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*From Blade Runner to Solaris:
Covert Adaptations of Mary Shelley's
Frankenstein in Contemporary Cinema*

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FROM *BLADE RUNNER* TO *SOLARIS*:
COVERT ADAPTATIONS OF MARY SHELLEY'S
FRANKENSTEIN IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

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I

The study of the interplay between film and literature has been traditionally regarded almost exclusively from the perspective of adaptation, that is, as the process of transference of a given text into the cinematic medium. The aim of this paper is to suggest that literary texts can be sources of films in more ways than this, that films actually *adapt* literary texts even when they are not adaptations. This is particularly the case when different versions of a literary work have created a myth which is constantly reworked, so the myth, and not just the book, becomes an intertextual source strongly pervading a certain culture. And this process is perfectly illustrated by the cinematic fortunes, sometimes misfortunes, of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which provide not just a long chain of film adaptations of the book, but also a wide range of ways of *adapting* it. This paper will focus on the latter rather than the former, that is to say, it will not examine the *overt* adaptations of the work as a whole which have been produced from the very beginning of sound film, but the *covert* adaptations of certain themes, structures, traits, which have become a recurring feature of contemporary cinema. These evince affinities and connections indicating a common cultural background, and they amount to an evident effort to revisit and rewrite Mary Shelley's masterpiece from a postmodern perspective. This fact also points to another important insight to be derived from the examination of the fortunes of *Frankenstein* in contemporary cinema: the symptomatic nature in cultural terms—and not just in terms of authorship—of the dialogue between literature and film. This examination therefore should produce a tentative and possibly sketchy overview of a variety of postmodern uses of the Frankenstein myth as well as of a variety of cinematic uses of literary texts.

II

The semantic polyvalence of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* partly explains why the book has become a myth. This polyvalence is to a great extent the result of the fact that the text lies at the crossroads of different genres and trends: it has its roots in Gothic literature but transcends it by introducing certain concerns characteristic of Romanticism and some issues anticipating science fiction. In *Frankenstein* there are traces of the Gothic descent in Victor's confinement in the attic at Ingolstadt, alienated from family and friends, which results in the creation of a monster that will persecute him, slaughter his brother William and his friend Clerval, and eventually murder his beloved Elizabeth, the heroine, who articulates with Victor and the creature the Gothic triangle. But this Gothic pattern is a trace rather than an actual presence: on the one hand, the Gothic underworld makes room for sublime Romantic landscapes, and the creature is no Gothic villain—nor is Victor a hero—but Victor's double, thus representing the Romantic figure of the *doppelgänger*; on the other hand, the supernatural is replaced by scientific experimentation.

Frankenstein thus takes a double leap from Gothic to Romantic and to science fiction. It couples a Romantic creator, an overreacher with Faustian and Promethean overtones, transgressing the boundaries set to man (and criticised for it not only by punishment but also by contrast with an alternative set of values represented by the novel's silent women), with a creature who has also a Romantic core as both rebellious Satan and alienated Ancient Mariner. The creator is not a magician signing a compact with the devil, but a scientist whose product turns out to be dangerous because it escapes his control; and the creature, abandoned by his godlike creator and turned evil by society's mistreatment, is not just an object of terror but also an object of reflection, or, as it has been put by science fiction scholars, of cognition. Creator and creature thus constitute the mythic core of the book, which, since a creature always implies a creator, can be epitomised by the multifaceted entity of the creature as double/replica, monster/misfit-outcast-alien, artifact/machine-robot. These facets articulate the enduring themes dramatized by book and later by myth: identity, monstrosity/marginality, technology. In other words: what is a self (split inside and determined outside, submitted both to inner drives and outer conditions), what makes a monster (the humanity of the monster and the inhumanity of man), what is the purpose—and the limit—of knowledge (the transformation of humanity by science and the dangers of science as dark humanity).

As is always the case with myth, different works, in this case films, have at different times explored these issues in different ways, have offered different answers to these questions. There are quite a few of them: the story of the transference of Shelley's novel to sound cinema starts as early as 1931 (James Whale's *Frankenstein*) and culminates in 1994, the date of the latest adaptation by Kenneth Branagh, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. The surveys of Lavalley, Tropp, and Menegaldo have aptly traced Shelley's cinematic *hideous progeny*, although they cannot but leave a significant gap: apparently, in the twenty-year span

separating the 1973 and the 1993 TV adaptations, *Frankenstein* disappeared from the screen. This is so, however, only if we consider *overt* adaptations of the work, that is to say, films which are intended and/or presented as literal illustrations of it. The gap disappears when we admit *covert* adaptations into the picture, that is to say, films which are intertextually related to the book—in varying degrees depending on the centrality of *Frankenstein* as intertext. These revisit the myth with more freedom and originality because they are not direct imitations of the book, but use the creature's facets as double/replica, monster/alien, or machine/robot in order to carry out not only an exploration but also a questioning of identity, monstrosity and technology. In fact, they make explicit the postmodern assumptions that are implicit in Branagh's overt adaptation.

As I have shown elsewhere, Branagh's film is a postmodern elaboration of the myth. His reworking of the Frankenstein myth insists on the question of the relation between body and soul, highlights the ascendancy of body and the uncertainty of identity and produces a representation of the self not in terms of Romantic inner division, but of postmodern fragmentation and dehumanisation. This central insight is accompanied by other postmodern concerns. To the traditional presentation of technology as dangerous transgression of moral boundaries, the film adds an emphasis on resurrection rather than creation, suggesting an awareness of the new pitfalls for our conception of the human created by contemporary scientific advances which might make the reanimation—or at least the duplication—of bodies a reality. Finally, the female critique of Romantic aspiration and the Rousseauistic presentation of monstrosity as social construct, which had been relegated to the background or even silenced in previous films, is again foregrounded because of its affinity with the postmodern vindication of margins, for which women and monsters are used as privileged sites. In Branagh's film Elizabeth and the monster are given a new—in terms of film—and stronger voice to express a critique of patriarchal models of society or technology. In revisiting the core of the Frankenstein myth—identity, marginality/monstrosity, technology—the film thus shows evident traces of the questioning or deconstructing attitude characteristic of the postmodern condition.

III

These traces, however, are also visible in other postmodern covert elaborations of the myth. In fact they are much more visible, as if the more covert the connection with the literary work, the more overt the connection with postmodern culture. The most exemplary case is *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982): I do not think it is an overstatement to say that if *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* is the *Frankenstein* of the nineties, as a critic has argued, *Blade Runner* is the *Frankenstein* of the eighties. This is not the place for a full demonstration of this statement, but it is safe to argue that the film, like Branagh's, explores the question of the seat of the soul, of body and soul, by means of the dialectics between the maker and the made—in this case biological androids or *replicants* that turn out to be more

human than the humans who create, exploit and finally pursue and “retire” them. The film also uses the related paradox of the body both obliterating the soul—the dehumanisation of the human characters, the inhumanity of man—and generating a soul—the humanisation of the replicants, the humanity of the monster. In addition to this, the film presents the female represented by the android Rachael—and therefore coupled with the monstrous, a double marginality—as an alternative to patriarchal technology gone wrong, as a possibility of redemption. In this sense there is a significant difference between the film and the novel inspiring it, which is not *Frankenstein*, but Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). This creates a very peculiar situation: the film is both an overt adaptation of Dick’s book and a covert one of Shelley’s, and, in fact, the basic differences between the overt book source and the film adaptation can be explained by the mediation of the covert intertext. This accounts for some of the most interesting transformations of Dick’s novel, which tend to restore the dialectic between creature and creator to its original terms. In the film there is a Promethean and god-like creator, Tyrrell, absent in Dick’s novel, who, like Victor, is confronted and ultimately punished by his rebellious, Satanic creature, the replicant Roy Baty. In addition to it, the deceiving and manipulative android Rachael is turned into an artificial but redeeming Elizabeth, who offers the protagonist the possibility of love in an idyllic setting, something which again was lacking in Dick’s text. And last, but not least, the term *replicant*, which underscores the idea of replica and duplication, is also a telltale invention of the film.¹

Blade Runner clearly points to the ground where the seeds of the myth and genre planted by *Frankenstein* have fully germinated: science fiction, specially that variety addressing the issue of human identity by means of artificial creatures. To this variety of *science fictions of identity* belongs another exploration of the seat of the soul, *Robocop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987), in this case by means of a *cyborg*, that is, a creature part flesh and part circuits. After being killed, brought back to life, and having his body reconstructed by means of robotic implants which turn him into a machine, police agent Murphy starts remembering fragments of his past life and hence of his identity. The cyborg, like Branagh’s creature, is again a pretext to talk about the composite body and corporal memory (that is, the fact that body parts seem to be able to remember their previous life and therefore to be the site of identity).² In *Robocop* the cyborg and his problems of identity are a product of resurrection by technology, as in Branagh’s film, and this is also the case in *Alien: Resurrection* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997), where the creature is actually a monster, resurrected by genetic engineering. This resurrection, however, implies also that of the heroine of the series, Ripley, who becomes the monster’s mother, with the ensuing problems of identity this poses for her—also explored in the figure of the female android that seems to be more human than the humans,

¹ Another film based on a story by Philip K. Dick very recently released, *Impostor* (2003), also explores, although in a very superficial way, the problems of identity created by duplication.

² These themes have also been developed in films dealing with transplants and implants, including those of body and not just mechanical parts, in contemporary and not futuristic settings, as in the recent *The Eye* (Pang Brothers 2001).

and again the female shows the way to redemption, that is, to humanity. The scene in which Ripley discovers a series of deficient replicas of herself—aborted selves—which preceded her creation, suggests also a leap from duplication to multiplication as a new and more subtle threat posed by misguided science for human identity. This is also visible in more recent films which demonstrate that the Frankenstein myth will still be active in the twenty-first century. In *The Sixth Day* (Roger Spottiswoode, 2000), resurrection by cloning creates human replicas and makes possible the multiple repetition of an individual, thus recovering the theme of the double but adding the postmodern concern with the original and the copy. The hero, Adam Gibson (and of course the first name is a good indicator of the film’s intentions and preoccupations), leads a normal life until he is illegally cloned by mistake, so that he will have to face an exact copy of himself—who in fact thinks he is the original Gibson—who is fighting with a series of copies—the originals are dead—of those responsible for the mistake, a mogul and his paid assassins.³

This issue of the identity of the replica but in relation to the original rather than to the creator, partly as a result of this possibility of multiplication—but also because it is not the creator who is replicated, is the core of *Solaris* (Steven Soderbergh, 2002). *Solaris* is the name of a planet being studied and explored by a group of scientists who are sent on their mission from a space station significantly called *Prometheus*—thus equating this mission with that of Victor Frankenstein. The planet produces a troubling effect on them: it makes real, it incarnates, their memories, phantoms, dreams, fantasies. In the case of the protagonist this means the resurrection of his dead wife, Rhexya—again a significant name, since it suggests *res/rei*, the Latin word for *thing*. And indeed this is the thematic core of the film, which explores the familiar topic of the identity and the humanity of this creature: who is she? is she body or soul, dream or fact, fiction or reality? who is the true Rhexya, the one who once lived and died or the one created from her husband’s memories of her? These questions become even more troubling and difficult to answer when the protagonist discovers that, even if he gets rid of the replica, this can be replicated as many times and as long as her memory haunts his mind. As in *Blade Runner*, despite the covert reference to the Frankenstein myth, the film is an overt adaptation of a novel of the same title by Stanislaw Lem published in 1961, but in this case it was the book that adapted—updated?—Mary Shelley’s novel. What is interesting in this case is that Lem’s novel in its turn seemed to echo—adapt?—a film, *Forbidden Planet* (Fred M. Wilcox, 1956), which was a covert film adaptation of *Frankenstein* as well as of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. The planet of this film also materialises its inhabitants’ desires instantaneously, thus resembling, as Tropp has explained, Frankenstein’s laboratory insofar as it gives limitless power to men, although not only to their conscious but also to their subconscious minds, as in *Frankenstein* or *Solaris*.

³ Resurrection by cloning is also the topic of a very recent film, *Godsend* (2004), which also explores the topic of corporal memory characteristic of films about transplants and implants, but approaches these topics from the perspective of the terror film, and more particularly the children ghost story.

Obviously it is impossible to deal here in depth with these and other covert adaptations of *Frankenstein*. Let us simply add that there is another, different—but clearly postmodern—strain of the myth represented by Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* (1990). In this film parody, generic hybridity and self-consciousness are coupled with an exploration of monstrosity and monster-making as a process of communal marginalisation and persecution of the different or the other, which in Burton's film is associated not only with innocence but also with artistry. The creature as an emblem of marginality—now of a political nature—is also explored in Victor Erice's *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973), one of the most fascinating film interpretations of the Frankenstein myth, in this case effected by means of the intertextual quotation of Whale's first version of it. *The Elephant Man* (David Lynch, 1980) although not so closely related to the myth, also looks at exclusion and alienation as a result of physical monstrosity. In all these films the creature is basically seen as misfit or outcast. There are also films focusing on its dimension as machine and turning on the topic of the artificial robot becoming human (*Bicentennial Man*, *Making Mr Right*, *A.I.*); or on the rebellion of the man-made machine (*2001*, *Terminator*, *Matrix*), or on the related topic of the mad scientist and science gone wrong (*Jurassic Park*, *Deep Blue Sea*, *Minority Report*). In these cases, however, it is difficult to decide whether they are variants of the Frankenstein myth or simply of the science fiction genre which was also founded by *Frankenstein*.⁴

IV

The variety and complexity of the dialogue between literature and cinema illustrated by all these films, and particularly by the first and the last one—*Blade Runner* and *Solaris*—suggests the extraordinary possibilities for the study of their interplay once this is freed of certain traditional and obtrusive misconceptions. Perhaps the main one is the concept of adaptation. Since films adapt not only the texts of which they are overt adaptations, but also other texts they recreate in a covert way, adaptation can be contemplated as part of a larger concept, that of intertextuality, which in fact explains much better the complex interplay of sources and the different kinds of relationship between film and literature. There is also an additional advantage: the possibility of applying the insights of the different theories and models of intertextuality in order to have a more exhaustive study and a better understanding of the relations between literature and film. This is the case of (1) Bakhtin's initial formulation of intertextuality as dialogism; (2) Lotman's conception of culture as text (a text being any system of signs), including therefore a dialogue of different kinds of text; the addition to this cultural conception of intertextuality of (3) a new emphasis on the reader as its main agent by Kristeva and Barthes, which is both developed and qualified by (4) Riffaterre's

⁴ For an interesting presentation—more useful for its scope than for its analysis—of films related to *Frankenstein* in one way or the other, see chapter five of Sara Martín Alegre's book on monsters. Frenzt and Hocker have also provided an interesting exploration of the Frankenstein myth in *Blade Runner*, *Terminator* and, curiously enough, *Rocky IV*.

understanding of intertextuality as a way—perhaps the means—of reading; and finally (5) Genette's classification of different kinds of intertextuality—which he calls *transtextuality*. From the theories of these two latter in particular we can elaborate models for the study of different kinds of relationship between literature and film and also for the intertextual interpretation or literary reception of film. That is one of the great contributions the concept of intertextuality can make to the study of film: *we read films as much as we view them*, or, in other words, we view them through our readings. Literature is not only an important reservoir of stories and plots, topics and themes, genres and strategies, which are incorporated and transformed in films. It also plays an important part in the dialogue of texts and discourses from which meaning in film ultimately emerges.

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