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"CHILDREN SHOULD PLAY WITH DEAD THINGS": TRANSFORMING FRANKENSTEIN IN TIM BURTON'S FRANKENWEENIE - ERIN HAWLEY

OCTOBER 7, 2015 BY ANGELAN

1

Abstract: *In this paper, I explore the possibility of retelling Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein in a children's media text. Like most material within the horror genre, Frankenstein is not immediately accessible to children and its key themes and tropes have traditionally been read as articulations of "adult" concerns. Yet Frankenstein is also a tale with surprisingly child-centric themes. With this in mind, I consider how the Frankenstein tale has been transformed within the constructed space of a child's worldview in Tim Burton's 2012 animated film Frankenweenie. I argue that the film neither simplifies nor expresses great fidelity to Shelley's novel, but instead cultivates a sense of curiosity and cultural literacy regarding the Frankenstein tale and the horror genre itself.*



Sparky the dog. Frankenweenie (Tim Burton, 2012)

The horror genre has long been considered "off limits" to children. From the rewriting of fairytales to erase their violent and scary content (Zipes 1993) to the literal defacement of eighteenth century children's literature to remove traces of the Gothic (Townshend 2008), efforts to disentangle children's texts from horror have given rise to the notion that children *cannot* derive the same sort of pleasure from "being scared" that adults can. Recent scholarship has suggested, however, that children can and do take pleasure in horror material. In her work on child cinema audiences in Britain, Sarah Smith has found that horror films in the 1930s were "extremely popular with children" due to the "mixed

feelings of fear and fun" they evoked (2005, 58). Writing of James Whale's film *Frankenstein* (1931), Smith observes that children were "fascinated by its appeal and attended in droves" (2005, 70). Similarly, David Buckingham's research into children as horror viewers reveals that, while fright reactions to horror material can be powerful and long-lived, child audiences also take pleasure in the conventions of the horror text – they enjoy watching "evil destroyed" but also watching it "triumph"; they enjoy the feeling of fear itself and, like adult viewers, find pleasure in horror's momentary destabilisation of societal norms (1996, 112-116).

The pleasures of horror from a child's perspective have also been explored by Neil Gaiman (2006), who tells an interesting story about his daughter's fascination with James Whale's *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). "My daughter Maddy loves the idea of *The Bride of Frankenstein*," he writes: "she's ten". Such fascination leads to dress-ups and play, and eventually to young Maddy and her friend watching the horror classic under Gaiman's supervision. When confronted with the movie itself, however, the enthusiasm wanes: the kids *don't get it*. As Gaiman observes, "They enjoyed it, wriggling and squealing in all the right places. But once it was done, the girls had an identical reaction. 'Is it over?' asked one. 'That was weird,' said the other, flatly. They were as unsatisfied as an audience could be".

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To some extent, this reaction is not surprising. *The Bride of Frankenstein* is based on Mary Shelley's Gothic novel *Frankenstein*, a text that – like most material within the horror genre – is usually read as an articulation of decidedly *adult* concerns. From the original novel to its more recent manifestations in popular media, the Frankenstein tale is peppered with depictions of violence and violation, murder and misogyny; across the long history of its remaking in popular culture it has been interpreted as a story about genetic manipulation (Waldby 2002, 29), sexual transgression (Mellor 2003, 12-13), and post-partum depression (Johnson 1982, 6), to name just a few of its more adult-centric resonances.

Yet *Frankenstein* is also a tale with surprisingly child-centric themes. At its heart, it is a story about what it means to be an outsider and what it means to encounter, experience, and negotiate otherness; these are themes that have more recently been explored by writers of children's and young adult fiction from Roald Dahl to Stephenie Meyer. As Barbara Johnson has pointed out, *Frankenstein* is also essentially a story about parent/child relationships: with its themes of monstrosity and technology, Johnson tells us, Shelley's novel explores "the love-hate relation we have toward our children" (1982, 6). Building on Johnson we can suggest that by offering us a glimpse of the world through the monster's eyes the novel also briefly presents this "love-hate relation" from the child's perspective, and that decades of Frankenstein movies continue this by offering the misunderstood monster as an icon of all that is unruly, confused, and frightening about childhood itself.

The story Gaiman tells about his daughter's fascination with *The Bride of Frankenstein* and her reaction – "that was weird" – to the movie itself is a lovely articulation of the way children may be simultaneously drawn to and locked out of the Frankenstein tale. It is interesting to note that Gaiman's daughter and her friend were not frightened by the film or put off by its horror elements (indeed, they seemed to enjoy this aspect of the movie, "wriggling and squealing in all the right places"); instead, it was a certain indefinable strangeness that informed their ultimately "unsatisfied" reaction. All this suggests that children *can* engage meaningfully and pleasurably with material in the horror genre, especially if that material is rewritten with a child's perspective in mind.

In this article, I explore the relationship between *Frankenstein* and young audiences and consider the possibility of retelling Shelley's novel in a children's media text. My analysis is inspired by the recent appearance of characters from Shelley's novel and its various adaptations in three children's animated films: *Frankenweenie* (Tim Burton, 2012), in which a boy named Victor Frankenstein reanimates his dog Sparky after a tragic car accident; *Igor* (Anthony Leondis, 2008), in which a hunch-backed laboratory assistant brings a female monster to life; and *Hotel Transylvania* (Genndy Tartakovsky, 2012), in which the Frankenstein monster and his Bride join Dracula and a host of other characters from the horror genre. This trend towards engaging the Frankenstein myth in children's media begs the question: how have such texts made Shelley's tale accessible to young audiences, and with what degree of success?

Below, I take up this question with specific reference to Tim Burton's *Frankenweenie*. Not only is Burton's film (as we shall see) the most highly regarded and in some senses the most successful of these three texts, it is also the most complex and arguably does not "dumb down" its source material. My analysis of *Frankenweenie* will examine how the film constructs a "child's eye view" and transforms the Frankenstein tale so that its characters, themes, and narratives make sense within the imagined space of a child's world. I will demonstrate that Burton's film captures the spirit of its source text without necessarily striving for fidelity. I will also consider some of *Frankenweenie*'s extra-textual material, exploring how reviews, product tie-ins, and even the film's intertextual references contribute to its overall project of *transforming* but not *simplifying* the Frankenstein tale for children.

Adaptation, simplification, and transformation



Victor and his dog Sparky from Tim Burton's homage to the

Frankenweenie is a stop-motion animation inspired by Burton's earlier live-action film of the same name. Here, the Frankenstein tale is relocated to one of Burton's characteristic suburbia-scapes ("New Holland"), complete with manicured lawns, hedge sculptures, and monstrously mediocre residents. Within this new narrative space, "Victor Frankenstein" is a child: a troubled, creative loner who spends his time tinkering in the attic, playing with

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Frankenstein story, Frankenweenie (2012).

his beloved dog Sparky, and making movies. Tragedy enters Victor's life when Sparky is killed in a car accident. Inspired by his science teacher, the delightfully dour Mr Rzykruski, Victor steals Sparky's body from the pet cemetery, drags the corpse back to the family home, and reanimates him in the attic. When Victor's classmates learn his secret, they try to replicate the experiment. Chaos ensues as pets both living and dead are transformed into monsters who descend on New Holland, leading to a climactic showdown at the windmill overlooking the town.

The relationship between *Frankenweenie* and its source text, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, is complex. Burton's film both diverges from and intersects with Shelley's novel, defining itself through patterns of fleeting fidelity and moments of spectacular transformation. At the same time, the film makes reference to a plethora of other texts both within and beyond the Frankenstein mythos, thereby demonstrating the ways in which "adaptation" approaches and merges with "intertextuality" (see Elliott 2014; Martin 2009; Leitch 2003). In other words, *Frankenweenie* is by no means a "faithful" retelling of Shelley's *Frankenstein*. It should be noted, however, that Shelley's novel – despite being adapted many times in the centuries since its publication, across different media and in different genres – has not tended to inspire fierce fidelity in adapting authors. As Albert Lavalley points out, *Frankenstein* tends to be "viewed by the playwright or the screenwriter as a mythic text, an occasion for the writer to let loose his own fantasies or to stage what he feels is dramatically effective, to remain true to the central core of the myth, [but] often to let it interact with fears and tensions of the current time" (1979, 245).

The notion of "fidelity" to an original text as the means of measuring an adaptation's success, strength, and value has itself been thoroughly contested and problematised in recent years. Fuelled particularly by the work of adaptation theorists such as Robert Stam (2005), Thomas Leitch (2003, 2007), and Imelda Whelehan (1999), this problematisation of the fidelity model has been an intervention in established ways of thinking about the relationship between an adaptive text and its source material. As Will Brooker observes, though, fidelity criticism may be "outmoded and discredited within academia" but it has managed to "retain its currency within popular discourse" (2012, 45); in particular, it still informs the critical reception of films that adapt well-known novels or works of literature. Even within academia, moreover, fidelity criticism has tended to linger in discussions of *children's* media texts, particularly when the texts in question are retellings of classic or literary works. It is often assumed that such adaptations carry some degree of responsibility for encouraging children to read and connect with the source material (Napolitano 2009, 81); in this way, the issue of fidelity becomes more urgent in the context of children's media.

Concerns about fidelity in children's adaptations are compounded by the issue of simplification. *Frankenweenie*, for instance, is both an adaptation of a literary text and a reworking of classic horror films within the space of a child's animation: the question we may immediately wish to ask, then, is "what has been lost in this process?". Both Shelley's novel and the films of James Whale are today held in high regard as cultural classics, while the Frankenstein myth itself is a repository of ideas and cultural conversations about selfhood, embodiment, subjectivity, life, and death. Potentially, the simplification of this myth for children would involve more than just a strategic removal of violent and sexual content in order to achieve a PG rating: it would be a process of dumbing down, a cleaning up of a story that works best when it is *not* "clean". It would also be a form of commercialisation, a reduction of a complex tale so that it can be packaged and marketed to young audiences.

These problems of simplification, commodification, and the dumbing down of source material are frequently mentioned by analysts of children's adaptations, especially when the adaptation in question is a Disney product (as is *Frankenweenie*). Writing in 1965 for the journal *Horn Book*, Frances Sayers refers to the "sweet" and "saccharine" nature of Disney adaptations and argues that, in order to both address and construct a child or family audience, Disney texts present life as lacking "any conflict except the obvious conflict of violence" (609). Her concerns have been echoed by Hastings, who writes of the "conscious effort [by Disney] to produce children's movies with no alarming moral ambiguities" (1993, 84). Zipes, in turn, laments the way Disney has "'violated' the literary genre of the fairytale and packaged his versions in his name through the merchandising of books, toys, clothing, and records" (1995, 38). Marc Napolitano's work on the "Disneyfication of Dickens" is particularly relevant here because it explores the intersection between adult literature and children's media. Napolitano argues that the films *Oliver & Company* and *The Muppet Christmas Carol* – both Disney texts that retell canonical works by Charles Dickens – are "simplified and sanitized adaptations of Dickens that were marketed to families by the Walt Disney Company" (2009, 80). In *Oliver & Company* in particular, Napolitano argues, Disney "lightens the material significantly and uses cute, cuddly animal characters, all of whom would be reproduced as stuffed toys, McDonald's Happy Meal

prizes... and countless other types of child-friendly merchandise to market the film to kids" (2009, 82).

All such criticism of Disney's treatment of literary material is important, and functions as part of a wider interrogation of the seemingly "apolitical" and "critically untouchable" world of children's animated film (Bell, Haas, and Sells 1995, 2). As analysts of Disney products, it is essential that we disentangle ourselves from our own enjoyment of the Disney "magic"; this is part of what Zipes has called "Breaking the Disney Spell" (1995). At the same time, however, claims about "Disneyfication" can be problematic when they make sweeping assumptions about young audiences, their levels of media literacy, and the ways in which they engage with media texts. In other words, when accusing a children's text of simplification we ourselves risk making an overly simplified reading of the child audience. The charge of simplification becomes especially problematic when it lapses into what Semenza (2008) has termed the "dumbing down cliché": the notion that adapting a literary text for children must *always* and *automatically* involve a process of reduction and commodification.

In the context of these concerns, *Frankenweenie* provides us with an interesting example because it *resists* the simplification process and simultaneously encourages its young audience to reconnect with the source material through means other than fidelity. The film's refusal to "Disneyfy" the Frankenstein tale is signified by the transformation of the Disney logo in the opening sequence: lightning strikes the familiar Disney castle and the picture turns black and white, a suggestion that there will be no fairies or cute, singing animals in the film that follows; that there will be no attempts to render the Frankenstein tale "safe" and "simple" even as it is opened up for young viewers. While this transformation of the Disney logo is indicative of the mediating presence of Burton in the adaptation process, and of the supposed clash between the Disney and Burton brands, it can also be read as a resistance to simplification – a suggestion that the film will be "Frankenstein for kids" but not "Frankenstein lite".

In what follows, I explore how *Frankenweenie* transforms (rather than simplifies) the Frankenstein tale within the imagined space of a child's world. I use the term "transformation" with an awareness of its applicability to studies of animation as an art form, a technology, and a mode of representation. As both Susan Napier (2000) and Paul Wells (1998) have noted, animation has metamorphic qualities that distinguish it from live-action cinema and that manifest at the levels of story, body, and space. Wells has also argued that the process of adapting a literary text into animated film can involve "an act of literal transformation which carries with it mythic and metaphoric possibility" (2007, 201). In this way, the idea of transformation allows us to discuss children's animated films as adaptations without making assumptions about animation as a medium (for instance, that it is inferior to live-action cinema) or about children as audiences (for instance, that they are incapable of understanding textual and intertextual complexities).

Transformation and the child's eye view

In her analysis of the filmic adaptation of Maurice Sendak's beloved picture book *Where the Wild Things Are*, Sarah Annunziato (2014) explores the construction of a "child's eye view", arguing that the film – while drawing attention and public comment for its scariness and mature themes – is appropriate for young audiences because it imagines the world as seen through a child's eyes. Similar claims can be made of *Frankenweenie*, which constructs a child's view of the world and repeatedly invites its viewers to inhabit this childlike space. In both these films, the creation of a child's eye view specifically *involves* moments of scariness rather than excluding them. The relationship between *Frankenstein* and *Frankenweenie* differs, however, from that between the book and film versions of *Where the Wild Things Are* because it involves a shift from adult to child audience. In Burton's film, therefore, employing a child's perspective allows for a significant rethinking of the original tale.

In its simplest sense, this child's eye view is visible in the depiction of New Holland and its residents. While certainly reminiscent of some of Burton's other visions of suburbia, New Holland is best described as a small town landscape seen through a child's eyes: a place of long shadows and neat lines, of fantasy and darkness, of strange children and menacing adults. The frequent use of low camera angles to depict some of these adult characters (such as the mayor Mr Bergermeister and the science teacher Mr Rzykruski) aligns us with Victor and invites us to adopt a child's perspective. While not menacing or imposing, Victor's parents, too, are adults as seen by children: simplistic to the point of caricature, caught up in trivial or meaningless "grown-up" concerns (Victor's father talks endlessly about his work as a travel agent; Victor's mother is repeatedly seen vacuuming the house and/or reading romance novels). On the other hand, the world of Victor (the child's world) is depicted as complex, detailed, and intricate. This is best represented by the attic, a cluttered space of creativity, invention, and play – and a notable contrast with the rest of Victor's house and suburb, which are neat, sparse, and boring.

This inherent *difference* between adults and children – and the resultant conflict, always seen from the child's perspective – is central to the plot of *Frankenweenie*. From the opening scenes we learn that Victor is misunderstood by his mostly well-meaning parents, who worry that he spends too much time alone and will "turn out weird". His father encourages Victor to take up baseball, which leads inadvertently to Sparky's death: the little dog meets his doom while chasing a ball hit by Victor. The subsequent depiction of Victor's grief is highly moving, all the more so because his parents do not seem to understand the extent of his sadness. His mother offers clichés and platitudes: "If we could bring him back, we would" and "when you lose someone they never really leave you – they just move into a special place in your heart", which Victor interprets as hollow and macabre ("I don't want him in my heart", he objects, "I want him here with me"). These early scenes suggest a sense of turmoil beneath the calm surface of even the most loving parent-child relationship: a version, perhaps, of the "love-hate relation" that Johnson (1982, 6) detects within Shelley's visions of monstrosity. They also reveal that the world seen through a child's eyes is not a simple place, even though it may be dominated by fantasies (such as the desire to bring Sparky back to life, which Victor soon fulfills).

It is through these early depictions of conflict, death, and grief that the film captures the thematic spirit of Mary Shelley's novel. In Shelley's text, Victor Frankenstein is driven to create his monster by a desire to suspend mortality and escape the horrors of death and decay: Shelley's Victor is both haunted and inspired by the death of his mother, Caroline, which leads him to seek out scientific means of "renew[ing] life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption" (Shelley 1993, 43). For children, the death of a pet is often a first experience of mortality; thus in *Frankenweenie* it is the dog, Sparky's, death that allows Victor to confront the notion of perishability that so horrifies his predecessor in Shelley's novel. This experience of death and perishability also precipitates the story events and initiates the move *into* the horror genre by inspiring Victor's act of monster-making.

The scene in which Victor reanimates Sparky provides Burton and his team with much opportunity to revel in horror movie history and to pay homage to the films of James Whale, particularly *Frankenstein* (1931) and its sequel, *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). Lightning flashes and thunder crashes as Victor sews Sparky's body back together and fixes bolts to his neck; the body is then covered by a sheet and raised through the roof to receive the life-giving electric charge. Yet here, too, the child's eye view is at work. Attentive viewers will notice that Sparky's body is laid out on an ironing board, and that toys, appliances, and other household objects form part of the elaborate life-giving apparatus. Signifiers of "childhood" and "ordinariness" are thus interwoven with the signifiers of life, creation, and monstrosity borrowed from Whale. Instead of fingers twitching and eyes opening, Sparky's "alive-ness" is signified by a wagging tail; and instead of proclaiming "It's alive!" like his predecessor in the Whale films, young Victor Frankenstein says "You're alive". This shift in language reveals that the monster has been created according to a child's desires and wishes: the moment of creation is framed by Victor's desire not only for Sparky to still be alive but for the friendship, happiness, and unconditional love that a pet often represents. Accordingly, the child views the monster as a friend and companion (*you*) rather than as the product of an experiment (*it*).

This transformation of *Frankenstein* to suit a child's perspective certainly involves a degree of *softening*, a removal of *some* aspects of violence and conflict that define the original tale. For instance, Shelley's novel and most of its adaptations are constructed around the conflict between monster and maker – this conflict is not present in *Frankenweenie*. As we would expect given the film's target audience, Burton and his screenwriter John August also de-sexualise the Frankenstein tale: another notable absence is Shelley's sub-plot involving the creation of a mate for the monster, and the resultant murder of Victor's bride Elizabeth on their wedding night. This does not mean, however, that *Frankenweenie* shies away from an exploration of monstrosity and horror. Indeed, while Sparky himself is not depicted as a true monster, the film is replete with images of monstrosity. These come particularly in the form of the creatures that Victor's classmates bring to life: pets and other icons of familiarity, domesticity, and innocence (sea monkeys, a fluffy white cat, a dead hamster) who become snarling, terrifying, rampaging beasts. The image of these monsters running amok through the fairground of New Holland encapsulates the film's transformation of its source material. This scene is only tenuously connected to Shelley's plot, yet it resounds with Frankensteinian questions and dilemmas, particularly as they might be understood by children: When you have created your monster, what are you going to do with him/her/it? And what happens if your monster (your game, your story) escapes your control? While exploring the lighter side of monster-making, then, the film also explores the darker side of play, re-interpreting the Frankensteinian themes of creativity, perishability, and the life/death boundary so that they are seen from a child's perspective.

Paratexts, intertexts, and the complex world of *Frankenweenie*



While not a notable box office success, *Frankenweenie* received a generally positive critical reception. The film is rated highly – at 87% – on the aggregate review website Rotten Tomatoes, and is frequently described by reviewers as an enjoyable product for both children and adults (see, for instance, Paatsch 2012; Chang 2012; Mazmanian 2012).

Occasionally, charges of simplification are levelled at the film: Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian* describes *Frankenweenie* as “a sentimental kind of retro gothic lite, appearing under the Disney banner” (2012), while A.O. Scott in the *New York Times* writes that “the movie, a Walt Disney release, also feels tame and compromised” (2012). Other reviewers found the film dark enough to be entertaining, with many making positive mention of Burton’s ability to balance the sweetness of a children’s story with the darkness of a horror film. Leigh Paatsch in the *Herald Sun*, for instance, commends the film for “deftly balancing blatant eeriness with a chipper cheeriness that excuses many a macabre event” (2012). Lou Lumenick in the *New York Post* praises the film for its “creepy but basically sweet humor” (2012), as does Matthew Bond in the *Daily Mail Australia* who describes it as “strange, but also touching and lovely” (2012). In *Time* magazine, Richard Corliss addresses the film’s boundary-crossing quality when he notes approvingly that “*Frankenweenie*’s message to the young” is that “children should play with dead things” (2012).

This positive reception sets Burton’s film apart from other recent children’s films that play with horror tropes and characters, such as the aforementioned *Hotel Transylvania* and *Igor*, both of which received lukewarm reviews. *Hotel Transylvania* in particular was frequently criticised for its shallow approach to the narratives it draws upon, including Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (see, for instance, Reynolds 2012; Collin 2012). L. Kent Wolgamott in the *Lincoln Journal Star* (2012) observes that while *Frankenweenie* did not perform as well at the box office as *Hotel Transylvania*, it is “by far, the superior film” (and he contextualises this comment by urging readers not to “consider box-office returns to be the only measure of a film’s success”, adding that with *Frankenweenie* Burton has created a “masterpiece”).

Some reviews of *Frankenweenie* mention the construction of a child’s eye view. Adam Mazmanian in *The Washington Times*, for instance, identifies this as the means by which the film “draw[s] in young audiences”, adding that its “knowing winks at horror-movie history will appeal to grown-ups” (2012). It is interesting that Mazmanian feels the need to separate the film’s audience into these two distinct categories, and that he distinguishes the “adult” and “child” sections of the audience by an ability (or lack thereof) to “get” the film’s intertextual references. Wolgamott takes this further, praising the film for its references to classic horror movies but adding “that’s not anything the preschool through middle school animation crowd is going to get, or could possibly care about” (2012). Both critics agree that intertextuality is a means by which *Frankenweenie* resists simplification and becomes something *more* than a light and fluffy children’s film. At the same time, both critics produce distinct readings of the film’s child and adult audiences, and locate the qualities of media literacy and cultural awareness (which might enable the decoding of the film’s intertextuality) squarely within the adult space.

It is certainly true that *Frankenweenie* is littered with intertextual references: to other texts in the Frankenstein mythos (particularly the films of James Whale), to films in Burton’s oeuvre (such as *Edward Scissorhands*), and to texts in the horror genre more broadly (such as the Japanese monster movie *Gamera*). This is coupled with a playful self-reflexivity that we often see in filmic adaptations of *Frankenstein*. As Esther Schor (2003) has pointed out, adaptations of Shelley’s novel – from the early stage productions to the first known Frankenstein film in 1910, and beyond – often depict the monster’s coming-to-life in a spectacular and self-referential way; most filmic versions, in particular, play upon what William Nestruck

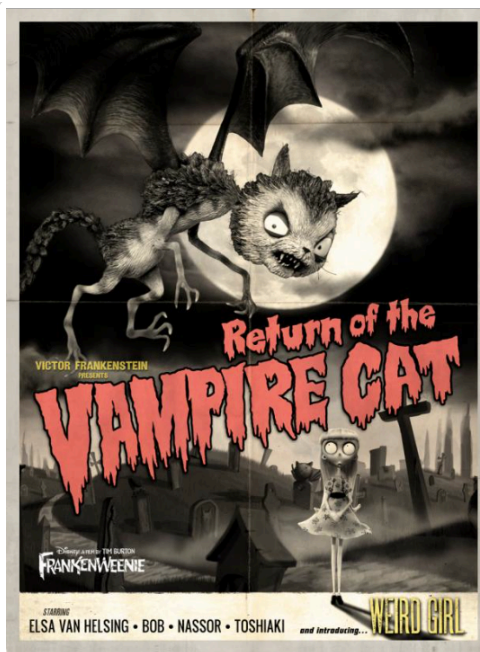
(1979, 292) has termed the "myth of animation" – a thematic link or bridge between the Frankenstein tale and cinema's own powers to bring a still image, body, or scene to life. *Frankenweenie*, of course, is an *animated* film, and this brings new meaning to Nestruck's "myth". The technologies of movie-making and, specifically, stop-motion animation are spectacularised in the image of Sparky's coming-to-life, adding another layer of intertextuality to a film already rich with cultural references.

It may be tempting to assume, as do Mazmanian and Wolgamott, that children are excluded from this intertextual conversation. Indeed, it has become increasingly common for children's films to engage in a dual mode of address, enchanting children with stories, songs, and imagery while offering jokes, intertextual references, or clever moments of self-awareness to adults. The implication is that long-suffering parents should be rewarded for watching films with their children or otherwise lured into the watching process by the promise of adult-centric entertainment. Burton's film is somewhat different because the intertextual references are closely bound to the narrative – they are less an amusing aside for adults than part of the film's very fabric. They are also, potentially, a means of encouraging audiences to connect with the source material. While *Frankenweenie* does not openly strive to generate reverence for (or even awareness of) Mary Shelley, her novel, and the act of reading *Frankenstein*, it arguably promotes a more complex form of literacy that speaks directly to the process of adaptation itself. By referencing the movies of James Whale, in particular, Burton positions his film within a web of Frankenstein texts and also destabilises the primacy of Shelley's novel as source text: adapting Frankenstein, we are told, is a complex business that involves the engagement with already apparent intertextuality rather than the "recovery" of a single source text from out of the depths of adaptation history.

It is likely, furthermore, that many of the children who constitute *Frankenweenie*'s primary audience *are* able to decode the film's intertextual references due to their familiarity with the horror genre and its tropes, characters, and conventions. As noted above, children have traditionally been locked out of the horror genre; in recent years, however, encounters between young audiences and horror have been initiated through a plethora of child-friendly horror texts: as well as *Hotel Transylvania* and *Igor*, these include the films *ParaNorman* (Sam Fell and Chris Butler, 2012) and *Monsters vs Aliens* (Rob Letterman and Conrad Vernon, 2009), the video game *Plants vs Zombies* (PopCap Games, 2009), the books and television series *Grossology* (Sylvia Branzei, 1992-1997; Nelvana Limited, 2006-2009), and Chris Riddell's *Goth Girl* books (2013-2015), as well as older but still relevant texts such as *The Simpsons* (which frequently lampoons the genre through its "Treehouse of Horror" episodes). Meanwhile, imagery and tropes from the Frankenstein tale have been so pervasively circulated in popular culture for such a long time that children are likely to have some degree of familiarity with the tale even if they do not connect it to its original source. Indeed, it is not uncommon for children's texts to make passing reference to the tale and its characters (for instance, an episode of the cartoon *Spongebob Squarepants* is entitled "Frankendoodle", while Dav Pilkey's *Captain Underpants* books contain a character named "Frankenbooger").

It is also likely that children today are familiar with complex levels of intertextuality and are adept at negotiating intersecting currents of media; thus Cathlena Martin writes of the "overlapping intertextual nature of children's culture" (2009, 86). In her analysis of the transmedia adaptation of the novel *Charlotte's Web*, Martin claims that an enjoyment and understanding of intertextuality may come more naturally to today's children, who "experience transmedia stories on a regular basis" and therefore "no longer view the printed text as the only way to experience [a literary classic such as] *Charlotte's Web*", whereas adults are more likely to "resist multi-media adaptation, relying on the supremacy of print text as 'high art'" (2009, 88). This returns us to the concept of "fidelity" to an original text, and suggests that in discussions of adaptation for children fidelity is likely to be a concept imposed by adult readers and critics rather than something inherently understood or valued by children. If this raises concerns over the disappearance of "the book" as a cultural object, it also demonstrates that "simplicity" is not a concept that sits well with the highly interconnected, transmedia quality of children's culture today.

Interestingly, the promotional material for *Frankenweenie* played upon this ability in young audiences to understand and enjoy intertextuality. Elliott reminds us that "[t]he-in merchandise produces and distributes the culture of Disney beyond the cinema" (2014, 195); yet the marketing campaign for *Frankenweenie* took a very different route from the usual toys, games, and Happy Meals associated with Disney and with the process of Disneyfication. Instead, the film was promoted through such unusual means as the release of six mock B-movie posters each featuring one of the child characters together with the monster he/she creates (including *Night of the Were-Rat: a Tale of Terror* featuring "Edgar E. Gore" and *Return of the Vampire Cat* featuring "Weird Girl"). These promotional texts not only foreground the film's child protagonists (as opposed to its adult characters) but serve to locate "childhood" within the parameters of the horror genre and



The promotional release of the free *Frankenweenie: an Electrifying Book*. The e-book explores the production of *Frankenweenie*: readers are given access to production photographs, original artwork, and interviews. This is a promotional mock poster for a film titled "Return of the Vampire Cat".

within monster-movie history. If entryway paratexts guide and instruct our viewing of a media text, as Gray (2010) suggests, these posters invite us to connect childhood with monstrosity in a way that "preps" us for the viewing of *Frankenweenie* itself (whether we are adults or children). They also underscore the overall playfulness of the film and relatedly its resistance to the processes of Disneyfication and simplification. Due to the foregrounding of the child characters, furthermore, the posters specifically address child audiences and clearly include them in the film's intertextual conversation.

Another key aspect of the film's promotion was the release of a free e-book entitled *Frankenweenie: an Electrifying Book*. Designed for audiences of all ages, the e-book explores the production of *Frankenweenie*: readers are given access to production photographs, original artwork, and interviews, with particular emphasis on the process of stop-motion animation and the making of Sparky (who we can view as a sketch, a 3-D

model, and a finished "product"). In this way, the e-book allows children access to Nestrick's "myth of animation" and to the idea of animation as a "bridge" between the narrative and the technology of *Frankenweenie*. The e-book also makes the film's intertextuality more evident. It begins, for instance, with a foreword by actor Martin Landau accompanied an image of the character he voices (Mr Rzykruski); Landau discusses his previous collaboration with Tim Burton, the film *Ed Wood*, and his role in this film as Bela Lugosi, star of the horror classic *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931). A pop-up button informs us that Landau's character is also "a nod to Vincent Price, the late actor known for his iconic roles in various horror films" (Disney Book Group, 2012). The e-book thus enables or enhances the ability of *any* audience member (including children) to decode the film's intertextual references – and even, arguably, leads young audiences back to the various source texts that inspired *Frankenweenie*.

In this way, the film (together with its promotional material) both assumes and encourages a level of cultural literacy regarding the Frankenstein tale and, more broadly, the horror genre itself. As this analysis has demonstrated, the film's intertextuality works together with its paratexts to cultivate an awareness of what lies beyond its own textual boundaries. *Frankenweenie* thus imagines and constructs its audience to be a media-literate and curious child.

Conclusion

Prior to the release of Tim Burton's *Frankenweenie*, the thought of an animated film based on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and released under the Disney banner might have horrified literary purists and fans of horror cinema alike. An animated Frankenstein, in which darkness and moral conflict are replaced by cute animal side-kicks and catchy songs, may well have been taken as a sign of Disney's cultural domination and its ability not just to appropriate literary material but to colonise sites of literary and cultural meaning. Burton's film, however, demonstrates that "Disneyfication" is not the only route to adapting a literary classic for children, and that the transformation of such a tale within the space of a child's worldview need not involve a simplification process. As noted above, we can contextualise *Frankenweenie* within a recent trend in media and popular culture that has seen the horror genre re-imagined for young audiences; yet Burton's film can be read not just as an example of "horror for kids" but as a startlingly successful transformation of a previously inaccessible tale in line with the concerns that define a child's world. Importantly, *Frankenweenie's* most powerful images are not cartoonish renditions of monsters and mad scientists – they are the images of Victor grieving for Sparky, and of the neighbourhood kids struggling to control the monsters they have unleashed. These themes of loss, and of losing *control*, are central to the film's re-imagining of a classic horror tale according to a child's eye view. In this way, *Frankenweenie* makes *Frankenstein* accessible to children and also gives adult viewers a sense of what horror, otherness, and monstrosity could mean to a child.

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