned from a mixture of human and alien genes, and the T-1000 emerges, possessing not only the tenacity and indestructibility of the T-800 but also higher level lethal talents for simulation, metamorphoses, and trickery. Interestingly, in *Terminator 2* and *Alien: Resurrection* for example, the humorous elements are directly aligned with monstrosity: Arnold Schwarzenegger's reformed T-800 and Sigourney Weaver's human-alien clone and mother have the best comedic lines. Yet with their emergence as bearers of humor comes an openness to vulnerability. The T-800 learns to understand what tears signify; and Ripley, the powerful alien-human mother, tenderly engages in an embrace with the newborn as if it were a lover-child prior to killing it.

A crucial part of the dynamic in these hybrid genres of the Frankenstein cinemyth is that the categories of first (or "inferior" or "femi-

nized”) shadow; second (or “technologized” or “hypermasculinized/demonized”) shadow, and third (female monsters and the feminine-as-monstrous) shadows blur into each other. Thus, Dr. Sandra Mornay and Joan Raymond in *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* mirror each other as fast-talking dames whose feminine attributes mark them as “inferior” shadows, and yet whose ambition, wit, manipulative intelligence, and physical beauty render them instances of the feminine-as-monstrous. Later, when Dracula bites Mornay, she makes the transition into female monster as a formidable vampiress, and yet she remains Dracula’s servant and ultimately proves ineffectual at hypnotizing even the not-too-intelligent Chick Young (Budd Abbott), thus maintaining her position as a “feminized” shadow at the same time. As another example, Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* occupies the site of what Mary Russo calls the “female grotesque”³¹ by being simultaneously dangerous and endangered. With her muscle-clad body, expertise in warfare, and fanatical adherence to stopping Skynet at all costs, she has been transformed into a female Terminator and thus occupies the site of the third shadow. Yet she is still very much flesh and blood and a woman who must be rescued from danger, just like any feminized shadow, as the ending of *Terminator 2* shows. Finally, in *Blade Runner*, Roy Batty, the best and last of the rebel replicants, who are “more human than human,” appears as an avenging angel-demon when he confronts Tyrell, the Frankensteinian “biomechanical god.” In this version of the Frankensteinian myth, the creature demands “more life” for itself and its mate and in an elegant game of genetic chess with its father, explores all possibilities for prolonging its life. When all such possible moves seem fruitless, Roy Batty becomes a Judas figure who kisses his father tenderly on the lips (with ambiguous homoerotic tinges) before he crushes his skull. Yet the next sequence aligns him with a howling, avenging beast and a Christlike figure, with his bloodily spiked hand and the white dove that he releases as he expires, granting the gift of life to the stunned Rick Deckart, the blade runner assigned to terminate all rebel replicants. *Blade Runner* ends up radically problematizing the boundaries of the *Frankenstein* narrative. The replicants, rather than the humans, emerge as more genuinely free, more committed to life and passion, than their human counterparts. In contrast, the conventionally “heroic” figure, Deckart, is feminized in his fumbling and puny attempts to complete his mission. Because clear hints are incorporated, at least in the director’s cut, that Deckart, too, is probably also a replicant, both Deckart and Batty once again mirror each other, occupying the intersecting spheres of technologized and hypermasculinized shadow, and feminized shadow (sacrificial and vulnerable victims). These hybrid gen-

res enable this fluctuation-juxtaposition of different types of shadows, which the straight horror cinematic narrative tends to keep distinct. In the long run it is precisely from such blurring that these “hideous progeny” of the horror genre derive their abilities more radically to unfix, and yet ambivalently reinstate (with several significant exceptions, as I shall point out), the conventional borders of power, gender, sexuality, and monstrosity.



Still from *Young Frankenstein* appears courtesy of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, Twentieth Century Fox, Crossbow Productions, Gruskoff/Venture Films, Jouer Limited, 1974.