

“It Could Be Worse ... It Could Be Raining”: The Language of Meteorology in Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Its Intersemiotic Translations

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Abstract

The language relating to climatic conditions certainly plays a major role in the novel *Frankenstein*, published by Mary Shelley in 1818. The aim of this article is therefore to analyze the use the author makes of this language, which often acquires symbolic overtones that work in synergy with the development of the plot and the characters’ psychology, and study the way this same language is adapted and exploited in some of the films that translate the novel intersemiotically. To this end, this paper will focus on the cinematographic adaptations of Shelley’s work dating from 1931, 1994 and 2015, although sporadic references to other products will be made too. During the analysis, some of the notions of intersemiotic translation will be applied to the selected corpus, in order to demonstrate how the practice of various forms of translation, including inter- and intra-semiotic translation, heavily contributes to the creation of the canon we live by.

Keywords: intersemiotic translation, adaptation, film studies, literary canon, cultural canon

1. Introduction: The Myth of Frankenstein

The first two hundred years of *Frankenstein*, published by Mary Shelley in 1818, have seen several re-writings as well as multiple interlinguistic and intersemiotic translations. In particular, the cinematographic adaptations of the novel are innumerable. Beginning with the short film directed by J. Searle Dawley in 1910, each decade of the twentieth century has seen several transpositions of the original text, among which the cult movie *Young Frankenstein* (Mel Brooks, 1974), quoted in the title of this article, stands out for its originality and wit. This tradition naturally carries on in the twenty-first century, as the proliferation of films (loosely) based on Shelley’s work testifies.

The selection of the main corpus of analysis was therefore complex. The three main films chosen for this study—*Frankenstein*, *The Man who Made a Monster*, directed by James Whale in 1931; *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*, directed by Kenneth Branagh in 1994, and *Victor Frankenstein*, directed by Paul McGuigan in 2015—appeared, however, particularly interesting. The different periods in which they were released, in fact, make it possible, on the one hand, to appreciate how the myth of Frankenstein has evolved throughout the years, thus shedding some light on the different approaches to intersemiotic translation *per se*. On the other hand, the lapse of time between one transposition and the other raises important issues in relation to the societies which produced them.

As widely recognized by literary criticism (among others, see Phillips, 2006; Bloom, 2007), and as suggested by the quotation taken from *Young Frankenstein* that provides the title to this paper, natural elements such as rain, thunder, ice and snow play a major role in Shelley’s novel and in many of its adaptations. In fact, the idea for the novel came to Shelley after a storm, during a year that was defined as “without a Summer” (Brönnimann & Krämer, 2016). Thus, lexis relating to severe weather, like that which Mary Shelley, her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, together with Lord Byron and John William Polidori experienced in June 1816, when they were spending their holiday at Villa Diodati, near Lake Geneva, is prominent from the very first page of the text.

On many occasions in the novel, the author exploits the weather as a presage to the various dramatic events

described in the text (for instance, the murder of the protagonist's brother William takes place during a thundershower and when Victor's wedding is celebrated, a storm forms the backdrop to Elizabeth's death). In addition, the weather often plays a prominent role in the definition of the characters' psychological development and is exploited by the author to emphasize their state of mind.

Obviously, stormy weather, abrupt lightning, heavy rain and loud thunder are all *topoi* of Gothic literature, of which *Frankenstein* is clearly an example. Yet, in Shelley's text, this aspect takes on further meanings. On the one hand, as suggested above, the weather mirrors the characters' psyche (stormy weather often corresponding to a state of frenzy; heavy rain reflecting the characters' depression and desperation; snow and icy landscapes emphasizing their loneliness, and so on). On the other hand, lightning and the power it discharges are clearly associated, in the text, to electricity and Galvanism, the theory at the very basis of the reanimation of dead tissue pursued by Victor.

However, as suggested *infra*, these elements—and the consequent verbal and visual language that relates to the weather—are treated very differently in the source and the target texts, leading to profound changes in the “isotopies” (Greimas, 1983) that connect Shelley's novel and its intersemiotic translations.

2. The Weather in *Frankenstein* and its Translations

From the very opening of the novel—which presents the letters explorer Walton writes to his sister during his journey to the North Pole—the text presents a series of descriptions where the language connected to the weather and the effects of nature on both the surrounding reality and the characters' psyche is pivotal.

Step by step, the weather sets the situational and the cultural context in which the narrative develops; it accompanies the state of mind of the characters, and mirrors, as suggested *supra*, their feelings, reflecting for example their frenzy (as with the storms that work as a setting to Victor's experiments or to the creature's violence), their languid moods (as with the rain that accompanies Victor's *malaise* and depression, or the snow that makes the creature feel even more isolated). In spite of this, in Shelley's novel the weather is often perceived as heralding hope and successful enterprises and from the beginning to the end of the novel is perceived in a positive light.

For instance, in the very first letter, the semantic fields exploited and the collocations of the qualifiers point to a positive perception of the climatic features mentioned: the cold northern wind Walton experiences in St. Petersburg, for example, fills the character with “delight”, and although it gives him a foretaste of the icy climates he will be met with once he reaches the North Pole, it is perceived as a “wind of promise” and not at all as a source of desolation (Shelley, 1963, p. 20). And although, as the narrative progresses, the perception of the surrounding world changes slightly, so that icy climates, which cover the landscape with frost and snow, come to reflect the loneliness of the character and his lack of actual friendship during his journey, the connotations of the lexical items selected remain positive.

Indeed, Victor himself emphasizes this perspective throughout his narrative, presenting, on different occasions, thunderstorms as “violent”, “terrible”, “frightful”, “utterly destructive”, and yet “delightful” (*ivi*, pp. 37–38); tempests are described as “terrific” and yet “beautiful” (*ivi*, pp. 82–83); storms are defined as “wars” which, while bringing about destruction, deserve the designation of “noble”, and they are considered exciting and exhilarating, to the point that they can “elevate [Victor's] spirits” and are received by the protagonist with a “clasp” of the hands (*ibid.*). Similarly, further along the narrative, Victor notes the violence of the weather, describing the hostile surrounding as “icy”, stating that the glacier “overhangs” him, and that the storm leaves on the ground only “a few shattered pines [...] scattered around”. Yet, these words are immediately followed by the account of how the

solemn silence of this glorious presence-chamber of imperial nature was broken only by the brawling waves or the fall of some vast fragment, the thunder sound of the avalanche or the cracking, reverberated along the mountains, of the accumulated ice, which, through the silent working of immutable laws, was ever and anon rent and torn, as if it had been but a plaything in their hands. These sublime and magnificent scenes afforded me the greatest consolation that I was capable of receiving. They elevated me from all littleness of feeling, and although they did not remove my grief, they subdued and tranquillized it (*ivi*, p. 109).

Lexical items such as “solemn”, “glorious”, “sublime” and “magnificent” clearly suggest a positive perception of nature in all its manifestations, which is confirmed by the adjective “imperial” and the notion that, as Victor almost ironically recognizes, the laws of nature are “immutable”.

These scenes appear to pacify the mind of the protagonist and provide him with a form of consolation, but his

determination to go against nature and reanimate dead matter do bring about a feverish state which consumes him.

Despite the abundance of images relating to stormy weather, within the novel readers meet occasionally descriptions of fine weather too. This is for example the case with the scene that portrays the creature living in the woods after he has escaped from his creator's laboratory, which Victor had already left. On this occasion, after some rainy and cold nights, during which the orphaned creature suffers from his maker's desertion, he is able to appreciate the warmth of the sun, the freshness of the water in the stream and the pleasantness of the birds' chirping. While conscious of the fact that Victor is adamant about refusing him and denying him any form of acknowledgment, at this stage of the narrative the creature has not yet discovered the hatred the rest of humanity will develop of him. Thus, the descriptions of the climatic conditions and the natural world, in this section, reflect the serenity of the creature, who, just like a child, is becoming aware of his being and discovering the beauty of the world that surrounds him. These scenes, which are scarce in the novel itself, are even more sporadic in the film transpositions of the novel, which generally emphasize the "horror" vein of the text in order to be clearly assigned to the horror sub-genre of science-fiction production.

2.1 *Whale's* Frankenstein, the Man who Created a Monster (1931)

A partial exception to the scarcity of descriptions of fine weather is the scene which, in the film directed by Whale in 1931, ends with the creature throwing a little girl into the river, on the false assumption that his action could be part of the game they were playing (00:47:59–00:50:29). At this stage of the film, spectators have already made their acquaintance with the creature, who is presented as a primitive and uneducated being terrorized by fire when he first discovers it (00:33:46–00:34:21). Hence, the creature is represented as a "child" in the wider sense of the word, that is to say, as a being who has no experience of the world and who does not know how to relate to it. From his very first appearance, the emphasis is thus on the "inexperience", and consequently the "innocence", of Victor's creature. Further along in the filmic text, during a scene that stands out for its idyllic nature, the director emphasizes again the innocence of childhood: on the one hand, the little girl, who has not yet been poisoned by the fears of the Other inculcated in youngsters, agrees to play with the creature, despite his monstrous aspect. On the other hand, the creature (precisely as a child does) tries to learn by observation and imitation so that, once there are no more flowers to throw into the water, he innocently throws the girl, expecting her to float just like the flowers. The almost idyllic scene ends with the creature realizing his mistake and running away from the scene of the murder. The fine weather represented on screen (which forms the backdrop of the following scene too, which portrays village festivities: 00:47:10–00:47:52; 00:50:46–00:51:30) is thus exploited to create a contrast between what is natural and what is not, namely the creature himself. Indeed, on this occasion, nature seems to rebel and appears determined to stop the unnatural creature, who in fact must struggle through the branches of the trees in order to flee from the crime scene (00:50:41–00:50:45).

The emphasis is therefore on the contrast between natural and unnatural, human and sub-human, in that it is the unnaturalness of the creature that prevents him from appreciating the difference between a human being and a flower. Unlike what happens in the novel, however, the parental responsibility is not clearly addressed: just as the girl's father allows her, rather carelessly, to go and play on her own along the stream, so Victor allows the creature to run free, without educating him in the slightest, simply rejecting his "offspring" and abandoning him to himself. Victor thus refuses to acknowledge the creature at all levels, and in fact does not give him a name, thereby depriving him of an identity and of recognition. As Hegel maintained in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), it is, indeed, in the name assigned to each individual that his/her identity resides (Hegel, 1977, p. 311). By denying a name to his creature, Victor implicitly objectifies him and, from the outset, prevents him from growing into an actual human being, relegating him to the animalistic state he was created in.

There are numerous discrepancies between this intersemiotic translation and the source text by Shelley. From a structural point of view, for instance, the filmic narrative is delivered in external focalization and develops on a single narrative level. It is true that even before the opening credits, a narrator addresses the audience directly, introducing the story the film is about to tell, in the attempt to recapture the atmosphere created by the original author in her *Introduction* to the 1831 edition of the novel. During this preamble, the narrator resorts for instance to lexical items such as "death", "thrill", "shock", "horrify", "strain" (00:00:03–00:01:00). Thus, although the letters which open the written text are not reproduced in the audio-visual translation, viewers are nonetheless given what appears to be a frame to the story.

The latter, however, begins with Frankenstein and his assistant Fritz lurking around a graveyard in search of bodies. It is therefore possible to see how the target text changes one of the main figurative isotopies

characteristic of the source, where Victor worked alone, and already points to further changes, in relation to the same type of isotopy, that will be developed in subsequent filmic adaptations. In fact, possibly because of the influence of the cult movie *Young Frankenstein*, Victor's assistant is generally identified with the name of "Igor" (Note 1).

It is also this film which established the physical appearance of the creature, which was to be iterated and intertextually exploited for many decades, and that would remain constant in virtually all the films from the 1930s to the 1990s (Note 2). In this case too, then, the figurative isotopy introduced by this film was exploited on many occasions, including more popular products aimed at the masses such as television series (Note 3) and comics (Note 4). The responsibility this film has had in creating and perpetuating the myth of Frankenstein therefore appears huge. Consequently, the fact that it should set the tone for the representation of many other elements connected to the original text, does not come as a surprise. Indeed, most of the scenes that represent on screen the moment when Frankenstein gives life to his creature are inspired by this first visual description, which thus provides future directors/translators with the central episode of their works. In the famous scene that portrays Victor in his lab, the spectator is actually confronted for the first time with a visual representation of the reanimation process in which the weather plays a fundamental role. Through a strategy of addition, for the first time the scientist lays down and straps the creature to the platform which is then raised in order to capture the electricity of lightning.



Figure 1. Standstill: Victor and Fritz in the lab (00:23:39)

This is the famous scene ending with Victor repeatedly shouting, "It's alive!" (00:24.51–00:25:16), which appears in practically every filmic transposition, and which also originated a comic book series illustrated by Bernie Writghson and written by Steve Neils between 2012 and 2018, whose title reads, precisely: *Frankenstein Alive, Alive!* (Note 5). The episode thus represents a departure from the thematic and figurative isotopies of the source text, and by taking to the extreme Victor's frenzy, introduces a trait of his character which points also to a change of the pathemic isotopies of the original.

This context of situation would be later adopted also in Mel Brooks's parody, where the momentous occasion elicits laughter thanks to the insertion of puns, wordplays and instances of physical humor, and where the exact same passage is reproduced. On this occasion, the "elevation" of the platform is in reality initially misunderstood by Inga (00:43:13–00:43:25), who associates it to a different kind of elevation, introducing one of the many sexual innuendos in this film. Furthermore, the figure of Igor—with his hump that changes position, his weird looks and peculiar actions—cannot but intensify the spectator's amusement. Indeed, both misunderstanding and hyper-understanding—on which verbal humor generally relies (Norrick, 1993)—are certainly exploited to the extreme in this cult film, which, as a consequence, represents a brilliant example of linguistic creativity. Despite its humorous overtones, the scene, at this stage of the filmic narrative, reproduces intertextually the scene rendered famous by Whale in 1931. Even though Dr Frankenstein, played by Gene Wilder, uses the noun "Life!" (00:45:38–00:45:53), rather than the adjective "Alive!", because of the strong connections between the two from the point of view of signified, semantic field and etymology, the two scenes can in fact be considered formally equivalent.

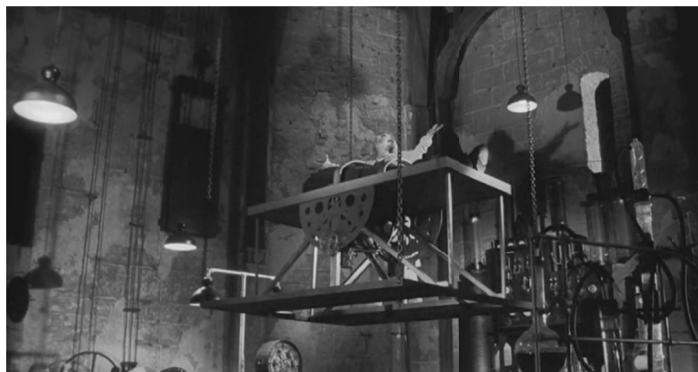


Figure 2. Standstill: Frankenstein and his creature (00:44:22)

As we can see in Figures 1 and 2, also from a visual perspective, the two settings are very similar: both films are in fact black and white; in both, the laboratory is represented as a room in an old building made of stone, where lots of electrical equipment is stored, and the body of the creature is placed on a platform which is then elevated. Furthermore, in both instances, the weather plays a prominent role, since not only storms and bolts of lightning provide the electric charge necessary to impress life onto dead matter, but they also reflect Frankenstein's frenzy. Consequently, also in this case, the figurative isotopies change, in that no storm like the one represented on screen is described at this stage of the narrative by Shelley. In addition, Victor, who is feverish and quite ill in the novel, is here represented as much more agitated and frantic, thus pointing to a change in the pathemic isotopies of the source.

The above observations reveal one of the main changes the type of intersemiotic translation this article focuses on entail. Indeed, as the target text is an audio-visual product, it relies heavily on the presence of both images and sounds, which appear fundamental in the reproduction on screen of the thunder and lightning Shelley could only describe in her novel. Naturally, the development of new cinematographic techniques accounts for the formal differences between Whale's production and more recent products. During the 1930s, filmmakers could only resort to "matte painting"—which would then evolve, at the hands of Frank Williams, into the Williams Process—stop motions and rather naïve make up. But since the 1990s, digital technology has placed new technologies at the directors' disposal, enabling them to combine computer animations with digital backgrounds, motion capture techniques, high-speed phantom cameras, 3-D, etc., in order to obtain much more fluid results (Cotta Vaz & Barron, 2002).

As a consequence, the reanimation scene and the creature himself, which appeared rather unsophisticated and naïve in the 1930s, are much more refined and less clumsy in more recent motion pictures. Furthermore, the soundtrack and the way music is exploited are more natural: this is particularly noticeable in the very first cinematographic adaptation of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, namely the silent short in black and white directed by J. Searle Dawley in 1910. Here, the music that works as a background to the creation of the "monster", despite its attempt to convey a sensation of urgency, might recall the tracks often exploited in comedy sketches to a contemporary ear.

In addition, acting styles have changed considerably. Indeed, despite Boris Karloff's excellent performance as the creature, both his and the other actors' style (particularly Colin Clive, in the role of Victor, and Mae Clarke's, playing Elizabeth), are rather overplayed. In actual fact, Konstantin Stanislavsky's system, being heavily rooted in theatre, led sometimes to fairly stylized acting styles, more concerned with plot and language than emotions (see for instance Stanislavsky, 1935, 1936). Despite this, during the 1960s and 1970s, the new generations of actors began to graduate from acting programs using Lee Strasberg's Method (1987). This was based on Stanislavsky's System, but encouraged actors to resort to their imagination and emotions in an attempt to "become" their characters, thus achieving more expressive performances. Since then, many other acting techniques have been developed, most notably, by Stella Adler (1988) and Uta Hagen (1991) among others, which all aim at developing a natural style, replacing melodrama with subtleness and stylization with naturalness. The result can be observed, for instance, in *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, directed by Kenneth Branagh in 1994, a film which stands apart from many previous adaptations by its closeness to the original novel.

2.2 Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994)

Even though the filmic text does not reproduce the letters that open the novel, Branagh's production provides

nonetheless the context in which the narrative is told at more than one level. In the guise of opening credits, in fact, the film quotes the *Introduction* Mary Shelly wrote to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, thereby offering, in spite of cuts, what has often been considered a faithful translation of the original novel. From this opening scene, however, the peculiarities of intersemiotic translation into an audio-visual product again appear evident, resulting in the presence of the spoken word on screen. Despite this, in Whale's translation, the text was recited by a rather stylized male narrator. On the contrary, in Branagh's film, the voice-over reciting the words from the novel, belongs to a female. Furthermore, thanks to the use of the first-person pronoun—"I busied myself to think of a story which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror" (00:00:30–00:00:54)—this voice is from the onset clearly associated with Shelley herself. Thus, in spite of a minor ellipsis, thanks to which the segment "a story to rival those which had excited us to this task" is omitted from the filmic text, through the exploitation of spoken language, the narrative is brought to life, and has a greater aura of authenticity.

Moreover, as anticipated above, the opening scene of the film, while not reproducing the initial letters, contextualizes Victor's tale by representing—contrary to other cinematographic versions of Shelley's novel—the character of Walton on screen. After some running titles, which introduce the explorer to the viewer, the film reproduces part of his journey to the North Pole. In these initial passages, the weather and its (visual) language play a major role, and the way they are exploited marks a drastic change in relation to the original source text. Indeed, whereas the novel does not give a detailed description of the weather conditions, and the reader does not get the feeling that Walton's crew encountered such tremendous storms, the film (because of both its audio-visual nature and because of the choices made by screenwriter and director) is much more graphic and vivid.



Figure 3. Standstill: storm at sea (00:01:37)

As we can observe in Figure 3, for instance, the filmic text opens with the filmic representation of a violent storm where lightning and thunder have a strong impact on Walton's journey and the safety of his crew. As a result, from the very beginning viewers are confronted with the extreme danger Walton's enterprise entails, which clearly encourages them to perceive the encounter with Victor in these same terms. As a consequence, from the onset, viewers listen to his tale with a greater sense of urgency and peril. The perlocutionary effect of these segments and their dramatic consequences, which the novel builds step by step, therefore, changes considerably.

By comparing the target filmic text to the description Shelley provides, it is thus possible to see how procedures of cutting (and the translation losses they entail) are balanced and compensated through additions. For example, in the third letter, readers are confronted with the account of his journey Walton gives his sister, in which he emphasizes how the gales they encountered are not worth mentioning, and how nature, while "untamed", is simultaneously "obedient" (Shelley, 1963, p. 27). So, in this section of the written text, both the lexical items selected, and the oxymoron referred to above, point to a positive perception of the moment. This, however, appears in contrast with the scene represented on screen in Branagh's production, where the violence of the weather conveys the perilousness of the situation. It is true that the beginning of letter four, which describes the meeting between Walton and Victor, opens with words that emphasize the difficult climatic conditions. Yet, within the segment "we were nearly surrounded by ice [...] Our situation was somewhat dangerous, especially as we were compassed round by a very thick fog" (ivi, p. 28), the qualifier "somewhat", which precedes the adjective "dangerous", clearly mitigates the hazard considerably, reducing its intensity, thus setting a different scene for the reader.

This is not all. It is, in fact, during this scene—when Walton’s sailors get promptly to work in the attempt to free the ship from the ice—that spectators are faced with another important difference between source and target text. From the tone of his letters in Shelley’s text, the character of Walton is in fact very gentle, generous and good-tempered; certainly determined, but always positive and optimistic. His relationship with his crew is clearly defined by these qualities and the way he posits himself in relation to others, speaking highly of his sailors, stating that they “appear to be men on whom I can depend and are certainly possessed of dauntless courage” (*ivi*, p. 23) and that they “are bold and apparently firm of purpose, nor do the floating sheets of ice that continually pass us, indicating the dangers of the region towards which we are advancing, appear to dismay them” (*ivi*, p. 27). In particular, he describes his lieutenant as

a man of wonderful courage and enterprise he is madly desirous of glory, or rather, to word my phrase more characteristically, of advancement in his profession. He is an Englishman, and in the midst of national and professional prejudices, unsoftened by cultivation, retains some of the noblest endowments of humanity [...] The master is a person of an excellent disposition and remarkable in the ship for his gentleness and the mildness of his discipline (*ivi*, p. 24).

On the contrary, in the film directed by Branagh, Walton appears much more abrupt: he is not on particularly friendly terms with the men of his crew, who in fact threaten to mutiny, and he has no hesitation in shouting at them and putting their lives at risk in the pursuit of his goal. The sentence “As many [lives] as it takes” (00:04:05–00:04:08), which Walton yells out on this occasion as a reply to his lieutenant’s question “At the cost of how many more lives?” (00:04:01–00:04:04), is in actual fact exemplary, and effectively establishes his character within the filmic narrative. Thus, further to the changes in the figurative isotopies discussed above, it is possible to see how also the pathemic isotopies relating to the character’s psychology and his development change drastically during the translation process. As a matter of fact, although in the novel too, readers are confronted by the description of a similar situation—so much so that the very same word “mutiny” is used twice (*ivi*, pp. 213–214)—the filmic text appears nonetheless unfaithful. If this is so, it is not simply because, through strategies of shifting, the novel presents this scene only towards the end of the text, rather than at the very beginning as the film does, but, more importantly, because on this occasion too, the tone of Shelley’s narrative is much less violent and agitated. The letter dated 2nd September concludes in fact with Walton sharing his fears of a mutiny with his sister, positing it as a natural consequence of the desperate situation the sailors face, surrounded as they are by mountains of ice and exposed to excessive cold. Furthermore, after hearing his crew’s demands—namely that if they were to set the ship free of the ice that has imprisoned it, they would return home and abandon the voyage they had embarked on—Walton (contrary to his filmic representation), is not furious, but troubled and feels he cannot refuse to comply.

In spite of these and other differences, and the important changes in the isotopies that connect the original text by Shelley to its cinematographic transposition, this translation is generally deemed faithful. More than that, as emphasized by its title, the film posits itself as a product that Costa would define “blatantly literary”, since it brings to the fore the encounter between cinema and literature (Costa, 1993, my translation). From a narratological perspective too, the frame created through the reproduction on screen of the North Pole setting indicates that, in Branagh’s film, it is possible to identify, as in the novel, both extradiegetic and intradiegetic narrators (Genette, 1972).

Because of this structure, both the novel and the filmic text present many analepses and, to a certain extent, prolepses (*ibid.*). Thus, this encounter of first- and second-degree levels of narration naturally creates a rather complex structure, assembling (just as Frankenstein does with his creature) the text through the combination of different narratives delivered at different levels by different narrators.

Yet the faithfulness, which seems to be posited by the very title of the target text, is both confirmed and, simultaneously, denied by one of the focal scenes of the entire film, namely the laboratory scene, during which a frantic Frankenstein gives life to the creature. On this occasion, in fact, the process through which the creature comes to life relies, as in Whale’s version of the novel, on electric power. In this version too, the creature is strapped to a platform of wire mesh, which is then elevated.



Figure 4. Standstill: Branagh's creature (00:04:07)

However, he is immersed in a tub and electrified only then. Thus, on the one hand, the target text adheres to the canon created by the 1931 production, maintaining some of the figurative isotopies the film established. At the same time, however, it marks a distance from it, retrieving some of the information (or, to be more precise, the lack of information) presented in the original source text. The director, in fact, shows on screen how Victor, before the experiment that would give life to dead matter, repeatedly collects the amniotic fluid of numerous women in labor, and it becomes evident that the tub should recreate the womb of an absent mother. It therefore seems that the secret Shelley refers to in her novel, and which Victor never discloses to his addressee (Shelley, 1963, pp. 52–54), can be identified here with the amniotic fluid Victor immerses his creature in and that he injects into his body while he is in the tub.

On this occasion too, the Doctor, directly addressing the creature, repeatedly yells “Live!” (00:45:42–00:45:45), only to resort to the canonical “It’s alive!” a few second later (00:46:38–00:46:48). However, the moment the creature is born, despite the unnaturalness of the process, resembles much more an actual birth, and the “monster” himself bears resemblance to an actual new-born: despite his size, he has in fact difficulty in standing over, let alone walk properly. Furthermore, in this translation, the appearance of the creature, played by Robert De Niro, is different from the stereotypical representation’s cinema had offered in previous years. However, while certainly closer to the original than the 1931 version, in this product too spectators can find various scenes which are added by the director and that therefore change the thematic isotopies of the source. Besides, for example, the scene of passion after Victor and Elizabeth’s wedding, an important scene which is inserted in the target text is when the creature is represented as hanging from the ceiling thanks to a set of chains, immediately after his “birth”. This scene is actually rather grotesque and emphasizes the unnaturalness of the process which brought the creature to life. Indeed, Victor initially ties the “monster” to these chains simply because the latter cannot stand on his own. During this procedure, however, Victor stumbles and sets the winch in motion by mistake, thereby suddenly lifting the creature, who, during the process, is also hit on the head by a piece of heavy machinery. Both moments therefore point to Victor’s inadequacy in his role of the creature’s “father”. The relationship between “creator” and “creature”, “parent” and “offspring” is therefore marked, from the very beginning, by the parent’s shortcomings and a sense of “lack” and “absence”, which will be confirmed in the remaining of the text. This additional scene, then, on the one hand changes the figurative isotopies of the original text. On the other hand, however, it works as a strategy of expansion in relation to the thematic isotopy of Shelley’s novel (where the parental issue is very much present) and will be borrowed in some of the following filmic adaptations of the novel, including Paul McGuigan’s.



Figure 5. Standstill: the hanging

Because of this, the additions, the changes in the isotopies discussed above, as well as the conservation of some of the more canonical traits of previous translations, suggest that Branagh's target text could be more precisely defined as "partially faithful" (Swain, 1981), or, as Andrew might term it, as an "intersection" (Andrew, 1984), thus bringing to the fore questions of fidelity and faithfulness in translation.

Obviously, in this instance, these issues are blatant and problematic, in that the changes of medium and signic system typical of intersemiotic transposition impose onto the target text inevitable and radical alterations due to the multimodal channel of communication adopted. However, the considerations raised here stand for other types of translation too, where the notion of faithfulness has been at the center of critical discussions for a very long time.

2.3 McGuigan's *Victor Frankenstein* (2015)

McGuigan's film can also be analyzed in terms of fidelity and infidelity, addressing isotopic concerns. Indeed, in this case too viewers find a change in the figurative and thematic isotopies in relation to both the original source text by Shelley and the intersemiotic translation of the novel by Whale. In this filmic version, Dr Frankenstein recruits in fact his assistant at a circus and cures his lump with his scientific intuition. In addition, in this film, in order to overcome the scientific difficulties imposed by the size of the creature, the Doctor decides to use two hearts and other double organs in order to give the "monster" more chances of survival. In this motion picture too, the spectator is confronted with the "birth" scene, in which life is impressed onto dead matter. The setting is similar to that of the previous films analyzed here, in that everything happens in a laboratory which, much like in *Young Frankenstein*, is placed in a castle. However, in 2015, the whole scene is made more spectacular by the new special effects and the steam-punk sub-genre which the evolution of cinematographic art has put at the director's disposal. The many types of machinery used in order to animate the creature still rely on lightning and the violence of the weather conditions, taking, as Figure 6 suggests, the impact of nature on the surrounding reality to greater extreme. In actual fact, because of the violence of the storm, the electric system that runs the various machineries Frankenstein uses during his experiment overload, causing explosions and a tremendous fire which will finally destroy the lab and kill many people.



Figure 6. Standstill: McGuigan's creature

Thus, despite the many differences that distinguish the various translations analyzed here, what appears constant is the portrayal of the weather which, in every target text, is not only taken to extremes, but also identified as the main factor in the vitalization process.

This aspect, however, which intertextually perpetuates what was first posited in Whale's filmic adaptation of Shelley's novel, can only be identified as a fundamental change in the thematic and figurative isotopies of the original text. Indeed, the author is very careful not to describe in detail the experiment and the "secret" behind Frankenstein's discovery. Because of this, "the cause of generation and life" (Shelley, 1963, p. 55) and Victor's ability to "bestow animation upon lifeless matter" remain secret (*ibid.*). Naturally, within the text, readers can find numerous references to the experiments performed by Luigi Galvani towards the end of the 18th century. For instance, the segment quoted above, in which Victor describes a storm he witnessed when he was fifteen, concludes with the words:

Before this I was not unacquainted with the more obvious laws of electricity. On this occasion a man of great research in natural philosophy was with us, and excited by this catastrophe, he entered on the explanation of a theory which he had formed on the subject of electricity and galvanism, which was at once new and astonishing to me (*ivi*, p. 45).

As a consequence, this and other segments could be considered as clues which guide readers in the discovery of Victor's secret. Yet, because the text never confirms nor denies Frankenstein's use of electricity and lightning during his experiment, the decodification process finds no textual open and overt proof for this interpretation. The various scenes that depict Victor in his lab, using the electric power of lightning to give life to his creature, can therefore be identified as the intertextual perpetuation of the addition translation strategies which, based on a specific reading of the source text, produce a fundamental infidelity and an important change in the thematic and figurative isotopies of the original text.

Indeed, there is no actual textual reason why the birth of the creature should not be ascribed to other means, especially in consideration of the fact that in the novel the author also refers to alchemy, citing for instance Paracelsus, Albert Magnus and so on (*ibid.*).

It is thus perhaps not by chance that the very first cinematographic transposition of Shelley's text—written and directed by J. Searle Dawley in 1910—should present the birth of the creature as the result of magic and alchemy, rather than actual science. In this silent, black and white short, the narration is replaced by "intertitles" which, as shown in Figure 7, appear on-screen during the film and give extra-information about the setting, the characters, the plot etc.

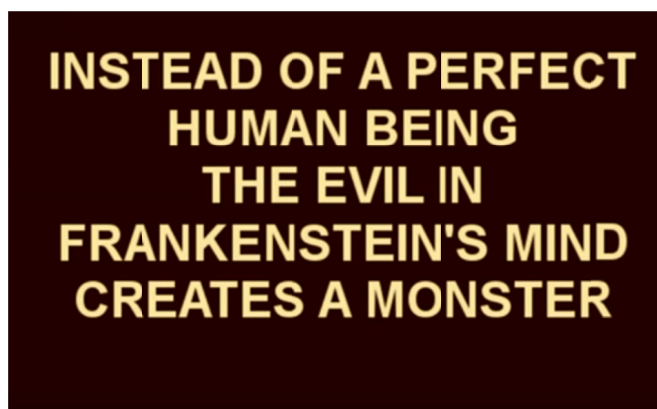


Figure 7. Intertitle from Dawley's film (1910)

Thus, the intertitle (Dawley, 1910, 00:02:24–00:02:33) overtly emphasizes the despicable nature of Frankenstein's deed, changing the focalization of the narrative. Indeed, the intertitle works as a narrative segment which could be ascribed to an omniscient narrator, who intrudes in the narrative by adopting a zero-focalization (Genette, 1972). As such, this narrator demonstrates his complete knowledge of the events and the characters' psychology. Through zero-focalization, the narrator can actually acknowledge the evil nature of Frankenstein's actions and suggest the devastating outcome of his experiments even before the creature is born. On the contrary, in the novel, as well as some of the intersemiotic translations released throughout the years,

Victor understands the consequences of his deeds and the unnaturalness of the process of revitalization; only after his creature is born:

It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips [...] now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart (Shelley, 1963, pp. 58–59).

As we can see, in the source text the rain offers a backdrop to this moment and Victor's reactions to it. However, the weather, as described by Shelley, is neither violent nor extreme. Rather, the rain creates an atmosphere of desolation and accompanies Victor's acknowledgment of his creature's nature and its definition as a "wretch", which fills his creator's eyes and heart with "horror" and "disgust": a monster.

Similarly, in Branagh's transposition, when Victor witnesses the grotesque scene discussed above, whereby the creature ends up hanging from the ceiling, he questions his actions by saying "what have I done?" (00:48:54). In Dawley's transposition too, Victor's reaction in the face of his creature is one of dismay. Yet, the fact that the outcome of his experiment should be anticipated by the intertitle above, works as a strong cohesive device and creates a cumulative effect which reinforces the perception of the creature's birth as a heinous act. The latter, in this intersemiotic translation, is however ascribed to some sort of alchemic process, through which Victor creates his "monster" in a cauldron, by mixing various ingredients:



Figure 8. Standstill: Victor and his cauldron

This is actually the birth of the creature as represented in the graphic novel realized by Gris Grimly in 2013, as discussed in more detail elsewhere (Canepari, forthcoming), which on many levels stands out for its fidelity to the original text. Contrary to the cinematographic transpositions of Shelley's text which would follow, in this filmic adaptation the revitalization process is not ascribed to electricity and the weather does not play any part in the process. As such, this early film suggests that the following cinematographic adaptations of Shelley's novel, through additions, expansions and fundamental changes in the various types of isotopy of the source text, contributed to the creation of a canon which is not only literary but, fundamentally, cultural.

3. Results

As the analysis carried out in this article had demonstrated, many of the thematic, figurative and pathetic isotopies which characterize the source text under discussion change considerably during the process of intersemiotic translation. In particular, as suggested above, the way the weather is represented on screen, and the role it plays in relation to the revitalization process, can be considered the result of addition strategies which alter the fundamental isotopies of the original text drastically.

Naturally, the very process of intersemiotic translation engenders substantial differences between the written

language on which a source text like Shelley's novel relies and the various languages exploited by the audio-visual products which work as its target texts. Indeed, as Manzoli states, a film can actually show what a novel can only describe (2003). Further to this, the choices made by intersemiotic translators (i.e., the directors and scriptwriters) are inevitably marked by more subjective and personal aspects, when compared to the choices made by interlinguistic translators. Indeed, even when the former adopts a faithful approach to the translation process, they are nonetheless obliged to fill the gaps and the ambiguities the original author might have left unresolved, offering a visual representation of the written text.

As discussed above, this is extremely evident in relation to the reanimation process and the role the weather plays in it. As demonstrated by the standstills provided, taken from the films that form the corpus of analysis of this article, the visual elements characteristic of the target texts point in fact to the multimodal variation the semantic threads of the source undergo during the process of intersemiotic translation.

In addition, the analysis carried out in section 2 suggests that isotopic lines behave differently when viewed interlinguistically and intersemiotically. Indeed, if it is true that in interlinguistic translation isotopies rarely change, to the point that they are generally considered invariant in translation (Mudersbach & Gerzymisch-Arbogast, 1989), when considered in intersemiotic terms, they are on the contrary inclined to change substantially.

A further distinction, however, should be made. Indeed, although during the intersemiotic transposition of a novel to a film, isotopies vary considerably, this is not always the case when they are viewed intrasemiotically (Eco, 2004, p. 131). As a matter of fact, it is possible to understand the various adaptations of the same source text by Shelley not only as different intersemiotic translations, but also, at least in some of the cases analyzed here, as intrasemiotic translations of the first filmic transposition which introduced the myth of Frankenstein to the mass audience. As this article suggests, in fact, many of the filmic adaptations of Shelley's novel intertextually perpetuate the same isotopic lines set by Whale's intersemiotic translation, especially in relation to the reanimation process and, to a lesser extent, to the physical appearance of Victor's creature.

4. Conclusion

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* certainly contributed—albeit “indirectly”, as David Fishelov notes (2016, p. 1)—to the literary canon of the time. However, it was Whale's production that undoubtedly played a prominent part in the construction of that cultural canon surrounding the characters of Frankenstein and his creature, inspiring the iconographic representations of the “monster” for almost two centuries.

The study of the various translations of Shelley's text, then, demonstrate the importance of translation, in all its forms, in the molding of the culture and the societies we live in. Indeed, the adaptation history of the novel further points to the way the representations offered by popular culture are often responsible for the construction of society and its members according to specific, and partial, perspectives, which, while accommodating the integration of certain elements, inevitably lead to the suppression of others. By suggesting that what are in fact translation “infidelities” contribute in fundamental ways to the creation of a canon, simultaneously transforming the original text into something different in the perception of entire cultures and generations, this article brings forward the importance of Translation Studies and the practice of contrastive analyses as important tools in the analysis of cultures and societies as well as texts. This, in terms of intersemiotic and intrasemiotic translation too. Indeed, the analysis of adaptations and remakes (understood here as forms of re-translations) can make explicit the myths of a society in a given historical moment, and witness to the anthropological foundations of specific attitudes, beliefs and ideologies in a particular culture. As such, they can shed light both onto the past and, more importantly, onto the present and the future of our societies.

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Notes

Note 1. See for instance *Victor Frankenstein*, directed by McGuigan in 2015.

Note 2. See for example films such as *The Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935); *Son of Frankenstein* (Rowland Lee, 1939); *House of Frankenstein* (Erle Kenton, 1944); *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Terence Fisher, 1957) and, naturally, the cult movie *Young Frankenstein*, directed by Mel Brooks in 1974.

Note 3. See for instance *The Munsters* (1964–1966) and *The Addams Family* (1964–1966)—where Herman Munster and Lurch are indeed versions of Shelley's invention—as well as many comic books, graphic novels and animated films.

Note 4. The intersemiotic translations in comic art are, indeed, equally numerous: since the 1940s (when Prize Comics' *New Adventures of Frankenstein* was first published), Victor's creature has appeared in innumerable comic books and graphic novels. For a detailed description, see M. Canepari, forthcoming.

Note 5. The series was supposed to include twelve comic books. However, Wrightson's death in 2017, prematurely interrupted the project, so that only four issues were actually published.

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