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## Monsters on Screen: A Comparative Study of Branagh's Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Coppola's Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

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### Abstract:

In the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* (1st published 1818) Mary Shelley bade her 'hideous progeny to go forth and prosper'. However, it is likely that she could not imagine the prolonged afterlife of her progeny who would prosper for two centuries and reach beyond the pages of books. Five years after its publication *Frankenstein* was adapted for the stage by Brinsley Peake with the title *Presumption*, an adaptation which Mary Shelley saw. Since then, *Frankenstein*, to settle on a conservative number, has been adapted more than thirty times as major motion pictures. This is discounting the numerous TV adaptations and spin offs. Another popular example of adapting a monster on screen is that of *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker. This cult tale of horror has also been brought to life on countless occasions beginning from the early 1920s.

This paper would study two cinematic adaptations of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* namely Kenneth Branagh's Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1994) and Francis Ford Coppola's Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1992), both being posited as faithful adaptations to examine the departures made by the directors and what these bring to the cinematic texts. This paper would talk briefly about the horror literature and chart, briefly again, the cinematic lives of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. It would then take a close look at two adaptations to find how Branagh's faithful adaptation is informed by Coppola's ideas of adaptation and how both produce a more romanticized presentation of their subjects. It would also examine how these texts talk to other cinematic texts and in this create a postmodern space for the two beloved monsters.

**Keywords:** Adaptation, Relocation, Monstrosity, Afterlife.

In the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* (1<sup>st</sup> published 1818) Mary Shelley bade her 'hideous progeny to go forth and prosper'. However, it is likely that she could not imagine the prolonged afterlife of her progeny who would prosper for two centuries and reach beyond the pages of books. Five years after its publication *Frankenstein* was adapted for the stage by Brinsley Peake with the title *Presumption*, an adaptation which Mary Shelley saw. Since then, *Frankenstein*, to settle on a conservative number, has been adapted more than thirty times as major motion pictures. This list, however, does not include the numerous TV adaptations and spin offs that have been made on the life of the mad scientist and his monster. One can safely argue that the popularity of screen adaptations of Mary Shelley's novel has made many arrive at the novel via the adaptations. But anyone who does so is surprised by the quietness with which Shelley portrays the animation scene. There are no lightning bolts, no thunder, no celebratory ejaculation; it occurs silently, to the accompaniment of a sputtering candle and pattering rain, observed only by Victor Frankenstein: "It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered

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dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs" (34).

Filmmakers, on the other hand, have animated this animation scene with their own imagination making it look exciting and eventful. They have presented the scene of creation elaborately and have, in turn, tried to explain the science behind the creation of the monster. Such an interpretation can be traced back to Peake and the early stage adaptors of the novel who found the original sequence sedate and ventured to colour it with their own imagination. Cinematic adaptations of the novel have followed suit and have variously responded to the historical contexts in their creation of the monster. In the history of *Frankenstein* films, we can trace a Rohrschach – a psychologist's inkblot – of our collective fears. Critics have explored the implication of racism and lynching in the 1931 *Frankenstein*; of eugenics and the threat of a "master race" in Whale's 1935 *Bride of Frankenstein*; of nuclear danger in the 1957 *Curse of Frankenstein* (dir. Terence Fisher) and the Hammer Studios sequels of the 1950s and 1960s; of organ transplants in various films of the 1960s and 70s; of sexual perversity in *Andy Warhol's Frankenstein* (dir. Antonio Margheriti and Paul Morrissey, 1974); of the post-modern subject in Kenneth Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994); and of replicant cyborgs, and artificial intelligence in such films as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Steven Spielberg's *Artificial Intelligence: AI* (2001). But such a history lies beyond the scope of this paper in which I try to examine Kenneth Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994) in order to demonstrate how, despite the film's avowed claim to be faithful to the book, it displays important differences with it which are related to other films, not only previous adaptations of *Frankenstein*, esp., *The Bride of Frankenstein* (Whale, 1935), but also contemporary adaptations of other texts — Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) in particular.

Adaptations of *Frankenstein* have omitted various elements from the novel to suit their purpose. Commenting on the early adaptations Albert J. Lavalley writes that "we never see Justine and the locket that betrayed her, we never meet Walton, and no one has ever seen the Monster read *Paradise Lost* or Plutarch" (246). Adaptations, however, also add new elements to the myth: 'a creation scene, a wedding night scene or an abduction of the bride, and a scene of fiery destruction' (245-6). The early acts of adaptation include two classic films by James Whale; *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), both produced by the Universal Studios. These films introduced the paraphernalia and gadgetry of the laboratory and the creation scene, the presence of an assistant—who provides the wrong brain for the creature—and of a mad scientist, Dr. Pretorius, the intervention of the mob chasing the monster and the completion of the creation of a mate. All of these are absent in Shelley's novel but recur in most of the later versions and have become part of the cinematic myth. Martin Tropp observes that "In fact Whale's two films each inspired its own branch of the Frankenstein tradition... [and] in turn firmly established a pattern that would influence science fiction and horror films through the Fifties and Sixties... Late in the Fifties, these characters returned to inspire a whole new Frankenstein cycle." (47). The new cycle referred to by Tropp was the series of films produced in Britain by the Hammer Studio, which started in 1957 with Terence Fisher's *The Curse of Frankenstein* and ended in 1974 with Fisher's *Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell*, adding up to seven films altogether. The Hammer series contributed the recreation of Victor (Peter Cushing) as Gothic villain, and the lush Victorian décor as well as period costume (enhanced by the fine colour photography which replaced black and white); it innovated in the creation scene and the new importance attached to sexuality; and it developed to unexpected extremes the brain motif in a series of brain transplants taking place in succeeding films. After the Universal and the Hammer cycles, there was a third stage in the

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When noted director Kenneth Branagh decided to adapt *Frankenstein* for screen with *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* two decades after *Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell* he expectedly endeavoured to counter the textual departures made by earlier directors and professed to restore the textual authenticity, an attempt suggested by the choice of his title. Branagh's attempted restoration of the novel, however, is only true to a certain extent. It is undeniable that Branagh restores precisely those parts usually absent from film adaptations, as pointed out by Lavalley: the Justine subplot, the narrative frame including Walton and the Arctic setting, and the creature's process of self-education. But the scenes noted by Lavalley as recurrent additions in all adaptations are also present: the creation, wedding-night and destruction scenes. Lavalley aptly observes that Branagh views Shelley's novel as "a mythic text, an occasion for the writer to let loose his own fantasies or to stage what he feels is dramatically effective, to remain true to the central core of the myth, and often to let it interact with fears and tensions of the current time" (245).

It is apparent that Branagh responds to previous adaptations of the Frankenstein myth. Moreover, one finds that his film is also informed by Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 movie *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Produced by the same studio, Tristar, these two films not only have similar sounding titles but also attempt to restore textual authenticity. Coppola himself is behind the creation of Branagh's film and it was Coppola who roped in Branagh to direct the film which was planned as an extension of his adaptive act. He also roped in the scriptwriter for the movie, James V. Hart who wanted to bring alive 'the real Dracula'. Coppola's idea of the real Dracula is based on the historical figure of Vlad Tepes, better known as Vlad the Impaler, whom modern scholars, following Raymond McNally and Radu Florescu's pioneering works [namely *In Search of Dracula* (1972), and their later collaborations, *Dracula: A Biography of Vlad the Impaler, 1431–1476* (1973) and *Dracula, Prince of Many Faces: His Life and Times* (1989)], see as the historical source for Stoker's vampire. Florescu and McNally's research delved into historical records, folklore, and regional narratives, piecing together a vivid portrait of Vlad's life and the tumultuous times in which he lived. This approach not only demystified the real-life Vlad but also shed light on the socio-political context that shaped the Dracula legend. Furthermore, Florescu and McNally conducted extensive research into the evolution of the Dracula myth. Their scholarly inquiries went beyond the pages of Stoker's novel, tracing the roots of vampire folklore in Eastern European cultures and examining the various influences that converged to create the enduring image of the vampire. By doing so, they provided a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted origins of Dracula, connecting the dots between folklore, history, and literature.

In *In Search of Dracula*, the authors embarked on a literal journey through Eastern Europe, retracing Dracula's footsteps and exploring the landscapes that inspired Stoker's novel. This immersive approach added a unique dimension to their research, offering readers a vivid sense of the places that played a role in shaping the Dracula myth. The book not only serves as a scholarly work but also as a travelogue, inviting readers to accompany the authors on their

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quest for the historical Dracula. Florescu and McNally's books on Dracula are not merely academic endeavors; they are captivating narratives that bridge the gap between scholarship and popular interest. Their meticulous research, attention to detail, and engaging writing style make their works accessible to both scholars and general readers alike. By unraveling the layers of Dracula's complex persona and examining the historical and cultural tapestry that surrounds him, Florescu and McNally have left an indelible mark on Dracula studies, enriching our understanding of this enduring and enigmatic figure.

Coppola's romantic vampire is shown, in a background story, to be a Christian crusader whose wife commits suicide after getting a concocted news of her husband's death. Dracula comes not only back to find her dead but also her being denied salvation for the sin committed. He turns to the dark side and is damned forever. Years later he finds his wife reincarnated as Mina Harker (both roles played by Winona Ryder) and the story turns into a romance wherein the Dracula myth is chequered with the Beauty and the Beast pattern. Coppola's movie is visually appealing with its lush colours and Victorian setting and is strengthened by the performances of consummate actors such as Gary Oldman (as Dracula), Anthony Hopkins (as Van Helsing) and Keanu Reeves (as Jonathan Harker). But it fails to evoke the element of horror which is quintessential to Bram Stoker's vampire. Stoker suspends his readers between impulses of fear and attraction for the Count but Coppola's monster is more of a distraught lover who is only trying to reconnect with his beloved. Thus the promised restoration of the text fails on various levels and in the end remains a romanticized, and essentially fabricated, version of the literary original.

Coppola's Dracula achieves salvation in the end and Branagh also salvages his hero from being a complex character having a dark underside to someone who is essentially reacting to personal loss. Victor sees his mother die of childbirth with blood splattered all over her and promises to stop the process of death. Later when his beloved teacher Waldman is stabbed by a criminal this desire is reinvigorated. Later in the film he attempts to bring Elizabeth back to life after her heart is ripped out by the monster. Victor is basically fighting death; his Promethean rebellion against God springs from his refusal to accept death, not in an abstract sense, but in a very specific one: his mother's, his teacher's, his beloved's. Feeling, not intellect, is the force driving him, again not a general love for mankind, but for certain human beings the love of a dutiful son, a student, a lover. His grandeur thus decreases, but so does his blame: his sin is not the result of inhuman ambition, but of very human feelings. Branagh keeps things simple. Though he introduces Justine plot but she is lynched by the mob instantly after being blamed for Williams' death. This absolves Victor of the guilt of withholding information during her trial in the novel. Victor's withholding of information leads one to speculate the deep connection between him and his creation; his dark doppelganger. No such speculation is there in the movie.

Branagh maintains textual authenticity by maintaining the time-frame of the novel and including the narrative of Walton. He also shows the monster's self-education. But the figure of the monster is cast in more negative colour. His ripping the heart of Elizabeth is one sure sign of the director's wish to label him a villainous figure and not as someone marred by fate. He has Waldman's brain and the body of a criminal. But reverting the soul-body binary Branagh shows that the criminal memory of the body dominates over the intellectual impulses of the brain when he is brought back to life. In this reversal and in his intertextuality Branagh's movie assumes postmodern dimension. When the monster asks his creator, "What of my soul? Do I have one?" one is made aware of his helplessness but Branagh's treatment does not let our sympathy dwell on him.

Branagh's film also talks back to James Whale's film *The Bride of Frankenstein*. In Whale's film Victor creates a female companion for the creature and this companion, when confronted with both creator and creature, is appalled by the latter's ugliness and rejects him.

The creature, in despair, sets fire to the laboratory with both of them inside. Branagh is undoubtedly making use of that episode when Victor accomplishes the creation of a female creature that is confronted with a similar choice as both the male creature and Victor himself try to gain her for themselves. But he again reverses the situation because, in this case, the female creature is a resurrected Elizabeth, intended as Victor's- not the creature's- mate, who rejects Victor. This is another reversal of a cinematic myth which has sat heavy on our appreciation of the novel. The resurrected female is a cross of Elizabeth's head and Justine's torso (an oblique comment on Justine's attraction for Victor in the movie) which reminds one of the elaborate animation scene of the monster who is shown to be a patchwork of limbs from different bodies.

Branagh's film, much like that of Copolla, renders their literary subjects in a romanticized way. This feature of cinematic adaptation reminds one of movies like *Shakespeare in Love*, *Bright Star* and *Becoming Jane* which show the lives of authors (namely Shakespeare, Keats and Austen) and include their beloveds, both historical and imagined. These movies attempt to trace artistic creation to the impetus provided by love relation. Such a portrayal is, at best, romantic and renders rather a disservice to literature. But the cinematic medium is strong and these fabricated renderings, once cast on screen, stay in the mind of the audience. We may conclude by observing that though romancing monsters is the flavor of the season (as underlined by Oscar winning Del Torro movie *The Shape of Water*) romanticized renderings of literary characters often sit uneasy on the tenuous relation between literature and its cinematic adaptations.

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### Bio-note

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Literature, Popular Culture, Shakespeare Adaptations, Indian Partition writing and Indian English Drama, Indian Science Fiction in national journals and edited volumes. Apart from these he is actively engaged in translation projects and has published his translations of tribal folk literature, partition narratives and Indian English poetry in anthologies. Dr Sarkar has edited noted academic research journals named *Wesleyan Journal of Research* (a multi-disciplinary peer-reviewed journal) and *Appropriations* (a peer-reviewed national-level journal of English literary studies) and has been acting as reviewer for peer-reviewed national-level journals like *Post-Scriptum* and *Post-colonial Interventions*. His recent area of interest is concerned with posthumanism in cultural texts, science fiction and translation studies.