

# Evolution of the *Frankenstein* Myth in Adaptation: From Progenitor to Popular Culture

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## Abstract

The *Frankenstein* Myth began with Mary Shelley's publication in 1818 which is believed to be the birth of speculative fiction. In Shelley's *Frankenstein*, homoerotic subtexts such as the "Homosexual Panic Trope" can be perceived between the creature and creator. The sexual revolution of the 1970s brought with it greater representation for queer and disabled bodies in science fiction through the appropriation of *Frankenstein* Myth to represent 2SLGBTQA+ individuals. Early movie examples of queer characters include *The Bride of Frankenstein*, with modern examples including *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Flesh for Frankenstein*. These queer monsters challenged dominant heteronormative relationships during the twentieth century and has continued to gain momentum with historically inspired films and TV shows such *Gods and Monsters* and *Penny Dreadful*. Science fiction films such as *Splice* continue to reexamine gender and sexuality through the *Frankenstein* Myth that expands upon the role of monstrosity and disability in relation to transgender and queer theory. The *Frankenstein* Myth is profoundly influential, though the queer nature of its development is often overlooked. *Frankenstein* represents a biopunk post human condition where gender can be changed, a reflection of medical science's ability to reassign one's physical gender expression, as explored by transgender and queer theorists. This paper will explore the development of the *Frankenstein* Myth and its impact on transgender representation. Queer characters challenge gendered and sexual oppression, highlighting the importance of 2SLGBTQA+ inclusion in fantasy, speculative fiction and horror genres dealing with the trans human subject.

**Keywords:** *Frankenstein* Myth, queer and transgender theory, transhumanism, biopunk

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## Introduction

The *Frankenstein* Myth has often been replicated and adapted from a scientism narrative since Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein* in 1818. It involves the reanimation of the dead, leading to a moral downfall as crimes against nature. The Victorian cultural obsession with purity was more about power dynamics regarding sexuality and gender than about religious piety as Foucault describes it: “the greatest reserve was counseled when dealing with sins of purity” (19). Acts condemned as “crimes contrary to nature” referred to homosexuality, sodomy and caressing body contact (Foucault 38). The homosexual became an identity concept in the nineteenth-century and was believed to exist in a state of habitual sin that violated ancient canonical codes against sodomy as an action representing inverted masculinity and “a hermaphroditism of the soul” (Foucault 43). The violation of ancient and Victorian social codes makes queer villainy especially impactful against heteronormative power structures.

The intimate and dysfunctional relationship between Victor Frankenstein and his creation has homoerotic undertones and variations of the dysfunctional creator/monster queer relationship. The destructive relationship often takes the form of a “Homosexual Panic Trope” present in Shelley’s and other classic gothic texts, and mirrors homosexual persecution in Victorian England (McGavran 48). Doctor Frankenstein’s fatal obsession with his creature is a tragic example of the gothic trope, as Frankenstein is both attracted to and repulsed by his creature. Since “Queer” refers to any practices and behaviours without reproductive goals nor regard for social and economic factors (Smith 388), queer characters fit so well into the gothic genre, which examines unusual and unnatural characters and occurrences. As well, rejection of

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the traditional modes of storytelling has been a common trait of gothic literature originating with authors like Shelley, with her use of gore and the ethical dilemmas of scientism. Perhaps this is why avant-garde was so successful at portraying grotesque disability combined with eroticism; it has much in common with the gothic (Harding 98).

Speculative fiction adaptations such as Logan's *Penny Dreadful* works through issues of monstrosity and sexuality in ways that challenge heteronormative power dynamics by depicting homosexual activity between two male-identifying monsters (Strother 137). Picart hypothesizes that "the hybrid offshoots of *Frankenstein* horror cinemyth draw from contradictory and competing meaning systems-as evidence in the perpetual war between ideologically progressive and conservative forces" (4). *Frankenstein* challenged conventional literary forms at the time of its publication by focusing on reanimation through science instead of mysticism. The grotesque can represent disabled bodies from queer and trans disability theory readings of gothic texts that makes the *Frankenstein* Myth revolutionary from a sexual and gender perspective.

### **Queer Gothic and "Homosexual Panic Trope"**

Scott's essay "Queer Gothic" argues that powerfully charged homoerotic interpretations of Shelley's text, such as Lynd Ward's 1934 illustrations of *Frankenstein*, convey the terror and excitement of the "Homosexual Panic Trope" common to gothic literature (Scott 400, 441). The "Homosexual Panic Trope" is a compelling argument that suggests *Frankenstein* can be interpreted from a queer lens further explored in cinemyth adaption. Queer gothic literature

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and adaptation, especially Logan's *Penny Dreadful*, teaches audiences about gender and sexuality without being constrained by stereotypical heteronormative and patriarchal representations normalized by popular culture.

Queer readings of *Frankenstein* explore the commonalities between the monster body and the queer and trans body and have relevance to 2SLGBTQA+ theories of gender and identity. Stryker discusses the power of the *Frankenstein* Myth in terms of gender theory and relates the post-human creature to the post-operative transgender body as a metaphor for the post-op experience of being reborn. This post-human condition has its roots in the Gothic steampunk subgenres cyberpunk and biopunk that lends well to transgender and queer narratives that explore life beyond the margin of what is the dominant heteronormative perspective. Thus, *Frankenstein* birthed a queer gothic mythos that has penetrated areas of speculative fiction, horror, and fantasy.

The versatility of a queer *Frankenstein* Myth as a gothic narrative technique is contrasted by the human qualities mirrored, for better or worse, by character relationships on screen. For example, the 1931 black and white film *Bride of Frankenstein* explores the homoerotic tension between Dr. Pretorius and Dr. Frankenstein while highlighting the dysfunctional nature of creator and mentor relationships. These then-controversial films are now available to a broader audience through streaming services, further expanding the transnational influence of the *Frankenstein* Myth adaptations. Queer *Frankenstein* films of relevance include the cult film *Rocky Horror Picture Show* which showcases the queer and

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proud cross-dresser Frank-n-Furter who creates a muscular man sex slave, and Condon's 1998 film *Gods and Monsters* that fictionalizes the last days of director James Whale in ways that are evocative and emotionally unsettling. Whale directed the first two black and white *Frankenstein* films for Universal Studios therefore carrying a lot of significance regarding the development of the creator narrative in 20<sup>th</sup> Century cinema. Rarer films such as Morrissey's *Flesh for Frankenstein* which sexualized the *Frankenstein* Myth, the campy horror comedy *Frankenhooker* and the unethical science horror *Splice* explore sexual deviance through camp and horror genres. These shows and films embrace different levels of camp and queer humour as a powerful subversive force, and a theatrical form of extravagance, aesthetic and sensibility which transgress traditional morals and means of production (King para. 4).

### ***Frankenstein as Horror Cinemyth Adaptation***

Shelley's queer legacy begins with the birth of the socially and sexually rejected monster, a victim of Victor's homosexual panic and attraction to his creature (McGavran 48). According to queer theorist Sedgwick, early Gothic novels embodied homophobic mechanisms and thematics that both defined and limited the genre (92). The suggested but never fulfilled homosexual desire in Shelley's classic gothic novel is actualized through cinema adaptation and variations of the *Frankenstein* Myth. From classic cinematography to post-modern avant-garde, *Frankenstein's* queer cinema adaptations grew in number during the 1970s. This was a time of sexual and political liberation in the international art world in the form of camp as a means of queer resistance against stigma (Cleto 89).

### Rocky Horror Picture Show

One example is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show's* Dr. Frank-N-Furter played by cis-gendered actor Tim Curry, the satirical transexual mad scientist parodies Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein and mocks gothic homosexual panic. The transexual reveal of Dr. Furter in the elevator scene is iconic and is replicated in the scene where Rocky, the creature, is awakened. The relationship between creator and creature experiences power and gender role inversions in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, as the transexual mad scientist beds and weds the muscular dimwit hunk creature Rocky, a parody of the brilliant yet hideous monster in *Frankenstein*. Instead of murdering Victor's bride, Catherine (as in Shelley's novel), the creature Rocky is seduced by the protagonist, Janet, who is engaged to Brad. Frank-N-Furter has sex with all three vulnerable characters: Brad, who is ashamed of his sexual activity with men; Janet, who regrets cheating on Brad; and Rocky, who was built with only half a brain and does not understand what is progressing in the narrative. Instead of running from his creature, as Victor does in the novel, Dr. Frank-N-Furter releases the hounds to capture the estranged creature. This inversion of the creature/creator relationship refers to the evolution of the Frankenstein myth to embrace the queer gothic, instead of running from it as in the original novel. Frank-N-Furter accepts queerness and successfully acts out Victor Frankenstein's unfulfilled desires, becoming the othered body who maintains power and control.

The unfolding of Frank-N-Furter's transgender body in the modern production of *Rocky Horror* breaks social boundaries, much like the nature of Victorian gothic narratives, but with

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the intention of challenging homophobia and transphobia and raising consciousness while combating capitalistic gender and sexuality norms. As well, the othering and solitude experienced by the creature in *Frankenstein* parallel the social isolation experienced by queer 2SLGBTQA+ people. This transition from a repressive Victorian text into a queer breakdown of social norms transforms the queer gothic legacy from one of shame and fear into a dynamic of provocative fearlessness. Shelley's queer gothic legacy is fully realized, reaching an apex of impact with Laverne Cox's Dr. Frank-N-Furter in a modern live performance of the cult hit *The Rocky Horror Picture Show: Let's Do the Time Warp Again* that embodies the scientist's transsexual nature (Ortega 2016). As a talented and charismatic transwoman, Cox provides the personal experience of trans identity that makes her Frank-N-Furter performance an authentic trans body experience. Although the language around transsexuality has changed in modern times, the performance of Frank-N-Furter by a transgender female allows for a more authentic performance of a trans body.

### **Whale's Adaptations of *Frankenstein***

Another film, the classic *Bride of Frankenstein* by gay director James Whale (1935), has a strong queer subtext. Homosexual Dr. Pretorius tries to divide Victor Frankenstein and Elizabeth with nefarious intentions when after he “[gives] Elizabeth a thoroughly disgusted look, Pretorius insists on being alone with the young baron” (Sedgwick 114). In this example, the queer Dr. Pretorius is a villain who tries to undermine the heterosexual relationship with the seduction of forbidden science. Pretorius subverts the sexual and gender norms of the

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period that can be compared to the transgression of Victorian norms (Foucault 38). Pretorius is especially disruptive to the heteronormative protagonist, as the elder violates the social rules of the mentor and student relationship.

*Gods and Monsters* is a fictional 1950s period piece about Whale in the final days of his life as he confides his regrets to a young man before committing suicide. The film explores the relationship between Whale and his handyman-turned-confidant and inverts the negative queer relationship of Dr. Pretorius and Frankenstein as a positive yet problematic loving friendship. A beautiful film about mental illness, homosexuality and the frailty of human suffering, *Gods and Monsters* provides an endearing yet tragic end to the classic queer *Frankenstein* myth that examines homophobia in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century through the old man's recollection of how gay men struggled in the 1950.

### **Adaptations of Disability in the Avant-Grade, Camp, and the Grotesque**

Camp was appropriated to challenge conventional interpretations of art and literature (Harding 91). Andy Warhol's *Flesh for Frankenstein* is a controversial film banned in many countries at the time of its release due to its blend of avant-garde and pornographic themes. However, it also became a commercial success. Paul Morrissey is credited as the director in all but the Italian versions of the *Flesh for Frankenstein*, with a dedication to Andy Warhol, a close friend and contemporary. Warhol was shot in 1968 and left with scars that required him to wear a corset to protect his incision which influenced themes of scarification with the creature as a disabled body striking attention (Harding 92). Warhol saw the potential in the *Frankenstein*

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narrative's ability to bridge the "experimental aesthetics of the vanguard and the popular culture preoccupations of the social mainstream" (92). Warhol's scars are the film's main subject, combining graphic 3D technology with semi-pornographic images while relying on characters, imagery, and settings like Whale's iconic *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein*. One example is the Baron's servant Otto whom Fritz inspires from the classic Universal Pictures versions (93-4).

The campy and avant-garde aspects of *Flesh for Frankenstein* pushed the boundaries of art and horror that challenged sexual oppression in the 1970s. Baron Frankenstein engages in sadistic and sexual occult practices to resurrect a male and female pair of creatures, who appear like docile sex objects in the film. The film includes necrosexuality in the resurrection process of the Baron's zombie bride and groom, whom he reanimates using the viscera as a source of power and sexual obsession (MacCormack 349). The homoerotic tension between the Baron and Otto is emphasized during the female zombie's resurrection in which Frankenstein mounts the zombie and copulates with her entrails. This imagery deals with the grotesque through the lens of a mutated and disabled body. Otto witnesses the exchange with emphasized focus, seemingly attracted to both creator and the created. The avant-garde and gothic approach turns Warhol's pain inside out as the male and female zombies are disemboweled (MacCormack 357). The prosthetic disembowelment is a metaphor for Warhol's suffering and is an example of a shift toward disability politics in theatre and film in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (McKelvey 315). The female zombie is accidentally wounded by Otto's oral rape of her surgical scars, and the male dies by self-inflicted wounds

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after impaling the ecstatic Baron's liver with a pole (Morrissey 1974). The film's pessimism examines the darker sides of human lust and transgresses against societal norms by sexualizing death and resurrection of heteronormative procreation.

Gender takes on new meaning in *Frankenstein* Myth adaptations, necrosexuality and reassignment surgeries change the gothic body from a heterosexual mode of production into an object of assemblage and desire. Gender reassignment surgery is reflected in trans fictional fantasy and sci-fi narratives in the form of the queer-gendered reveal. Henenlotter's *Frankenhooker* is a campy queer *Frankenstein* Myth that highlights the protagonist, inventor Jeffery Franken, as an unredeemable villain who kills a group of female prostitutes to utilize their body parts to reanimate his decapitated girlfriend. This adaptation blends two sci and horror tropes, the oversexualized femme fatale and the hypermasculine mad scientist, but turns the tables on these trope cliches by transforming hypermasculine men into gendered scientific experiments (Szwedky & Pribbernow 321). Jeffrey is punished accordingly for his sexist ways, as his reassembled fiancé reanimates him after he is murdered by the prostitutes' pimp (Henenlotter). Aside from some mild female foreplay while on drugs, the queer *Frankenstein* Myth in this film adaptation is more about gender inversion and the gothic body. The appropriation of sex worker body parts calls attention to the toxic possessive nature of hypermasculinity that objectifies the female form. In the climax, there is a gendered reversal where Elizabeth sews Jeffrey's head onto a female's body which inverts the male creator and female creation dynamic. According to postmodern feminist critique, *Frankenhooker* has had her vengeance reconstructing and castrating the bourgeois male perspective which questions

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heterosexist modernism and its many forms of oppression (Mazza 1991). Gender and sexuality are much more fluid from a queer gothic perspective, as narratives revolve around the transgression of moral norms making it a likely home for queer monsters to challenge the dominant heteronormative belief structures.

Another female creator/created dynamic is found in the 2009 sci-fi horror film *Splice*, in which married genetic scientists embody the dramatically bad parent aspect of the *Frankenstein* Myth. In this gothic biohorror film, Schmeink explored the emotional relationships between the creator and its creators (344). Psychoanalytic approaches to this film reveal a double Electra/Oedipus complex as the hermaphrodite creation is seduced by the father as a girl, then switches gender and rapes the mother (344-5). The effect on film is complicated and disturbing: “through the inversion of the relational matrix and the subversion of the gender roles, *Splice* stresses creation and the responsibility of parenthood as the main problematic of the *Frankenstein* myth” (348). Adrian Brody’s character tries to drown the creature as a child, and Sarah Polly’s tortured mother character role maims the creation’s tail to forcibly remove her stinger. Dealing with gothic themes such as body horror, maiming, child abuse and incest, *Splice* is a disturbing narrative about the dangers of neglect as the creature murders the father, rapes and impregnates the mother, and then dies by the mother’s hand. It is a hermaphrodite bio creation, another example of a transgender gothic queer body in *Frankenstein* Myth adaptation that challenges gender and sexual identity norms while advocating the alternative gender self-acceptance and body positivity.

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### Reinventing the *Frankenstein* Myth in *Penny Dreadful*

Finally, *Penny Dreadful* weaves the *Frankenstein* Myth into other intersecting character storylines to adapt and retool the gothic narrative. This Victorian-period television show alludes to other gothic classics such as Matthew G. Lewis' battle with Satan in *The Monk*, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Mina's descent into darkness in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and battling Egyptian creatures inspired by Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*. In *Penny Dreadful*, the parental relationship is strained with a mutual sense of guilt and betrayal in the events leading up to Mina's capture by the series' feral version of Dracula, known as "The Master." The possession storyline is juxtaposed by Frankenstein's relationship with his firstborn creation, a monster-turned-theatrical stagehand, who stalks his creator and readily murders to provoke the scientist into creating a bride. This series explores the relationship between monstrosity and sexuality using cinematic techniques such as lighting and camera movement to represent male and female bodies as equally erotic (Monterrubio Ibáñez 17; Strother 138). The marginalization of homoerotic sensuality adds a vulnerability to the characters, who are also monsters in the cultural and literal sense. The gothic queer body in *Penny Dreadful* reinvents the queer *Frankenstein* Myth, exploring the psychological and social relationships with the self and other.

### Conclusion

Through adaptation, the queer *Frankenstein* Myth has expanded beyond the "Homosexual Panic Trope" attributed to Shelley's published novel to include themes of homosexuality in *Bride of Frankenstein*, and the transgender gothic body in *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (both

1973 and 2016 versions) *Frankenhooker*, and *Splice*. It was also adapted by avant-garde artists such as Warhol and Morrisson in *Flesh for Frankenstein* and is reinvented today in the mythological hybridization of *Penny Dreadful*. Queer gothic adaptation examines the themes of monstrous bodies and the fragility and resilience of human nature, to move beyond heteronormative tropes toward inclusive representations of gender and sexuality.

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