

## Frankenstein to Frankenberry: Morphing of the Monster Myth in Pop Culture

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Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, much like the monster itself, entered society ultimately to be transformed into an entity only partially resembling that of its birth. The Frankenstein monster has become an icon of society's contemporary monster, but an icon Mary Shelley would scarce recognize. Much as Victor's idealized creation is left to become a horrible wretch at the hands of a society unable to comprehend the true nature of the creature, so too does Shelley's thematic creation become bastardized at the hands of pop culture. A number of studies have traced the developing image of the Frankenstein monster from its original conception through the contemporary horror film. But the question I wish to posit here is not one that covers this well-traversed material on the changing image of the monster, but a question of how both readers and viewers may internalize the image of the monster and how this internalization reshapes thematic discourse into an ever-emergent construction of fear, and ultimately, parody. The key to such an explication is not so much *how* the image of monsters has changed, but instead, how one internalizes the emotional content of the Monster in whatever physical shape it may present itself. Through this internalization from a *feeling* into an *emotion*, we can identify why the imagery of the monster, to maintain an affective quality, must always remain emergent.

As Catherine Lutz puts it, appropriate to an examination of the Frankenstein monster, "To have feelings is to be truly human."<sup>1</sup> It is from emotions that one constructs a specific and individual identity through a semiotic connection between signifier and signified. But as we observe the world, through firsthand experience, through film, through text, etcetera, emotions develop and shift based on a sliding semiotic relationship between such signification. It is through these changing associations that one can define his or her own emotional identification with an outside narrative, and in turn, establish an ever-developing emergent identity. But it is only through an emotional recognition of the events that allow us to internalize these stories and form an increasing chain of emergent identities; thus, an individual grows and explores ever more complicated societal constructs.

Before going further, it is necessary to define two important terms, *feeling* and *emotion*, so one does not erroneously draw the assumption that I

intend them to be synonymous. Such a distinction is important to a discussion of monsters because it will allow us to differentiate between the momentary feeling of shock at the unexpected and the emotion of what we have internalized as truly horrific. A feeling, as I will intend it here, is a natural occurrence, a purely psychological and physiological bodily response. Such *feelings* can be considered infantile responses to non-internalized stimuli. An *emotion* is associated with the internalized feeling, when external stimuli, either concrete or abstract, becomes associated with natural feelings. Emotions, according to Martha Nussbaum, “are not feelings that well up in some natural and untutored way from our natural selves, they are, in fact, not personal or natural at all, they are, instead, contrivances, social constructs.”<sup>2</sup> While Nussbaum does not draw a clear distinction between emotion and feeling, her definition is important in that it establishes emotion as a construct, one that must be assembled through an individual’s interaction and semiotic development with his or her external world. Therefore, how an individual internalizes the outside world, whether through a myriad of first or secondhand experiences, will define how one emotionally identifies with the world. Stories become a teacher for how we construct our emotional identities, and therefore, as Nussbaum notes, “are not natural stirrings but constructs [and] if they rest upon beliefs, then they can be modified by a modification of beliefs.”<sup>3</sup> So if a belief is a form of signifier, and we associate a particular emotion as its signified, then a change in the semiotic relationship of the signifier will redefine how we internalize the emotion.

Residual identity, the codes by which we previously defined ourselves, will influence modes of signification in dominant emotional identity, the way we see ourselves in a present context. The ways in which individuals of particular cultures internalize their own emotional responses will be culturally specific, and will form culturally appropriate semiotic relationships. Based on this process, emergent identities can form according to drastically differing semiotic relationships. But these relationships, as Ann Cvetkovich observes, are not inherent. “Like sexuality and other physical processes, affect is not a pre-discursive entity, a fact that is often obscured by the construction of affects or bodily sensations as natural. To study the politics of affect, then, is more broadly to study the politics of cathexis and to explore how meanings are given to the energy attached to particular events and representations.”<sup>4</sup> The energy I wish to focus on most specifically in relation to the figure of the Frankenstein monster is one of fear, which, according to Robert Thomas’ definition in “The Concept of Fear,” is “not only what is likely to threaten life, injure our bodies, cause physical pain, which is seen as ‘dangerous’ or ‘threatening.’ Whatever is construed as contrary to our

gratifications, ambitions, fulfillments, can be seen as harmful, distressing, ruinous according to some criterion of value.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, one cannot experience a moment of fear without first internalizing a preexisting-condition, applying some external stimuli to this condition, and finally interpreting a context in which the pre-existing condition could be altered to an undesirable state. Fear becomes the internalized reaction to one’s possible inability to prevent a stimulus from negatively impacting the pre-existing condition.

Based on the above structure of fear, one can see the role suspense plays in such a formula. When an individual is faced with fear, but he or she cannot, without substantial doubt, identify the external stimuli, the result is a moment of suspense. At this moment, the individual experiences fear even though he or she has not been able to identify the stimulus that is causing the fear. There is, in other words, nothing yet to be afraid of. Suspense then produces a physiological reaction similar to those experiencing a moment of fear, but in this case, there is no object to which the individual can project the emotion. Therefore, one can define a pre-fear state in which the individual has recognized a not unpleasant pre-existing condition that becomes threatened by some external stimuli. The individual experiences a moment of suspense during the period prior to identifying the specific identity of the stimuli, at which point suspense gives way to fear when the individual is unsure of his or her own power to interfere with and defend the pre-existing condition from destruction. Through this process, we internalize the stimulus that has caused us fear, and in turn we re-evaluate (sometimes subconsciously) our relationship to the original pre-existing condition. It is then, through this internalization that we combat the fearful stimuli by creating a new emergent identity altered from the original pre-fear state. As a result, fear cannot remain a constant; it must change in light of the perceptions of a continually altered emergent identity.

From these newly forming modes of emergent identities, an audience internalizes fear from feeling into emotion, thus giving it meaning. According to Judith Halberstam’s insightful book *Skin Shows* (1995), there is an overall sense that the semiotics of a monster must remain fluid with regard to meaning, as it can be interpreted limitlessly, depending upon changing sociological perceptions. Halberstam specifically addresses the role of both text and cinema in defining this internalization of fear. Because “the production of fear in a literary text (as opposed to a cinematic text) emanates from a vertiginous excess of meaning” (2), a reader is not limited to a specific mode of representation with which he or she juxtaposes with a pre-fear state. “One might expect to find that cinema multiplies the possibilities for monstrosity but in fact the visual register quickly reaches a limit of visibility.

In *Frankenstein* the reader can only imagine the dreadful spectacle of the monster and so it's limited only by the readers imagination."<sup>6</sup> Thus, the finality of the internalization of visual cinematic (and stage) representations becomes the key factor in the morphing of the monster image.

There has been much critical work defining the monster within Mary Shelley's text as a critique on early 19<sup>th</sup> century political roles, the rise and dangers of the industrial revolution, the role of feminine ideology, and the list goes on. But it is the very fact that the list *does go on* that is of central importance to the way individuals internalize their own constructs of fear. The text, precisely as Halberstam notes, does not allow a solidification of the relationship between the signifier and the signified. The textual imagery created by the imagination always remains fluid in conjunction with the reader's pre-emergent identity. Not only does the physicality of the monster remain ambiguous--Shelley provides little in the way of specific description--but the thematic implications of the text, as the numerous interpretations suggest, also remain fluid based on its relationship with changing social constructs. However, the form of the horror film does not allow this same fluidity as the visual representation bypasses the work of the imagination to restructure the story's thematic relevance and redefine what the imagination sees as a horrific image.

To understand the apparent fluidity of the textual narrative versus the relative stagnation of the film versions, we need to consider Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the fantastic. "The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event."<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the fantastic occurs at the moment of suspense, when an individual senses that the pre-fear state may be in danger but has yet to define the stimuli as either natural or supernatural. The importance of Todorov's theory, as it applies to redefining textual emergent identities, is that "the fantastic implies an integration of the reader into the world of the characters; the world is defined by the reader's own ambiguous perception of the events narrated."<sup>8</sup> Once the reader makes a decision between the two choices, natural or supernatural, the moment of the fantastic is destroyed, for that which has caused the hesitation as been resolved and "we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous."<sup>9</sup> The fantastic no longer causes us to hesitate, because as a reader, we have already defined the terms with which we will read the text. Once the answer to the question is defined, the reader will never experience, in the same context, a further mode of hesitation. The basis then, for both the Fantastic and Fear is founded on an unanswered question. In the case of the Fantastic, 'Is this a natural or supernatural event?' and in the case of Fear, 'Do these events

threaten my earlier state of an agreeable identity?’ But once we provide an answer to these questions, we internalize the emotional quality and therefore redefine a new identity in which to address the abject.

According to Barbara Creed, the horror film fills the definition of the abject in three ways:

- 1) The horror film abounds in images of abjection, foremost of which is the corpse, whole and mutilated, followed by an array of bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears and putrefying flesh.
- 2) The concept of a border is central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film; that which crosses or threatens to cross the ‘border’ is abject. Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same—to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability.
- 3) The work of abjection is in the construction of the maternal figure as abject. [ . . . ] Partly consumed by the desire to remain locked in a blissful relationship with the mother and partly terrified of separation, the child finds it easy to succumb to the comforting pleasure of the dyadic relationship.<sup>10</sup>

The above articulation of abjection is important to our discussion of internalization specifically because Creed is emphasizing borderlines and an individual’s relationship to that border. What may be on the other side is the key element to abjection, and what an audience will perceive as monstrous.

So how does the internalization of textual imagery differ from the visual imagery presented in a horror film, and how does this difference impact the way a reader or audience internalizes these forms of abjection? The second point above provides an answer to this question that resides in the fact that the key element of the abject is in projecting a border, a foundation determining on which side a specific signifier falls. The defining element of abject signification relies on the location in respect to perceived boundaries. But the fact that the border changes from film to film also implies that how we define the abject must also change from film to film. I argue that the boundary of abjection remains constant in the textuality of the novel’s depictions because the text need not change to match the sliding boundaries of imaginative abjection. In visual representations, the imagination is bypassed as the film solidifies this boundary, and thus, the temporality of the abjection remains

consistent with an individual's ability to form a newly emergent identity to combat the emotional imbalance between the two sides of this border. Since the boundaries of the abject versus the non-abject are solidified in visual representations, the mode of representation must be shifted to match the changing emotional recognition of such boundary placement. However, within the context of the imagination's interpretation of textual imagery, the boundary of abjection is free to slide to match appropriate culture discourse. Therefore, the imagination is free to shift the boundaries of abjection freely as the imagery is not solidified by the text and the reader is able to continually shift the perspective of abject boundaries based on recurring modes of emergent emotional identity.

What we need most specifically to consider in such a discussion is not so much the thematic elements presented in differing film versions of the Frankenstein story, although they will play a role in defining the characteristics of imagery, but how the imagery of the monster creates modes of abjection that remain constant while the boundaries are forever shifting based on the contexts of emergent identities. For as themes go, an audience can *interpret* the monster's placement within the story to match whatever context it finds appropriate, as long as the visual references to the monster remain consistent with the theme the audience chooses to apply. However, my focus in this work is on the emotional context of fear and the monster's ability to produce such a sensation within the audience. So if we argue that our relationship to the boundary of abjection remains fluid in the text of *Frankenstein*, while the actual boundary is able to slide, but our relationship becomes fixed through visual representations, we must examine specifically why *seeing* the horror locks our positions in regard to infinite space but shifts the boundary itself of how we define abjection.

In light of the changing borders of affect based on these ever emergent identity constructions, for the Frankenstein monster to continue to make its impact on us in a visual realm, the image of the monster must continually change to produce an affective moment. If creating a physical appearance for the monster will lead to a shifting of affective boundaries and ultimately destroy the emotionally fearful representation of the monster image, one comes to the realization that the only way to maintain the affective properties of the monster is to keep its appearance hidden from the audience. Once the audience is able to construct an identity for the monster, the semiotic connection between embodiment and abstract horror must appropriately shift. But once the image of the monster becomes solidified, imagination is no longer able to reposition the boundaries of affectation, and the result is a stagnant mode of presentation void of socially constructed emotion. Such a

mode of presentation has been produced in numerous forms of pop-culture horror and science fiction films and establishes a context in which we can understand how the image of the Frankenstein monster has been ultimately left as a symbol of quick shock, as I will illustrate in the monster's conception of typical slasher film villain, or as a humorous symbol filling the role of horror parody, television children's cartoon, or spokesfigure for sugar-coated cereal.

What we cannot see frightens us most. Reason competes with imagination to establish boundaries around the external stimuli and, thus, clearly establishes a means of remaining separated from that which harms us. But reason will ultimately prove ineffective without a frame of reference grounded in a context of physical reality to establish a solidified boundary between the real and the unreal, the natural and the supernatural. Without this definitive context, reason is unable to mark the separation between two modes of perception, so as an audience or a reader, we are forced to hesitate, resulting in a moment of suspense that I discussed earlier as the first stage in externalizing the *feeling* and producing an externally constructed *emotion* of fear.

But once that image is removed from the imagination of the audience and placed before him or her as a physical reality with boundaries, as horrifying or unrealistic as it may be, the imagination becomes confined by these boundaries of the natural physical ties of the external stimuli. It is important to note that because the physical nature of the stimuli is specifically *external*, there is no need to *internalize* the physical creation. Since now the image is confined within boundaries, the imagination has nothing to fly to--the sublime nature of the object is literally grounded within the walls of the real. Our initial response is not one of internalized fear because the image of the monster has been subsequently externalized. The audience may be physically startled by the presence of the monster in whatever deformity the director chooses, but specifically because of the physically external nature of the creature, this feeling of shock is never internalized into an emotion, simply an immediate *natural* reaction of shock.

Once the physical nature of the creature is fully confined within the boundaries of comprehension, in other words, there is no longer a hesitation (in Todorov's words), reason appropriately shifts the borders of abjection to the other side of the monster. We therefore find ourselves on the same side of the border with what we previously internalized as a part of the object, yet now, externally resituated as we theoretically begin to see the costume, the fiction, and ultimately, the absurdity of our previously internalized fear.

Our fears then are nothing more than a reflection of what we see in the monster, the absurdity of what we recognize as once frightening, but a fear

that no longer seems reasonably possible. What we had internalized as the horrific has proven to be nothing more than a sublime imbalance of our imagination's constructs of reality. In such a thought, we find comfort to address those horrors we are still left to internalize. We often see in the image of Frankenstein's monster the absurdity of our own fears and transfer those fears to the Frankenstein myth in pop culture, an image that may shock us, may make us laugh, but ultimately an image in which we seek shelter and comfort from the unseen that frightens us most.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Lutz, 1960, 66.
- <sup>2</sup> Nussbaum, 1990, 287.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., 292.
- <sup>4</sup> Cvetkovich, 1992, 24.
- <sup>5</sup> Halberstam, 1995, 2.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., 3.
- <sup>7</sup> Todorov, 1975, 25.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 31.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 25.
- <sup>10</sup> Creed, 2000, 67.

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