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Monstrosity as Machine: Dracula and Frankenstein’s Monster

Jack Halberstam says that "Monsters are meaning machines". In his quote, he refers to monsters as a negative identity, and to monstrosity as a technology. Technology can be wielded, and indeed monstrosity can too. By defining characteristics of a monster, one is creating a negative identity that exists outside of accepted social norms where those norms are the positive. The further detailed one gets in describing a monster, the more elaborately they describe their understanding of normal. This is not unlike what happens when a sculptor creates a relief in stone, but instead of defining characteristics of a monster the artist decides what part of the whole material needs to be removed. And as the artist removes more and more, a sculpture takes shape much like how the defining of a monster allows for the definition of norms to take shape. Monsters, in this way, are machines in how they're able to churn out such definitions. What’s more—if I’m allowed to expand on this—one can describe a person or thing with all the non-monstrous descriptors they please, yet these too become monstrous in the aggregate once something monstrous enough is attributed to the subject. This is like the fallacy sometimes referred to as poisoning the well, you may see it when someone is outed as having been a serial killer or mass shooter. After people find out, they begin to look at other aspects and say things like, “he was too nice,” or “in all these years he lived next door, he rarely said hi”. These aren’t inherently monstrous characteristics, but once tainted by something monstrous enough, other things begin to be seen in that vain.

In Bram Stoker’s Dracula, a vampire named Dracula from modern day Romania attempts to move to London, presumably for the opportunity to prey on a larger population and to establish a community of new vampires via the transfer of blood.

As it is illustrated, the monstrosity of stoker’s Dracula is his predatory characteristic. His propensity to find, stalk, seduce, and either transform or kill others is what sticks out more than anything else. This, in and of itself is clear enough, but what might get lost to some, is what this means about his other attributes. He is foreign, coming into the home city of the book’s protagonists, having purchased a staggering number of properties—50. When considered in the context of the more monstrous aspects, Dracula as a monster is implicitly describing foreigners themselves as monstrous by association. Further still, even though I can’t recall Dracula’s intentions for coming to London ever being explicitly stated in the book, it becomes easier to think of Dracula’s intentions as for gaining an entrenched position in a British city that allows him to transform and control an untold number of locals. Had he simply been an immigrant, with no intention to assimilate the local population, and no apparent predatory behavior the result would not so easily be reached. In vilifying Dracula, the foreigner through vampirism, the relief that remains is the local Brit as the accepted norm. Though outside of the topic of monstrosity as a tool, but furthering the idea introduced by it, the white Anglo Saxon protagonists continue on to expel the foreign vampire back to his home and kill him and in so doing Stoker portrays them as Heroes!

Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein is as well known, if not more so than Bram Stoker’s Dracula. In it, the doctor Victor Frankenstein—filled with grief over his deceased mother—performs experiments in reanimation until he is finally able to bring to life a being made up of various pieces from corpses, creating what is commonly referred to as The Monster.

It’s abundantly clear by Shelley’s expressly referring to it as such, that Frankenstein’s creation is a monster. What is interesting here, is that it [the monster] is referred to in this way almost immediately, before much about the being can be known, allowing the reader to contemplate that a main point of monstrosity here is the act of animation. Surely monstrosity can be seen in both Frankenstein, and his creation, and can be a point of debate.

As a quick aside, I personally find myself conflicted about whether or not to consider the monster as monstrous. Sure it’s not in control of its emotions and lashes out in at times lethal ways. But it seems to me that if you made a 2-year-old child 8-foot-tall and strong as all hell, that kid may very well be lethal at times too. The way I see it, what makes the monster monstrous is the concept that anything born of a monstrous act is itself monstrous. But there’s issues too with this idea because It wouldn’t seem right to say that children born as a result of rape are inherently monstrous, it would seem these children are as innocent and normal as any other from their point of creation.

In the story of Frankenstein and his monster, what I find most interesting is to analyze the act of animation itself as monstrous, and how that effects how attributes of the actor—Victor Frankenstein—are portrayed. What isn’t arguable, is that this act was taken under extremely risky experimental circumstances. It is somewhat unique in this story that one can conceive of separating the act from the actor, and label science itself as the true monster. As science is at its heart a process of discovery, the meaning machine would imply that consistency and technological conservatism are the accepted and promoted norms.

However interesting this last thought is, there is more meaning to be had when attributing this act to Victor, because there is more than the act itself that we can paint with the brush of monstrosity. His interest in science, even that which lies outside of more extreme interests of animation and galvanism, are then painted as reckless disregard for the risks involved in discovery. This says more than the act itself does, it is not just the act but the scientific process, and those who believe in it that are monstrous in this context. As a quick note, however, I’d be remiss if I didn’t point out that I see some difficulty in what this means as an accepted norm. Are we to believe then, that the norm to be accepted is to be a believer who does not doubt their experiences and perceived limits in the world around them?

Even though certain anecdotes have their weak points, the monster as meaning machine has ample value in its utility to both a story teller and as a tool for readers to better understand what may be implied when a monster is depicted—however and wherever they may be depicted.

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