

The Pop-Culture Evolution of Frankenstein's Monster

Review of FRANKENSTEIN The First Two Hundred Years By Christopher Frayling

By ZOË LESCAZE The New York Times OCT. 23, 2017

It is (still) alive. In the two centuries since Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote “Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus” in 1818, her eight-foot monster has become the ultimate emblem of the uneasy borderline separating what science can do and what it should do. As the scholar Christopher Frayling writes in his new, amply illustrated history of the novel and its enduring fascination, “The real creation myth of modern times...is no longer Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.” In the age of stem cells, genetic engineering, cloning, three-parent babies, and cryogenic attempts at resurrection, the “real creation myth is ‘Frankenstein.’”

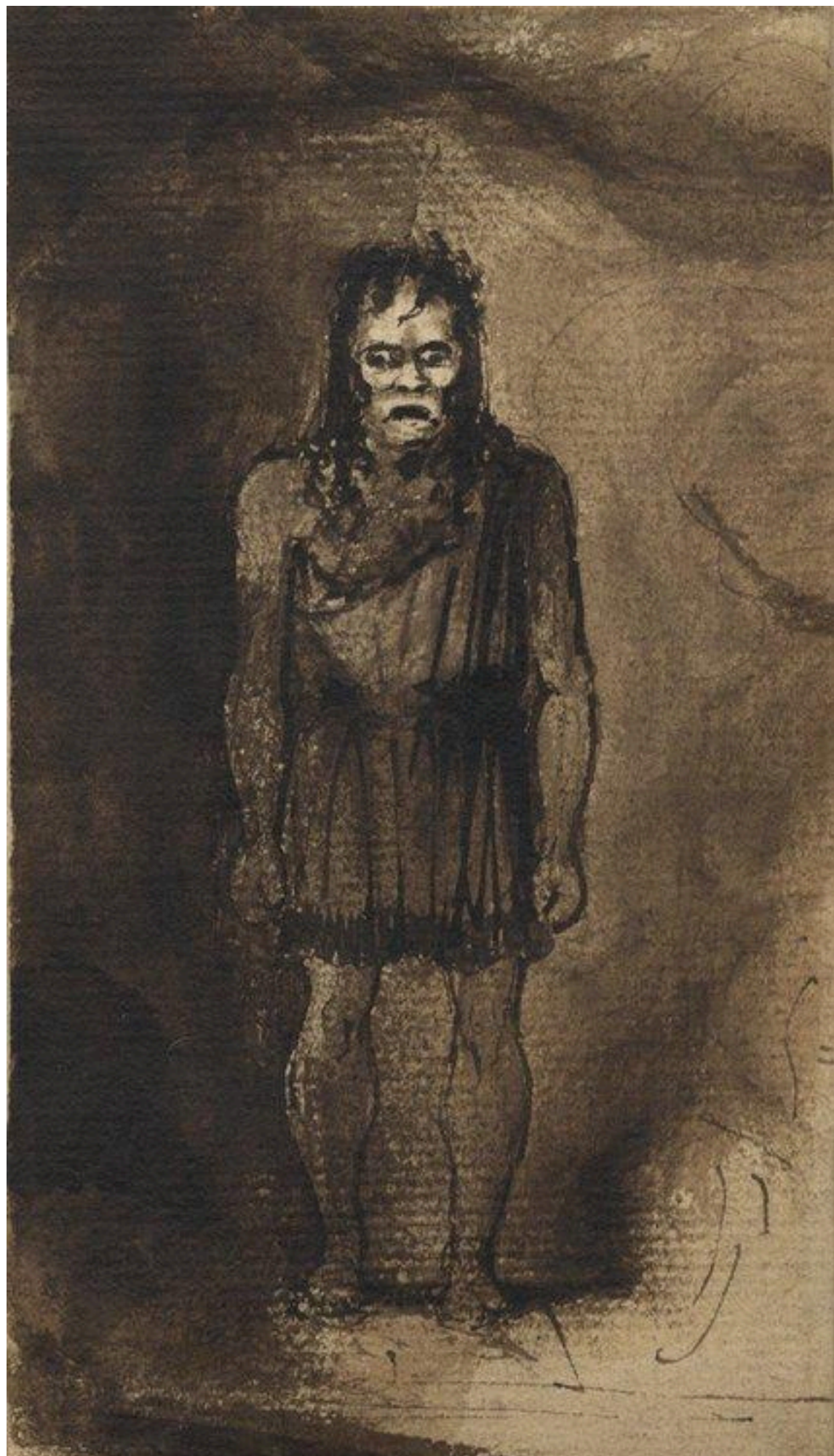
The nuances of Shelley’s novel were largely shed in the formation of that myth. Victor Frankenstein, the complex, tortured genius, became a mad scientist; his creature went from a French-speaking, poetry-reading autodidact to a grunting, groaning killer. Through prints, paintings, ephemera and photography, Frayling traces the creature’s visual evolution. In Richard Brinsley Peake’s 1823 play “Presumption, or the Fate of Frankenstein,” the first stage production of the novel, the monster appears as an unwieldy, but not unattractive, muscle-bound giant in a toga. Political cartoonists simplified the monster to caricature perceived social threats (“The Irish Frankenstein” became a popular motif). By the time Boris Karloff appeared onscreen in 1931, the monster had become a heavy-lidded, bolt-necked brute.

The novel’s stormy genesis is almost as famous as the monster’s lightning-charged birth. Frayling fastidiously pieces together the summer of 1816, when three Romantic luminaries and their friends spent a holiday on Lake Geneva. The relentlessly gloomy weather and frequent storms forced the unmarried Mary Godwin, Percy Shelley and Lord Byron to entertain themselves indoors. Gossipy English tourists in the region suspected these radical freethinkers were engaging in every form of bad behavior (one fashionable hotel even furnished a telescope from which guests could spy on the villa). But the reality was more sedate: Lord Byron challenged his friends to write ghost stories, and the rest is literary history. When the 18-year-old Godwin read her effort, she created modern science fiction as a genre.

The chronology of Frayling’s plates jumps around freely, between grindhouse film posters, New Yorker cartoons, postage stamps and the excellent woodcuts Lynd Kendall Ward created for a 1934 edition of the novel. The sheer quantity demonstrates just how thoroughly the creature has saturated contemporary culture. He appears in affectionate parodies (“The Munsters,” “Young Frankenstein”), campy riffs on the genre (“The Rocky Horror Picture Show”), cartoons (“The Simpsons”) and commercial kitsch (plastic toys and vodka ads). It’s a blithe pop jumble, with one jarring exception: Wedged between a poster for a blaxploitation film and an Archie comic is a spread containing a 1935 Vanity Fair cover depicting a Hitler-monster hybrid. Beside it is a photograph of a towering “German worker” statue in a swastika-draped exhibition staged by the Third Reich. The lack of context or commentary for these images is careless.

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Sketch by Richard Wynn Keene of the actor O. Smith as the Monster in the first revival of “Presumption!” or the Fate of Frankenstein, at the English Opera House, Lyceum, in summer 1828. Courtesy of Jennie Bissett. Credit From “Frankenstein: The First Two Hundred Years”

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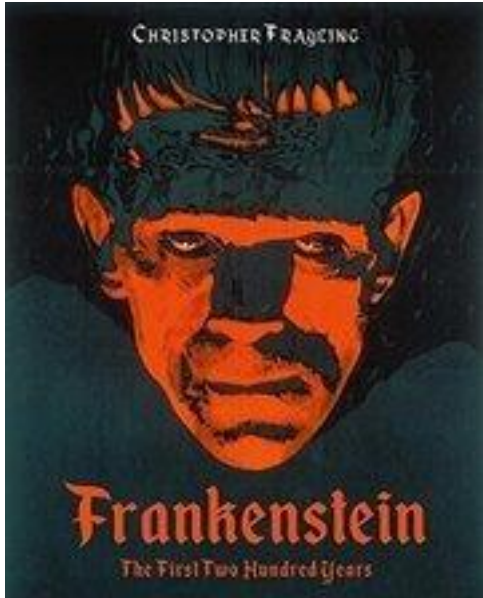
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Unsurprisingly, Frayling devotes many plates to posters and production stills from the first “Frankenstein” feature and its sequels. What is surprising is how many visual cues the filmmakers took from art history. Doctor Frankenstein’s murdered wife lies prone across the nuptial bed just like the woman beset by demons in Henry Fuseli’s 1782 oil painting “The Nightmare.” In one spread, Elsa Lanchester, inhabiting the title role in the 1935 film “The Bride of Frankenstein,” appears in dramatic profile beside the famous ancient Egyptian bust of Nefertiti. According to Frayling, Karloff’s look was directly informed by “[Los Chinchillas](#),” a print from Francisco de Goya’s 1799 series “Los Caprichos,” which unfortunately isn’t pictured.

Some of the book’s most intriguing images appear early on, when Frayling is describing the fierce debates and radical experiments that formed the novel’s scientific context. Galvanism is well represented (one engraving from 1803 shows the Italian scientist Giovanni Aldini electrifying the corpse of a hanged man to animate his limbs), but Frayling omits images illustrating the grisly underbelly of anatomical studies. Shelley wrote her novel at a time when medical schools’ demand for cadavers made body snatching a lucrative business. (Those who

could afford to locked their loved ones' coffins in metal cages.) The macabre watercolors of Thomas Rowlandson, who painted the “resurrection men,” as these criminals were known, and the dissection theaters they supplied, would have rendered an already rich history more complete.



Zoë Lescaze is an art critic and the author of “Paleoart: Visions of the Prehistoric Past.”