

**BRANAGH'S "FRANKSTEIN": THE MAKING OF MONSTROSITY IN FILM****Fernando Simão Vugman****Abstract:**

Along human history the imaginary figure of the monster has always functioned as a reference to distinguish the human from the non-human, the civilized from the non-civilized, the good from evil. In Mary Shelley's Frankenstein film director Kenneth Branagh presents a very faithful adaptation of Shelley's story to cinema. In the present essay it will be analyzed how cinematic technical devices, and, particularly the visual resources, work to reproduce on the screen some of the issues which define human and monstrous characteristics and the human/monster opposition as they appear in the original story.

Resumo:

Ao longo da história humana, a figura imaginária do monstro sempre funcionou como uma referência para distinguir o humano do não humano, o civilizado do não civilizado, o bem do mal. No filme Frankenstein (Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, 1994), o diretor Kenneth Branagh procura apresentar uma adaptação para o cinema bastante fiel ao romance original de Mary Shelley. Neste artigo será discutido como recursos técnicos do cinema - em especial os recursos visuais - trabalham para reproduzir na tela alguns dos elementos que definem as características humanas e aquelas dos monstros, bem como a oposição humano/monstruoso, conforme aparecem na história original.

Palavras-chave:

Filme, monstrosidade, cultura.

Throughout history monsters have represented the borders which separate the human from the non-human, the civilized from the non-civilized, the good from evil. While standing for the "other", monsters have functioned as a reference, although negative, to what it means to be human. One other trait of the monster following the idea of the human/monster frontier is its always latent ability to cross that border. And the border separating humans from monsters has moved along time, at least in Western culture. In geographical terms, for instance, Caliban, the monster in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, was situated in an unknown island; hence, a monster with no possibility of reaching the civilized world. If one takes Mr. Hyde in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as an example of a more recent monster, then one will see a monster generated within the very center of the civilized world – London – without ever leaving it. In this sense, Victor Frankenstein's creature can be situated half the way between both: he moves from the civilized Europe to the limits of the known world, in the North Pole.

In the evolution of monsters, still taking the three ones mentioned above as a reference, one can observe a tendency to intensify the male character of the world in which they were generated. Thus, though all of them appear in societies dominated by men, one should note that while Caliban does have a mother, Frankenstein's monster is motherless, and Mr. Hyde is born within the very body and soul of a man in an environment almost completely devoid of female characters. Besides, while Caliban and Frankenstein's creature show a desire for a female companion, Mr. Hyde never gives a thought to that possibility. So there is also a sexual element related to the modeling of monsters.

Another element in defining monsters is their ignorance about the civilized ways. The education of the monster can already be observed in *The Tempest*, as civilized language is taught to Caliban. Of course, being a monster, Caliban will never reach the status of a civilized human being; rather, his use of language will be subversive and... monstrous. As for Mr. Hyde, he is born intellectually civilized and both his gain in intellectual knowledge and in emotional development will only serve evil means.

In the story by Mary Shelley the education of the monster plays an important role. A long passage in the book describes how the monster learns what it means to be human. In the woods, Victor's creature learns the language of the humans, learns human history, and is exposed to the good feelings human beings can share. In fact, the monster eventually proves to be much more morally mature than his creator and more human than him in many senses. Still, the monster created by Frankenstein will be repelled by human society and will share the eventual fate of monsters in general: destruction or expulsion back to the dark side of line.

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* Kenneth Branagh presents a very faithful adaptation of Shelley's story to cinema. In the present essay it will be analyzed how cinematic technical devices, and, particularly the visual resources, work to reproduce on the screen some of the issues which define human and monstrous characteristics and the human/monster opposition as they appear in the original story.

Branagh's film begins with a short text appearing in white over a black screen. It announces that the story will develop in the "dawn of the Nineteenth Century," an epoch described as a "world in the brink of revolutionary change," and that "[a]longside political and social upheaval, scientific advances... would profoundly change the lives of all." The resource to a written text presented in such a dramatic tone serves to confer a historical and official authority to what will follow. In addition, as the text ends by alerting the audience that the story to begin will "strike terror in the hearts of all who would venture into the unknown," a clue is offered that the borders of civilization are at stake, and that that is a privileged moment to meet terror, i.e., the monster.

In accordance to Shelley's original story, the first scene shows Captain's Robert Walton ship in the waters of the North Pole. The scene is dark and obscure in the extreme long shot showing the ship tossing under the storm in a straight-on angle. Next, a sequence of fast cuts in medium shots and plan américain taken from high-angles presents the members of the crew being thrown over the deck and struggling to stay on the boat. Another cut shows the ship in a long shot close to an iceberg emerging from the sea. Again with medium shots the crew is shown; a sailor falls to the water framed in high-angle while the rest of the crew, watching him drawn, is framed in low-angle shots. The sequence ends with a long shot of the ship finally trapped by the surrounding ice.

The fast editing alternating long shots and medium shots and the always mobile mise-en-scene functions to produce a feeling of instability. The darkness of the shots suggests the unknown that the captain and his sailors are about to face. Their powerlessness while watching one of them drowning and the final trapping of the ship, now with the camera and the mise-en-scene resting still, prepares the audience to the terror that shall strike them when the monster comes.

In the sequence above, framing plays an important role in creating the atmosphere of despair and instability that comes with facing the borders of the unknown. More than that, framing and camera movement are also important elements helping in the portrayal of society in the film. It is interesting to note that a mobile camera is often used when framing the people in the story, contrasting to a more stable framing in most of the shots of the monster, specially when he is shown alone.

A good example of how these technical devices work might come from the analysis of the scene where Victor first appears as an adult. He is studying in his studio at home. In a medium shot he is framed at the right side of the screen, seating at a table covered with books. From the back and left, Caroline, his pregnant mother, enters the studio. She moves to the foreground and seats opposite to him. An oblique soft side light is used to simulate the light coming from a window on the background. It is dim, rendering a shadowy atmosphere. While they talk about his interest in learning, they are framed by a fixed camera in a straight-on angle, the camera being positioned at the level of their heads. The general darkness of the room suggests the proximity of the unknown; the stability of the camera and the mise-en-scene suggest that the monster has not broken in to disrupt normality.

The stable normality off the scene will be interrupted by Victor's mother comment that "life shouldn't be all study". With that she takes a book from his hand and runs to the door, followed by him. Next, a cut takes us to the ample hall of the Frankensteins. The room is softly and well lit. The household is dancing, so all characters are moving. The camera isn't fixed any more; it travels circling the mise-en-scene while, at the same time, zooms in and out to focus on one pair of dancers and then to follow them switching to form new pairs. The intra-diegetic music of the clavichord adds to the ambiance of happy unawareness of what is to come. Eventually, the camera frames Victor's mother. Now fixed, it zooms in till it stops in a close up. Her expression changes from joy to pain. In the following sequence she will die while giving birth to Victor's brother. Caroline's death is the starting point. Because Victor cannot accept her death he will fight against the laws of nature and society; from then on, he will open the door to the coming of the monster.

The opposition between what is socially and spiritually acceptable will be well presented in a further scene. That scene starts with Victor arriving at his first class at the medical school in Ingolstadt. The class takes place in a circular theater some four stories high. Down, at the center, is the lecturer, surrounded by the students scattered by the stories. The lecturer is interrupted by Victor's arrival, at the top level. From that moment on they will argue; the former supporting a vision of science consonant with the accepted religious beliefs, while the latter will favor a science which defies the established order. Again light will function to compose an atmosphere of surrounding darkness, suggesting the proximity of the monster. And framing will also play its part since the camera does always frame the lecturer from a high angle while Victor is framed from a low angle. In this way, the framing makes clear whose viewpoint is going to be favored in the story. The editing is fast too, switching from one character to the other as they argue, and to the rest of the students, in order to show their reaction to the arguments presented by both. Such fast editing reinforces the feeling of uneasiness that the coming of terror should arise.

A very different use of framing and camera movement occur when the monster is shown. For instance, the scene of the monster walking to the woods develops in a rather calm rhythm. It begins with a close up of the feet of the monster, covered by the long overcoat he is wearing. He is framed from the back, slowly progressing among the trees, and while he moves to the background of the mise-en-scene the camera tilts upwards in a slow movement. Except for the monster, the rest of the mise-en-scene is still. The soft light that filters through the forest comes from the background, from the place in which direction the monster is heading.

The way the monster is framed in that scene suggests his innocence. His walk by the forest will be pursued by a fixed camera, and from shot to shot his progression will be shown by pan movements. The editing is slower and when a cut from a medium shot to a close up happens, what we see is his monstrous face capable of inspiring not terror but with an expression of awe. The same style is maintained throughout the sequence in which he arrives at the house in the woods. While he peeps through a hole in the wooden wall of the house and watches the household during their everyday routine, editing, framing and lighting work to reverse the atmosphere of terror that the physical proximity of the monster should inspire. Here, the shots alternate from an extreme close up of his eyes to medium shots, plan américain and close ups of the peasant family. The calm rhythm of the family in their domestic deeds together with the quiet curiosity of the monster, the fixity of the camera, the soft light, and the slow editing all add up to compose an environment of stability, coziness, and innocence.

This contrasting use of technical devices helps to complicate the conventional association of the monster with violence, terror and darkness. The nervous instability of the shots showing civilized society suggests the contradictions of a people living at the verge of "revolutionary change". It also functions to reveal how human beings move aimlessly in search of knowledge, a knowledge looking for light but inevitably running to the dark side of the border.

However, if in his portrayal of the monster Branagh is faithful enough to the original story, thus justifying the title of the film --Mary Shelley's Frankenstein-- when it comes to presenting the female characters on the screen the director seems incapable to resist obeying some Hollywood conventions, as well as satisfying the expectations of the 20th century audience. In other words, in contrast with the passive attitude of the women in the novel, who seem to be restricted to limits of the house, Branagh attributes a much more active role to the women in his film, specially Elizabeth, the female protagonist.

Two scenes in the film should illustrate that point. The first, is that in which Elizabeth refuses to accept Victor Frankenstein's request to postpone their marriage; his secret reason being his plan to create a female companion for his first creature. The sequence begins with Victor arriving from his journey to meet the monster, who asked him for a bride. Without explaining his motives, Victor asks Elizabeth to wait a month till he finishes his unconfessed affairs. She not only refuses to wait, but goes as far as to decide to leave the house to someplace where she can "recover". In addition, she accuses him of never keeping his promises and of being selfish. Particularly interesting is the shot beginning the moment when they enter the house. From the inside, the camera frames both coming from the outside through the front door, Elizabeth first, followed by Victor. As they come forward, the camera moves back, always with her on the foreground. In the middle of the hall she stops, enraged, and is circled by the camera. The camera stops when she is framed in a close up. She argues with Victor and turns to the stairs, on the background, leaving him behind. All that is in striking contrast with what happens in Shelley's book. There, Elizabeth seems to have nothing to say about the matter, and all we have is Victor's account of the decision taken between his father and himself: "To England, therefore, I was bound, and it was understood that my union with Elizabeth should take place immediately on my return" (Shelley, 146).

The second scene which illustrates how women are much more independent in Branagh's film than in the original story, is that which starts after Victor brings Elizabeth to life again by means of the same process used to generate the first creature. Some aspects should be discussed here. For instance, while in the book the female monster is never finished, in the film Elizabeth is re-created as monster; more than that, she's got a personal identity. Indeed, Elizabeth/monster acquires almost immediately an individual personality, which is more than what the first creature had achieved (there is a moment in the film when he asks Victor: "Who am I?"). Another aspect worth noting is the independent manner of her personality as monster. Thus, while Victor and the monster fight for her, each one claiming her as a personal belonging, she rejects both, and decides her own destiny by burning herself to death with a lamp.

The two situations described above show a distancing from the original story that cannot be explained simply by the necessary changes one has to do in order to translate a story from one medium (textual, literary) to another (audio/visual, filmic). In fact, they make much more sense when they are analyzed under the perspective of a late 20th century audience, no longer used to a female protagonist who is unquestionably obedient to the male law. And, consequently, under the commercial perspective of filmmaking, specially a Hollywood film, which forces the film to conform to the expectations of that audience. Aspects like these, which are more of a commercial order than of an artistic concern, would tempt one to say that, in contrast to the title of Branagh's film, it is still a Hollywood Frankenstein.

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