

MARY SHELLEY'S NOVELS, THE GUILLOTINE, AND CONTEMPORARY HORROR  
FILM

Kristen Lacefield

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Approved by:

Jeanne Moskal

Beverly Taylor

Ruth Salvaggio

James Thompson

John McGowan

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## ABSTRACT

KRISTEN LACEFIELD: *Mary Shelley's Novels, the Guillotine, and Contemporary Horror Film*  
(Under the direction of Jeanne Moskal)

Assessments of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* commonly refer to it as a seminal work of proto-science-fiction, a narrative that not only captured certain modern ideas of its time but also prophesied the anxieties that would emerge fully almost two centuries later in response to accelerating technological and scientific developments. However, despite the nearly ubiquitous recognition of *Frankenstein's* influence on modern popular culture, there are few comparative studies of Shelley's novel and its derivatives among popular modern films. Moreover, *Frankenstein's* influence on modern film has been underestimated; that is, its influence extends to more cinematic genres and works than the limited examples for which it has been credited. Also, scholars have largely ignored the artistic prescience and modern influence of Shelley's later work of sci-fi/horror, *The Last Man*. In light of this critical deficiency, I advocate moving beyond analyses of *Frankenstein's* obvious derivatives to study films which fuse her novels' motifs with appeals to twentieth-century and post-millennium audiences. I also employ the historical symbol of the guillotine—introduced in the late eighteenth century—as a metaphor for anxieties related to modernity and evoked in Shelley's works and modern horror films.

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## **Introduction: Mary Shelley, the Guillotine, and Horror Cinema**

Assessments of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* commonly refer to it as a seminal work of proto-science-fiction, a narrative that not only captured certain modern ideas of its time but also prophesied the anxieties that would emerge fully almost two centuries later in response to accelerating technological and scientific developments. Additionally, *Frankenstein* is also widely credited as the progenitor of a set of modern fiction genres—tech-horror and the mad-scientist narrative, for example—tremendously popular in literature and media today.

However, despite the nearly ubiquitous recognition of *Frankenstein's* influence on modern popular culture, there are few comparative studies of Shelley's novel and its derivatives among popular modern films (for instance, James Whale's film and the numerous later adaptations of the novel). Moreover, *Frankenstein's* influence on modern film has been underestimated; that is, its influence extends to more cinematic genres and works than the limited examples for which it has been credited. In light of this critical deficiency, I advocate moving beyond analyses of *Frankenstein's* obvious derivatives to study films which fuse her novel's motifs with appeals to twentieth-century and post-millennium audiences. These films belong to several popular genres including bio-horror, tech-horror, reproductive horror, apocalyptic sci-fi, and the zombie film; some prominent examples are *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *The Fly* (1958), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)—all of which inspired numerous sequels and remakes—and the more recent *28 Days Later* (2002), *Dawn of the*

*Dead* (2004), *I Am Legend* (2007), *The Human Centipede* (2010), *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011), and the just-released zombie film *World War Z* (2013), as well as the popular television series *The Walking Dead* (2010-2013). All of these films emphasize the particular anxieties explored in *Frankenstein* and employ similar themes and motifs.

In considering the legacy of *Frankenstein*, it is important to examine the mythology surrounding its creation—a mythology fostered by Shelley in her 1831 introduction to the novel, first published in 1818, wherein she discusses the conditions under which she conceived it. Especially famous is her colorful anecdote concerning the informal writing contest of 1816 among herself, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, and John Polidori. At one point that summer, she writes, Byron initiated this competition, a challenge that frustrated her for days: “I thought and pondered—vainly. I felt that blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations. ‘Have you thought of a story?’ I was asked each morning, and each morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative.”<sup>1</sup> Yet she asserts that creative inspiration finally arrived in a nightmare about a frightening creature produced through artificial means.<sup>2</sup>

Scholarship has tended to take Mary Shelley at her word about the novel’s origins in a contest and a nightmare. *Frankenstein* is thus often understood as the result of a fortuitous spark that generated a mysterious creative outflowing from deep within the writer’s psyche. Instead, my analysis emphasizes the historical context that produced Shelley’s narrative, specifically the constitutive influence of three particular historical developments of the

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Shelley, “Introduction” to 1831 edition, in *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*, vol. 1 of *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. by Nora Crook (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1996), p. 186.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Romantic period: (1.) the violence of the French Revolution, especially the Terror and the ten years preceding Napoleon's 1799 ascendancy; (2.) the intrusion of modern technology into life and death processes like execution and childbirth, especially the introduction of guillotine execution and the concomitant rise of modern obstetrics in the late eighteenth century; (3.) and the emergence of materialist theories in science and medicine, which inspired various sensationalized experiments such as those performed on the corpses of the guillotined.

Due to the guillotine's significance as a symbol for all three historical developments—the French Revolution, the emergence of modern technology, and the rise of materialist science—I employ it in my analysis as a metaphorical paradigm for interpreting the *Frankenstein* narrative. The guillotine was a powerful signifier in the British Romantic imagination because of its status as both a symbol and a symptom of the period's historical anxieties. Chapter One of this dissertation provides a brief history of the guillotine and assesses its significance in popular British attitudes of the Romantic Period, examining in particular the guillotine's function as symbol and symptom of its historical context.

The guillotine's relevance for *Frankenstein* is a primary component of Chapter Two, which argues that the character of Victor Frankenstein is a narrative displacement of Giovanni Aldini, widely perceived at the time as the prototypical “mad-scientist” due to his notorious experiments, which used guillotined corpses to test the materialist scientific theories of his uncle, Luigi Galvani. According to Mary Shelley's introduction to *Frankenstein*, during the summer of 1816 Percy and Byron often pondered the possibility that “perhaps a corpse would be reanimated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component part of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and

ended with vital warmth.”<sup>3</sup> The theory’s originator, Galvani, was a physicist and physician famous throughout Europe for his experiments in what he termed *animal electricity*, the theory that electricity activates the nervous system in animals and humans.

Scholars’ long acceptance of the ghost-story myth, rather than of the guillotine as the defining context for *Frankenstein*, has led to a distorted assessment of Shelley’s novel. Scholars often acknowledge Galvani as an important source for *Frankenstein* but neglect to credit his nephew and successor Giovanni Aldini, whose notoriety was tied to the guillotine and who was better known to the British public than his uncle, in part because he was fluent in English and French. Aldini travelled throughout Europe conducting sensationalistic public experiments on executed corpses—for instance, at the London execution of the notorious murderer George Foster at Newgate in 1803—experiments that were covered in British newspapers along with their underlying theory, galvanism.<sup>4</sup> Aldini first achieved notoriety during the French Revolution for frequenting guillotine executions and conducting experiments on the severed heads of the condemned, “testing” the heads post-execution for facial expressions and other signs of residual life and then re-animating them with electricity. Like Victor Frankenstein’s use of corpses for scientific research in Mary Shelley’s novel, Aldini searched for the key to life in his experiments on corpses. In fact, guillotine execution attained a distinctive mystique in the popular Romantic imagination partly due to Aldini’s famous experiments.

Aldini preferred to utilize corpses who had suffered guillotine execution because of its mechanized precision: there was a clarity to the guillotine in that it reduced the act of

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Gay, *Enlightenment: The Science of Freedom* (New York: Norton, 1996).



execution to a single moment, a sudden shift from life to death.<sup>5</sup> Rather than a more extended process in which the instant of death was difficult to discern (as with a hanging, for example), the guillotine presented death as a distinct, mechanized switch-point from animation to lifelessness. This aspect of guillotine execution accorded with galvanism's notion that life might be generated or halted abruptly with the application or withdrawal of a single electrical charge. Conversely, popular reports of severed heads exhibiting expressions post-guillotining implied that some residual force or "charge" might exist for a time after the execution. For Aldini, guillotine execution reinforced galvanic notions about life and death processes. His experiments with guillotined corpses supported a materialist view of existence, according to which life is merely the animation of biological material by exclusively physical—rather than spiritual—processes.

Victor Frankenstein the corpse-stealer, like Aldini, was an eccentric scientist callously using the dead in his attempt to regenerate life through the application of electrical charges. And while Shelley's novel does not specify how Victor's "subjects" originally died, her first readers would have recognized connection between executions and scientific experimentation on corpses. They were connected not only because of Aldini famous experiments but also due to the so-called Murder Act of 1751, a controversial prohibition on burying criminals executed for murder that stipulated that their corpses be used for dissection.<sup>6</sup>

By recognizing Aldini's role in *Frankenstein*, we can see more clearly how Shelley's novel activates associations with the guillotine specifically, not just with the widely

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<sup>5</sup> Gay, *Science of Freedom*, pp. 30-52.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Canuel, *The Shadow of Death: Literature, Romanticism, and the Subject of Punishment* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007), p. 35.

acknowledged context of the French Revolution: *Frankenstein* evinces the very anxieties and tensions symbolized by the guillotine. I argue that viewing Victor as a displacement of Aldini allows for a reading of *Frankenstein* with reference to the guillotine and offers interesting new ways of interpreting Shelley's novel.

### **The Guillotine as Historical Symptom and Modern Symbol**

Since its invention in 1791 in the first years of the French Revolution, the guillotine has evoked multiplex responses, functioning as a kind of Rorschach test for various anxieties about modernity, with its sometimes-frightening technological and political developments. The guillotine symbolized such Enlightenment trends. For instance, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens writes:

It was the best cure for headache, it infallibly prevented the hair from turning grey, it imparted a particular delicacy to the complexion, it was the National Razor which shaved close: who kissed La Guillotine, looked through the little window and sneezed into the sack. It was the sign of the regeneration of the human race. It superseded the Cross. Models of it were worn on breasts from which the Cross was discarded, and it was bowed down to and believed in where the Cross was denied.<sup>7</sup>

For Dickens, the guillotine symbolizes the atheism of the French Revolution that dismissed Catholicism in favor of egalitarian Enlightenment humanism. The guillotine initially seemed to exemplify these ideals, and, as Dickens notes, enjoyed an almost mythical status among French revolutionaries as the signifier *par excellence* of a liberated modernity. And yet, as Dickens indicates, the guillotine's meanings reversed those of the crucifixion. Whereas the

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 332.

Cross transformed from a signifier of death to a symbol of spiritual transcendence, the guillotine devolved into a metaphor for the horrors of totalitarianism.

Over a century later, Dickens' fellow novelist Albert Camus articulated the horror mechanization engendered by modern revolution and crystallized in guillotine execution: "I was struck by this picture because the guillotine looked like such a precision instrument, perfect and gleaming. I was made to see that contrary to what I thought, it was very simple. The machine destroyed everything: you were killed discreetly, with a little shame and with great precision."<sup>8</sup> Here, the narrator's initially positive appraisal is rendered darkly ironic in the following sentence with the blunt declaration that "the machine destroys everything." Camus's equation of resplendent technological precision with totalizing destruction points to one of the enduring central paradoxes of the French Revolution and of modernity itself. Michel Foucault viewed the Enlightenment as an attempt to regulate and instrumentalize "natural" impulses, forcing human drives and behaviors to operate within the confines of a "disciplinary society."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno identified in modernity a perversion of human society into something reductively mechanized and materialist.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, the guillotine emphasized more ontological questions. Its designers regarded the replacement of the human executioner by a machine as a humane improvement, but inasmuch as this depersonalization focused on the act of death itself, a distinct moment of

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<sup>8</sup> Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 102.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1975), p. 105.

<sup>10</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

termination via the severing of head and body. Yet paradoxically, strange facial expressions and contortions often appeared on the severed heads after decapitation, implying the possible continuation of consciousness and provoking a sense of ontological indeterminacy.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the image of a severed head not only questioned where life ended and where it began, but also pointed to the disagreement between Cartesian and materialist paradigms of identity. According to the Cartesian model, the locus of identity is the mind distinct from the material body. This concept of a mind/body split also accords with traditional religious notions of identity as primarily spiritual rather than physical. Opposing this distinction between the mind and the body, modern materialism conversely understands the “mind” as a purely physical phenomenon (the brain) and refuses to relegate the body to an ontologically inferior category as Cartesian and traditional Christian perspectives do. This fundamental disagreement about human subjectivity is the source of the contradictions expressed by Slavoj Žižek when he writes, “The guillotine, this image of uncontrollable Otherness with which no identification seems possible, is nothing but the objective correlate of the abstract negativity that defines the subject.”<sup>12</sup> The guillotine thus embodies a set of ontological paradoxes generated by the modernity.

Given that the guillotine can be read as symptom and signifier of modern historical anxieties, I intend to employ it as a kind of clue signalling a labyrinth of meanings embedded in Romantic literature and certain modern films. I also want to analyze the significance of the

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<sup>11</sup> Whether these expressions demonstrated actual consciousness or merely the odd automatic contortions of a dying nervous system was a difficult question to answer, yet witnesses often attributed emotions to the dying victims' faces, but these might have been mere fantasies by the observers rather than actual occurrences.

<sup>12</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (New York: Verso, 2008), p. 90.

*slice* itself—the uneasy, indeterminate line that simultaneously separates and joins ontological categories such as life/death, mind/body, spirit/matter, and nature/technology. This hitherto understudied aspect of guillotine lore—the slice—is a have neglected the particular significance of the slice as a distinctively useful metaphor for uncomfortable juxtapositions and indeterminacies of modernity, providing new ways of interpreting Romantic texts such as *Frankenstein* and countering conventional assumptions about Romantic organicism. That is, using the guillotine slice as an interpretive paradigm will help us to identify juxtapositions in Romantic texts and recognize a kind of asyndeton as a key constitutive feature of Romanticism itself.

### **The Slice Metaphor, Historical Anxiety, and Modern Paradox in *Frankenstein* and *The***

#### ***Last Man***

In Chapters Three and Four, I focus on the metaphor of the slice in analyzing the tensions within ontological binaries of life/death, mind/body, spirit/matter, nature/tech that I argue underlie Mary Shelley's science fiction novels *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*, her lesser-known apocalyptic novel. These works emphasize ontological categories contested by modernity, exploring modernity's simultaneous blurring and sharpening of the theoretical slices that simultaneously separate and join oppositional categories. Shelley's novels merge categories of life and death through repeated descriptions of their protagonists as barely alive or death-like, but they also frequently emphasize the sharp discordance between life and death. We see this paradox in the *Frankenstein* narrative, which classifies the Creature as alive but inhuman and repeatedly describes Victor in terms suggestive of death. In the same way, *The Last Man's* hero, Lionel Verney, the witness of a worldwide plague who constantly

anticipates his own imminent death, often perceives himself as existing uncomfortably between existential states, with the specter of death intruding uncomfortably into life. We can also see this paradox functioning in John Polidori's *The Vampyre*, which, with its invention of the *undead* aristocrat, originated the now ubiquitous vampire of modern cinema as an elegant figure who preys on the living and gains eternal life through the death of his victims. This descriptive collapsing of the line between existence and death suggests the same preoccupation with boundaries underlying popular discussions of the guillotine in the Romantic period—in which the sharp juxtapositions or *slices* of guillotine execution were symbolically symptomatic of unresolved paradoxes inherent in modern ontological categories.

More than any of Mary Shelley's subsequent works, her apocalyptic novel *The Last Man* expands on many of the ontological anxieties underlying *Frankenstein*. Like Shelley's earlier "modern" novel, *The Last Man* articulates an anxiety about the tension between antonymic categories life/death, spirit/matter, mind/body, and nature/technology—or nature/civilization, to put it another way. This last binary is often expressed in fiction and film as an apocalyptic narrative, one in which civilization disintegrates and humanity nears extinction. As apocalypse is a prominent topic in a number of twentieth-century and post-millennium films, I contend that the thematic influence of *The Last Man* has been underestimated and that its evocation of ontological anxieties and apocalyptic themes make it—like *Frankenstein*—a kind of literary ancestor to a number of later science fiction and horror films. For this reason, I argue that *The Last Man* deserves greater critical attention.

In Chapters Five and Six, I turn to some popular cinematic descendents of Shelley's novels, moving beyond a consideration of only those films explicitly named after

*Frankenstein*. My analysis focuses on *Frankenstein*'s wider, unnamed influence on films recognizably symptomatic of the same modern anxieties that produced her classic narrative. For example, one of the basic conventions of the modern zombie genre—including the first and best-known zombie film, George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*—is that killing a zombie requires inflicting a fatal injury to its head.<sup>13</sup> Modern scholarship on zombie films commonly notes the ubiquity of this imperative to destroy the zombie brain (rather than, say, the heart).<sup>14</sup> Significantly, this convention confines the locus of existence to the head and suggests a categorical and existential split between the head (or mind) and the body. In utilizing this motif of the *slice*, zombie films draw more deeply upon the same kinds of anxieties elicited by guillotine execution—the sense that existence is localized in the mind and, moreover, that the mind is somehow categorically and existentially distinct from the body. In their exploration of such ontological anxieties, zombie films like *Night of the Living Dead* and *28 Days Later* echo thematic preoccupations of *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*. Moreover, zombie films lack much suggestion of any non-material, spiritual existence, implying the materialist view that identity and behavior are entirely biologically determined.

In addition to the zombie genre, I also examine two groundbreaking science-fiction films of the 1950s, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *The Fly*, as well as notable subsequent remakes and films inspired by the original classic films.

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<sup>13</sup> George Romero, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968; Los Angeles, CA: Image Ten), DVD: 2001.

<sup>14</sup> See Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro, *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011); William Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (And Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture* (New York: McFarland, 2010); and Stephanie Boluk, *Generation Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

## Chapter Two

### **“Head after head, and never heads enough”: Perceptions of Revolutionary Violence and the Guillotine in the British Romantic Psyche**

In its investigation of Romanticism’s engagement with the early years of the French Revolution (the period of time from the fall of the Bastille in 1789 to Napoleon’s ascendancy in 1799), literary scholarship has tended until recently, and to some extent even still, to treat the Romantics’ experience of the Revolution as immediate, as a single moment of sublime horror rather than as a profoundly mediated, local process of reception, apprehension, and negotiation.

Indeed, this is a valid critique of Ronald Paulson’s otherwise immensely useful *Representations of Revolution*.<sup>1</sup> In Paulson’s work as well as in that of Mary Jacobus, Julie Carlson, and Terrence Hoagwood (among others), the underlying assumption is that the Revolutionary experience was, for the most part, unmediated—that the Romantics somehow possessed direct, comprehensive knowledge of the events in France, that their knowledge of the Revolution was undifferentiated, and that their nightmare visions of its violence and action were prompted by some direct view of its spectacle.<sup>2</sup> However, the ideal of unmediated apprehension is not even true for most of the events described in accounts such as those of Helen Maria Williams and Mary Wollstonecraft, although it is also probably the

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Paulsen, *Reflections of Revolution* (New York: Norton, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Terrence Hoagwood, *Politics, Philosophy, and the Production of Romantic Texts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).



case that a sense of an unmediated experience is what these writers were consciously attempting in their reports.

Against the scholarly consensus described above, Jeremy Popkin, for one, asserts that the lived experience of the French Revolution was profoundly mediated.<sup>1</sup> He reminds us that the vast majority of the Revolution's spectators and even its actors experienced the Revolution not in person but through an enormous, growing system of journalistic transmission that originated with the Revolution and that changed the conditions of political discourse. In essence, journalism did not simply convey the news from France but it also shaped events there (and certainly the British response) and it was in the rapid establishment of the proto-modern-news cycle that we find a kind of anxiety-producing dissemination of daily news. The London *Times* provides an interesting example of the new journalism's influence on popular understandings of events in France. The *Times* was established only in 1785, but by the summer of 1794, it held the position of a respected and popular source of continental news. This status was the result its unusual network of correspondence and transmission. The French Revolution profoundly increased the interest in and the demand for fast, frequent coverage of news events. For the entirety of the Revolution, the *Times* was unusual in its early and consistent devotion to such coverage, and its authority rested in its exceptional speed.<sup>2</sup> In one article, for instance, the paper noted, "The Messenger who

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Popkin, *A Short History of the French Revolution* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Ian McCalman, *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

brought the dispatches yesterday from France made the quickest journey ever known, having come from Paris in 38 hours.”<sup>3</sup>

By 1794, the *Times* possessed a network of correspondents in France and had developed various routes and couriers for timely transmission. Reports from Paris to London arrived three times per week, with an average transmission time of eight or nine days, and consequently the paper offered frequent updates on events in Paris several times a week, sometimes offering several pages of information on the Revolution per issue.<sup>4</sup> The relative superiority of its coverage gave the *Times* considerable power to shape the British experience of the events in France. The paper could also influence the order and timing with which its audience learned of revolutionary events. Yet this influence inevitably created distortions in the British understanding of such events; one of the most significant distortions was a recurrent sense of acceleration and compression. For instance, in January 1793, during the trial and execution of Louis XVI, the paper increased its speed and frequency to the point that it provided a hourly breakdown of events.<sup>5</sup> This dynamic had the effect of adding to the dramatic effect and immediacy of the news from France. Such practices could also magnify shock and confusion, contributing to the dramatic emotional response of many Britons to events both positive and negative. This style of news delivery heightened the contrasts and discordances of the Revolution, reinforcing Britons’ tendency to experience it as a series of extreme events and seismic shifts. Even the often-shocking literary conceptualizations of the September Massacres and the Terror pale in comparison to the sensational, frequently

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<sup>3</sup> Qtd. in Ronald Paulsen, *Reflections of the Revolution*, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

fabricated accounts provided in *The Times* and other periodicals, which in numerous instances resembled what William Cobbett described as “dark catalogue[s]” of atrocity.<sup>6</sup> The journalism there deepened its audience’s sense of cognitive dissonance. Moreover, the journalism’s tone—dramatic, emotional, and often exploitive—demonstrates that its goal was not objectivity but sensationalism. In particular, anti-Jacobinism proliferated, as exemplified in this September 11, 1792 passage from the *Times*:

The Countess de Chevre, with her five children, the oldest not eleven years of age, were massacred at her house, Rue de Bacq, on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, and their bodies exposed before the door. The children were first assassinated before the eyes of the parent. She bore this infernal sight with a fortitude almost supernatural; she embraced the bleeding head of the youngest, and met her fate with heroic contempt. The wretches first cut off the arms that sustained her last sad comfort, and then severed her head from her body.<sup>7</sup>

As we see in the report above, British newspaper reports tended to highlight and often exaggerate graphic depictions of Jacobin cruelties while at the same time emphasizing the admirable fortitude and bearing of the persecuted nobility.

Like the *Times*, other journalistic forms offered an anti-Jacobin view. Pamphlets, tracts, cartoons, and etchings enjoyed tremendous popularity during the period. A collection of scholarly essays, *Reflections of Revolution: Images of Romanticism*, addresses the

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<sup>6</sup> Qtd. in Matthew Buckley’s *Tragedy Walks the Streets: The French Revolution in the Making of Modern Drama* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 72.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

representation of revolutionary violence in the popular arts.<sup>8</sup> For example, the grotesque cartoons of James Gillray illuminate the public's strong opinions about the events in France. One of Gillray's most famous etchings, *Un petit Souper a la Parisienne – or – a Family of Sans Culotts refreshing after the fatigues of the day*, depicts a radical French family engaging in cannibalism at the dining room table.<sup>9</sup> (The widespread rumors of French cannibalism are taken up by Angus Easson, who examines the impact of such rumors on extreme responses to the Revolution in British culture and literature.) **The** horrific associations of the French Revolution with dismemberment did not always take the extreme form of characterizing the French as cannibals but instead often employed a slightly less shocking form—an emphasis on dismemberment by guillotine.

In her multi-volume *Letters Written from France* during the years 1790-1796, Williams describes a number of guillotine executions. The following excerpts especially demonstrate Williams's approach to her descriptions and are instructive for understanding the way that those writing home tended to relate bloody executions. This passage describes the execution of Charlotte Corday:

It is difficult to conceive the kind of heroism which she displayed in the way to the execution. The women who were called furies of the guillotine, and who had assembled to insult her on leaving the prison, were awed into silence by her demeanor, while some of the spectators uncovered their heads before her, and others gave loud tokens of applause. There was such an air of chastened exultation thrown over her countenance, that she inspired sentiments of love rather than sensations of

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<sup>8</sup> A. Yarrington, *Reflections of Revolution: Images of Romanticism* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Gillray produced this etching in 1792.

pity. She ascended the scaffold with undaunted firmness, and, knowing that she had only to die, resolved to die with dignity. She had learned from her jailor the mode of punishment, but was not instructed in the detail; and when the executioner decided to tie her feet to the plank, she resisted, from an apprehension that he had been ordered to insult her; but on his explaining himself she submitted with a smile. When he took off the handkerchief, the moment before she bent under the fatal stroke, she blushed deeply; and her head, which was held up to the multitude the moment after...exhibited this last impression of offended modesty.<sup>10</sup>

This description of Corday's expression post-guillotine became a popular, widely proliferated anecdote in both France and Britain. This anecdote is significant because it reinforced the fear that the consciousness of the executed might continue post-decapitation; moreover, this anecdote generated increased fascination with guillotine execution in the British public. In another passage, Williams deepens this sense of horror and fascination surrounding the guillotine with a vivid description of a distraught Marie Antoinette:

Marie Antoinette had preserved an uniform behavior during the whole of her trial, and except when a starting tear accompanied her answer to [to interrogation]. She was condemned about four in the morning, and heard her sentence with composure. But her firmness forsook her in the way from the court to her dungeon—she burst into tears; when, as if ashamed of this weakness, she observed to her guards, that though she wept at that moment, they should see her go to the scaffold without shedding a tear. In her way to execution, where she was taken after the accustomed manner in a cart, with her hands tied behind her, she paid little attention to the priest

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<sup>10</sup> Helen Maria Williams, *Letters Written from France*, ed. by Neil Frastat (New York: Broadview, 2001), p. 89-90.

who attended her, and still less to the surrounding multitude. Her eyes, though bent on vacancy, did not conceal the emotion that was laboring at her heart—her cheeks were sometimes in a singular manner streaked with red, and sometimes overpowered with deadly paleness; but her general look was that of indignant sorrow. She reached the place of execution about noon, and when she turned her eyes toward the gardens and the palace, she became visibly agitated. She ascended the scaffold with precipitation, and her head was in a moment held up to the people by the executioner.<sup>11</sup>

Williams also provides another interesting execution commentary in her description and interpretation of Louis XVI's execution.

The calmness which Lewis the sixteenth displayed on this great trial of human fortitude, is attributed not only to the support his mind received from religious faith, but also to the hope which it is said he cherished, even till his last moment, that the people, whom he meant to address from the scaffold, would demand that his life might be spared. And his confessor, from motives of compassion, had encouraged him in this hope. After ascending the scaffold with a firm step, twice the unhappy monarch attempted to speak, and twice Santerre prevented him from being heard by ordering the drums to be beat immediately. Alas, had he been permitted to speak, poor was his chance of exciting commiseration! Those who pitied his calamities had carefully shunned that fateful spot, and those who most immediately surrounded him only wait till the stroke was given, in order to dip their pikes and their handkerchiefs in his blood...Two persons who were on that scaffold assert, that the unhappy

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 92-93.

monarch, finding the hope he had cherished of awakening the compassion of the people, frustrated by the impossibility of his being heard, as a last resource, declared that he had secrets to reveal ... Then it was that despair seized upon the mind of the unfortunate monarch—his countenance assumed a look of horror—twice with agony he repeated, “I am undone! I am undone!” His confessor meanwhile called to him from the foot of the scaffold...and in one moment he was delivered from the evils of mortality. The executioner held up the bleeding head, and the guards cried, “Vive le Republique!” Some dipped their handkerchiefs in the blood—but the greater number—chilled with horror at what had passed, desired the commander would lead them instantly from the spot. The hair was sold in separate tresses at the foot of the scaffold; and, as if every incident of this tragedy had been intended to display the strange vicissitudes of human fortune, as if every scene were meant “to point a moral,” the body was conveyed in a cart to the parish church.<sup>12</sup>

Such vivid descriptions of the French monarchs’ demeanor and behavior at their executions further reinforced the public’s fascination with the guillotine, giving it a heightened symbolic cultural currency in both France and Britain. Moreover, such sympathetic accounts echoed those such as Edmund Burke in generating some sense of emotional repugnance to the violent revolutionary events in France.

Wollstonecraft also recorded a number of observations about the guillotine executions of revolutionary France. In Book 3, Chapter 1 of Wollstonecraft’s *The French Revolution*, following her account of the Bastille’s fall, she stops to consider whether the Revolution was worth all the excesses of the Terror. If the National Assembly had “been allowed quietly to

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 101-102.

have made some reforms, paving the way for more, the Bastille, though tottering on its dungeons, might yet have stood erect. And, if it had, the sum of human misery could scarcely have been increased.”<sup>13</sup> One way to interpret this passage, according to Stephen Blakemore, is to see that Wollstonecraft is equating the violence of the *ancient regime* and with that of the Terror.<sup>14</sup> That is, the revolutionary government has simply traded one form of fear and oppression for another.

For the guillotine not finding its way to the splendid square it has polluted, streams of innocent blood would not have flowed, to obliterate the remembrance of false imprisonment, and drown the groans of solitary grief in the loud cry of agony—when, the thread of life quickly cut in twain, the quivering light of hope is instantly dashed out—and the billows suddenly closing, the silence of death is felt! This tale is soon told.<sup>15</sup>

The passage reflects her ambivalence, in which she seems unclear as to whether the Bastille’s fall was worth the guillotine’s blood. The “innocent blood” of the victims of the guillotine balances against the remembrance of the Bastille’s victims, a remembrance that is obliterated or washed away by the guillotine’s blood, since one cancels out the other. It is almost as if this blood is expiatory. But it is also as if the Revolution’s “stains”—the blood, the guillotines, and the Terror escape and flow from the Bastille’s “opening.”

There are other ambivalences and dichotomies in Wollstonecraft’s report. The contrast between public executions and the secret imprisonments—the blood drowning the

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *The French Revolution*, ed. by Janet Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 275.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Blakemore, *Burke and the Fall of Language* (Brown University Press, 1989).

<sup>15</sup> Wollstonecraft, *French Revolution*, p. 76.



“groans of solitary grief in the loud cry of agony” insinuates a distinction between imprisoned life and Revolutionary death. Wollstonecraft emphasizes this contrast by closing the sentence with the sharp finality of death and the drowning “billows” that return us to the imagery of “innocent blood” drowning the groans of the Bastille’s prisoners. The juxtaposition of the terms “innocent” and “blood” draw attention to the distinct sense of paradox inherent in revolutionary violence.

In France before the guillotine, executioners performed beheadings with a sword or axe. Sometimes it took repeated blows to completely sever the head, and it was very likely for the condemned to slowly bleed to death from their wounds before the head could be severed. The family of the victim or the victim himself would sometimes pay the executioner to ensure that the blade was sharp in order for a quick and relatively painless death. Hanging was another common type of execution, a form of death that could take minutes or longer. Other more gruesome methods of executions were also used, such as the wheel or burning at the stake. Opposition to these punishments was slowly growing, due mainly to the ideas and philosophies of the Enlightenment thinkers—philosophers such as Voltaire and Locke—who argued for humanitarian methods of execution.<sup>16</sup>

Scholar Regina Janes notes a further significance of the invention of the guillotine.<sup>17</sup> Traditional beheadings carried out by ax or sword (in which severed heads were placed on pikes) represented the violence of the mob, but, to the leaders of the revolution, the guillotine

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<sup>16</sup> See Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment and Why It Still Matters* (New York: Random House, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Regina Janes, *Losing Our Heads: Beheadings in Literature and Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2005).

was “the technological perfection of impersonal violence.” The guillotine also had a humanitarian justification:

When Guillotine presented the projected reforms in the criminal code to the assembly, he proposed at the same time “un simple mecanisme” to effect the decapitations. With his death delivered to him more efficiently, the victim would struggle less and endure less agony. Such a machine would enable the state to kill citizens without hurting them. The condemned were spared pain to their bodies, the executioners pain to their sensibilities...With a decapitating machine, the monopoly of violence would be restored to the state, re-institutionalized, and immobilized.<sup>18</sup>

Despite its modernity and its egalitarian, humanitarian purposes, the guillotine ironically came to symbolize the bloodthirsty mob because its efficiency made possible executions on a massive scale.

Almost immediately after the French Revolution commenced, its leaders initiated a drastic revision of the legal system, including the penal code. Dr. Joseph Ignace Guillotine on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1789, proposed six articles to the new Legislative Assembly.<sup>19</sup> Guillotine was a well-regarded professor of anatomy. One contributing factor to his reputation was his previous work, under King Louis XVI, investigating Anton Mesmer. A German physician living in Paris, Mesmer theorized that a natural energetic transference, known as magnétisme animal, occurred between all animated and inanimate objects; moreover, Mesmer claimed that he could control this force. Mesmerism was a type of vitalism that emphasized the movement of life energy through distinct channels in the body. Guillotine’s commission

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

concluded that Mesmer's claims were fraudulent. Guillotine's involvement in the Mesmer controversy demonstrates an historical connection between the guillotine and materialist theories such as such as vitalism.

In the revolutionary setting, Guillotine called for decapitation to become the sole method of execution in France, be carried out by a simple machine, and to involve no torture. Guillotine presented an etching of one possible device, resembling an ornate but hollow stone column with a falling blade, operated by an effete executioner cutting the suspension rope.<sup>20</sup> The machine was also to be hidden from the view of large crowds, to accord with Guillotine's view that execution should be private and dignified. (Guillotine's view of execution was consonant with modern views.) Five other reforms were proposed: one asked for a nationwide standardization in punishment, while others concerned the treatment of the criminal's family, who were not to be harmed or discredited; property, which was not to be confiscated; and corpses, which were to be returned to the families. On December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1789, the assembly accepted five recommendations, but the beheading machine was rejected. However, in 1791 the National Assembly sought a new method for all condemned people, regardless of class. Proponents believed that capital punishment's purpose was the ending of life instead of the infliction of pain. A committee was formed under Antoine Louis, physician to the King and Secretary of the Academy of Surgery, and Dr. Guillotine. It is from the latter's name that the guillotine derived its name. For a while, it was facetiously called "Mdlle. Guillotine" or "Guillotine's daughter."

The group developing the guillotine for the National Assembly was influenced by earlier execution devices such as the Scottish Maiden and the Halifax Gibbet. While these

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

prior instruments usually crushed the neck or used blunt force to take off a head, the committee's device used a crescent blade and a lunette (a hinged two part yoke to immobilize the victim's neck). Later, this design for a quick, painless, decapitation machine was given to Tobias Schmidt, a German engineer, who then built the first guillotine and tested it, initially on animals, but later on human corpses. It comprised two fourteen-foot uprights joined by a crossbar, whose internal edges were grooved and greased with tallow; the weighted blade was either straight or curved like an axe. The system was operated via a rope and pulley, while the whole construction was mounted on a high platform. The final testing took place at a hospital, where three carefully chosen corpses—those of strong, stocky men—were successfully beheaded. The first execution took place on April 25th, 1792, when a highwayman called Nicholas-Jacques Pelletier was killed. After an independent report recommended further changes, a number of alterations in the design occurred: metal trays to collect blood were added, the famous angled blade was introduced, and the designers abandoned the high platform—now replaced by a basic scaffold.

The guillotine may have been similar in form and function to other older devices, but it broke new ground: an entire country officially, and unilaterally, adopted this decapitation machine for all of its executions. The government shipped the same design out to all regions, and each was operated in the same manner, under the same laws; there was to be no local variation. Moreover, the guillotine administered a fast and painless death to anyone, regardless of age, sex or wealth, an embodiment of such concepts as equality and humanity. Prior to the Assembly's 1791 decree, in France and England generally only the upper classes received the privilege of an execution by decapitation. This class-differentiation in modes of

execution continued to be the case in much of Europe; however, France's guillotine was available to all.

Most remarkably, the guillotine was adopted more widely and with more speed than most reforms. Born out of a discussion in 1789 that had actually considered banning the death penalty, the machine had been used to kill over 15,000 people by the Revolution's close in 1799, despite not being fully invented until the middle of 1792. Indeed, by 1795, only a year and a half after its first use, the guillotine had decapitated over a thousand people in Paris alone. Timing certainly played a part, as the machine was introduced across France only months before a bloody new period in the Revolution: the Terror.

In 1793, political events caused a new governmental body to be introduced: The Committee of Public Safety. This body was supposed to work quickly and effectively, protecting the Republic from enemies and solving problems with the necessary force; in practice, it became a dictatorship run by Robespierre. The committee demanded the arrest and execution of "anyone who 'either by their conduct, their contacts, their words or their writings, showed themselves to be supporters of tyranny, of federalism, or to be enemies of liberty.'" This loose definition could cover almost everyone, and during the years 1793-4 Robespierre's government sent thousands to the guillotine.

It is important to remember that of the many who perished during the Terror, most did not die by guillotining. Some were shot; others drowned; in Lyons in December 1793, people were lined up in front of open graves and shredded by grape-shot from cannons.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, the guillotine became synonymous with the period in all of its stark contradictions: it was a social and political symbol of equality and humaneness to some and a

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 62-73.

symbol of tyranny, terror, and death to others (and particularly to the British imagination at the time).

It is easy to see why the quick, methodical, movement of the machine should have transfixed the European imagination. Every execution involved a fountain of blood from the victim's neck, and the sheer number of people guillotined could create red pools, if not actual flowing streams. Where executioners once prided themselves on their skill, speed now became the focus. While only fifty-three people were executed by the Halifax Gibbet between 1541 and 1650, some French guillotine executions exceeded that total in a single day.<sup>22</sup>

The guillotine appears to have enjoyed some affection in France for a time. Indeed, popular nicknames like 'the national razor', 'the widow', and 'Madame Guillotine' seem to be more accepting than hostile. The gruesome images coupled easily with morbid humor, and the machine became a cultural icon affecting fashion, literature, and even children's toys. In this respect, the guillotine offered yet another set of contradictions, as such popular incarnations reinterpreted a gruesome death-machine as fashionable and even comical symbol. In the early years of its use, the guillotine's symbolism of the Revolution also made its popular incarnations as toys and fashion a kind of patriotic act, much like the popular flag-pins of our own time. After the Terror, the "Victim's Ball" became fashionable: only relatives of the executed could attend, and these guests dressed with their hair up and their necks exposed, mimicking the condemned. This paradox of terror and humor often accompanies historical moments in which individuals cannot successfully integrate horrific events into their psyches; thus, humor appears to be a kind of morbid coping mechanism. For example,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

such a dynamic occurred during the Black Death that decimated Europe's population in the Middle Ages (when up to one-third of the population died within a relatively short time); a distinctive strain of black humor—a sort of gallows humor—emerged in response to the widespread suffering and death from a gruesome, painful disease. Moreover, executions by guillotine were often a popular entertainment that attracted great crowds of spectators. Vendors would sell programs listing the names of those scheduled to die. People would come day after day and vie for the best seats; knitting female citizens—famous to us from Dickens's *Madame Defarge*—formed a cadre of hardcore regulars. Parents would bring their children. Toward the end of the Terror, however, attendance thinned considerably.

It thinned, perhaps, because the guillotine in daily use seemed to betray its first purpose as a humane instrument. However, some observers raised the possibility that the very swiftness of the guillotine prolonged the victim's suffering. The blade cut quickly enough so that there was relatively little impact on the brain case, and perhaps less likelihood of immediate unconsciousness than with a more violent decapitation, or long-drop hanging. Execution-watchers told numerous stories of blinking eyelids, speaking, moving eyes, movement of the mouth, even an expression of "unequivocal indignation" on the face of the decapitated Charlotte Corday when the executioner slapped her face.<sup>23</sup> Some British expatriates in France described gruesome guillotining that heightened physical expressions of the condemned post-execution, thus provoking British readers' doubts about the device's alleged "humanitarianism." The often sympathetic and sentimental descriptions of the condemned added to the abolitionist spirit of the age, which Mark Canuel discusses at length

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

in his book on the death penalty and the abolition movement.<sup>24</sup> Anatomists and other scientists in several countries have tried to perform definitive experiments on severed human heads as recently as 1956. Inevitably, the evidence is only anecdotal. What appears to be a head responding to the sound of its name, or to the pain of a pinprick, may be only random muscle twitching or automatic reflex action, with no awareness involved. It is also possible that the massive drop in cerebral blood pressure would have caused victims to lose consciousness in several seconds. However, in the late- eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, a number of European physiologists conducted experiments to determine what the condemned were capable of perceiving post-execution.

One of the most famous experiments on criminals condemned to death took place in Germany in 1791.<sup>25</sup> In the presence of physicians and students assembled at the site of an execution by decapitation, the investigator began by demonstrating that exposed parts of the torso's neck muscles quiver when touched with a probe. Deeper contact caused muscular contractions strong enough to arch the back and to abduct the arms that had been folded with the fingers interdigitated. A light touch of the probe evoked facial muscle twitches, especially around the lips; such grotesque grimaces forced some shuddering observers to leave. The results led to the conclusion that consciousness probably persisted after decapitation.

The expanding controversy over the possible persistence of consciousness in severed heads was fueled by such research and by the journalistic custom of reporting detailed results. On one hand, it was alleged that spontaneous muscular twitches and contractions in a freshly severed head devoid of blood manifested the possibility of conscious perception of

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<sup>24</sup> See Mark Canuel, *The Shadow of Death: Literature, Romanticism, and the Subject of Punishment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Graham Fife, *The Shadow of the Guillotine* (New York: Piatkus, 2004), p. 43-44.



pain, lasting perhaps for fifteen minutes. Contrary opinion rested on the assumption that there was a direction of flow of an hypothesized life essence called “nerve ether,” or “nerve fluid,” which filled the cerebral ventricles.<sup>26</sup> A number of physiologists hypothesized that sensibility, or consciousness, was engendered by the flow of this fluid along nerves to the brain. Consequently, they believed that the almost instantaneous loss of blood after the decapitation stopped the supply of “fluid” to the brain and therefore eliminated any possibility of consciousness.

Repeated experiments merely polarized the conflict. Proponents of consciousness cited recent observations made on the head of an executed criminal.<sup>27</sup> The criminal died by sword on the morning of February 25, 1803, in Breslau. A galvanic device composed of zinc and silver plates was used to evoke the previously described strong muscular contractions in the head. The investigator then had two assistants hold the head firmly in their hands while he stared intently at the face. When the cut end of the cord was touched with the mechanical probe, the lips contorted and the facial muscles reacted in a way which impressed the observer in a sure sign of sensed pain. When a finger was quickly thrust toward the open eye of the severed head, the lids closed as though the brain were conscious of an immediate threat. Each time the victim’s name was shouted into an ear, the head’s eyelids opened, the gaze turned slowly to that side, and the mouth made opening movements as if trying to speak. These reactions ostensibly confirmed the hypothesis made by the proponents of consciousness insofar as they indicated the possibility of continued consciousness, perception, and response after decapitation. Conversely, however, the successful stimulation

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>27</sup> Janes, *Losing Our Heads*, p. 101.

of the corpse by electricity reinforces the notion of a human as merely biological—to the point that facial expressions turn out to be merely biological responses to stimuli that can be simulated with the use of electricity. In a sense, then, this kind of work might have indicated the notion of consciousness after execution, but it did not seem to validate the idea of a spirit or soul that animates the body from within.

A more intriguing study was also performed in 1803 in Mainz on seven criminals guillotined.<sup>28</sup> A special two-room hut had been built on the site. The researchers equipped one room with galvanic equipment. The other had an oven for temperature control, and contained voltaic columns and Leyden jars for electrical stimulation. It was hoped that this experiment would elucidate the fundamental relationship between galvanism and electricity. Physicians, surgeons, pharmacists, and medical students comprised the research team. Two of the students stood directly beneath the scaffold during and after the execution. It was their task to check for any signs of consciousness immediately after decapitation. One student held the head firmly in both hands for concentrated observation of the face, while the other shouted, “Do you hear me?” in the ears. Alternating tasks, they did this with seven heads whose stationary eyelids varied from total retraction to total occlusion. In no instance did the researchers observe any reaction, and they concluded that loss of consciousness was practically instantaneous on decapitation. The first headless torso entered the galvanic room in four minutes. Stimulation of the exposed end of the spinal cord with cables/wires connected to a galvanic apparatus yielded an animated result similar to that of the prior study.

Ultimately, late-eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century physiologists were unable to settle the question of whether the condemned retained some degree of consciousness after

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<sup>28</sup> Alister Kershaw, *A History of the Guillotine* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1993), pp. 76-81.

execution. This question continued to inform discussions of the humaneness of the guillotine and even the practice of guillotining itself. After an execution, it was not uncommon for the head of the condemned to be picked up and turned toward the body so that the last image the condemned would see as he/she exited this world would be blood flowing from his/her severed neck. This debate over the consciousness of the condemned also informed perceptions of guillotine execution in England and colored the ways in which expatriates living in France during the Revolution and the Terror depicted the guillotine in their reports back to England.

It is common in Romantic literary criticism to note the importance of both idealism and disappointment in Romantic attitudes. In particular, the outcome of the French Revolution--its quick devolution from the bright dawning of a newly enlightened age to gruesome violence--elicited passionate and often discordant attitudes from many Romantic writers. Wordsworth's *Prelude*, for instance, reflects both the unfettered enthusiasm of his more youthful years in France as well as his later dismay over the violence of the Terror.<sup>29</sup> Because many Romantic writers believed that democracy offered a vastly superior system to France's *ancien regime*, they tended to support the Revolution there as the heralding of positive change in history. A number of them, like Wordsworth, spent time in France prior to or even during the Revolution, attempting to absorb by osmosis the exciting spirit of that time and place. Those British writers of the period who did not live in France still had access to events there via letters from friends abroad, as well as frequent reports in periodicals like London's *The Times*. Some of the most compelling reports of the period appear in the letters of writers like Williams, which provide intriguing "you-are-there" accounts of the

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<sup>29</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude and Other Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Revolution. A number of critics have analyzed the theme of Romantic disappointment--it is a constitutive feature of much Wordsworthian criticism. However, the scope of this disappointment must be better understood against the background of such intensely felt initial hope (and even euphoria) in expectation of an enlightened, democratic political Revolution. It is this stark contrast that deserves deeper analysis, for such a cognitive dissonance is significant in many Romantic works.

Perhaps the best symbol of this dissonance between revolutionary idealism and horror is the guillotine. As scholars such as Michel Foucault and Regina Janes have pointed out, the guillotine was an invention specially commissioned by the new revolutionary government in France as a humane, "enlightened" means of execution; however, it soon came to represent the dark violence of the Revolution—especially the notorious period known as The Terror. This was especially true in the British public's perception, since anti-Jacobin propaganda emphasized the bloodiest reports from France and often exaggerated disturbing events there. In effect, the guillotine execution attained a distinctive mystique as the symbol *par excellence* of the Terror.

Yet the guillotine also channeled into a larger dichotomy that both troubled and fascinated Romantic writers. The ostensible dawn of a new government guided by the principles of the Enlightenment suddenly transformed into a period of terrifying violence. Such a pronounced transformation had the effect of placing a dark negative print against the previous image of positive, even beautiful political and social change. The violence of the Revolution--exemplified by (often seemingly arbitrary) mob violence and guillotine executions--seemed even darker (or redder, in vivid descriptions that emphasized blood running in the streets) in immediate contrast to the brightness of all of the initially

idealistic hopes for the Revolution. The beauty of what the Romantics assumed to be a milestone in human evolution suddenly metamorphosed into its opposite--savage mob violence and primitive despotism couched in ostensibly democratic goals.

This stark paradox--enlightenment vs. primitivism, democracy vs. despotism, humane execution vs. terrifying spectacle, beauty vs. grotesqueness--accounts for many of the themes we find in Romantic literature. Much scholarship focuses particularly on the Gothic literature and drama of the period, as well as the commonly used motif of the *doppelganger* (found in works such as *Caleb Williams*, *The Private Confessions of Thomas Hogg*, and, of course, *Frankenstein*). Scholars such as Jerrod Hogle have provided extensive analysis of motif of the double in Romantic and Gothic literature.<sup>30</sup> And while a number of scholars recognize the Gothic as the dark side of Romantic paradox expressing fearful, repressed emotions; it is important to understand that what is significant about Gothic literature in terms of the French Revolution is not simply the way it expresses fears engendered by both the *ancien regime* and the Revolution itself but also the fact that it exists as a compelling negative image in an incongruent relationship with the idealism and innocent naivete of Romantic emotion. We find this dichotomy in many Romantic works (even non-Gothic works). In fact, as one of the most significant events of the Romantic period, the Terror both contributed to and epitomized the foundational structural ambivalence--an almost schizophrenic split at times--of the Romantic mind.

Beyond its symbolism of this ideological ambivalence, the guillotine also generated intriguing ontological questions. Correlative with a new philosophical emphasis on

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<sup>30</sup> Jerrold Hogle, "The Figure of 'The Double' in Gothic Literature" in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Literature*, ed. by Jerrold Hogle. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 66-78.

sensibility during this period (the term denoting human qualities of perception and biological/emotional response), a number of scientists and physicians speculated about when the condemned individual's consciousness would cease in a guillotine execution. Reinforcing this debate, some who witnessed guillotine executions recorded the strange expressions on the visages of the severed heads post-execution. Whether these expressions demonstrated actual consciousness or merely the odd automatic contortions of a dying nervous system was a difficult question to answer, yet witnesses often attributed emotions to the dying victims' faces, but these might have been mere fantasies by the observers rather than actual occurrences. Nevertheless, such accounts fascinated scientists and physicians, and at least one recorded experiment from the period was performed during an actual execution to attempt to determine if consciousness continued post-beheading.

The significance of such queries corresponds to the larger emphasis on sensibility in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Offering a new paradigm for thinking about human consciousness, the interest in *feeling* made torture and execution seem more heinous than before. It is no accident that the focus on sensibility intertwined with abolitionist/slave writings, anti-capital punishment theories, and concerns about the violence in France.<sup>31</sup> However, the scientific interest in the guillotine also points to a more fundamental question about human consciousness that greatly concerned a generation of philosophers, writers, and scientists who were beginning to think in a more profound way about the mind, subjective experience, and the essence of consciousness itself (this latter idea often expressed in conversations about the slippery concept of the "soul"). Such questions nearly always

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<sup>31</sup> Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

involve difficult paradoxes, dichotomies such as mind/body (the Cartesian split), matter/spirit, and life/death.

Guillotine execution exemplified such modern paradoxes in an especially powerful way. Of course, prior to the development of the guillotine, executions had always been a commonplace occurrence, and beheadings were certainly nothing unusual. Yet the clinical, mechanical, seemingly exact nature of this new form of execution suddenly entailed a new set of horrors in the popular psyche. The designers of the guillotine regarded the replacement of the human element (the executioner) with a machine as a humane improvement, but it also replaced the emphasis on an interpersonal act with an intensified focus on the act of dying itself, a distinct and clearly delineated moment to capture the popular imagination. Moreover, the collection of heads that accrued beneath the guillotine created a sense of the victims as headless, lifeless dolls--a disturbing image to those many who preferred to think of human identity in terms of spiritual subjectivity rather than mere biological objectivity. These intriguing paradoxes account for a number of representations of the guillotine in British reports/literature.

The guillotine thus raised not so much a question but a new pattern of thinking via violent juxtaposition and asyndeton, as opposed to the paradigm of organic connection by which critics traditionally have understood Romanticism. This disruptive pattern appears pervasively but unpredictably in Regency literature.

## Chapter Three

### **The Guillotine, Materialist Science, and the Historical Context of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein***

I mentioned in my introduction that Mary Shelley's 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein*, the novel she had published in 1818, has proved a misleading clue to scholars of the horror genre as well as to Romanticists. There she narrates a few anecdotes about the summer of 1816 spent with Percy Shelley, Byron, and his physician, John Polidori. Though she does not mention it, Percy Shelley was still married to Harriet Shelley at the time, and Mary's step-sister Claire Clairmont—tactfully unmentioned—was desperately pursuing a one-sided affair with Byron, her competition with Mary to catch a poet as a lover. During this period, Byron initiated a writing competition mostly among the men in the group, a challenge that frustrated her for days: "I thought and pondered—vainly. I felt that blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations. 'Have you thought of a story?' I was asked each morning, and each morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative."<sup>32</sup> Yet she asserts that creative inspiration finally arrived in a nightmare about a frightening creature produced through artificial means.

Scholarship has tended to take Mary Shelley at her word about the novel's origins in a contest and a nightmare. *Frankenstein* is thus often understood as the result of a fortuitous

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<sup>32</sup> Mary Shelley, "Introduction" to 1831 edition, in *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, vol. 1 of *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. by Nora Crook (London: William Pickering, 1996), p.126



spark that generated a mysterious creative outflowing from deep within the writer's psyche. Instead, my analysis emphasizes the historical context that produced Shelley's narrative, specifically the constitutive influence of three particular historical developments of the Romantic period: (1.) the French Revolution; (2.) the intrusion of modern technology into life and death processes like execution and childbirth—especially the introduction of guillotine execution and the concomitant rise of modern obstetrics in the late eighteenth century; (3.) and the emergence of materialist theories in science and medicine, which inspired various sensationalized experiments such as those performed on the corpses of the guillotined.

Due to the guillotine's significance as a symbol for all three historical developments—revolution, the emergence of modern technology, and the rise of materialist science—I employ it in my analysis as a metaphorical paradigm for interpreting the *Frankenstein* narrative. The guillotine was a powerful signifier in the British Romantic imagination because of its status as both a symbol and a symptom of the period's historical anxieties.

### **The Origin of the *Frankenstein* Concept**

*Frankenstein* was born in part out of the creative synergy surrounding Mary Shelley that summer in Geneva. She writes of the conversations—“many and long”<sup>33</sup>—she witnessed between her husband and Byron. A number of letters and journal entries also attest to their extensive spirited debates about the nature of life and consciousness and the implications of recent trends in scientific thought.<sup>34</sup> John Polidori, Lord Byron's personal

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

physician and companion during this period, frequently joined in these discussions, probably mentioning somnambulism and night terrors, the subjects of his medical school thesis, and the arguments against the death penalty that he had recently advanced in a lengthy essay arguing for its abolition.<sup>35</sup> Polidori's presence is significant because it was during this time that he wrote a fragment for his later novella *The Vampyre*, a pioneer in its genre and the forerunner of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Like *Frankenstein*, Polidori's novella explores theoretical tensions between ontological categories and expresses anxieties about a number of emergent trends in science and philosophy. Romantic-period novelist Matthew Lewis, the writer of the controversial Gothic classic *The Monk*, was another visitor to the Shelley circle that summer. Lewis's usually-overlooked visit occurred between his two voyages to his plantations in Jamaica. Lewis's preoccupation in Geneva with the slavery he had witnessed in Jamaica casts Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in a new light.

Mary Shelley's retrospective Introduction notes that her circle was fascinated by galvanism: she writes that Percy and Byron often pondered the possibility that "perhaps a corpse would be reanimated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component part of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth."<sup>36</sup> The theory of galvanism was developed by Luigi Galvani, a physicist and

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<sup>34</sup> I'm referring here not only to Mary Shelley's letters/journals but also to those of her husband, Byron, and Polidori.

<sup>35</sup> This essay, the product of a long period of research and thought, was completed that summer in Switzerland and published in *The Pamphleteer* later that year. Byron assisted Polidori in the editing process. Coincidentally, at this time Percy Shelley was also working on an essay about the death penalty, so this topic likely generated extensive conversations between the three men.

<sup>36</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 65.

physician who had attained widespread fame in Europe for his experiments in what he termed *animal electricity*, the theory that electricity activates the nervous system in animals and humans. Galvani's experiments demonstrated a connection between electricity and the nervous system's response, suggesting that the animating life force of human existence might be a physical phenomenon (electricity) rather than a spiritual one (the soul). For this reason, galvanism was a flashpoint of controversy between Romantic-period materialists and religious leaders.<sup>37</sup>

Scholars often acknowledge Galvani as an important source for *Frankenstein* but neglect to credit his nephew and successor Giovanni Aldini, whose notoriety was tied to the guillotine and who was better known to the British public than his uncle, in part because he was fluent in English and French. Aldini travelled throughout Europe conducting sensationalistic public experiments on executed corpses—for instance, at the London execution of the notorious murderer George Foster at Newgate in 1803—experiments that were covered in British newspapers along with their underlying theory, galvanism.<sup>38</sup> Aldini first achieved notoriety during the French Revolution for frequenting guillotine executions and conducting experiments on the severed heads of the condemned, “testing” the heads post-execution for facial expressions and other signs of residual life and then re-animating them with electricity. Like Victor Frankenstein's use of corpses for scientific research in Mary Shelley's novel, Aldini searched for the key to life in his experiments on corpses. In fact, guillotine execution attained a distinctive mystique in the popular Romantic imagination partly due to Aldini's famous experiments.

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<sup>37</sup> See a first-hand account by Giovanni Aldini and Robert Hooper, *An Account of the Late Improvements in Galvanism*, originally published in 1809 (Ulan Press, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> Peter Gay, *Enlightenment: The Science of Freedom* (New York: Norton, 1996).

Aldini preferred to utilize corpses who had suffered guillotine execution because of its mechanized precision: there was a clarity to the guillotine in that it reduced the act of execution to a single moment, a sudden shift from life to death.<sup>39</sup> Rather than a more extended process in which the instant of death was difficult to discern (as with a hanging, for example), the guillotine presented death as a distinct, mechanized switch-point from animation to lifelessness. This aspect of guillotine execution accorded with galvanism's notion that life might be generated or halted abruptly with the application or withdrawal of a single electrical charge. Conversely, popular reports of severed heads exhibiting expressions post-guillotining implied that some residual force or "charge" might exist for a time after the execution. For Aldini, guillotine execution reinforced galvanic notions about life and death processes. His experiments with guillotined corpses supported a materialist view of existence, according to which life is merely the animation of biological material by exclusively physical—rather than spiritual—processes.

Victor Frankenstein the corpse-stealer, like Aldini, was an eccentric scientist callously using the dead in his attempt to regenerate life through the application of electrical charges. And while Shelley's novel does not specify how Victor's "subjects" originally died, her first readers would have recognized connection between executions and scientific experimentation on corpses. They were connected not only because of Aldini famous experiments but also due to the so-called Murder Act of 1751, a controversial prohibition on

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<sup>39</sup> Gay, *Science of Freedom*, pp. 30-52.

burying criminals executed for murder that stipulated that their corpses be used for dissection.<sup>40</sup>

By recognizing Aldini's role in *Frankenstein*, we can see more clearly how Shelley's novel activates associations with the guillotine specifically, not just with the widely acknowledged context of the French Revolution: *Frankenstein* evinces the very anxieties and tensions symbolized by the guillotine. I argue that viewing Victor as a displacement of Aldini allows for a reading of *Frankenstein* with reference to the guillotine and offers interesting new ways of interpreting Shelley's novel.

Following the guillotine's installation as the execution method of the revolutionary regime in France, it quickly came to symbolize an assortment of British anxieties about the Revolution. But beyond its evocation of revolution-related fears, the guillotine also generated anxiety due to the clinical, seemingly exact nature of this new method of capital punishment. Despite the fact that guillotine execution may not seem, to us, very different from the beheadings that had been granted to the aristocracy in England for hundreds of years, the replacement of an executioner with a mechanized "razor" lent new fear, new precision, and new personalization to the act of execution. The designers of the guillotine had regarded the replacement of the human element (the executioner) with a machine as a humane improvement, but it also replaced the emphasis on an interpersonal act with an intensified focus on the moment of death itself. As Mike Dash notes, "It was so quick, so clean, so bloodily final that it was hard for an execution-going public accustomed to the protracted struggles of [earlier execution methods] to believe that life could be extinguished

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<sup>40</sup> Mark Canuel, *The Shadow of Death: Literature, Romanticism, and the Subject of Punishment* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007), p. 35.

quite so swiftly.”<sup>41</sup> This aspect of swiftness elicited a particular anxiety, as it seemed, unnaturally, to compress death into a single second. Granted, a decapitation by axe or sword typically achieved the same instantaneous result, but it was not uncommon for executioners to attempt a beheading two or more times in a flawed effort to sever the head. And while guillotine execution itself occasionally required more than one release of the blade—especially if the machine was faulty or the blade lacked the requisite sharpness—the replacement of a swordsman by a machine created a perception of guillotine execution as a clinical, instantaneous event rather than a humanized process.

Paradoxically, the apparently swift guillotine aroused fears of a protracted agony. The first guillotine executions provoked a debate emerged about the exact moment of consciousness’s cessation. Some physicists claimed that awareness might continue after decapitation. The guillotine thus seemed to suggest an indeterminate ontological state, what Rebecca Comray calls a “transitionless transition” that “simultaneously reinforces and erodes the distinction between dying and living.”<sup>42</sup> She explains that guillotine execution rendered death “at once punctual and precise, and radically indeterminate: both incontestable and yet infinitely uncertain.”<sup>43</sup>

Guillotine execution, though seeming overwhelmingly to support the materialist view, also evoked uncertainty about the relationship between the head (or brain) and body. The bodiless heads that accrued beneath the guillotine rendered the victims as headless,

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<sup>41</sup> Mike Dash, *The Limit: Engineering on the Boundaries of Science* (London: London Bridge, 1995), p. 128.

<sup>42</sup> Rebecca Comray, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010), p. 97-98.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, p. 98.

lifeless dolls devoid of spiritual subjectivity. That is, replacing the human element had the effect of transforming a natural process (death) to a technological one, suggesting an emerging modern tension between the categories of nature and technology. Of course, guillotine execution did entail a prominent performative element in the sense that great attention was given to the prisoner's behavior prior to execution—his/her comportment ascending the scaffold and final words to the audience—but, again, in the actual act of guillotining, technology ended these personality-laden moments.

In this chapter, I will focus on four related existential dichotomies evoked by the guillotine—life/death, head/body, matter/spirit, and nature/technology—and their manifestations in Mary Shelley's proto-science-fiction novels *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*, as well as Polidori's novella *The Vampyre*. In my analysis, I enlist the image of the guillotine *slice* as a metaphor for the line that paradoxically separates and joins opposing sides of the ontological dichotomies listed above. The novels examined in this essay interrogate these theoretical *slicings* by simultaneously blurring and sharpening the boundaries between existential states. For example, even as Shelley's novels merge categories of life and death through repeated descriptions of their protagonists as barely alive or death-like, they also frequently emphasize the sharp discordance between life and death. We see this paradox in the *Frankenstein* narrative, which classifies the Creature as alive but inhuman and repeatedly describes Victor in terms suggestive of death. *The Last Man* employs a similar motif. Forced to witness the plague's widespread ravages of the plague and burdened with the constant anticipation of bereavement and death, Lionel Verney exists uncomfortably between existential states, the specter of death constantly intruding into life. We can also see this paradox functioning in John Polidori's *The Vampyre*, which, with its

invention of the *undead* aristocrat, originated the now ubiquitous vampire of modern cinema as an elegant figure who preys on the living and gains eternal life through the death of his victims. This descriptive collapsing of the line between existence and death suggests the same preoccupation with boundaries underlying popular discussions of the guillotine in the Romantic period—in which the sharp juxtapositions or *slices* of guillotine execution were symbolically symptomatic of unresolved paradoxes inherent in modern ontological categories.

One such juxtaposition in *Frankenstein* appears in Victor Frankenstein's discussion of his early research, which involved studying corpses and observing processes of biological decay. In one passage in particular, Victor thus explains the rationale for his morbid scientific approach:

Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed? To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death. I observed the natural decay and corruption of the human body...I saw how the fine form of man was degraded and wasted. I beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life; I saw how the worm inherited the wonders of the eye and brain. I paused, examining and analyzing all the minutiae of causation from life to death, and death to life.<sup>44</sup>

Victor here emphasizes death as the key to understanding life, a paradox juxtaposing two seemingly antonymic states. He focuses on the grotesque “corruption of the human body” and “pauses” over the “causation from life to death, and death to life”; in effect, he asserts that understanding death is necessary for understanding life.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 62.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*



Mary Shelley also presents this problematic life/death dichotomy in categorizing the Creature. Neither human nor inhuman, the Creature exists on the metaphorical slice between antithetical categories, in an indeterminate zone somewhere between life and death. In the sense that he is sentient, he is very much alive; but as the derivative product of lifeless corpses, he is existentially inauthentic. In fact, Mary Shelley's Creature, a combination of disparate parts birthed by electricity, resembles a machine, foreshadowing the cyborgs of modern science fiction. Taken as a whole, Shelley's novel regards the Creature as neither completely dead nor alive and yet both at the same time, blurring the line between two seemingly exclusive states of existence.

Victor, too, exists on this slice between categories: enervated, lifeless, and outside of strict ontological categories (neither fully alive nor dead). In one typical passage, Victor bemoans this sense of indeterminacy:

The blood flowed freely in my veins, but a weight of despair and remorse pressed on my heart, which nothing could remove. Sleep fled from my eyes; I wandered like an evil spirit . . . . this state of mind preyed on my health, which had perhaps never entirely recovered from the first shock it had sustained. I shunned the face of man; all sound of joy or complacency was torture to me; solitude was my only consolation—deep, dark, deathlike solitude.<sup>46</sup>

Victor's internal sense of his indeterminacy corroborates the observation of an outside observer, Walton:

Margaret, if you had seen the man who thus capitulated for his safety, your surprise would have been boundless. His limbs were nearly frozen, and his

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 93.

body dreadfully emaciated by fatigue and suffering. I never saw a man in so wretched a condition. We attempted to carry him into the cabin; but as soon as he had quitted the fresh air, he fainted. We accordingly brought him back to the deck, and restored him to animation by rubbing him with brandy and forcing him to swallow a small quantity. As soon as he showed signs of life we wrapped him up in blankets...<sup>47</sup>

Shelley thus introduces Victor as a barely-conscious, emaciated body wrapped in blankets like a corpse wrapped in burial cloths.

Shelley consolidates the representation of Victor as half-alive, ever on the verge of slipping entirely into death, in order to emphasize his figurative burial under a weight of depression, guilt, and despair. In effect, she suggests that psychologically Victor exists in a liminal state between life and death—physically barely alive and yet always ill, conscious and yet always suffering emotionally, frequently yearning for death. Incidentally, Victor’s suicidal ideation is congruent with a different antinomy: idealism/horror. His abrupt shift from youthful optimism to its inverse, horror, functions as a photographic negative, with despair juxtaposed in sharp relief against the character’s earlier idealism. We see this juxtaposition in Victor’s abrupt attitudinal change after the Creature’s “birth”:

The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human nature. I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body . . . . I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. . . I slept indeed,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 26-27.

but I was disturbed by the wildest of dreams. I thought I saw Elizabeth in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death...I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of flannel.<sup>48</sup>

This passage presents a distinct discordance between ardent idealism and “breathless” horror that correlates with its juxtaposition the antonymic states of life and death.

Furthermore, Victor’s focus on life’s materiality evokes an anxiety about the ontological dichotomy matter/spirit. In effect, *Frankenstein* emphasizes a materialist view of life to the exclusion of a spiritual perspective, in which graphic terms like “corpse” and “grave-worms” and Elizabeth’s sudden decay from a youthful girl into a rotting corpse trump any notion of an extra-material reality. Victor’s materialism also informs his preoccupation with “the natural decay and corruption of the human body,” in accordance with his father’s “greatest precautions that my mind should be impressed with no supernatural horrors . . . . a churchyard was to me merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life, which from being the seat of beauty and strength had become food for the worm.”<sup>49</sup> Even after Victor regrets giving life to the Creature, he does not venture into theological arguments or give consideration to whether the Creature might have a soul—spiritual considerations are absent from the novel, save for occasional references to the Creature as an “abomination” and a

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 58-59.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

“demon.”<sup>50</sup> Victor’s motivation for despising his creation seems not to be spiritual/religious guilt but a basic, involuntary feeling of revulsion. A materialist view also underlies Victor’s responses to the deaths of Elizabeth and Henry Clerval: he does not speculate on their existence in an afterlife but instead refers to them as merely corpses, a description he also invokes when referencing his dead mother and William.

All in all, then, Victor’s perspective evinces a distinctively modern sensibility inherent in materialist theories that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; that is, materialism contested the older religious concept of life as essentially spiritual. For Victor, the “soul” does not figure into life and death processes, nor does any divine giver of life. He asserts a theoretical equivalency between life and death as interchangeable aspects of an exclusively material biological cycle.

An anxiety about ontological categories also underlies Mary Shelley’s allusions to slavery.<sup>51</sup> A number of scholars have connected *Frankenstein* to contemporaneous controversies about slavery and abolition, citing passages like the Creature’s declaration that he will not submit to “abject slavery” and Victor’s fear of the subjugation of the human race: “Even if [the Creature and his mate] were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 102.

<sup>51</sup> See John Clement Ball, “Imperial Monstrosities: *Frankenstein*, the West Indies, and V.S. Naipaul,” in *Ariel: A Review of English Literature* 32:3 (July 2001), pp. 23-47; and H.L. Machow, *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror.”<sup>52</sup> In addition to their political resonance, I stress that allusions to slavery reinforce the novel’s larger anxieties about ontological categories. For just as the Creature in *Frankenstein* exists in an indeterminate, contested space between seemingly distinct categories (life/death, human/inhuman), so does the slave, historically speaking. We see this in the political and philosophical debates about slavery during this period, which often focused on the slave’s ontological status—whether he was human or subhuman. The force of Mary Shelley’s adducing slavery/freedom to her novel’s antinomies is clearer if we examine the understudied fact of Matthew Lewis’s visit to Geneva in 1816. An owner of a large estate of plantations in Jamaica (inherited recently from his father), Lewis devoted much of his time to the management of his estate and of its numerous slaves. At the time of his visit to Geneva, Lewis was preoccupied with his Jamaican plantations; in fact, his stay in Geneva occurred between two separate voyages he made to Jamaica to oversee his extensive estates. Consequently, while in Geneva, Lewis frequently discussed with Percy Shelley and Byron the management and treatment of the many Jamaican slaves he owned. Lewis’s opinions on slavery exemplify widespread European attitudes and their contradictions. While opposing the emancipation of the currently enslaved—primarily for economic reasons—Lewis supported the abolition of any trade that would newly enslave Africans. He treated his Jamaican slaves in an exceptionally humanely, assuming their basic inferiority and incapacity for self-sufficiency. Lewis’s journals discuss the “law of provisions,” which permitted the slaves a day to tend their plots of land, and advocating the provision limit to once a week so that the slaves would not gather too much at once and end

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<sup>52</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 107.

up trading for alcohol, which, in turn, would soon send them begging.<sup>53</sup> Lewis's condescension toward the slaves validated (for himself) his authority over them and justifying their enslavement.<sup>54</sup>

While in Geneva, Lewis added to his will a codicil stipulating that his heirs must visit the plantations regularly and must maintain his humanitarian reforms. The codicil was witnessed by Byron, Shelley and Polidori, who apparently were willing to countenance Lewis's continued support of slavery's continuance. By recognizing Lewis's importance, I will complicate the more familiar narrative of *Frankenstein's* origin in ghosts, galvanism and thunderstorms. Lewis's preoccupation with his Jamaican plantations suggests the likelihood that he conversed about slavery with the Shelley circle and that references to slavery in *Frankenstein* are intentional and significant.

Lewis's connection to West Indian slavery also provides deeper insight into the Creature's agreement to a permanent exile in South America in exchange for a wife. By recognizing Lewis's influence, we can see an implicit allusion to the West Indian slave revolts, specifically the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804, the only successful slave rebellion antedating *Frankenstein's* composition.<sup>55</sup> The Haitian Revolution began as a violent uprising against plantations and slaveholders led by the notorious Jamaican-born voodoo priest Dutty Bookman, who was said to have initiated the revolt with a voodoo ceremony that included an

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<sup>53</sup> Mathew Gregory Lewis Esq. M.P., *Journal of a West India Proprietor Kept During a Residence in the Island of Jamaica* (London: A. Spottiswode Printer. 1834), p. 83.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p. 45.

<sup>55</sup> For my explanation of this perspective, see Rebecca Cole Heinowitz, *British Romanticism and Spanish America, 1777-1826: Rewriting Conquest* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

animal sacrifice and the drinking of human blood. According to reports widely circulated in Europe, Bookman controlled his army using voodoo “black magic,” apparently a sort of group hypnosis. Bookman’s army of slaves raided 1800 plantations in seven days, killing over a thousand slaveholders and constituting, for the European public, a deliberate campaign of “pillage, rape, torture, mutilation, and death.”<sup>56</sup> When the Haitian rebellion succeeded in 1804 under Toussaint Louverture (also reported to be a voodoo practitioner), fears abounded in England that its territory in the West Indies—particularly Jamaica—might undergo a similar violent revolution.

One element of the Haitian Revolution little-mentioned by Romanticists was its reliance on the machete as the slaves’ primary weapon. At the time, however, the machete had acquired a horrific mystique in the popular European imagination. Much like today (with its link to genocidal atrocities on the “dark continent” of Africa) the machete carried a whole set of racial connotations. I would argue that the machete’s symbolism of revolutionary atrocity in the Romantic Period, along with the fear specifically inspired by its blade—with its power to slice, maim, and decapitate—makes it a symbolic cousin of the guillotine. That is, while both the guillotine and the machete connected Enlightenment-era revolution, the mechanized, “modern” aspects of the guillotine separated it from the supposed primitiveness of the West Indian slave revolts. Perhaps the machete’s primitive connotations accounts for its popularity in narratives that foreground apocalypse and human savagery; we see this dynamic quite markedly in the popular zombie genre, as I will discuss in a later chapter.

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<sup>56</sup> Jack R. Censer and Lynn Avery Hunt, *Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution* (Pittsburgh: Penn State University Press), p. 124.

The popular-culture connection between revolution and zombies surprisingly is relevant to *Frankenstein*. Those scholars who have noted Mary Shelley's allusions to slavery have missed an important implication of this historical connection. Because Europeans during this period associated the West Indian slave revolts with voodoo magic, I would argue that Shelley's allusion to the Haitian uprisings entail a related notion of voodoo. Of particular significance to me is the term popularly applied to those believed to be controlled by voodoo hypnosis: "zombies." The term zombie originated within the voodoo tradition and still carries this particular connotation among those familiar with voodoo practices. A recent Halloween-inspired article in *The New York Times*, entitled "A Zombie is a Slave Forever," explains the significance of the zombie in voodoo and the way that it came to symbolize the horrors of slavery in the West Indies:

Most people think of them as the walking dead, a being without a soul or someone with no free will. This is true. But the zombie is not an alien enemy who's been [produced] by Hollywood. He is a New World phenomenon that arose from the mixture of old African religious beliefs and the pain of slavery, especially the notoriously merciless and coldblooded slavery of French-run, pre-independence Haiti...Suicide was a frequent recourse of the slaves, who were handy with poisons and powders...And yet, the fear of becoming a zombie might stop them from doing so...To become a zombie was the slave's worst nightmare: to be dead and still a slave, an eternal field hand. It is thought that slave drivers on the plantations, who were usually slaves themselves and sometimes Voodoo priests, used this fear of zombification to keep recalcitrant slaves in order.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Amy Wilentz, "A Zombie is a Slave Forever," *The New York Times* (Oct 30, 2012).



Historically, then, the figure of the zombie functioned symbolically in two distinct ways with respect to slavery: as the article explains, the threat of being rendered a zombie discouraged slaves from suicide and revolution, while simultaneously the popular perception of the Haitian revolutionaries as unconscious voodoo victims endowed them with a powerful, frightening mystique.

As I noted, the Creature shares with the historical figure of the slave an indeterminate, contested position between ontological categories of life/death and human/subhuman. The voodoo zombie also exists indeterminately between these ontological categories. In fact, the zombie's ontological indeterminacy is more pronounced than the slave's, since a zombie—depicted as unconscious, ghoulish, and corpse-like—exists even more uneasily on the slice between ontological categories. Thus, the zombie evokes complementary anxiety to that provoked by guillotine decapitation. Both worries fixate on one component continuing to function after separation. In the case of the zombie, the body continues to function without the brain; whereas, after guillotine decapitation, the brain was thought to function for several minutes apart from the body.

Beyond the issue of ontological status, I would argue that the implicit allusions in *Frankenstein* to slavery and the Haitian Revolution are ultimately significant because they allow us to identify the Creature as a literary ancestor of one of the most popular “monsters” to later emerge in modern cinema—the sci-fi zombie.<sup>58</sup> That is to say, Mary Shelley's association of the Creature with the slave rebellions in Haiti also functions as a link between her futuristic theme of artificial reproduction and the traditional zombie mythology of Haitian voodoo. This conflation—however unconscious and unintentional on the author's part—of

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<sup>58</sup> I analyze modern zombie films later in a later chapter.

the novel's central science-fiction concept with an antiquated voodoo superstition is intriguing in its prescience, inasmuch as it anticipated the way in which twentieth-century sci-fi/horror films would one day re-conceptualize the notion of the zombie—transforming it from the traditional slave-ghoul of voodoo superstition into a modern bio-monster born of scientific hubris.

The figure of the zombie is relevant not only to Mary Shelley's references to slavery in *Frankenstein* but also to her depiction of Victor at certain times in the novel. The increasing lifelessness with which she frequently characterizes him seems oddly reminiscent of the undead zombies of Haitian voodoo and certain modern horror films. As I discussed earlier, it is the Creature who most apparently shares an indeterminate ontological status with the zombies of later literature and film; however, I would argue that it is Victor whom Shelley most often describes in terms evocative of a zombie—as listless, semi-dead, emotionally hollowed-out, and emaciated. And yet at alternate moments in the text, we also frequently perceive Victor on the hyperactive end of the behavioral spectrum. On those occasions where he does not exhibit a lifeless despondency, he conversely seems overcome with an inexplicable mania. I would argue that Victor's mania also supports this zombie-like characterization: rather than indicating physical and mental vigor, Victor's hyperactivity suggests, again, a kind of ontological vacancy, one that is merely camouflaged by his frenetic speech and activity. That is, his frenzied behavior is no more reflective of interior substance/solidity than his periods of listlessness. Elizabeth's murder demonstrates the impotence underlying Victor's mania, for despite his frenzied anxiety on his wedding night, he fails to recognize the Creature's obvious intention to kill Elizabeth—completely abandoning her at the critical moment. In fact, Victor's hyper-vigilant behavior in this scene

constitutes a futile pantomime performance rather than a legitimate defensive effort.

Therefore, like his frequent depressive moods, Victor's manic episodes signify a kind of vacuity and interior emptiness or deficiency at the core of Victor's character.

My point in emphasizing this deficiency is that in a certain sense, such a characterization negates Victor ontologically: that is, his manic-depressive extremes do not suggest a deep, multi-layered psychic interior but rather the opposite. Essentially, his enervation and his mania are two expressions of the same psychic insubstantiality. Moreover, I would argue that the frequent suggestions of Victor's narcissism in *Frankenstein* support this perspective, since psychological theories about narcissism have typically understood it as symptomatic of an absence at the core of the psyche.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, such a characterization gives to Victor an indeterminate ontological status and renders him a kind of zombie figure. His extreme depressive and manic behaviors correspond to the two distinct notions of the zombie prevalent in popular culture—either slow-moving and enervated, or, conversely, frenzied and rabid.<sup>60</sup>

The convergence, via the machete, of guillotine-related anxieties and slavery, foreshadows another convergence with the guillotine of the apparently unrelated matter of obstetrics. Mary Shelley had only recently given birth to her second child, William, prior to

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<sup>59</sup> This perspective is foundational for the modern psychiatric label of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, which understands pathological narcissism as the psyche's response to an insufficiently-developed interior self. See W. Keith Campbell and Joshua Miller, *The Handbook of Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder* (New York: Wiley, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> For instance, George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* renders zombies as numbed and languid, while recent works such as *28 Days Later* and the television show *The Walking Dead* depict rabid zombies with unnaturally accelerated movements.

arriving in Geneva that summer.<sup>61</sup> The presence in Geneva of Claire Clairmont, several months pregnant with Byron's child, reinforced a preoccupation with reproduction. It is a truism of *Frankenstein* scholarship that the novel is deeply engaged with reproductive anxieties, not only the current ones but the longstanding factor of Wollstonecraft's death in childbirth from puerperal fever. Ellen Moers initiated the view that *Frankenstein* should be read as "a birth myth" due to Mary Shelley's "chronic and chaotic experience with motherhood":

Pregnant at sixteen, and almost constantly pregnant throughout the following five years; yet not a secure mother, for she lost most of her babies soon after they were born; and not a lawful mother, for she was not married—not at least when, at the age of eighteen, Mary Godwin began to write *Frankenstein*. So are monsters born.<sup>62</sup>

Treating the novel as a displaced autobiography, Moers reads the monster's birth as a metaphor for distraught young, middle-class woman's anxiety about failed motherhood.<sup>63</sup>

If we look more widely than Mary Shelley's own life, we see that *Frankenstein* was published at a time when traditional attitudes about reproduction were being supplanted by obstetrical theories and practices that originated in France and spread to other European countries.<sup>64</sup> This new "scientific" perspective understood childbirth as a medical condition that required the oversight of male physicians—obstetricians—who gradually replaced

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<sup>61</sup> Her first child had been born prematurely and died in 1815. This was the first of a number of difficult personal losses for Mary Shelley.

<sup>62</sup> Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (1976; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 92.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> See Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2005).

traditional female midwives. Obstetricians asserted that the profession required extensive medical expertise and the use of surgical instruments, such as the recently-invented *curette*, a surgical tool used to remove the uterine lining or its contents by scraping and scooping. *Curettage* remains the second step of the common D&C procedure (dilation and curettage) still performed after miscarriages and abortions. The supplanting of midwifery by obstetrics and its instruments loosely resembled galvanism's goal of generating life artificially through technological intervention. This period also saw a considerable increase in the publication of childbirthing manuals, a trend which scholars such as Alan Bewell largely attribute to the emergence of modern obstetrics.<sup>65</sup> These obstetrics manuals all stress the importance of a knowledge of anatomy and physiology; they also give advice on the symptoms and diagnosis of pregnancy, the disorders peculiar to pregnant women, and various ways to determine the sex of an unborn child. Delivery methods are frequently dealt with in detail, often with plate illustrations of the different kinds of births that a midwife may confront. Some books also comment on the lying-in period and on the diseases of new mothers and their infants. My argument for the surprising metaphoric convergence of obstetrical instruments with the guillotine is strengthened by an understudied feature of Galvani's career: before he conducted his famous electric experiments, he was one of Europe's pioneer obstetricians, serving as the Chair of Obstetrics at the University of Bologna's Institute of Sciences and later as the Institute's president.

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<sup>65</sup> Alan Bewell, "An Issue of Monstrous Desire," *Frankenstein and Obstetrics*. *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 2:1 (Fall 1988), pp. 105-28.

The rise of obstetrics coincided with the emergence of modern permissiveness about birth control and abortion, especially in France.<sup>66</sup> The French Revolution by superceding church law, legalized practices that had previously been forbidden, including birth control, non-procreative sex acts, and pornography. Of course these had all existed before, but they had been legally suppressed. Respectable young girls in France in 1785 were as limited in their knowledge of sex and birth control as their counterparts in Britain. However, in 1796, that had entirely changed. It was now perfectly legal to sell condoms openly and to instruct buyers on how to use them, as well as to inform the public about the rhythm method or about non-procreative sex acts; pulpy novels featuring such subjects also became legal.<sup>67</sup>

While the French proceeded in one direction regarding abortion, the British moved in another, demonstrates R. Sauer: “The view that the fetus was alive from conception gained in popularity.” This sentiment resulted in the 1803 passage of the Ellenborough Act, which prohibited abortion after “quickening”—when a woman first feels fetal movement (16-20 weeks)—and established the death penalty for those convicted (although this penalty was rarely sought in abortion-related prosecutions). In 1837, the government extending the Ellenborough Act by removing the distinction between abortion conducted before and after quickening.<sup>68</sup> Such measures indicate the controversy at the time about the status of the fetus, but then—as today—the British public was hardly uniform in its opinion on the

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<sup>66</sup> See Angus McLaren, *The History of Contraception: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (New York: Blackwell, 1992).

<sup>67</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1996), pp. 65-68.

<sup>68</sup> R. Sauer, “Infanticide and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” in *Population Studies* (April 1955): 85-7.

subject.<sup>69</sup> In fact, a number of historians suggest that abortion (frequently illegal) as well as infanticide occurred far more often in Britain at this time than the political climate of the time suggests. Saur comments further that “many children in the early 1800s were . . . so unwanted as to become victims of infanticide.”<sup>70</sup>

Abortion and infanticide are familiar motifs in *Frankenstein* criticism, resting chiefly on the Creature’s self-description as “the miserable and the abandoned” and “an abortion,” as well as on Victor’s abortion-like destruction of the female Creature.<sup>71</sup> What is significant to me about these allusions is that abortion and infanticide necessarily point to the indeterminate ontological status of the fetus/infant, just as the Creature occupies a contested position on the boundary between human/inhuman, alive/dead. The fact that the Creature presents the same kind of categorical uncertainty as the fetus explains why zombie and vampire films—the modern-day versions of “undead” monsters—usually include a subplot involving abortion/infanticide. Just like the zombie, the vampire, and Frankenstein’s Creature, the fetus exists on the slice within ontological antinomies.

We see this concern even in today’s debates about abortion, which often involve discussions about who possesses the more important ontological status (whose life is more important), the fetus or the mother? I would also note that the unique relationship between mother and fetus/infant—in which the fetus/infant is not totally separate from but in fact is interrelated with and dependent on the mother—offers a unique challenge to the idea of stable ontological categories; in this sense, the fetus and mother exist on their own

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 185.

metaphorical slice somewhere between two seemingly oppositional states (self/other, life/death). Perhaps this indeterminacy is one reason why the figure of the monstrous mother is so popular in gothic literature and film.<sup>72</sup>

### ***Frankenstein's Literary Sibling: John Polidori's The Vampyre***

Another notable Romantic work that grew out of the famous collaborative summer at Lake Geneva was John Polidori's novella *The Vampyre*. Scholarship on *The Vampyre*, the forerunner of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, acknowledges the fact that Polidori's story originated in a story Byron conceived during this summer that both spent with the Shelleys in Geneva. As a corollary to *Frankenstein*—in date and place of origin and in similar thematic preoccupations—*The Vampyre* offers additional insights on the modern anxieties expressed in Mary Shelley's novel.

*The Vampyre* was first published in 1819 in the *New Monthly Magazine* with the false attribution "A Tale by Lord Byron." The name of the work's protagonist, "Lord Ruthven," added to this assumption, for that name was originally used in Lady Caroline Lamb's novel *Glenarvon*, in which a thinly-disguised Byron figure was also named Lord Ruthven. (Also, the fact that Polidori's novel expanded an idea originally expressed by Byron that summer in 1816 also added to the confusion somewhat.) Despite repeated denials by Byron and Polidori, the authorship often went unclarified—a point of irritation for Polidori especially. (A later book publication correctly cited Polidori as the author.) The story was an immediate popular success, partly because of the Byron attribution and partly because it exploited the gothic horror predilections of the public. Polidori transformed the vampire from a character in folklore into the modern aristocratic figure still recognized today.

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<sup>72</sup> Shelley, "Preface to the 1831 Edition," *Frankenstein*.



The original fragment written by Byron that inspired Polidori to write his novella first appeared under the title "A Fragment" in the 1819 collection *Mazeppa: A Poem*. Byron wrote his story in an epistolary form with the narrator recounting the events that had occurred in a letter. The narrator embarks on a journey or "Grand Tour" to the East with an elderly man, Augustus Darvell. During the journey, Darvell becomes physically weaker, "daily more enfeebled."<sup>73</sup> They both arrive at a Turkish cemetery between Smyrna and Ephesus near the columns of Diana. Near death, Darvell reaches a pact with the narrator not to reveal his impending death to anyone. A stork appears in the cemetery with a snake in its mouth. After Darvell dies, the narrator is shocked to see that his face turns black and his body rapidly decomposes: "*I was shocked with the sudden certainty which could not be mistaken — his countenance in a few minutes became nearly black. I should have attributed so rapid a change to poison, had I not been aware that he had no opportunity of receiving it unperceived.*"<sup>74</sup> According to Polidori, Byron intended to have Darvell reappear, alive again, as a vampire, but did not finish the story. Polidori's account of Byron's story indicates it "*depended for interest upon the circumstances of two friends leaving England, and one dying in Greece, the other finding him alive upon his return, and making love to his sister.*"<sup>75</sup> Interestingly, this narrative fear over the seduction of a woman by a vampire indicates that from the beginning, the modern vampire tradition formulated by Byron/Polidori incorporated a distinct set of anxieties about sexuality.

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<sup>73</sup> Chris Baldick, *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), p. 28-29.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, p. 32.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

Building upon Byron's original story fragment, Polidori's novella greatly modified the earlier characterization of vampires in Eastern European folklore, which depicted rabid, grotesque creatures—usually dead peasants. Polidori transformed this unattractive figure of folklore into an intelligent, refined aristocrat who seduces his victims; he also added the notion that vampires were nocturnal and found sunlight poisonous. Significantly, Polidori's narrative emphasizes the indeterminate ontological status of the vampire, just as Mary Shelley's two horror novels feature characters existing outside strict categories of human/inhuman and life/death. Like the Creature, the vampire is “undead” and therefore on the metaphorical slice within such dichotomies.

It is unsurprising that *The Vampyre* is preoccupied with the tension between ontological categories, since its original inspiration in Geneva that famous summer occurred at the same time in which Byron and Polidori were revising Polidori's essay “On the Punishment of Death” in preparation for its publication in a political periodical *The Pamphleteer*. Influenced by the Italian criminologist Beccaria, Polidori's critique of the death penalty was the culmination of a year's study of execution practices in Europe, including guillotine execution.<sup>76</sup> Unlike Percy Shelley's essay against capital punishment—written at nearly the same time—Polidori's essay incorporated medical opinion (as he was a physician) in addition to the ethical considerations typically found in writings of this sort. Beyond his interest in the death penalty, Polidori's research prior to that summer in Geneva had focused on two other intriguing topics: sleepwalking and night terrors. In fact, these were the official subjects of his final thesis in medical school, which had required two years' research and composition. Polidori's interest in sleepwalking shares with his concern over the death

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<sup>76</sup> Canuel, *The Shadow of Death*, p. 72.

penalty a focus on oppositional categories (consciousness vs. unconsciousness, life/death, etc.). It is no surprise, then, that *The Vampyre* frequently expresses an anxiety about an “undead” creature existing on the blurred boundary between antonymic categories. Moreover, Polidori also frequently describes the protagonist in a way suggestive of death (similar to the way Mary Shelley depicts Victor Frankenstein at times): “He was confined to his chamber. There he would often lie for days, incapable of being roused. He had become emaciated, his eyes had attained a glassy lustre.”<sup>77</sup> Such descriptions occur frequently in Polidori’s narrative, indicating that the protagonist—like the vampire—occupies an uneasy status on the slice between life/death. Furthermore, like Victor’s vision of his mother/Elizabeth’s corpse in *Frankenstein*, Polidori’s novel frequently focuses on the horrific materiality of biological processes. In a scene in which the protagonist discovers a dead woman, Polidori writes of her “lifeless corpse” where “upon her neck and breast was blood, and upon her throat were the marks of teeth having opened the vein...”<sup>78</sup> Thus in Polidori’s text, we find a similar anxiety about the material vs. spiritual nature of existence that we find in *Frankenstein*.

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<sup>77</sup> John Polidori, “The Vampyre,” in *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, ed. by Chris Baldick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 35.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

## Chapter Four

### **Modern Apocalypse and Ontological Anxiety in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man***

Like Shelley's earlier novel, her proto-science-fiction novel *The Last Man* expresses anxieties about the tension between ontological categories such as life/death, spirit/matter, mind/body, and nature/technology—or nature/civilization, to put it another way. Such anxieties are often depicted in modern film in the form of apocalyptic narratives, in which civilization disintegrates in response to the threat of human extinction. As apocalypse is a prominent topic in a number of twentieth-century and post-millennium films, I contend that the thematic influence of *The Last Man* has been underestimated and that its evocation of ontological anxieties and apocalyptic themes make it—like *Frankenstein*—a kind of literary ancestor to a number of later science fiction and horror films. For this reason, I argue that *The Last Man* deserves greater critical attention.

Apocalypse was a subject of interest to a number of Romantic painters, most famously John Martin, and Romantic writers, including Byron, whose poem “Darkness” describes the end of the world due to the extinguishment of the sun.<sup>95</sup> The reasons for this theme's emergence is manifold, but a major cause lies in the ontological and existential anxieties suggested by emerging scientific theories and discoveries, nascent during the

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<sup>95</sup> Lord Byron, “Darkness,” in *The Complete Poetical Works*, vol. 3, ed. by Jerome McGann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) pp. 34-35.

Romantic period and continuing into twentieth-century and post-millennium eras.<sup>96</sup> Among the apocalyptic works produced during the Romantic period, *The Last Man* is the most distinctive: while a number of works of catastrophe and apocalypse from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are underwritten by a recognizably Christian teleology, Shelley's novel avoids religious sentiments in favor of a materialist scientific perspective. *The Last Man* is also totally unique for its time in its focus on the literal extinction of a the human species through a decidedly plausible scientific scenario—disease and contagion—rather than the mysterious—almost supernatural—cosmic forces depicted in Byron's poem. Also significant is the emphasis of *The Last Man* on the paradox of human death against the background of nature's larger perpetual processes. Depicting humankind's status as merely an ephemeral part of nature's larger processes, Shelley explores the disconnect between humanity as an important manifestation of nature and humanity as an insignificant, expendable element of the larger world and in this respect, anticipates modern apocalyptic narratives in science fiction and horror cinema.

### **A Modern Apocalyptic Narrative**

Although a number of critics affirm that *The Last Man* is a proto-science fiction novel, no critic has investigated this claim on its merits or devoted any significant attention to the role of science itself within the novel. Instead, critics merely note the work's futuristic setting while at the same time finding fault with its inability or unwillingness to incorporate the technological advancements (gadgetry and such) that typically proliferates in modern science fiction. Yet to dismiss the significance of science in *The Last Man* is to miss the

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<sup>96</sup> In Chapter Four and Five, I discuss the twentieth-century and post-millennium versions of this theme.

importance of Shelley's narrative in the context of the scientific climate in which she lived, an environment in which evolutionary and materialist theories were taking hold and replacing older traditional paradigms in both science and philosophy. It is important to understand the scientific context for Shelley's writing because her novel concerns itself with a number of scientific paradoxes with which the best minds of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries grappled. Moreover, with tremendous advances in the fields of biology, geology, and paleontology, the notion of extinction preoccupied the Romantic imagination and added to the Romantic celebration of the human relationship to nature a contrary fear of nature's dangers and its essential otherness—its divorce from humanity.

There is every reason to assume that Mary Shelley was well educated on scientific debates of her time. The fact that Percy Shelley possessed a deep interest in the sciences suggests that Mary benefited from participating in conversations about such matters, and it is known that his wife shared his interest in the theories of Erasmus Darwin and Georges Buffon.<sup>97</sup> Commonly regarded as a proto-evolutionary thinker, Erasmus Darwin believed that variations acquired by one generation could be passed to the next generation, so that nature would produce higher and more complex organisms over many generations, and he favored a developmental perspective over the old mechanistic theory of the past.<sup>98</sup> The naturalist Georges Buffon supported the idea of a much longer history—75,000 years—for the Earth than the biblical model allowed, accepted the idea of the descent of closely related species from a common ancestor, and promoted the theory of spontaneous generation and a

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<sup>97</sup> Anne Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, and Her Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 90-96.

<sup>98</sup> Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 301. Peter Bowler, *Evolution: The History of an Idea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 86.

general fixity of forms (with, however, the possibility of more superficial change across generations). Buffon did not accept the notion of a divine creator or supernatural design, and his teleological model for Earth opposed the traditional biblical model and also predicted the extinction of life due to a final ice age.<sup>99</sup> From her interactions with Percy and her own personal study, by the time Mary Shelley wrote her first novel, *Frankenstein*, Anne Mellor suggests that she already possessed “an extensive understanding of the science of her day,” which no doubt contributed to her inclusion of scientific ideas in *The Last Man*.

Beyond the theories of Darwin and Buffon, she was also likely familiar with the notions of Georges Cuvier, due to the widespread readership and popularity of his writing, which promoted the notion of the extinction of species from occasional catastrophic events like floods.<sup>100</sup> Shelley was also quite familiar with Thomas Malthus’s dire predictions of eventual overpopulation and famine and his assessment of nature as a realm of crowding and harsh competition for limited resources.<sup>101</sup>

Fiona Stafford describes the profound interest in catastrophe and extinction during the Romantic Period:

The general acceptance of the idea of extinction owed much to the eighteenth-century obsession with natural history...The fear of extinction, no longer associated solely with the Apocalyptic end of mankind but rather with the gradual disappearance of particular human societies and natural species, began to spread rapidly...it was a

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<sup>99</sup> Bowler, *Evolution*, pp. 77-83.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 114-115.

<sup>101</sup> Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (New York: Prometheus, 1999). Fiona Stafford, *The Last of the Race: The Growth of a Myth from Milton to Darwin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 217.

highly significant development: the old theological tradition of fixed species (which asserted that God had created every kind of plant or creature, perfect and immutable, at the beginning of time) was gradually breaking down, and being replaced by the more modern notion that new species could appear, while others vanished forever.<sup>102</sup>

This troubling discordance between comfortable theological notions of life and the frightening evolutionary-materialist perspective appears most frequently in the musings of the *The Last Man's* narrator, Lionel Verney. Faced with the threat of death, Verney seems to engage in an intermittent internal dialogue with himself in which he attempts to comprehend the visible negation of his old theological assumptions to come to terms with the purposelessness and instability of organic nature that he sees everywhere around him.

Initially, Verney reasons that divine Providence will not allow the extinction of humankind to plague:

Yet we were not all to die. No truly, though thinned, the race of man would continue, and the great plague would, in after years, become a matter of history and wonder...Look at [man's] thought-endued countenance, his graceful limbs, his majestic brow, his wondrous mechanism—the type and model of this best work of God is not to be cast aside as a broken vessel—he shall be preserved, and his children and his children's children carry down the name and form of man to latest time.<sup>103</sup>

In the end, however, Verney puts aside such comforting ideas and accepts a more organic perspective, expressing his loss of assurance in humankind's future and a new lack of faith in a divine plan. As the plague ravages the human population, Verney desperately notes:

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<sup>102</sup> Stafford, *Last of the Race*, p. 115.

<sup>103</sup> Mary Shelley, *The Last Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 261.



A painful sense of the degradation of humanity, was introduced into every heart. Nature...shewed us plainly, that, though she permitted us to assign her laws and subdue her apparent powers, yet, if she put forth a finger, we must quake...Did God create man, merely in the end to become dead earth in the midst of healthful vegetating nature? Was he of no more account to his Maker, than a field of corn blighted in the ear...Our name was written 'a little lower than the angels;' and, behold, we were no better than ephemera.<sup>104</sup>

As in the previous passage, when Shelley's novel mentions God, it is usually merely an attempt to reconcile traditional notions of a benevolent universe with the substantial natural evidence to the contrary.

*The Last Man* is also unique among Romantic apocalyptic narratives in anticipating later developments in evolutionary theory. The narrator's predictions of nature's continued evolution and production of new complex, post-human species offers an example. In one passage in the novel, Verney raises the possibility of "the unknown and unimaginable lineaments of the creatures, who would then occupy the vacated dwelling of mankind," and in his recorded self-history, he warns his future readers, the "tender offspring of the re-born world" to beware of the implications of his woeful tale.<sup>105</sup> In essence, Verney looks forward to new post-human species even as he mourns the death of his own. In anticipating a post-human future occupied by an advanced, post-human species, *The Last Man* is a forerunner of later science fiction films.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 232, 398.

<sup>105</sup> Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 290, 437.

## Ontological Anxiety and Existential Despair in *The Last Man*

In a strictly autobiographical sense, *The Last Man*'s preoccupation with death is likely related to the fact that Shelley began writing the novel soon after Percy Shelley's death, a time when she frequently—and painfully—reminisced about their stay at Lake Geneva in the summer of 1816. For instance, in her preface to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, Shelley writes about her tendency to dwell on that period in her life:

I have an affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days, when death and grief were but words, which found no true echo in my heart. Its several pages speak of many a walk, many a drive, and many a conversation, when I was not alone; and my companion was one who, in this world, I shall never see more. But this is for myself; my readers have nothing to do with these associations.<sup>106</sup>

Whereas *Frankenstein* originated during a period “when death and grief were but words,” *The Last Man* seems to be Shelley's attempt at a kind of catharsis of her grief over her husband's—and children's—deaths. Yet despite this contextual difference, both novels share a number of significant ontological anxieties.

One such anxiety in *The Last Man* emerges in passages in which Verney sharply juxtaposes life and death within the same paragraphs. His vivid descriptions of moments of human liveliness in stark contrast to the specter of extinction that hangs over them emphasizes the paradoxical relationship between life and death as a disquieting feature of the human experience. In the following passage, Verney relates a profound sense of the pervasiveness and inevitability of death that sabotages his joy at a group of dancers:

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

The band played . . . its volatile notes gave wings to the feet of the dancers, while the lookers-on unconsciously beat time. At first the tripping measure lifted my spirit [but] the revulsion of thought passed like keen steel to my heart. Ye are all going to die, I thought; already your tomb is built up around you. Awhile, you fancy that you live: but frail is the ‘bower of flesh’ that encaskets life . . . The joyous sound . . . will suddenly feel the axle-tree give way, and spring and steel dissolve in dust. Not one of you, O fated crowd, can escape—not one! Not my own ones! Not my Idris and her babes! Horror and misery! Already the gay dance vanished, the green sward was swarmed with corpses, the blue air above became fetid with deathly exhalations . . . I felt that [my friends and family] were all near, that they were safe, yet methought this was all deceit!<sup>107</sup>

Verney’s explicit juxtaposition of two contrary states of being—his superimposition of the dancing scene with visions of death—crystallizes the disconcerting tension between the two. For while life and death are antithetical states, the certainty of death intrudes on life and gives Verney the feeling that those who are alive (and dance happily) are in a sense already dead. Torn between both perspectives, he finds that he cannot enjoy the dance or the company of his family, for in his mind he sees them as already condemned, nearly ghosts. Such literary “double consciousness” permeates *The Last Man*, much as it does *Frankenstein*.

More than almost any other novel of its time, *The Last Man* incorporates explicit, grotesque depictions of the human body’s infections and decay. I would argue that this unusual explicitness confirms the novel’s investment in the notion of life and death as biological rather than spiritual processes. Thus Mary Shelley moves away from comforting

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<sup>107</sup> Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 278.

biblical, spiritual, and societal interpretations of disease toward materialist assessment infused with nausea and horror. In the following passage, Verney enters the house of a man afflicted with the plague and describes what he finds there:

I soon arrived at the hut: the door was ajar. I entered, and one glance assured me that its former inhabitant was no more—he lay on a heap of straw, cold and stiff; while a pernicious effluvia filled the room, and various stains and marks served to show the virulence of the disorder. I had never before beheld one killed by pestilence. While every mind was full of dismay at its effects, a craving for excitement had led us to peruse De Foe’s account, and the masterly delineations of Arthur Mervyn. The pictures drawn in these books were so vivid, that we seemed to have experienced the results depicted by them. But cold were the sensations excited by words . . . . compared to what I felt in looking on the corpse of this unhappy stranger . . . . I raised his rigid limbs, I marked the distortion of his face, and the stony eyes lost to perception . . . . As I was thus occupied, chilled horror congealed my blood . . . . Half insantly I spoke to the dead. So the plague killed you, I muttered. Was the coming painful? You look as if the enemy had tortured you, before he murdered you.<sup>108</sup>

In relating the scent of the “pernicious effluvia” and the image of certain disgusting “stains and marks,” Mary Shelley provides for the reader an exceptionally vivid encounter with the horror of a natural process stripped of all comforting religious justifications or spiritual dimensions. I would also call attention to the passage in which Verney describes the corpse’s “rigid” limbs and “distorted,” “cold” facial expression. Such terms evoke a sense of dead matter, without a spiritual dimension. The expressions she uses in this passage and others

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p. 263.

reinforce a materialist perspective of life. The grotesque terminology employed in passages such as this irritated a number of contemporary critics, likely because of the disturbing implications they suggested.

In an autobiographical sense, it is likely that *The Last Man's* focus on the grotesque, material aspect of life/death was also inspired in part by certain revolting aspects of Percy Shelley's death and cremation in 1822. Edward Trelawny, one of those who recovered Shelley's body from the wreckage and witnessed its cremation, later published the following description:

[Shelley's] body was soon uncovered. Lime had been strewn on it; this, or decomposition, had the effect of staining it of a dark and ghastly indigo colour. Byron asked me to preserve the skull for him; but remembering that he had formerly used one as a drinking-cup, I was determined Shelley's should not be so profaned. The limbs did not separate from the trunk, as in the case of [Edward] Williams's body, so that the corpse was removed entire into the furnace . . . The heat from the sun and fire was so intense that the atmosphere was tremulous and wavy. The corpse fell open and the heart was laid bare. The frontal bone of the skull, where it had been struck with the mattock, fell off; and, as the back of the head rested on the red-hot bottom bars of the furnace, the brains literally seethed, bubbled, and boiled as in a cauldron, for a very long time . . . The fire was so fierce as to produce a white heat on the iron, and to reduce its contents to grey ashes. The only portions that were not consumed were

some fragments of bones, the jaw, and the skull, but what surprised us all was that the heart remained entire.<sup>109</sup>

What is interesting about this passage is the grotesque details provided about the decay and degeneration of Shelley's body. Trelawny's references to the body's disintegration at sea during cremation provide a grim image of the material, corruptible aspect of biological life. (See Figure 5 for an artistic rendering of Shelley's cremation.)

It is important to note that Mary Shelley did not witness the events Trelawny describes, as she was absent from the cremation. I would also add that Trelawny's account is notoriously suspect in the view of Shelley scholars, since he sought to advance his own public notoriety through its publication.<sup>110</sup> However, even accounting for Trelawny's exaggerations, Shelley's death at sea and his cremation were traumatic experiences for his wife—a vivid reminder of the corruptible, material nature of human existence—and almost certainly the grotesque biological reality that underlies life and death.

### **Apocalypse as Narrative Rupture: The Slice in *The Last Man***

The notion of apocalypse also functions in *The Last Man* as a prominent narrative rupture that occurs fairly late in the novel and destabilizes ontological categories of life/death, mind/body, spirit/matter, and biology/technology. I use the term narrative rupture to denote an abrupt change in a narrative that in some way unsettles the established plot, tone, and/or genre. As I will explain, such a rupture results from the tensions between

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<sup>109</sup> Edward Trelawny, *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron* (1858; rpt. DaCapo Press, 2000).

<sup>110</sup> See Emily Sunstein, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 297, 390.

theoretical categories symbolized by the slice, disrupting the ways in which ontological binaries function in the larger narrative structure. Narrative ruptures occur in *The Last Man* in the form of discordant plot elements intruding violently into a larger narrative structure. Some critics view them as evidence of an authorial deficiency, an inattention to required generic conventions or an inability to sustain a plotline to an appropriate conclusion. One sees such disapproval in criticism of *The Last Man* that locates its “failure” in Shelley’s abandonment of the novel’s earlier *Bildungsroman* and romance genres in favor of a disaster-horror narrative. Whereas the first half of *The Last Man* methodically charts the course of its protagonist’s positive development from youth to adulthood and carefully develops two romantic subplots at the center of the novel, the new apocalyptic plague narrative quickly drops the prior narrative concerns as it narrows obsessively toward a single horrifying theme—the grotesque extinction of humankind by plague. This discordant shift in tone, genre, and theme proves to be the primary stumbling block for many of the novel’s critics.

Such a critique fails to understand that the narrative rupture is itself significant. *The Last Man* suggests that the threat of disturbance and negation always hides beneath supposedly stable symbolic orders. If, as I have earlier suggested, Shelley’s apocalyptic narrative is preoccupied with the ways in which certain existential states are demarcated and categorized—that is, the ways in which they are symbolically ordered—the rupture of the novel’s plot with the introduction of the plague is an intentional depiction of the disruptive potential that threatens established symbolic orderings.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Such an interpretation of the novel makes sense from a structuralist perspective. Basic theoretical understandings of the relationship between signified and signifier acknowledge the inherent gap

The sudden outbreak of the plague disrupts this symbolic order, insomuch as death intrudes into and negates the narrative's earlier structure founded upon themes of life, growth, and reproduction. This disruption explains why the protagonist becomes acutely aware of the instability of existential categories after the plague emerges. Lionel Verney's frequent, obsessive ruminations on the intrusion of death into life and his chronic cognitive dissonance indicate the thoroughness of the plague's disruption of the earlier developmental plot structure and symbolic ordering of life/death as distinct categories.

*The Last Man's* apocalyptic storyline also negates the earlier idealism of the novel's protagonists and their idealistic pursuits that structure the narrative. Before the plague, Verney (modeled after Percy Shelley) evinces profoundly utopian notions about social progress, and the Byronic Lord Raymond is consumed with exaggerated desires for romance and heroism. Yet the sudden intrusion of the plague destroys these motivations. (Significantly, the plague's onset coincides with Raymond's death, for both events cancel the protagonists' idealistic pursuits.) Moreover, the plague inverts the established trajectory for the Verney character: the former leader of human civilization ultimately becomes the witness of its annihilation. The novel's conclusion also inverts Verney's transition from nature to civilization that occurs earlier in the narrative: his abandonment of his early uncultivated life

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between a thing-concept and the name-classification assigned to it. And certain schools of psychoanalytic thought point to the unruly remainder that is foreclosed outside of any symbolic order—whether language, systems, laws, theories, or narratives. Jacques Lacan described that element which is foreclosed (or excluded or repressed) by the symbolic order as a kind of remainder, which he names “the Real.” He uses this term because it implies an un-reality in the symbolic order; that is, no symbolic order is fully accurate because it always misses something. For example, a name fails to convey the totality of that which it names, a law is unable to account for every nuance of actual social conditions, and a narrative cannot provide the entire essence of an experience or idea. This “lack” or gap in the symbolic order is the Real.<sup>111</sup> The Real remains dormant until the moment at which it suddenly, violently erupts; when it erupts, it negates the established symbolic order. The Real is by nature unpredictable, destructive, and irrational, and it represents a sort of Freudian *return of the repressed*. If we consider the sudden emergence of the plague in *The Last Man* as the return of what is elided in the novel's initial narrative, then I would argue that it functions narratively as the Real.



in the wild for a place in enlightened society is reversed in the end to a lonely, primitive existence as the sole survivor of the end of civilization.

### **Mary Shelley's Non-Organicism: An Alternative View of Romanticism**

The ruptures and dichotomies we find in works such as *The Last Man* and *Frankenstein* indicate a distinctive asyndeton—or juxtaposition without conjunction. I would argue that the common use of this type of asyndeton in Romantic texts is significant because it contradicts the standard scholarly understanding of Romantic literature as fundamentally organic. A number of scholars have asserted that continuity and symbiosis is the underlying structural form in Romantic literature, in which the parts of a work join seamlessly and “organically” to comprise a whole.<sup>112</sup> And yet, I would argue that the stark dichotomies, ruptures, and asyndetons found in *Frankenstein*, *The Last Man*, and many other Romantic texts defy such an assumption, forcing us to re-evaluate notions of Romanticism as inherently organic.

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<sup>112</sup> For more on the standard view of Romantic organicism, see Robert Gleckner's discussion of Rene Wellek and A.O. Lovejoy in *Romanticism: Points of View* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975), pp. 236-240.

## Chapter Five

### **Mary Shelley's Legacy in the Twentieth Century: An Analysis of Correlative Themes in Popular Cinema**

Mary Shelley's overt influence on modern cinema started with James Whale's 1931 adaptation of *Frankenstein*, one of the American Film Institute's hundred most influential movies of the twentieth century; its most famous line, "It's alive! It's alive!" ranks among the most famous quotations in cinema.<sup>113</sup> Whale's film inspired numerous imitators, both directly—in the many sequels and remakes of *Frankenstein*—and indirectly—in shared motifs employed by films outside the *Frankenstein* sub-genre.

The first remake of the 1931 film was *Bride of Frankenstein*, released in 1935. The next sequel, 1939's *Son of Frankenstein*, was made, like all films that followed, without Whale. Several years later, *Ghost of Frankenstein*, was released; the fifth installment, *Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman*, was released in 1943 and was soon followed by *House of Frankenstein* in 1944. This trend continued for many years in the form of additional remakes and sequels, each one usually more outlandish than the last. Later Mel Brooks's comedy *Young Frankenstein* parodied elements of the first three Frankenstein movies.

In Whale's film, Heinrich "Henry" Frankenstein, an ardent young scientist, and his devoted assistant Fritz, a hunchback, piece together a human body, the parts of which have been secretly collected from various sources. Frankenstein's consuming desire is to create

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<sup>113</sup> James Whale, *Frankenstein* (1931: Los Angeles: Universal Studios), DVD: Universal Studios, 1991.

human life through various electrical devices which he has perfected. Elizabeth and Dr. Waldman, intent on rescuing Frankenstein, arrive just as Henry is making his final test. They all watch Frankenstein and the hunchback as they raise the dead creature on an operating table, high into the room, toward an opening at the top of the laboratory. Then, after a crash of thunder, the hands of Frankenstein's monster (the famous Boris Karloff) begin to move. This causes Frankenstein to shout, "It's alive!" The monster soon escapes from Frankenstein only to be persecuted by those villagers he encounters along the way.

Whale's original film begins with Edward Van Sloan stepping from behind a curtain and delivering a brief caution and also a tease:

Hello. Mr. Carl Lammele has asked me to give you just a friendly word of warning. We are about to unfold the story of Frankenstein, a man of science who sought to create a man after his own image without reckoning on God. It is one of the strangest tales ever told. It deals with two great mysteries of creation; life and death. I think it will thrill you. It may shock you. It might even horrify you. So, if any of you feel that you do not care to subject your nerves to such a strain, now's your chance to uh, well—we warned you!!

This opening monologue foregrounds the film's themes—a fear of technological innovation, anxieties about human identity, and the relationship between life and death. In fact, this monologue juxtaposes life and death beside each other in the same sentence, indicating an awareness of the kinds of ontological tensions functioning within Shelley's narrative. While Shelley scholarship has almost entirely focused on only the films explicitly inspired by Frankenstein—starting with James Whale's version and continuing through numerous remakes, sequels, and adaptations of the novel—I will avoid retreading this ground,

examining instead films not explicitly linked to Shelley's novels yet recognizably symptomatic of the same themes explored in her classic narrative.<sup>114</sup>

### **Ontological Anxiety and the Frankenstein “Mad Science” Narrative Re-Imagined in *The Fly***

One of the most successful “mad-scientist” films to follow Whale's Frankenstein was a 1958 horror B-movie directed by Kurt Neumann entitled *The Fly*, which starred Vincent Price as an ambitious scientist who develops a machine capable of instantaneously transporting a person from one location to another via the rapid molecular breakdown and reassembly of the body.<sup>115</sup> Price's character finds himself fused with a fly when he inadvertently allows a fly into the device, transporting both the insect and himself into a single chamber. The computer instantly combines the two lifeforms into a single monstrous organism.

*The Fly* clearly borrows from Mary Shelley's narrative. Like *Frankenstein*, *The Fly* focuses on an eccentric scientist in pursuit of ethically questionable scientific achievement. In the course of his experiments, he produces a monster; interestingly, *The Fly* fuses creature and creator into one person, complicating the ontological questions raised in *Frankenstein*. Another important thematic correlation between the two works is their emphasis on the grotesque material aspect of life. In fact, the horror of the film's concept lies in its combining of a human with an insect—one of the most repulsive and primitive of nature's creatures.

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<sup>114</sup> For an overview of scholarship on Whale's *Frankenstein*, see James Curtis, *James Whale: A New World of Gods and Monsters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 7-14.

<sup>115</sup> Kurt Neumann, *The Fly* (1958: Los Angeles: MGM), DVD: Warner Brothers, 1992.

Modern audiences today find *The Fly* to be a humorous example of 1950s sci-fi/horror. However, a 1986 remake also title *The Fly* and directed by David Cronenberg transforms the amusing 1950s premise into a grotesque bio-horror narrative, one that exploits modern anxieties about disease and mortality along with fears about gene splicing and technological advancements.<sup>116</sup> Cronenberg's version depicts, with great emphasis on abjection, the gradual transformation of a scientist, Seth Brundle, into a 185-pound fly, which he cynically names Brundlefly. As in the original film, the fusion of man and fly at the molecular level results from a botched transporter experiment, in which Brundle unknowingly transports himself and the fly simultaneously, forcing the computer to fuse them at the molecular level. After transportation, Brundle emerges from the pod, unaware that the computer has spliced his DNA with that of the fly. Over a period of weeks, he gradually metamorphoses into a fly.

Critics interpret Cronenberg's film as concerned primarily with monstrosity.<sup>117</sup> Cronenberg's films tend to upset ontological distinctions, featuring disturbing depictions of the human body in various states of mutation, decay, and/or disease. For this reason, his films are often categorized as bio-horror, a genre that I have shown began with *Frankenstein* and continued with *The Last Man*. Cronenberg's focus on the body is oriented toward arousing discomfort and disgust in the audience, as well as a greater appreciation for the biological foundation underlying supposedly civilized society. In Adam Smith's 2003 documentary *The American Nightmare*, Cronenberg explains his reasoning:

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<sup>116</sup> David Cronenberg, *The Fly* (1986: Los Angeles: Paramount Studios), DVD: Paramount Studios, 1993.

<sup>117</sup> See an overview of scholarly opinions in Ben Hervey, *Film Classics: The Fly* (New York: Palgrave, 2008).

You don't get society without the body, and you don't get body without society. I guess I insist on returning to the body, because I feel that so much of human culture is an attempt to flee the body. That we do not want to be disembodied. To not acknowledge it. To not deal with it. Really to not place it at the center of our reality. But I think that it is.<sup>118</sup>

Cronenberg's films thus each highlight a particular aspect of the animal or biological body: that under certain conditions, often those of illness, the biological body is repositioned as problematic and threatening. As Cronenberg says, "Humans are bodies, and our failure to acknowledge that is often our fatal flaw."<sup>119</sup> Cronenberg's films also critique those who only acknowledge the body by celebrating it—depicting the way in which in a bodily breakdown, the joy of embracing the body is replaced by pain, uncertainty, and incapacity. It is these unusual conditions of embodiment in which Cronenberg is interested.

Many have taken his version of *The Fly* to be a commentary on the AIDS epidemic, which attracted much attention in the 1980s. However, the symptoms depicted might also represent cancer: Brundle's disease is the result of a genetic mutation, and there are several references to cancer in the film. For instance, when Brundle tells his love about his illness, he says, "I think it's showing itself as a bizarre form of cancer, a general cellular cancer." (I would suggest that *The Fly* is one of the most complete cinematic portrayals of a cancerous process, from mutation to death, in all its tragic horror.) In either case, the film can be read as a phenomenological study of illness, depicting in minute detail the changes illness brings

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<sup>118</sup> Adam Simon, *The American Nightmare* (2000: New York: IFC), DVD: Warner Brothers, 2003.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

about. Cinema is a powerful tool for portraying illness as a multidimensional process. (This transformation, so perfectly captured by cinematic language, is entirely overlooked in other representational forms depicting illness, most notably in medical vocabulary.)

What is at stake in the case of illness? Maurice Merleau-Ponty cites instances of bodily disorder to uncover the ambiguity of the “body as lived” (consciousness) and the “body as biological.”<sup>120</sup> The natural ease of everyday physical life often elides this ontological split. By turning to pathological cases, Merleau-Ponty illustrates the tension between the two (mind vs. body). Along these lines, Cronenberg depicts Brundle’s biological body rapidly changing and hence splitting from his lived experience. His familiar, lived body afforded him a familiar set of capacities, but these are now replaced by uncanny capacities and—worse—incapacities. What we see in the film is Brundle’s habitual body peeled away from its biological “body at this moment,” and how he copes with the new challenges presented by his transformation.<sup>121</sup> This is the alienation and sense of being not at home in one’s own body and exposes the tension between ontological categories.

In depicting Brundle’s physical degeneration in *The Fly*, Cronenberg features excessive gore to render the film grotesque. Brundle is a tidy scientist, but his transformation makes him physically repulsive—he vomits digestive acid on himself, his face is blotchy, pieces of his body fall off, his hands—the emblem of humanity—are replaced by insect legs, and so on. When he first begins to change, his lover Roni confronts him by noting, “You’re changing, Seth. Everything about you is changing. You look bad. You smell bad.”<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Lived-In Body,” in *Existentialism: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Solomon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 261-265.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

Cronenberg uses visual effects to maximum effect: one of Brundle's ears falls off, he repeatedly vomits on his food, and he develops wings from within his abdomen. Finally his skin splits open and he sheds, the full insect form appearing. What is compelling about these changes is that they are ontologically destabilizing.

The betrayal of the flesh, the frailty of the body, the ephemeral nature of health and youth are invoked in the horror scenes in the form of a kind of promise—that decay and degeneration are the fate of all human bodies. This emphasis on grotesque biology and physical decay reinforces a materialist perspective of life and echoes the themes expressed in *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*. And like those novels, Cronenberg's film also avoids religion in favor of a determinist understanding of consciousness, dismissing the possibility of a soul and instead locating identity or "mind" solely in the physical brain. Just as the Creature's identity in *Frankenstein* is determined by his physical components, in *The Fly* Brundle's personality is determined by biology. For example, midway through his metamorphosis, he warns Roni that he is acquiring an insect's psychological nature. The following excerpt expresses this determinist notion:

Brundle: You need to leave here and never come back.

Roni: Why?

Brundle: Have you ever heard of insect politics?

Roni: [stares blankly]

Brundle: Neither have I. Insects don't have politics. The insect is brutal.

Roni: I don't know what you're saying.

Brundle: I'm saying...I'll hurt you if you stay.



This dialogue emphasizes biology and supports the view of identity as determined by the physical body rather than a psyche or mind separate from the body. Despite watching the horror of Brundle's transformation, the viewer cannot walk away from it and is instead locked into the camera, which depicts Brundle in his most intimate moments. In an early scene, the film depicts Brundle in his bathroom, removing his fingernails as fluid oozes out of his fingers. Startled, he asks in horror, "Am I dying? Is this how it starts?" This scene in the most intimate of rooms, the bathroom, violates our usual sense that bathroom activities should not be witnessed by anyone. The viewer is there with Brundle as a forced spectator. This violation of bathroom policy continues when Brundle loses his teeth, which he places in a bathroom cabinet along with other "relics" of his former body. The viewer is there, too, forced to witness Brundle's physical decay in an almost claustrophobic experience. The viewer thus vicariously shares the sensation of being unable to escape one's own pain and predicament—the central feature of illness. Whereas the others can choose whether to stay or leave, the ill person is trapped within the body and locked into a process of degeneration. Cronenberg himself said the film is about aging and death, about the universal process of growing old and dysfunctional.<sup>123</sup> It is the inevitability of illness and decay that is the source of the horror.

Another interesting theme in *The Fly* is its focus on the tension between the ontological categories of health vs. illness. Normally the two states—health and illness, or human and monster—are posited as mutually exclusive. Instead of accepting the dichotomy, Cronenberg seems to problematize it, showing that ultimately we all have "the disease of

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

being finite.”<sup>124</sup> The film initially dupes the viewer into accepting the human/monster and healthy/diseased dichotomies, then reveals their illusoriness. If change is the condition of organic life, the film’s general conclusion is that no one is exempt from processes of illness, aging, and ultimately dying: disintegration and decay are the inevitable endpoint of human trajectory. For this reason, the dichotomy between healthy and diseased, which seems so prominent in the film, is a false distinction. One is only temporarily healthy, and the difference between health and illness is only one of degree. Thus Brundle’s transformation, superficially a unique and monstrous one, is in fact only an instance of universal organic change. As Cronenberg says, “We are used to our bodies changing. First we grow up, then we grow down. There’s only a moment where there are a few years of an illusion of stability. It doesn’t last long.”<sup>125</sup> We all metamorphose, only at a slower rate.

The gradual transformation of a normal human body takes place over many decades and is therefore experienced as unthreatening, but the changes experienced by Brundle are sudden and therefore extraordinary. Late into his transformation, Brundle remarks, “Every time I look in the mirror there’s someone different, someone hideous, someone repulsive.” In *The Arist as Monster*, William Beard argues that *The Fly* explores human identity and the factors that threaten it. Mutation, disease, and abjection are subjected to an intense examination, focusing on the question: what constitutes a human subject and what constitutes a monster? This investigation, says Beard, requires a fully realized subject to be erased. This subjectivity must first be established so we can fully appreciate the loss. The film’s project is to observe the utter destruction of the human subject by forces of inconceivable otherness. I

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

would add that the film questions and problematizes the notion of the human in relation to the animal. As Brundle becomes more fly-like, he loses his human features and there some of his human subjectivity.

One striking similarity between Cronenberg's film and *Frankenstein* is their shared emphasis on reproductive anxiety. In *The Fly*, Brundle's girlfriend Roni becomes pregnant (prior to the apparent stages of Brundle's metamorphosis), and, fearing that the fetus might be infected with his disease, seeks an abortion. In Chapter Two, I discussed the significance of the fetus as occupying the same contested position as the Creature (neither fully alive nor dead). In *The Fly*, the inclusion of pregnancy and abortion indicates the film's similar interest in indeterminate ontological categories. Additionally, like *Frankenstein*, *The Fly* expresses an anxiety about modern technology's intrusion into biological processes (technology/nature). Brundle's invention and its consequences suggest scientific fields such as genetic engineering and gene splicing. Opponents of such research fear that "monsters" might result, and Cronenberg's film depicts just such an outcome, especially toward the end of the film: searching for a cure for his malady, Brundle consults the computer, which tells him that in order to counteract his metamorphosis into an insect, he must fuse his genes with those of another human. He therefore wishes to fuse himself with his pregnant girlfriend Roni in order to make what he mockingly calls, "the perfect family." At the last minute, Roni's ex-boyfriend arrives to rescue her—shooting the cable that connects Roni's teleportation pod to the computer. The computer then fuses Brundle with part of the telepod itself, creating a monstrous fusion of man, fly, and metal—human, insect, and inanimate object. This new monster slowly crawls out of the pod, metal pieces and cables trailing

behind it, only to be shot in the final scene. The film's cynical conclusion can be read as a warning about the monstrosities produced by modern science.

### **Identity, Infection, and Apocalypse in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers***

*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is a 1956 American science fiction film directed by Don Siegel and adapted from a 1954 novel by Jack Finney entitled simply *The Body Snatchers*. The story depicts an extraterrestrial invasion in a small California town. The invaders replace human beings with duplicates that appear identical but are devoid of any emotion or individuality. A local doctor uncovers what is happening and tries to stop them. The film has been remade twice, in 1978 by Daniel Kaufman and in 1999 by Olivier Hierspiel.

“Body-snatching” has long been restricted to the meaning of a secret exhumation of bodies from a grave or a tomb for the purpose of dissection or anatomical study. Body-snatching is distinct from grave robbery because body-snatchers leave anything of value behind, aside from the corpse itself. This film updates the term to designate stealing the victim's body while he or she is still alive. The novel's original title *The Body Snatchers* has been changed in recent editions to *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, likely to ally it with the 1956 and 1978 films; however, this change obfuscates a reading of the title that draws a comparison between the pod people of the story and those—like Victor Frankenstein—who steal corpses from the ground.

“Pod people,” as seen in the various versions, are the emotionless walking dead. This lack of emotion offers benefits (such as an end to violence) but creates an ontological emptiness that renders the aliens seemingly devoid of subjectivity. Note the emotional

vacancy referenced in this quotation from one of the pod people in the 1956 version: “Your new bodies are growing in there. They're taking you over cell for cell, atom for atom. There is no pain. Suddenly, while you're asleep, they'll absorb your minds, your memories and you're reborn into an untroubled world...Tomorrow you'll be one of us...There's no need for love...Love. Desire. Ambition. Faith. Without them, life is so simple, believe me.” And in another scene from the same film, we see a reference to the death of the soul and the description of empty, shell-like bodies:

A moment's sleep, and the girl I loved was an inhuman enemy bent on my destruction. That moment's sleep was death to Becky's soul, just as it had been for Jack and Teddy and Dan Kauffman and all the rest. Their bodies were now hosts harboring an alien form of life; a cosmic form, which to survive must take over every human man!

I would suggest that the film's stress on the soul and on empty bodies points to an anxiety about identity and whether it is composed of spirit or merely body (matter/spirit), as well as an anxiety about the relationship between the mind and the body (mind/body).

The final shots of Kaufman's 1978 film emphasize these ontological themes about identity and the nature of consciousness. The protagonist Matthew appears as though none of the events in the film have happened. The audience presumes that he is performing, going through his daily motions, in order to avoid discovery by the pod people around him. In his workplace, his lab-coated coworkers appear emotionless. They operate machinery, but then again, it appears that the machinery operates them. One close-up shows a character slowly rotating her head toward a bubbling vase, reaching for a dial, turning it, and watching as a motor inside the vase spins down. Everything moves in an expected, robotic way, as though

the world were highly orderly. The lab workers do not resemble each other physically, but their expressions and gestures are uniform. When they walk out of the building later in the scene, there is a sequence of shots that depicts them walking home mechanically.

The film concludes with an iconic image of Matthew standing before the capitol building in San Francisco, where the film is set. The colors are cold and muted, unlike the hyper-saturated color we see elsewhere in the film. He is approached by another character named Nancy—one of the few surviving humans to remain undetected—looking markedly different from earlier scenes, a businesswoman in white with her hair bound in tight coils. Now she is dressed in a red bohemian outfit with her hair loose, as though she has recently come alive. Nancy's liveliness is incongruous with the scene surrounding her—incongruous with the patchy grass, the dead trees, and the grey pavement—suggesting that anything resembling life has withdrawn from the world. As Nancy approaches Matthew, the smile on her face morphs into an expression of panic. With very little movement, Matthew raises his arm, points at her, tilts his head back, and widens his mouth in a silent scream, given voice by a shrill dubbed scream on the soundtrack. Matthew's scream is the most disturbing gesture that occurs in the various *Body Snatchers* films. The film ends with a freeze-frame on Matthew's face that zooms in quickly upon his mouth, which is essentially a hollow, frightening maw. The camera zooms entirely inside his mouth, and the audience, in a dark theater, is presented with an image of vacancy and ontological negation as the credits begin to roll.

Oliver Hierspiel's 1999 version *Invasion* also emphasizes this sense of psychological vacancy, but in a different way. There is a brief but significant shot of the protagonist Carol approaching an escalator. She walks methodically, her posture stiff, and her face

expressionless. With a fixed gaze, she rides the escalator, and the escalator lends the scene a sense of monotony in motion and of a mechanized lifelessness.

Hierspiel's film also depicts anxieties about the nature of human identity in its focus on human violence and the question of human animality. The film's characters debate this ontological question:

Yorish: I say that civilization is an illusion, a game of pretend. What is real is the fact that we are still animals, driven by primal instincts. As a psychiatrist, you must know this to be true.

Carol: To be honest, ambassador, when someone starts talking to me about the truth, what I hear is what they're telling me about themselves more than what they're saying about the world.

Dr. Henryk Belicec: Quite right, well done, doctor.

Yorish: Perhaps this is true, perhaps being a Russian in this country is a kind of pathology. So what do you think, can you help me? Can you give me a pill? To make me see the world the way you Americans see the world. Can a pill help me understand Iraq, or Dafur, or even New Orleans? All I am saying is that civilization crumbles whenever we need it most. In the right situation, we are all capable of the most terrible crimes. To imagine a world where this was not so, where every crisis did not result in new atrocities, where every newspaper is not full of war and violence. Well, this is to imagine a world where human beings cease to be human.

Carol: While I'll give you that we still retain some basic animal instincts, you have to admit we're not the same animal we were a few thousand years ago.

Yorish: True.

This debate not only explores the question of human identity (human/inhuman) but also implies (with Yorish's reference to pharmaceuticals) that the psyche is simply a material mechanism governed by biology.

If the *Body Snatchers* films explore ontological anxieties reminiscent of Frankenstein, their depiction of worldwide apocalypse, the threat of human extinction, and a final uninfected human all connect them thematically with *The Last Man*. In addition, the *Body Snatchers* films depict the "invasion" as an infection that spreads as an epidemic, recalling the plague in Shelley's narrative. The following quote from the 1956 version exemplifies this motif:

Less than a month ago, Santa Mira was like any other town. People with nothing but problems. Then, out of the sky came a solution. Seeds drifting through space for years took root in a farmer's field. From the seeds came pods which had the power to reproduce themselves in the exact likeness of any form of life . . . Maybe they're the result of some weird alien organism—a virus of some kind.

This emphasis on virality and infection is also highlighted in Hierspiel's film, in which the pod people infiltrate society by initiating a worldwide inoculation program that serves to transmit the alien disease.

### **Epidemic and Apocalypse in *Night of the Living Dead***

Shot in black-and-white over seven months on a shoestring budget, George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* defined the modern horror movie and influenced a number of horror



directors.<sup>126</sup> The *The Fly* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, it explores many of the themes with which *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* are concerned. The film's plot is simple: Barbara and her brother Johnny are attacked when visiting their father's grave, Johnny is killed by a zombie. Fleeing her attacker, Barbara flees to a nearby farmhouse and joins others who attempt to survive a zombie siege. The film ends with the deaths of all in the house.

Depicting the zombie apocalypse as the result of a biological infection, the film offers a B-movie scientific explanation of the zombie outbreak's origin: radiation from outer space. Romero thus evokes contemporary fears about nuclear warfare common at the time (given that the Cuban Missile Crisis was a fairly recent memory). The wretched condition of Romero's zombies resounds with popular fantasies about the aftermath of a nuclear attack on America—a widespread anxiety underpinning American post-war cinema, also evident in Franklin Schaffner's *Planet of the Apes*. Romero's film also evokes the religious doomsday embraced by fundamentalist Christians who believe in the eventual resurrection of the dead.

However, Romero does not posit anxiety about nuclear technology as the only correct interpretation of the apocalypse; instead, he prefers to let the audience determine the meaning of his metaphor. Horror films are to borrow a term from the novelist Umberto Eco, "open works," texts that allow a high degree of interpretive ambiguity.<sup>127</sup> Eco argues that such texts best suit our own time because they reflect the sense of disorder and discontinuity that vexes the modern world. In every era, the *Night of the Living Dead* audience attaches its own meanings to the zombies. Romero allows his metaphor to work subtly yet powerfully at the

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<sup>126</sup> George Romero, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968: Los Angeles: MGM Studios), DVD: MGM Studios, 1991.

<sup>127</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

heart of his film; his primary interest is not in providing a detailed explanation of the disaster so much as in analyzing the human response to it.

*Night of the Living Dead* is a film about apocalypse, a topic which has enjoyed a surge in popularity since the 1950s. The cultural critic Slavoj Žižek observes that Americans have a deep psychological attachment to images of catastrophe, which he attributes to fear of radical social change and a desire to preserve the status quo.<sup>128</sup> While many mainstream American films concern some kind of catastrophe, however, *Night of the Living Dead* does not offer the optimistic narrative closure expected of the Hollywood disaster movie. Instead, Romero presents a tragedy in which the hero dies. Moreover, the tragic vision has a distinctly political coloring.

Whereas Žižek's theories about catastrophe grow out of his analysis of American responses to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, *Night of the Living Dead* must be understood in relation to the impact of the Vietnam War on American consciousness in the 1960s. In the opening shot of Johnny and Barbara's car entering the graveyard, we see a fluttering American flag in the foreground. The symbolism of the flag becomes clear as the film progresses. However, by the late 1960s, such patriotic hegemony had been significantly contested and undermined. Romero's film emerged at a time of strong public disapproval of American military involvement in Vietnam, during which criticisms of patriotism occurred frequently. Popular culture scholar John Fiske writes, "It is not violence per se that characterizes popular culture, but only that violence whose structure makes it into a metaphor for the distribution of power in society."<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Psychoanalysis and Popular Culture* (New York: Verso Press, 2010).

<sup>129</sup> John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 123.

Like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Night of the Living Dead* problematizes what it means to be a human being and dramatizes the terror of alienation. The film's power to unsettle its audience also derives from its focus on the taboo subject of cannibalism (which it depicts far more graphically than previous zombie films.) In the eighteenth century, the British media circulated reports of French cannibalism by revolutionary crowds. *Night of the Living Dead* similarly uses cannibalism to dramatize power relations and social upheaval. The zombies are frenzied in their cannibalism. Meanwhile, the humans barricade themselves inside a house and spend the entire film arguing with each other and policing the boundaries of the house. The zombies in Romero's films always manage to break through.

"We are the living dead," Romero says in *The American Nightmare*, and his sentiment is echoed in the recent resurgence of zombie films.<sup>130</sup> In *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), for example, the zombies become nearly indistinguishable from the living, the mechanical monotony of the humans and zombies echoing the key visual signal of the *Body Snatchers* films. Some argue that humans are at a point in their evolution where technology has compromised our human nature—not quite living and not quite dead.

It is these modern anxieties about technology, identity, and apocalypse that underlie the narratives of a number of twentieth-century films. Viewed from this perspective, they suggest the strong influence of Mary Shelley's novels in later popular culture.

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<sup>130</sup> Simon, *The American Nightmare*.

## Chapter Six

### **Mary Shelley's Post-Millennium Legacy: The Film and Television Works of Danny Boyle and Frank Darabont**

One of the basic conventions of the modern zombie film—including the first and best-known zombie film, George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*—is that killing a zombie requires inflicting a fatal injury to its head.<sup>131</sup> Modern scholarship on zombie films commonly notes that this imperative to destroy the zombie brain (rather than other important organs such as the heart) is ubiquitous in zombie films.<sup>132</sup> Significantly, such a narrative requirement confines the locus of existence to the head and suggests a categorical and existential split between the head (or mind) and the body. This bifurcated paradigm is the same perspective suggested by the guillotine executions of revolutionary France, which focused the observer's attention on the act of separating head and body and generated anxiety about whether consciousness could continue after decapitation—therefore implying the mind's ability to function apart from the body (at least for a little while). It is this perspective of a distinction between mind and body that lies at root of the anxieties generated

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<sup>131</sup> George Romero, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968: Los Angeles, CA: Image Ten), DVD: 2001.

<sup>132</sup> See Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro, *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), William Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (And Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture* (New York: McFarland, 2010), and Stephanie Boluk, *Generation Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

by guillotine executions and zombie films alike. It is no wonder, then, that zombie films—which by definition explore modern fears about existential categories—require the destruction of the zombie’s head.

One of the most highly acclaimed zombie films, Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later*, emphasizes this mind/body split by depicting decapitation by blade as the preferred method for executing zombies.<sup>133</sup> Whereas some zombie films feature guns as the primary defensive tools, the protagonists of Boyle’s film exclusively employ a machete to decapitate the undead, despite the unconventionality and practical inferiority of such a method in comparison to firearm execution.<sup>134</sup> In utilizing this motif of the *slice*, Boyle draws more deeply upon the same kinds of anxieties elicited by guillotine execution—the sense that existence is localized in the mind and, moreover, that the mind is somehow categorically and existentially distinct from the body. And yet, as explained earlier, the machete carries its own set of anxieties about primitivism, “darker” ethnicities, and societal apocalypse. Perhaps the machete’s association with postcolonial anxieties over slave revolts explains why in zombie films like *28 Days Later* and the popular tv show *The Walking Dead*, machetes and machete-like weapons are most often associated with characters of African ancestry.

In regard to larger ontological anxieties, *28 Days Later* expresses thematic preoccupations similar to those found in *Frankenstein*: just as Mary Shelley’s narrative evinces a materialist perspective and references the paradoxical relationship between life and death, *28 Days Later* depicts zombies who are technically alive—in the most basic biological

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<sup>133</sup> Danny Boyle, *28 Days Later* (2002: London: DNA Films), DVD: Twentieth Century Fox, 2003.

<sup>134</sup> Frank Darabont, *The Walking Dead* (2010-present: New York: AMC Studios).

sense—but not alive in the traditional, spiritual sense. Boyle’s film begins with the outbreak of a “rage virus” that changes those infected into ravenous “undead.” Very soon, the spread of the virus reaches epidemic proportions, effecting an apocalyptic collapse of modern society. The film then narrows its focus to a single protagonist who awakens from a coma in a London hospital to find that the world around him has collapsed. He joins a small group of survivors as they leave London to search for a safer community—eventually finding a makeshift military camp protected by a group of traumatized British soldiers. At this point, the plot takes a turn similar to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, but the zombie threat remains a key plot element through the film’s conclusion.

As corpses brought to life by a virus developed in a lab, the zombies in *28 Days Later* lack anything more than a minimal consciousness and therefore paradoxically inhabit the categories of both life *and* death in an uneasy fashion—they are simultaneously alive and dead and yet do not occupy either category fully. As creatures occupying a liminal space between seemingly distinct categories, the zombies in Boyle’s film are akin to the Creature in Shelley’s novel (despite the Creature’s greater cognitive ability). Additionally, like *Frankenstein*, *28 Days Later* depicts consciousness and identity as strictly material rather than spiritual in nature. Just as the Creature’s consciousness is not viewed as emanating from a “soul” but merely as a physically animated brain, the zombies in Boyle’s film result from a virus that affects the brains of living people, changing them into aggressive, minimally cognizant animals. Therefore, identity in *28 Days Later* is a strictly biological matter since it can be altered entirely by the “rage virus” that turns normal humans into ravenous murderers. As does Shelley’s novel, *28 Days Later* promotes the notion of consciousness-as-brain and

contradicts the notion of the mind/body split, for it depicts the mind as synonymous with body, not distinct from it.

One of the key elements of all zombie movies is the abrupt shift in personality and behavior that results from a character's transformation from human to zombie. The greatest horror in a zombie film comes not from the death of a character but the instantaneous negation of a character's prior identity as he/she transforms into a zombie. This motif, ubiquitous within the zombie-film genre, implies an entirely materialist (mind-as-matter) perspective and elicits the viewer's horror over the susceptibility of identity and behavior to biological factors. That is, the zombie film "works" artistically by exploiting a fear that the human psyche is entirely biologically determined.<sup>135</sup>

One particular scene in *28 Days Later* that best depicts this materialist anxiety occurs toward the end of the film when the character John Reilly suddenly becomes infected with the virus and immediately transforms into a zombie. Prior to his transformation, the film presents him as utterly *human*, a noble character who enjoys a very close bond with his adolescent daughter and shields her from the grim apocalyptic reality around them. Toward the end of the film, however, he is unintentionally infected by a single drop of contaminated blood and immediately realizes the implications of this accident: in the seconds between infection and transformation, he gazes at his daughter with a loving but mournful expression and assures her of his feelings for her even as he warns her to keep her distance from him. At these last words, he convulses violently as his features contort and his eyes turn bloodshot. In an instant, the daughter he loved a mere second ago becomes the object of his predation: he charges at her with an animal-like growl, and another character must decapitate him to

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<sup>135</sup> See Christie and Lauro, *Better Off Dead*.

prevent him from cannibalizing her. The horror in such a scene lies precisely in this dramatic shift—the abrupt negation of a prior identity and its replacement with an entirely different, grotesque one (that is, the horror of mind as mere matter). Just as in *Frankenstein* a spiritual dimension is absent in Victor’s musings on life and his consideration of the Creature, so too does *28 Days Later* lack any suggestion of any non-material, spiritual dimension to existence: identity and behavior are entirely biologically determined. Moreover, the thoughtlessness with which the film’s protagonists kill the zombies and the utter absence of any sentimentality in their attitude toward them further reinforces the sense that the infected have no souls to respect, no dimension beyond the biological one to consider.

*28 Days Later* also suggests a paradoxical relationship between the categories of life and death, teasing its viewers by positioning then challenging a firm boundary between these oppositional states: like the Creature in Shelley’s novel, the zombies in *28 Days Later* occupy a space between traditional ontological categories. Despite the fact that the zombies in Boyle’s film are not actually dead but are merely infected with a virus, they lose all claim to human status after infection. And just as the Creature in Shelley’s story occupies a marginalized position as alive and yet also inhuman,<sup>136</sup> so too do the monstrous creatures in Boyle’s film stand outside of distinct classification. The film emphasizes this sense of an indeterminate state between life and death in a scene in which a character exploits a captured zombie for a starvation experiment: rather than mercifully killing the zombie, its captor keeps it a prisoner to observe the effects of the starvation process. The moral implications of this act remain unquestioned by the other characters, since—like Victor’s Creature—the zombie

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<sup>136</sup> Shelley scholars have likened this status to that of women. See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).



is not regarded as a legitimate *life* even if it is technically *alive*; thus, both the Creature and the zombie exist within the metaphorical *slice* that both divides and joins the categories of life and death. Alive and dead and yet fully neither, the Creature and the zombie are trapped within the cut where seemingly distinct categories paradoxically bleed into one another.

The tension between categories depicted in *28 Days Later* is a major component of Danny Boyle's other sci-fi/horror film, *Sunshine*.<sup>137</sup> A futuristic narrative centering on the threat of human extinction, *Sunshine* portrays a team of astronauts on board Icarus II, engaged in a suicide mission to detonate a bomb within the sun, thereby reversing its degeneration and safeguarding humanity's future. Probably alluding to Shelley's apocalyptic novel, Boyle's film names its Mary-Shelleyan antecedent when Icarus II's Captain Pinbacker declares himself "the Last Man." Similarly to Shelley's novel, the film concerns itself with existential questions on both a macro and micro level, as the threat of impending extinction forces a kind of cognitive dissonance on the film's central characters: alive and yet doomed to a certain death (either through the completion of their suicide mission or through species extinction if their mission fails), they exist on the boundary between opposite existential states (life/death). Yet this is not the only metaphorical *slice* Boyle investigates—his film also explores the dichotomy of spirit/matter. Like *The Last Man*, *Sunshine*'s narrative clearly suggests the *materiality* and *ephemerality* of existence (life-as-mere-matter). However, Boyle ultimately diverges from Shelley's grim materialism with a hopeful conclusion that evokes a sense of spiritual transcendence.

Despite this uplifting conclusion, the greater part of *Sunshine*'s narrative is fueled by an underlying existential anxiety about the characters' indeterminate status as alive and yet

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<sup>137</sup> Danny Boyle, *Sunshine* (2007: London: DNA Films), DVD: Twentieth Century Fox, 2008.

condemned to a certain death. It is the tension within the life/death binary that supplies the film's central anxiety: always juxtaposed uncomfortably against the astronauts' larger mission to save humanity is the certainty of their impending individual deaths. Through the entirety of their voyage to the center of the sun, the crew struggles with this cognitive dissonance, continually repressing the horror of their own fate beneath their dedication to the continued survival of the greater human species. One character in particular—Captain Pinbacker, the self-proclaimed “Last Man”—embodies this dissonance in a monstrous form. Driven to insanity by the implications of his mission, Pinbacker abandons the mission and welcomes the opportunity to witness the end of humankind: “At the end of time, a moment will come when just one man remains...The last man, alone with God.”<sup>138</sup>

Whereas in Shelley's apocalyptic novel the protagonist Lionel Verney laments his fate as the lonely witness of humanity's end, Boyle's *Last Man* views himself as the completion of human history and the embodiment of a new evolutionary reality. Psychologically disconnected from the rest of humankind, Pinbacker engages in a self-conscious process of physical mutation that transforms him into a kind of monster (for this reason critics often classify *Sunshine* as a horror film). He effects this disturbing “evolution” by repeatedly exposing his naked body to unfiltered sunlight in the ship's observation room. This exposure to the sun progressively burns and blisters his skin, so that by the end of the film, his appearance is grotesquely alien rather than human. Like the Creature in *Frankenstein*, Pinbacker disrupts normal existential categories, effectively functioning as a zombie as he stalks the other characters in an insane frenzy. Moreover, his dramatic emergence in the final third of the film subverts the narrative's established existential priorities (its privileging of

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<sup>138</sup> Boyle, *Sunshine*.

species over individual) and offers a perverse celebration of the Shelleyan Last Man rather than the mournful depiction found in Shelley's novel.

In its treatment of the question of God, *Sunshine* reinforces both a spiritual and a material perspective of existence. A clearly biological perspective fuels the film's central evolutionary concerns—extinction and species survival. Moreover, Boyle repeatedly includes references (both explicit and subtle) to the ephemeral and material aspects of existence. For example, *Sunshine* repeatedly references an oxygen garden maintained in one of the large rooms on board the Icarus II: for the astronauts, this greenhouse provides a reminder of Earth, and its plantlife symbolizes biological flourishing. Yet early in the film, an accident on board the ship requires the complete extermination of all the greenhouse plants by a controlled burn-out. The crew responds to this development despondently because for them it signifies their own biological fragility and ephemerality. After the burn-out, a single tiny blade of grass inexplicably survives, a biological remnant that the crew treasures all the more for its symbolic power in the face of a powerful exterminating force. Interestingly, one of the characters on the ship dies clutching this single blade of grass, metaphorically tying the biological vulnerability of humankind to the symbol of a tiny, fragile plant.

However, while *Sunshine's* narrative utilizes a materialist paradigm, it also evokes a distinctly spiritual tone, and its overall artistic goal is to provide a transcendental experience for the viewer. In this Boyle diverges from Shelley's *Last Man*; the film's cinematography emphasizes the sublimity of the sun in every scene, and the musical score renders the characters' deaths as spiritual events rather than empty negations. We see this pattern especially in the protagonist's death at the end. He smiles as he is slowly consumed by the sun's fire and the scene fades out in brilliant light, all the while accompanied by elevated,

new-age-like music. Unlike the grotesqueries of Shelley's novel, Boyle's film presents death as the path to a sublime spirituality—leaving room for God at the narrative's margins. Also the film's move in the last third into a kind of psychedelic, hallucinatory experience (especially with scenes in the sun and the protagonist's final moments on ship and unrealistic death that fulfills a dream and seems like a dream) moves it from the literal and tangible to something more subjective and more dreamlike—gesturing toward a spiritual dimension of mind disconnected from mere matter. Shelley's novel lacks this.<sup>139</sup>

Both *The Last Man* and *Sunshine* employ narrative rupture, a device that further destabilizes categories of life/death, mind/body, spirit/matter, and biology/technology. As I discussed in the earlier chapter with reference to *The Last Man*, the term *narrative rupture* denotes an abrupt change in a narrative that results from the tensions between theoretical categories symbolized by the slice, disrupting the ways in which ontological binaries function in the larger narrative structure. Because such ruptures are so disruptive to the larger narratives, some critics view them as evidence of an authorial/directorial deficiency—an inattention to required generic conventions or an inability to sustain a plotline consistently to an appropriate conclusion. A number of film critics have found fault with this aspect of *Sunshine*. Derek Elhy writes, “Like a collapsing star, *Sunshine* initially burns brightly but finally implodes into a dramatic black hole.”<sup>140</sup> Expressing a similar sentiment, Claudia Pulg

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<sup>139</sup> As a number of scholars, most prominently Terry Castle, have noted, dreams are a prominent motif of Gothic literature. See Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>140</sup> Derek Elhy, “Movie Review: Danny Boyle's *Sunshine*,” *Variety* (April 3, 2007).

argues that “as the film ultimately deviates from its course, the entire undertaking suffers.”<sup>141</sup> However, I would argue that such critiques fail to appreciate *Sunshine*’s narrative rupture as meaningful rather than haphazard.

We saw earlier that the apparent rupture in *The Last Man* actually serves to dramatize key ontological tensions. A similar dynamic underlies the plot of *Sunshine* when it abruptly introduces the monstrous character of Captain Pinbacker, a self-proclaimed “Last Man” who led an earlier failed mission and was driven to insanity while stranded alone for seven years on a spaceship orbiting the sun. At the core of Pinbacker’s madness is a conviction that God desires the end of the human species and has designated Pinbacker to be the sole witness to its end. With a Nietzschean arrogance, Pinbacker envisions himself as the embodiment of the next phase in human evolution and thus not only the Last Man but a kind of cosmic First Man—a motif reminiscent of the Space Baby born at the end of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*.<sup>142</sup> Accompanying Pinbacker’s delusion is his obsession with the sun, which he regards as the physical manifestation of God. As a demonic figure, Boyle’s Last Man destabilizes the film’s narrative, attacking the other characters and sabotaging their mission. His late emergence marks the film’s sudden transition from the conventions of science fiction to those of horror. This eruption of the Real upsets the narrative’s symbolic ordering of existential categories. Whereas the film clearly prioritizes the life of the species over the individual astronauts (MANY/few, SPECIES/individual), Pinbacker welcomes humankind’s extinction and desires to be its sole survivor. His attempts to sabotage the astronauts’ mission threaten the film’s theme of technological salvation and suggests a tension within the

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<sup>141</sup> Claudia Pulg, “Into the Sun: Danny Boyle’s *Sunshine*,” *USA Today* (July 20, 2007).

<sup>142</sup> Stanley Kubrick, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968: Los Angeles: MGM), DVD: Warner Brothers, 1998.

binary nature/technology, insomuch as technological intervention opposes the natural course of events (the death of the Sun and the consequent extinction of humankind).

Unlike *The Last Man* where the rupturing forces remain in control, *Sunshine* concludes with its pre-rupture priorities: the individual sacrifices of the protagonists' lives ensures the survival of the species, and the Last Man's deranged objectives are thwarted. Though the ship's crew face the inevitable end of their individual lives on this suicide mission, the salvation of the species provides a larger optimistic premise to the film. In depicting the survival of the human species at the expense of protagonists' death, *Sunshine* shifts its focus from a simple life/death dichotomy to one that opposes the survival of many to the survival of the few. This formulation presenting the protagonists' death as a necessary, noble sacrifice for the human race thus employs a value system that is recognizably utilitarian (MANY/few) and evolutionary (SPECIES/individual), in which the needs of the larger group (humanity) take precedence over the needs of individuals. Because the film ends with the detonation of the solar bomb and the mission's success, the larger narrative overcomes Pinbacker's interference, but the sudden disruption of the plot by this insane, monstrous character clearly functions as an eruption of the Real, which by definition is always unpredictable, irrational, and horrific.

In addition to his horror films, Boyle also recently directed a theatrical version of *Frankenstein* written by Nick Dear, which premiered at the Royal National Theater in London in 2011 and received numerous awards. Boyle's production generated such popular interest that a recording of it was recently screened at cinemas in Great Britain and America. Praised for its explicit exploration of various subtexts implicit in the original novel, Boyle's version foregrounds graphic sexuality and violence and employs a recurrent technological

motif that emphasizes more profoundly the anxiety about technology suggested by Shelley's novel. What is of greatest significance to this essay are the ways in which Boyle's production explores specific anxieties about the tensions within several related existential categories: life/death, mind/body, spirit/matter, and biology/technology. Like Shelley's novel, Boyle's play calls attention to the paradoxes inherent in these antinomies—the ways in which such distinct categories nevertheless seem to bleed into each other throughout the narrative. In fact, Boyle's production extends further than Shelley's novel in emphasizing the tensions inherent in such dichotomies.

Boyle's play greatly accentuates the grotesque dimensions of Shelley's narrative and engenders in the audience a more pronounced sense of the novel's materialist perspective. In continually evoking a strong feeling of repulsion at biological processes of reproduction and death, the play underlines the novel's focus on certain aspects of two existential dichotomies: life/death and spirit/matter. One way in which Boyle emphasizes materiality is by opening his play with a rather grotesque depiction of the Creature's birth. The play begins with a kind of large, red amniotic sack out of which the Creature bursts with great effort and the expulsion of fluid. The color red—indicative of blood—is prominent in the play in nearly every scene, especially the very explicit portrayal of Victor slicing up the body of the female mate he has just created for the creature. The emphasis on the color red and the frequent inclusion of bloody, graphic biological depictions heightens the play's focus on the disturbing, material dimensions of existence and decay.

Despite this material emphasis, Boyle also supplies theological exchanges between the Creature and Victor that are absent in Shelley's novel. In this way, Boyle's version makes *Frankenstein* a more defined exploration of humanity's relationship to God than Shelley's

novel allows, and the audience consequently engages in a much more consistently self-referential experience. For example, the Creature engages in very extensive discussions about the relevance of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* to his own life, discussions that go far beyond the allusions Shelley provides in her novel. Moreover, a significant moment occurs when Boyle's Creature and Victor shake hands to seal Victor's agreement to create a female creature. After sealing their agreement with this customary gesture, Victor withdraws his hand in a deliberately slow, highly emphasized movement that clearly alludes to the famous depiction of the hands of Adam and God painted on the Sistine Chapel. This movement, performed in such silence and slow motion that it is impossible not to recognize the reference, reinforces the play's evocation of disturbing theological questions.

In emphasizing the grotesque materiality of existence while also making explicit references to the most troubling of theological questions, Boyle's play deepens the tension between spirit and matter. It offers no hope or explanation of a spiritual dimension to existence in its relentless focus on the material aspects of reproduction and death, and yet at the same time its explicit depiction of recognizable theological questions and more direct comparisons to humanity's spiritual frustrations refuse to cross out the spiritual aspect of the spirit/matter dichotomy and instead deepen the compelling nature of its demands. In effect, Boyle's play more strongly highlights the theoretical paradoxes within the spirit/matter binary.

It is also important to note the use of narrative foreclosure and eruption in both Shelley's and Boyle's versions of *Frankenstein*. In Mary Shelley's novel, as we saw in an earlier chapter, Victor's abandonment of religion in favor of materialism and of natural processes for technological ones place him on one side of the existential *slice*



(MATTER/spirit and TECHNOLOGY/nature); his repression of the spiritual and natural sets the stage for the return of the repressed and the destabilization of these existential binaries. The resulting eruption of the Real assumes the form of the Creature's murderous revenge. The consequence of Victor's total disregard for spiritual or religious objections emerges as the Creature assumes a posture toward the end of the novel that is distinctly demonic (in fact, Victor explicitly refers to him as a demon). While the Creature initially displays a capacity for benevolence, Victor's refusal to acknowledge his responsibility as Creator or to view the Creature outside the limitations of a materialist perspective serves as the catalyst for the Creature's rapid transformation into an evil, almost-satanic figure. This depiction of the Creature as an evil demon is a perverse reference to the religious element excluded by Victor's rationalist and materialist perspective. Because religion is foreclosed in Victor's intellectual system, it emerges in a perverse form later in the narrative as a kind of violent eruption of the Real. Additionally, Victor's disregard for nature and his abdication of a traditional reproductive/domestic function with Elizabeth makes the murder of Elizabeth on his wedding night an ironic consequence of his earlier symbolic foreclosure: in essence, Victor's disregard for nature's reproductive power means that he must suffer its destructive power (violence/murder) as the eruption of the Real.

Boyle's stage production of *Frankenstein* provides a more pronounced depiction of this theoretical perspective. The play's stylistic emphasis on the uneasy dichotomy of nature and technology (discussed earlier in this essay) and its more explicit renderings of a number of sexual and reproductive motifs to which Shelley's novel only obliquely alludes allow the viewer a better understanding of the relationship between Victor's failures and their violent consequences. The play's clearest depiction of this dynamic occurs in Boyle's rendering of

the wedding-night scene in which the Creature rapes and murders Elizabeth on the very bed into which she has been trying to coax Victor. While disturbing, Boyle's addition of the rape of Elizabeth not only fills in a lacuna in Shelley's narrative but more importantly makes a direct metaphorical connection between Victor's avoidance of his natural reproductive role and the subsequent violent eruption of sexuality in the perverse form of a rape. (The violation of Elizabeth also "answers" Victor's refusal to provide a wife and a sexual/reproductive mechanism for the Creature.) In effect, Boyle's version of Shelley's narrative more strongly emphasizes the consequences of Victor's privileging of technological vs. natural reproduction.

The types of violent eruptions within categorical systems that I have discussed here are not limited to science fiction and horror genres; such dynamics also occur in political histories, both real and fictional. In particular, this metaphor of eruption is integral to understanding certain popular narratives about the French Revolution, especially in the sharp juxtapositions evoked in the British imagination by reports—real and fictional—from France at the time. Although this period no doubt posed a legitimate danger to a number of individuals in France at the time, exaggerated and entirely fictional atrocities were frequently reported in Britain, and the events of the Terror acquired a compelling, grotesque mystique that soon attached itself permanently to the guillotine. As the primary symbol of its historical moment, the guillotine was overlaid with the various antinomies generated by the revolution, and its association with Enlightenment-era perspectives as well as political terror transformed it into a locus for the various contradictions inherent in modernity.

The mystique surrounding this eruption of the Real also helps us to understand the popularity of sensational—and entirely fictional—cannibal narratives that circulated in

various official and unofficial British reports at the time concerning events in France. Like the rabid zombies in *28 Days Later*, the murderous Creature in *Frankenstein*, or the plague in *The Last Man*, the French cannibals in British narratives of the Terror embodied the Real in its most extreme, disturbing form—rendering the French as grotesque monsters.

The eruption of the Real as a reaction to the official enlightened, humane goals of the revolution also suggests a reason for the popularity of the Gothic during this historical period, as such literature depicts the violence and irrationality of the Real in various narrative forms. This dynamic also accounts for the widespread appeal of horror films in our own current “civilized” historical moment. Wherever society seeks to exclude undesired elements or problematic categories from the symbolic order, such elements often find ways—political, cultural, or artistic—through which to erupt and destabilize official systems of classification and control.

### **Frank Darabont’s Reimagining of the Frankenstein Narrative in *Mary Shelley’s***

#### ***Frankenstein and the The Walking Dead***

Because the *Frankenstein* narrative evokes many of the same anxieties that underlie zombie films, Danny Boyle is not the only filmmaker with an overlapping interest in both Shelley’s novel and zombie narratives. AMC’s apocalyptic television drama *The Walking Dead* has become, arguably, the most recognized and popular iteration of the zombie narrative since George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*. As with other zombie films, *The Walking Dead* questions the boundaries between existential categories of life/death, spirit/matter, and mind/body—exposing the metaphorical slices within these dichotomies and the troubling paradoxes they entail. Like Frankenstein’s Creature and the zombies in

Boyle's film, the zombies of *The Walking Dead* exist in an indeterminate space between existential categories. But if Darabont's zombie narrative closely correlates with earlier zombie films in many ways, it is distinct in its explicit emphasis on pregnancy and childbirth. Of course, I have already noted that reproduction is an important source of anxiety underlying the zombie genre. My point here, however, is that very few zombie films explicitly feature human, rather than zombie, reproduction and incorporate pregnancy and childbirth-related subplots. To my knowledge, Darabont's *The Walking Dead* is the first and only popular zombie narrative in which human reproduction itself is an integral, repeated motif—one that often shifts the show's focus away from the zombies.

I have already suggested that *Frankenstein* is the implicit ancestor of the modern zombie genre, but *The Walking Dead*'s emphasis on reproduction offers an additional thematic link to Shelley's novel. However, *The Walking Dead* and *Frankenstein* share a more direct connection: before he created the popular zombie show, Frank Darabont was the primary screenwriter for Kenneth Branagh's cinematic version of *Frankenstein*, the first attempt at a serious, sophisticated film adaptation of the classic literary work. Darabont's screenplay for Branagh's film reflects his profound interest in the ontological and reproductive themes he would later explore in *The Walking Dead*. (Most works in Darabont's oeuvre, in fact, share these same preoccupations.)<sup>143</sup> When considering the influence of Shelley's novel on the modern sci-fi/horror zombie genre, Darabont's work creative involvement in *M.S.'s Frankenstein* and *The Walking Dead* supports my understanding of the zombie as an artistic descendent of Frankenstein's Creature and the modern incarnation of the same anxieties that generated Shelley's novel almost two hundred

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<sup>143</sup> Especially *Trancers* (Los Angeles: Empire Pictures: 1995), *The Fly 2* (Los Angeles: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox: 1989), and *The Mist* (Los Angeles: MGM: 2007).

years ago. It is helpful, then, to examine Darabont's screenplay for *M.S.'s Frankenstein* before discussing his subsequent zombie series.

Branagh and Darabont's adaptation of *Frankenstein* was generally poorly received by film critiques and popular audiences alike. Of course, a film's reception is not necessarily an indication of its artistic value, but such a critical and commercial failure does require an explanation. Most criticism of the film focused on Branagh's direction: "tonally inconsistent," "over-the-top," "melodramatic," "overwrought," and even "campy." Also, a number of critics disliked Robert De Niro's portrayal of the Creature, viewing his performance as garish, lacking nuance, and even unintentionally comical. Such flaws seemed especially apparent because of their contrast with the film's artistic aspirations—its Shakspearean director, esteemed actors, and its determination to remain faithful to certain elements of Shelley's text that slowed the momentum of the main plot.

From the perspective of a film critique or a typical movie-goer, such critiques are valid. However, it is unfortunate that the failure of Branagh's film obscured the merits of Darabont's screenplay, which interprets Shelley's novel in ways that are deeply insightful and expand rather than reduce her original narrative. The best example of this deepening is Darabont's treatment of Victor's motivation for his experiments. In addition to intellectual ambition, Darabont suggests another reason for Victor's interest in artificial regeneration/reproduction: the death of his mother in childbirth—an element absent in Shelley's narrative. In an early scene, Victor's mother suffers through an agonizing, unsuccessful attempt at labor. Branagh's direction renders this scene especially horrific, with a graphic depiction of Victor's mother drenched in blood as she screams repeatedly. Darabont makes this traumatic experience the catalyst for Victor's decision to pursue his

research. Moments after his mother dies, Victor resolves that he will pursue a remedy for death: “Mother, you should never have died. No one need ever die. I will stop this. I will stop this!” It is only at this point in the film that Victor begins his research.

One could argue that such a change to Shelley’s story dilutes the novel’s implication of Victor’s ambition as his fatal flaw, the fundamental cause of his unethical experiment. While this may be true, Darabont’s narrative addition is interesting in its explicit juxtaposition of life and death (in which birth literally causes death). This juxtaposition emphasizes the narrative’s anxieties about reproduction, and it reinforces Victor’s preoccupation with the paradoxical relationship between life and death processes, a theme referenced in Shelley’s text when Victor explains the rationale for his research methodology.<sup>144</sup>

Another way in which Darabont’s screenplay adds to Shelley’s novel is by emphasizing the plague that occurs while Victor is at Ingolstadt. Darabont accords the plague an important status not only as a major plotpoint but also as a motif of physical decay. Several scenes in the film depict grotesque corpses piled high and transported from the city, along with images of those diseased but still alive, often moaning and collapse in the streets. Darabont’s screenplay also has Victor soliloquize about the plague in interior monologues and letters: for Victor, the plague is one more indication of inevitable biological decay, and it symbolizes in his mind the inextricable relationship between life and death processes—reinforcing his belief that in order to understand the secrets to generating life, one must study death.

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<sup>144</sup> See my earlier chapter on *Frankenstein*.

Shifting our focus from Darabont's *Frankenstein* screenplay to his most recent work, the popular television series *The Walking Dead*, we see an emphasis on similar themes. Darabont created *The Walking Dead* in 2010; based on a popular comic book, the television show began airing on the cable channel AMC in 2011, and quickly became a pop cultural phenomenon. In fact, its current third season is the highest-rated program on cable tv. As with George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* and Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later*, *The Walking Dead* depicts a group of strangers brought together as they struggle for survival against hordes of zombies. *The Walking Dead* most closely mirrors Boyle's film—and in fact likely drew inspiration from it—with a central protagonist named Rick Grimes who awakens from a coma to find the world he once knew now shattered. As with Boyle's film, *The Walking Dead* depicts fast-moving, rabid zombies—products of a government-created disease gone awry—who can only be killed by destroying the brain. Decapitated heads are, in fact, a key repeated motif in the tv series. Also, as in Boyle's earlier film, Darabont presents a post-apocalyptic society lacking the mechanisms of government and technology essential for maintaining order.

However, despite its adherence to the basic plot elements of modern zombie films, *The Walking Dead* incorporates reproductive themes as a foundational element of its narrative. Its preoccupation with human reproduction separates it from the other works in the zombie genre, which focus exclusively on zombie reproduction (the transmission of the zombie virus).<sup>145</sup> In fact, Darabont's series foregrounds issues of human reproduction to such an extent that they often overshadow the primary zombie plotline.

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<sup>145</sup> There are a few exceptions to this rule within the zombie genre, but even these rare exceptions only briefly reference human reproduction in an ancillary fashion. To my knowledge, the only other zombie work besides *The Walking Dead* that includes human

*The Walking Dead* early on allows its protagonist Rick Grimes to discover that his wife Lori is pregnant, possibly by another man. Over the course of the first season, this question of paternity develops into a significant problem for the central characters, disrupting their small community and creating dangerous divisions within it. Beyond this theme of uncertain paternity, the series also uses this pregnancy as way to underscore the vulnerability of biological life: in a world infested with the walking dead, a pregnancy is especially dangerous and a mother and infant find themselves especially susceptible to attack. Such a prominent narrative linking between reproduction and death foregrounds the ontological dichotomy that is the focus of this essay—a dichotomy that, I would argue, is central to the zombie genre itself.

Also interesting to me is the fact that Lori Grimes’s ambivalence about her pregnancy allows Darabont’s show to explore questions about the ontological status of a fetus. Just as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* placed the Creature in an indeterminate position similar to a fetus (as I explained in an earlier chapter), *The Walking Dead* emphasizes this indeterminacy throughout its narrative. After Lori realizes she is pregnant, she ingests several “morning-after” pills in an attempt to abort the several-weeks-old fetus within her.<sup>146</sup> She quickly regrets this action and vomits the pills, yet her husband Rick discovers her attempt and angrily chastises her for it, claiming that the hope of a new child is one of his few motivations to continue living in a post-apocalyptic world. In censuring his wife, Rick accuses her of attempting to “murder the baby,” clearly asserting the status of the fetus as a

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pregnancy and birth as a major plot element is the 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead*, in which a pregnant woman becomes a zombie and is tied to a bed and forced to give birth to a zombie infant by her grief-stricken, delusional husband.

<sup>146</sup> Her attempt is misguided because emergency contraception does not cause an abortion.



full human whose death would be morally equivalent to homicide. Lori's ultimate unwillingness to abort the fetus further reinforces this notion of the fetus as a legitimate human life.

Given *The Walking Dead's* interest in ontological questions related to reproduction and maternity, it is no surprise that the show's writers finally terminated Lori by means of a primitive, makeshift Caesarean section. Lori's death—depicted explicitly, even including a close-up of the knife's incision into her stomach—constituted perhaps the most wrenching plot twist for viewers of the show so far. Interestingly, the death of Lori in exchange for the life of her baby evokes the very same types of ontological questions we find in *Frankenstein* and a number of other Gothic novels from the Romantic period. It is this concern with the tensions between ontological categories that accounts in part for the popularity of the varied narratives and genres I have explored in this essay.

## Conclusion

Assessments of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* commonly refer to it as a seminal work of proto-science-fiction, a narrative that not only captured certain modern ideas of its time but also prophesied the anxieties that would emerge fully almost two centuries later in response to accelerating technological and scientific developments. Additionally, *Frankenstein* is also widely credited as the progenitor of a set of modern fiction genres—tech-horror and the mad-scientist narrative, for example—tremendously popular in literature and media today. However, despite the nearly ubiquitous recognition of *Frankenstein's* influence on modern popular culture, there are few comparative studies of Shelley's novel and its derivatives among popular modern films (for instance, James Whale's film and the numerous later adaptations of the novel). Moreover, *Frankenstein's* influence on modern film has been underestimated; that is, its influence extends to more cinematic genres and works than the limited examples for which it has been credited.

In this dissertation, I have moved beyond analyses of *Frankenstein's* obvious derivatives to study films which fuse her novel's motifs with appeals to twentieth-century and post-millennium audiences. These films belong to several popular genres including bio-horror, tech-horror, reproductive horror, apocalyptic sci-fi, and the zombie film; they emphasize the particular anxieties explored in *Frankenstein* and employ similar themes and motifs.

In considering the legacy of *Frankenstein*, I have examined the mythology surrounding its creation—a mythology fostered by Shelley in her 1831 introduction to the novel, first published in 1818, wherein she discusses the conditions under which she conceived it, especially her colorful anecdote concerning the informal writing contest of 1816 among herself, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, and John Polidori. Scholarship has tended to take Mary Shelley at her word about the novel's origins in a contest and a nightmare. *Frankenstein* is thus often understood as the result of a fortuitous spark that generated a mysterious creative outflowing from deep within the writer's psyche.

Instead, my analysis has emphasized the historical context that produced Shelley's narrative, specifically the constitutive influence of three particular historical developments of the Romantic period: (1.) the violence of the French Revolution, especially the Terror and the ten years preceding Napoleon's 1799 ascendancy; (2.) the intrusion of modern technology into life and death processes like execution and childbirth, especially the introduction of guillotine execution and the concomitant rise of modern obstetrics in the late eighteenth century; (3.) and the emergence of materialist theories in science and medicine, which inspired various sensationalized experiments such as those performed on the corpses of the guillotined.

Due to the guillotine's significance as a symbol for all three historical developments—the French Revolution, the emergence of modern technology, and the rise of materialist science—I have employed it in my analysis as a metaphorical paradigm for interpreting the *Frankenstein* narrative. The guillotine was a powerful signifier in the British Romantic imagination because of its status as both a symbol and a symptom of the period's historical anxieties. I have also argued for the guillotine's relevance for *Frankenstein* due to

my view that the character of Victor Frankenstein is a narrative displacement of Giovanni Aldini, widely perceived at the time as the prototypical “mad-scientist” due to his notorious experiments, which used guillotined corpses to test the materialist scientific theories of his uncle, Luigi Galvani. Scholars’ long acceptance of the ghost-story myth, rather than of the guillotine as the defining context for *Frankenstein*, has led to a distorted assessment of Shelley’s novel. Scholars often acknowledge Galvani as an important source for *Frankenstein* but neglect to credit his nephew and successor Giovanni Aldini, whose notoriety was tied to the guillotine and who was better known to the British public than his uncle, in part because he was fluent in English and French. Aldini travelled throughout Europe conducting sensationalistic public experiments on executed corpses—for instance, at the London execution of the notorious murderer George Foster at Newgate in 1803—experiments that were covered in British newspapers along with their underlying theory, galvanism. Aldini first achieved notoriety during the French Revolution for frequenting guillotine executions and conducting experiments on the severed heads of the condemned, “testing” the heads post-execution for facial expressions and other signs of residual life and then re-animating them with electricity. Like Victor Frankenstein’s use of corpses for scientific research in Mary Shelley’s novel, Aldini searched for the key to life in his experiments on corpses. In fact, guillotine execution attained a distinctive mystique in the popular Romantic imagination partly due to Aldini’s famous experiments.

Aldini preferred to utilize corpses who had suffered guillotine execution because of its mechanized precision: there was a clarity to the guillotine in that it reduced the act of execution to a single moment, a sudden shift from life to death. Rather than a more extended process in which the instant of death was difficult to discern (as with a hanging, for

example), the guillotine presented death as a distinct, mechanized switch-point from animation to lifelessness. This aspect of guillotine execution accorded with galvanism's notion that life might be generated or halted abruptly with the application or withdrawal of a single electrical charge. Conversely, popular reports of severed heads exhibiting expressions post-guillotining implied that some residual force or "charge" might exist for a time after the execution. For Aldini, guillotine execution reinforced galvanic notions about life and death processes. His experiments with guillotined corpses supported a materialist view of existence, according to which life is merely the animation of biological material by exclusively physical—rather than spiritual—processes.

By recognizing Aldini's role in *Frankenstein*, I have demonstrated how Shelley's novel activates associations with the guillotine specifically, not just with the widely acknowledged context of the French Revolution: *Frankenstein* evinces the very anxieties and tensions symbolized by the guillotine. I have also argued that viewing Victor as a displacement of Aldini allows for a reading of *Frankenstein* with reference to the guillotine and offers interesting new ways of interpreting Shelley's novel.

I have also incorporated the perspectives of scholars such as Michel Foucault, who viewed the Enlightenment as an attempt to regulate and instrumentalize "natural" impulses, forcing human drives and behaviors to operate within the confines of a "disciplinary society."<sup>147</sup> Similarly, Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno identified in modernity a perversion of human society into something reductively mechanized and materialist.

In addition, I have examined the various ontological questions symbolized by the guillotine. Its designers regarded the replacement of the human executioner by a machine as

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<sup>147</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1975), p. 105.

a humane improvement, but inasmuch as this depersonalization focused on the act of death itself, a distinct moment of termination via the severing of head and body. Yet paradoxically, strange facial expressions and contortions often appeared on the severed heads after decapitation, implying the possible continuation of consciousness and provoking a sense of ontological indeterminacy. Furthermore, the image of a severed head not only questioned where life ended and where it began, but also pointed to the disagreement between Cartesian and materialist paradigms of identity. According to the Cartesian model, the locus of identity is the mind distinct from the material body. This concept of a mind/body split also accords with traditional religious notions of identity as primarily spiritual rather than physical. Opposing this distinction between the mind and the body, modern materialism conversely understands the “mind” as a purely physical phenomenon (the brain) and refuses to relegate the body to an ontologically inferior category as Cartesian and traditional Christian perspectives do. This fundamental disagreement about human subjectivity is the source of the contradictions expressed by Slavoj Žižek and various other scholars, as I have discussed. Thus, the guillotine embodies a set of ontological paradoxes generated by the modernity.

Given that the guillotine can be read as symptom and signifier of modern historical anxieties, I have employed it as a kind of clue signalling a labyrinth of meanings embedded in Romantic literature and certain modern films. I have also analyzed the significance of the *slice* itself—the uneasy, indeterminate line that simultaneously separates and joins ontological categories such as life/death, mind/body, spirit/matter, and nature/technology. This hitherto understudied aspect of guillotine lore—the slice—has been neglected by scholars but, I have argued, is a distinctively useful metaphor for uncomfortable juxtapositions and indeterminacies of modernity, providing new ways of interpreting

Romantic texts such as *Frankenstein* and countering conventional assumptions about Romantic organicism. That is, I have argued that using the guillotine slice as an interpretive paradigm helps us to identify juxtapositions in Romantic texts and recognize a kind of asyndeton as a key constitutive feature of Romanticism itself.

It is common in Romantic literary criticism to note the importance of both idealism and disappointment in Romantic attitudes. In particular, the outcome of the French Revolution--its quick devolution from the bright dawning of a newly enlightened age to gruesome violence--elicited passionate and often discordant attitudes from many Romantic writers. Wordsworth's *Prelude*, for instance, reflects both the unfettered enthusiasm of his more youthful years in France as well as his later dismay over the violence of the Terror. Because many Romantic writers believed that democracy offered a vastly superior system to France's *ancien regime*, they tended to support the Revolution there as the heralding of positive change in history. A number of them, like Wordsworth, spent time in France prior to or even during the Revolution, attempting to absorb by osmosis the exciting spirit of that time and place. Those British writers of the period who did not live in France still had access to events there via letters from friends abroad, as well as frequent reports in periodicals like London's *The Times*. Some of the most compelling reports of the period appear in the letters of writers who provide intriguing "you-are-there" accounts of the Revolution. A number of critics have analyzed the theme of Romantic disappointment--it is a constitutive feature of much Wordsworthian criticism. However, I have argued in this dissertation that the scope of this disappointment must be better understood against the background of such intensely felt initial hope (and even euphoria) in expectation of an enlightened, democratic political

Revolution. It is this stark contrast—this cognitive dissonance—that accounts for the thematic preoccupations of many Romantic works.

In examining Mary Shelley's science fiction novels, I have focused on the metaphor of the slice in analyzing the tensions within ontological binaries of life/death, mind/body, spirit/matter, nature/tech that I have argued underlie *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*, her lesser-known apocalyptic novel. These works emphasize ontological categories contested by modernity, exploring modernity's simultaneous blurring and sharpening of the theoretical slices that simultaneously separate and join oppositional categories. Shelley's novels merge categories of life and death through repeated descriptions of their protagonists as barely alive or death-like, but they also frequently emphasize the sharp discordance between life and death. We see this paradox in the *Frankenstein* narrative, which classifies the Creature as alive but inhuman and repeatedly describes Victor in terms suggestive of death. In the same way, *The Last Man's* hero, Lionel Verney, the witness of a worldwide plague who constantly anticipates his own imminent death, often perceives himself as existing uncomfortably between existential states, with the specter of death intruding uncomfortably into life. We can also see this paradox functioning in John Polidori's *The Vampyre*, which, with its invention of the *undead* aristocrat, originated the now ubiquitous vampire of modern cinema as an elegant figure who preys on the living and gains eternal life through the death of his victims. This descriptive collapsing of the line between existence and death suggests the same preoccupation with boundaries underlying popular discussions of the guillotine in the Romantic period—in which the sharp juxtapositions or *slices* of guillotine execution were symbolically symptomatic of unresolved paradoxes inherent in modern ontological categories.



I have also analyzed how Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* expands on many of the ontological anxieties underlying *Frankenstein*. Like Shelley's earlier "modern" novel, *The Last Man* articulates an anxiety about the tension between antonymic categories life/death, spirit/matter, mind/body, and nature/technology—or nature/civilization, to put it another way. This last binary is often expressed in fiction and film as an apocalyptic narrative, one in which civilization disintegrates and humanity nears extinction. As apocalypse is a prominent topic in a number of twentieth-century and post-millennium films, I have contended that the thematic influence of *The Last Man* has been underestimated and that its evocation of ontological anxieties and apocalyptic themes make it—like *Frankenstein*—a kind of literary ancestor to a number of later science fiction and horror films. For this reason, I have argued that *The Last Man* deserves greater critical attention.

My analysis has also broadened to *Frankenstein's* wider, unnamed influence on films recognizably symptomatic of the same modern anxieties that produced her classic narrative. For example, one of the basic conventions of the modern zombie genre—including the first and best-known zombie film, George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*—is that killing a zombie requires inflicting a fatal injury to its head. Modern scholarship on zombie films commonly notes the ubiquity of this imperative to destroy the zombie brain (rather than, say, the heart). Significantly, this convention confines the locus of existence to the head and suggests a categorical and existential split between the head (or mind) and the body. In utilizing this motif of the *slice*, zombie films draw more deeply upon the same kinds of anxieties elicited by guillotine execution—the sense that existence is localized in the mind and, moreover, that the mind is somehow categorically and existentially distinct from the body. In their exploration of such ontological anxieties, zombie films like *Night of the Living*

*Dead* and *28 Days Later* echo thematic preoccupations of *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*. Moreover, zombie films lack much suggestion of any non-material, spiritual existence, implying the materialist view that identity and behavior are entirely biologically determined.

This fundamental disagreement about human subjectivity is the source of the contradictions explored by the classic novels of Mary Shelley as well as numerous modern science fiction and horror films. It is these ontological paradoxes generated by modernity and symbolized by the guillotine that, I have argued, provide us with an important way of understanding Romanticism, modern horror cinema, and modernity itself.

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