

Frankenstein and The Bride of Frankenstein

Richard T. Jameson

"The A List: The National Society of Film Critics
100 Essential Films," 2002

Reprinted by permission of the author

In 1931, the director Robert Florey lived in a Los Angeles apartment with a view of a Dutch-style bakery and its logo, a windmill complete with turning vanes. Florey had just been assigned by Carl Laemmle Jr. to direct a production of "Frankenstein" for Universal, and as he mused on a possible look for the film, he found himself considering a windmill as a key location—perhaps the site of the scientist's secret laboratory. As it happened, it would be James Whale, not Florey, who directed "Frankenstein," and Henry Frankenstein would set up shop in "an abandoned watchtower." But that windmill got lodged in the collective brain of the filmmaking team (also in one line of dialogue absent-mindedly retained from an early script draft), and finally made it on screen as an opportunistic but aptly crazed-Gothic setting for the film's fiery climax.

It's all very well to talk about aesthetically unified masterpieces and posit them as the definition of film art. But movies are a messy business, and the irksome (glorious?) truth is that some landmark films have become utterly indispensable and culturally pervasive despite being created by committee and riddled with imperfections. In the case of Frankenstein, the imperfections include half-baked sequences, tedious subsidiary or comic-relief characters, mannerisms and structural faults all but mandated by the conventions of the day, and abrupt lacunae traceable to censorship or to front-office insistence on a shorter running time. Not that anyone would dispute director James Whale's status as "auteur" and an inimitable stylist whose signature is all over "Frankenstein"'s decor, staging, lighting, composition, editing, and characterizations. But there is a sense in which this milestone of the horror genre and indelible fixture in Western culture uncannily took on a life of its own—perhaps even, to an extent, created itself.

Consider the thoroughness with which "Frankenstein" entered popular consciousness as a misapprehension. In the 1931 film, as in the 1818 novel by Mary Godwin Wollstonecraft Shelley, Frankenstein was the aristocratic scientist — "the modern Prometheus"—who stole lightning from the heavens to give life to a crea-



Poster from the 1953 re-release of the '30s horror classic
Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection

ture he'd assembled from parts of dead bodies. Yet almost immediately, audiences (and people who had only heard about the movie) started applying the name to the creature—superhuman in size and strength, effectively unkillable, and murderously insane. This was reinforced by "Frankenstein"'s becoming all but interchangeable with "Boris Karloff," the harsh, foreign-sounding, slightly ersatz name of the actor who had played the Monster. How did the confusion arise? Perhaps it was only a testament to star quality—Karloff's and the creature's. Frankenstein was too ringing a name to squander on an effete gent in a lab smock (the top-billed, but soon eclipsed, Colin Clive). In any event, the conflation of roles was condoned forthwith by Universal. In the prologue to "The Bride of Frankenstein," the 1935 sequel, Lord Byron (Gavin Gordon) congratulates authoress Mary Shelley (Elsa Lanchester) on her imagining of "Frankenstein, a monster created from cadavers out of rifled graves."

And indeed, the very title *The Bride of Frankenstein* invites multiple readings as to which is who.

Then again, ambiguity was built right into the initial production. Whereas Universal's first 1931 horror hit, Tod Browning's "*Dracula*," mostly kept faith with the period and settings of the Bram Stoker novel, "*Frankenstein*" takes place in a nowhere universe; contemporary fashions rub up against generic peasant wear (Tyrolean-Magyar), while a polyglot cast of stage Brits and flatfooted American movie types try to look as if they belong in a nonspecific Mittel-Europe where hanged felons are left creaking on crossroads gallows in the medieval manner. The village near the Frankenstein estate is an elaborate German town set left over from Universal's Academy Award-winning prestige picture "*All Quiet on the Western Front*" (1930), but otherwise the prevailing decor marks a problematic—but ultimately fortuitous—accommodation between the budgetary constraints of a marginally major studio and the theatrical expressionism James Whale had already cultivated as a stage director and designer. As realized by Universal's redoubtable art director Charles D. Hall, the film's patently manmade landscape features stark hills and starker trees thrust straight up against stormy skies that crowd close behind the players—who could in fact reach out and touch their canvas splendor. The spatial derangement of the environment achieves apotheosis in the eerie sequence of the Monster invading the Frankenstein manor on the day of Henry's wedding. The bridegroom and his cohorts run first to the top floor, then to the cellarage, drawn by the unseen Monster's eldritch groans. How is he getting from one zone to another, as if passing through solid stone? We never know.

That the Monster is a monster is never in doubt, and it's perfectly understandable that the local citizenry should take up arms against him when he starts killing their neighbors. But we also understand that the poor bastard never had a chance. Wrenched into life and then abandoned by a fickle Creator, implanted with a criminal brain, and tormented almost from "birth" by Henry's torch-wielding assistant Fritz (genre mainstay Dwight Frye), the Monster is driven to slaughter even as he yearns foremost to reach for the light. Karloff's miming of this aspiration remains heartbreakingly eloquent despite decades of imitation and parody. And just as King Kong became the most sympathetic figure in the RKO monster movie of that name two years hence, Whale would decisively adjust the vectors and valences of sympathy in "*The Bride of Frankenstein*," a sequel as inevitable as its superiority was unexpected.

Following the aforementioned prologue—which introduces a creator of another sort, Mary Shelley, to continue her exemplary tale from a lightning-lit, cliff-top castle distinctly reminiscent of Henry Frankenstein's tower—*Bride* casts back to the burning windmill where Frankenstein ended. There have been changes in the minutes/years separating the action of the two films. Ignoring the inconvenient postlude that had been hastily added to *Frankenstein* to show Henry recuperating after his fall, *Bride* reverts to Henry apparently dead—but only so that the twitching of his hand can signal survival, as a similar twitching of the creature's hand signaled coming to life in the first film. Tiresome characters (Henry's father the Baron; best friend and romantic rival Victor) have been allowed to disappear without comment. Better actors have replaced dull predecessors: the liquid-eyed Valerie Hobson in for Mae Clarke as Elizabeth, Henry's betrothed; E.E. Clive taking over as the burgomaster; and Una O'Connor drafted from Whale's intervening "*The Invisible Man*" (1933) to play Minnie the maid, a screech-owl Greek chorus obsessed with whether people are in their proper beds. The righteous outrage of the townsfolk has mutated into sadistic glee over the Monster's presumed destruction. And to tip the director's hand, when the Monster rises to send two of them to their deaths in the waters under the mill, Whale marks their separate splashes with droll nonreaction shots of an imperturbable owl.

In short, *Bride* replaces the Gothic portentousness of the original with acid black comedy, as well as a heightened, breathlessly sustained pitch of energy (a flamboyant fluidity of camerawork, and an adventurous music score by Franz Waxman instead of, in the case of "*Frankenstein*," none at all). However many days or weeks may have passed during the events of "*Frankenstein*" (there's really no telling), "*Bride*" crams a third of its running time into one frenzied night, with near-corpse Henry brought back to life and settled in what should have been his marriage bed, only to be enticed out of it and off to yet another secret lair by a fellow scientific heretic. The entrance of this new character, the preternaturally gaunt Dr. Praetorius (Ernest Thesiger, an old theatrical crony of Whale's), is anticipated by Elizabeth's hysterical vision of "a figure like Death" coming to separate her and Henry, and announced by Minnie—in perhaps the most outrageous intro in Hollywood history to date—as "a very queer-looking gentleman." Queer-looking and brazenly queer-sounding, too: as both the dialogue and Thesiger's deliciously fruity delivery make

clear, Praetorius regards Elizabeth, the conventional bride of Frankenstein, as a tedious rival and obstacle to his seduction of Henry to come “probe the mysteries of life and death together.”

Nor does Whale—a well-regarded and successful Hollywood figure who lived openly as a homosexual—stop at having a little fun with a campy villain. “The Bride of Frankenstein” develops a complex, and still startlingly brave, theme of the Monster as the ultimate outsider, someone feared and rejected by society even more for what and who he is than anything he has done. This covert gay analogue is soon interwoven with another iconic line: Captured by the mob at a hilly place of rocks, the Monster is bound and raised on a pole in a simulacrum of the Crucifixion (which Whale emphasizes with half a dozen separate camera angles and the equivalent of a long gasp in the editing). Escaped, then pursued anew, he literally descends into the underworld, the graveyard (his movement directly lined up with a slanting Christus), to confront Death—Praetorius. Only in this case, the potential Redeemer doesn’t conquer Death but rather allows himself to be drawn into a bargain with him. Again there is a peer-

less Karloff moment: bending over the silken profile of a dead woman in her coffin, the Monster tentatively salutes, “Friend?...” And from that point on, the film rushes magisterially toward its climax, and the high-water mark of classical Hollywood horror: the creation of a new Bride of Frankenstein (again, with devastating irony, Elsa Lanchester). True to her name, she prefers her maker, Henry, and loathes the “man” she was born to love. Inconsolable, the Monster accepts his destiny: “We belong dead.” And in an ecstasy of grief and the craziest gleam of triumph the movies ever dreamed, they are.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Richard T. Jameson’s essays and reviews have appeared in Straight Shooting, “Queen Anne & Magnolia News,” “Film Comment,” Mr. Showbiz, and Parallax View.