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Essais

It's alive and (side-)kicking! Frankenstein's double acts

Jean-François Baillon

In *The Evil of Frankenstein* (Freddie Francis, 1964), Frankenstein asks his assistant Hans why he is always with him, getting as only answer that the latter often asked himself the same question. Indeed, this is a very good question as in Mary Shelley's novel, Frankenstein has no assistant and brings forth his creature alone. In the film versions, however, he is most of the time assisted with one, or more often several assistants who are likely to be young, old, misshapen, queer, female, or any combination of the foregoing features¹.

The first occurrence of an assistant to Frankenstein was probably in Richard Brinsley Peake's play *Presumption* (1823), based on the first edition of the novel in 1818. In Peake's play, Fritz, much like Sganarelle in Molière's *Dom Juan*, introduces himself and his master in some sort of monologue where he complains about leaving his native village and being the servant of a man who has dealings with the devil. From the start, Fritz appears as a comic figure (on account of the tone of his monologue) while the class dimension of the story is foregrounded by the introduction of a character belonging to the lower classes. However, Fritz is more servant than assistant as he helps Clerval (who in the play is not a fellow student but Elizabeth's suitor) to discover the secret of Frankenstein's experiments. Stephen C. Behrendt, the editor of the online text of *Presumption* comments upon Fritz's functions in a way that implies illuminating parallelisms with the Holmes/Watson pair in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories:

In Fritz, Peake also introduces one of the most enduring features of dramatic and cinematic versions of *Frankenstein*: the assistant or servant. Like the character of Doctor Watson who later figures in the Sherlock Holmes mysteries both as the reader's representative and as –quite simply– someone with whom the otherwise silent and solitary figure can share his thoughts, Fritz performs

1 For a general analysis of a few major adaptations that takes the motif of the assistant into account, see Menegaldo Gilles, « Le Savant fou au miroir du mythe de Frankenstein : trois avatars filmiques (Whale, Fisher, Branagh) », in Hélène Machinal (éd.), *Le Savant fou*, Rennes : Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013, p. 173-192.

a comparable intermediary function. Instead of being a direct and integral participant in the main action as Doctor Watson is, however, he is instead an observer, one of whose primary functions is to *report* his observations to others –most notably Victor’s friend Clerval. In *Presumption*, Peake provided Fritz with both a sizable role and a set of distinctive eccentricities (most notably his ever-present case of “nerves”). Largely inexplicable when considered purely in terms of dramatic logic, this prominent role is explained by the fact that it was created expressly for the popular comic actor Robert Keeley (see also below, under Cast and Characters) as a vehicle for his particular talents².

However, against Behrens’s contention, I would like to show that what seems to be some sort of gratuitous addition, an inessential prosthetic invention of misguided and uninspired scriptwriters, is actually much more: as potentialities of Frankenstein –both character and text– get real through innumerable variations on doubles and supplementary characters, its deferred significations are unveiled and amplified. Eventually even the creature and the reader turn out to be sidekicks of the two figures of the creator that have mirrored each other from day one: Victor Frankenstein and Mary Shelley. Depending on the versions, the emphasis is laid on different aspects of the sidekick’s role as reverberator of Frankenstein’s multi-layered signification. In the end, by making viewers more aware of the moral, social or narratological issues at stake –to name but a few of the most obvious aspects of the question– Frankenstein’s sidekicks reflexively refer them to their own interpretive implication in the cinematic process.

Before we enter into such considerations, we need to rely on an acceptable definition of what a sidekick is. The Oxford English Dictionary online offers the following one: “A companion or close associate; *spec.* an accomplice or partner in crime; a subordinate member of a pair or group. More *loosely*, a friend, a colleague.” Now many crimes are committed in the story of Frankenstein, from the actual murders perpetrated by the creature but which Frankenstein ultimately takes responsibility for, to the metaphysical crime of playing God by making a human being out of the remnants of dead bodies, to the literary crime of bringing forth a “hideous progeny” to the world. In all these respects the sidekick/hero binary can be viewed in terms of various combinations, such as the author/reader or narrator/narratee couples and their substitutes, foregrounded by the series of embedded narratives within the initial texts.

Some of the more obvious functions of the sidekick are illustrated in Terence Fisher’s 1957 *The Curse of Frankenstein*. Thus Frankenstein’s ambivalent and reluctant main sidekick Paul fulfils some of the most familiar functions, such as establishing verisimilitude (making the creature alone is *very* unlikely) or wrecking Frankenstein’s ideal by damaging the brain of Professor Bernstein (a variation on a theme introduced in the 1931 version). He also rescues Frankenstein when the latter is attacked by “the thing” and buries both monster

2 <http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/peake/apparatus/drama.html> (consulté le 13 juillet 2015).

and story, a parallelism made obvious by his silence at the end of the film against Frankenstein's insistent "you must tell him". This confirms the sidekick's role in the storytelling process: Frankenstein as narrator is dependent on others for his narrative to be complete and –most important of all– plausible. However, even in an apparently simple adaptation such as Fisher's first version, the monster is also Frankenstein's sidekick since he proves useful in the murder of Justine, the cumbersome pregnant housemaid.

Thus Frankenstein's sidekicks generally fulfil three main functions, as they either supplement or obstruct him in: 1/ his scientific quest; 2/ his criminal career and 3/ his role as a narrator. With this threefold structure in mind it is now possible to approach a succession of significant variations in the *Frankenstein* cinematic corpus, starting with the opening scene from James Whale's 1935 *Bride of Frankenstein*. This scene already relies on the presence of sidekicks: Byron and Shelley as sidekicks to Mary in the writing of a sequel to the first instalment of the story. The whole sequence can be viewed as a veiled version of a creation scene, complete with thunder and lightning. Byron's confusion about the use of the name of Frankenstein is part of the metaleptic import of this introduction. To "create a Frankenstein" is indeed what Mary did.

Later on, the burning windmill becomes a double of the castle where Mary Shelley and Byron are found in the opening sequence of the film, and both closely resemble Frankenstein's laboratory/tower. These formal echoes reinforce the notion that Frankenstein's creation of a monster is not unlike the creation of horror fiction by Mary Shelley, or indeed by James Whale, while in terms of enunciation the opening of the film can be seen as a substitute of the viewer's position³.

In *Bride of Frankenstein*, the first thing we notice is the proliferation of sidekicks: Pretorius, the monster, Karl, Ludwig, all can at some point be considered as assistants and therefore sidekicks to Frankenstein. As for Frankenstein himself, he can be considered as a sidekick to Pretorius (the devil himself?). When the film begins, everyone believes that Frankenstein has died in the burning of the windmill that took place at the end of the previous film. Frankenstein is brought back to his castle and just as his fiancée Elizabeth mourns over his body a servant (Minnie) notices that his hand has started to move, which causes her to scream in horror "he's alive", an obvious echo of the creation scene of the first film (around 00:46:00). This equation of creator and creation is repeated later on, when Byron claims that Mary Shelley invented Frankenstein, "a monster conceived from cadavers" (00:03:09) and when, in the last part of the film, Pretorius introduces the new creation as "the bride of

3 Much later, an echo of Whale's *Bride* can be found in Branagh's *Frankenstein* (1994): the voice of Mary Shelley (in the opening of the film) is that of Helena Bonham-Carter, who plays the monster's bride. Branagh, the director, plays Frankenstein.

Frankenstein" (1:07:25). The "bride" herself, horrified by the appearance of the monster, turns to Frankenstein for protection and hides in his arms in a way that makes them look like a romantic couple (1:08:35). As often therefore, the identities of creator and creation are exchanged. A clear instance of this exchange of identities is provided by the scene when the creature tells Frankenstein to "sit down" (around 00:56:00), in striking repetition –and– of the earlier scene when Frankenstein gave his creature exactly the same order.

The revival of Frankenstein and the reversal of the creator/creature relationship is a situation that recurs in a much later film, Terence Fisher's 1958 *The Revenge of Frankenstein*. The film ends on the notion of the identity of creator and creature and the reversal of the sidekick/master relationship insofar as Frankenstein undergoes the same process as his creature through the work of his assistant Hans –what Peter Hutchings describes as "Frankenstein's climactic transformation into one of his own creations"⁴. Jonathan Rigby notes: "The ironic conversion of Frankenstein into his own monster is capped by the even greater irony, when looking at the Hammer series as a whole, that Frankenstein's only completely successful experiment was the work of a novice assistant"⁵. Interestingly in this version, Hans is the name of his assistant, while Karl is the name of the creature. The characters' names take us back to the original Whale adaptations.

The resurrection of Frankenstein is also a feature of the beginning of *Frankenstein Created Woman* (Terence Fisher, 1966) where Frankenstein is further identified to a creature figure through dialogue. As Frankenstein gradually comes back to life, his assistant Doctor Hertz indulges in a variation on the famous line "It's alive", now applying it to Frankenstein himself: "He lives! See, Hans, he is alive" (00:09:00-00:09:05).

A similar conflation of creator and monster is achieved in Freddie Francis's 1964 *Evil of Frankenstein*. In the opening sequence, the editing is used to create both confusion and identification between Frankenstein and two monstrous and frightening figures in deceptive strategies: first we see a close-up of a little girl lost in a wood and a hand reaching towards her, which causes her to scream in fear. A reverse shot reveals the hand to belong to Baron Frankenstein. In the second scene, the rather uncouth character who has just stolen a fresh corpse in a cabin in the woods knocks at the door of a house and the person who opens says "Baron Frankenstein?" Frankenstein then enters the frame from the left and steps in saying, "I am Baron Frankenstein."

In the first instance, it looks very much as if we could analyse the sequence in terms of Baron Frankenstein being the stand-in of his own creature. Minutes later, his experiment being interrupted by an obnoxious priest, he gets mad

4 Hutchings, Peter, *Terence Fisher*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, p. 97.

5 Rigby, Jonathan, *English Gothic: A Century of Horror Cinema*. London: Reynolds & Hearn, 2000, p. 70.

and attempts to throttle the latter, his assistant preventing him from committing murder. The situation is reminiscent of Frankenstein trying to prevent his creature from turning into some killing machine. Later on (00:17:00) Hans becomes narratee to Frankenstein, at his own request. As for the second extract, it is one of many variations on the theme of the double that we find in the Frankenstein films. Indeed, from *Bride of Frankenstein* to *The Revenge of Frankenstein*, *Flesh for Frankenstein* (Paul Morrissey, 1973) and *Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell* (Terence Fisher, 1974), we find numerous instances of films where the assistant turns out to be a double of Frankenstein.

In *Evil of Frankenstein*, as in many Hammer productions, Frankenstein does not have just one but several assistants. His “second assistant”, as it were, is a deaf-mute woman who helps him discover where his creature lay hidden for ten years preserved in ice. She shows similarities with the creature: she is deprived of speech and she is treated as a freak by the villagers.⁶ The “third assistant”, who is required to wake the creature up, is Professor Zoltan, a hypnotist whose show at the local fair includes a brief evocation of Frankenstein's monster, thus reminding us of one of the cinematic origins of the creature, namely *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*. Indeed, Zoltan soon congratulates Frankenstein for the fortune he is going to make by showing his monsters in circuses and funfairs all over the world (00:56:30). In an interesting composition (00:57:40) Zoltan is vividly lit drinking brandy in the foreground while, in the background, Frankenstein is attempting to get the creature to obey and Hans is taking notes on the right. It is only when Zoltan says “do as he says” that the creature stands up. At the end of the sequence, Zoltan and Frankenstein have almost traded places, with a bewildered Frankenstein in the foreground, and a victorious Zoltan leaning on the shoulder of the creature while looking at the baron with a vicious smile (00:58:40). The next sequence opens with a dissolve that reveals the face of the young deaf mute woman, that replaces that of Zoltan: she has been left out of the bargain that has just been struck between the three men (00:59:27). What comes next confirms that *Caligari* is, in effect, a hypotext: Zoltan is going to use the creature in order to commit crimes; he sends it out first to steal gold at night in the village, then on a revenge mission: “there are people in the village I want to punish. Do you understand? They are bad men. They must be punished” (01:05:10).

Many compositions (00:47:00, 00:48:00) also highlight the symmetry between mastermind and assistant who, although one gives orders to the other, are engaged in similar tasks in turn (the performances somehow give us to see expressions that are in contrast with the drift of the dialogue). Around

6 Another deaf-mute female assistant is Sarah in *Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell*. In Mel Brooks's 1974 *Young Frankenstein* we find two sidekicks: Igor and Inga, then a third, the creature itself during the “Putting on the Ritz” sequence.

00:48:30, the shot that reveals the creature's first movement (of the hand) starts with a close-up that suggests the similarity between the hand of the creature and the (gloved) hand of the creator.

The finale reprises that of *Bride of Frankenstein*: we notice similar camera angles and the general motif of the sacrifice of the creature is expanded. The assistant leaving with the deaf mute girl replaces the couple Frankenstein/Elizabeth leaving the laboratory-tower at the end of *Bride of Frankenstein*. The destruction of the laboratory by the creature can be seen as part of the general allegorical plot suggesting the inability of the creator to write the destiny of the creature.

The last stage in our exploration of the motif of the sidekick in cinematic Frankensteins will use a detour through a recent literary *rewriting* of the myth: Peter Ackroyd's *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* (2008) is helpful in the way it foregrounds metafictional issues that retrospectively shed light on the process of reinvention of the figure of Frankenstein, as we would like to submit by way of conclusion⁷.

Narrated in the first person by Victor Frankenstein, Ackroyd's novel turns out to be told by the "patient" of the "Hoxton Mental Asylum for Incurables," as the reader finds out on the very last page (296). The last scene consists in a confrontation between Frankenstein and John Polidori, who reveals to him (and to the reader) that there is no creature:

"Now you see my handiwork," I said.

He came in, holding up a lamp, and stood before us.

"Behold the creature. This is what I have made."

"Where?"

"Here. Before you."

"There is no one here," he said.

"Have you lost your wits? See here. Beside me. Here he sits."

"There is nothing beside you, except an empty chair."

"Nothing? I do not believe you. I know you lie."

"Why should I lie, Victor?"

"To deceive me. To betray me. To enrage me."

"There is nothing here. No one is with you. There is no creature." He walked over to my electrical engines. "This is sad stuff, Victor." (295)

If the reader chooses to believe Polidori, then the crimes committed by the creature were actually the "handiwork" of Frankenstein alone. As we now realize, the creature is presumably the name of Victor's other darker self—some inner sidekick that Victor projected and that, like the more material creature of the films, was necessary for him to get rid of the guilt of the murders. This is why the sidekicks provided by film adaptations, whichever way you pronounce them (ee-gor or "eye-gore"), are likely to be physically deformed, unless they are

7 Ackroyd, Peter, *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2008.

pure embodiments of fantasy, as is often the case of female assistants. We find both in Mel Brooks's *Young Frankenstein*, whose details are sometimes revelatory of the logic this article is trying to uncover. Thus, while young Frankenstein's insistence on the pronunciation of his name forms part of his general strategy to draw a line between sane, hard science, and the kind of criminal speculation his ancestor used to indulge in, his encounter with Igor at the station includes a funny incident which depicts him as somehow delusional—at least if we adopt Igor's point of view. Frankenstein suggests that he can help Igor get rid of his rather bulky hump, thus causing Igor to reply, "What hump?"

The nod to *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* that Ackroyd makes by ending his novel on the revelation that his narrator is a madman may remind us of the dichotomy between Caligari and Cesare in the classic German film. The respectable figure of authority secretly uses the sleepwalking figure to commit murders and spread terror among communities. Similarly, the Frankenstein films we have studied here frequently show the evil scientist using the creature to shun his responsibility, like a classic Gothic villain preying upon his victims or a scientist wreaking havoc upon the natural order.

Ackroyd's rewriting of Shelley's novel is also interesting in at least another respect. His rewriting of the famous creation scene (the "dreary night of November") subtly hints at a parallelism between Frankenstein and Mary Shelley, with the use of the phrase "my odious handiwork" (134), an obvious echo of Shelley's own "hideous progeny." The ending of Ackroyd's novel, which reveals the creature to be fictional, adds to its metafictional status. Again this retrospectively lends support to a vision of the role of the sidekicks of Frankenstein as in fact essential to the making of fiction. Even in Mary Shelley's novel, the role of Walton as co-writer of the tale should not be underestimated:

"Frankenstein discovered that I made notes concerning his history: he asked to see them, and then himself corrected and augmented them in many places; but principally in *giving the life and spirit* to the conversations he held with his enemy" (146, my italics).

This striking phrasing conflates two dimensions of Shelley's book: the notion of storytelling as re-animation of the creature; the moral and religious interpretation of the tale in terms of a rewriting of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (the "enemy" being a common way of referring to Satan himself).

Thus, the never-ending process of rewriting and adapting Shelley's text on stage, on film and—in the case of Ackroyd—on the printed page can be seen as a process of supplementation and replication of displaced potentialities. We create the text as much as it creates us as readers and viewers. In the end the continued transformations of the myth designate and reassign places and question assumptions concerning the process of creation that the novel had

always already addressed –from the creation of Man through the Miltonian and scientific intertexts through to literary creation with the invitation to an allegorical reading implied by the 1831 preface.

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Abstract

In Mary Shelley's novel, Frankenstein has no assistant and gives birth to the creature alone. In the film versions, however, he is often supported by one or several assistants. According to the logic of the supplement, what looks like a mere adjunct turns out to double Frankenstein's identity in many ways that unveil its deferred and different significations. Frankenstein's cinematic sidekicks might well be expressions of his interal duality, *insidekicks* comparable to those the "hideous progeny" gives in the fertile womb of its mother.

Keywords

Sidekicks, Frankenstein, film, adaptation.

Résumé

Dans le roman de Mary Shelley, Frankenstein n'a pas d'assistant et donne naissance, seul, à la créature. Dans les versions cinématographiques, en revanche, il est souvent flanqué d'un, voire de plusieurs assistants. Selon la logique du supplément, ce qui semble n'être qu'un ajout s'avère redoubler l'identité de Frankenstein de bien des façons qui en dévoilent les significations différées. Les sidekicks cinématographiques de Frankenstein pourraient bien être des expressions de sa dualité interne, des *insidekicks* tels les coups que donne la « hideuse progéniture » dans le ventre fécond de sa génitrice.

Mots-clés

Faire-valoir, Frankenstein, cinéma, adaptation.