

## **The Power of the Diegetic Paradigm: How the Cinematography of “Marry Shelley’s Frankenstein” Reinforces Its Pre-Text On-Camera**

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### **Abstract**

The film Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein by Kennet Branagh strongly emphasizes the social, political and cultural concerns of the author Mary Shelley. Branagh employs cinematography to refer to the pre-text and its main ideas implicitly or explicitly. His adaptation, indeed, differs from the plot in the novel, however, Branagh still manages to reinforce Mary Shelley’s discussion in her novel thanks to semiotics. In this case, Branagh expresses what he grasps from the novel by creating his own imagery through cinematographic elements such as camera angles and gaffing. With the help of cinematography, Branagh remains loyal to Mary Shelley’s novel since he extends Shelley’s concerns and discusses them according to his own time. Even though the plot changes, which cannot be a concern in adaptation theory, Branagh still reflects Mary Shelley’s characters remaining loyal to the origin, and he sets camera and lighting in harmony with the characterization and setting of the novel.

Keywords: Literary Adaptation, Cinematography, Literature and Cinema, Mary Shelley, Kennet Branagh, Frankenstein

### **Introduction**

Literary adaptations may differ from original texts because literature and cinema employ different means to convey a meaning. Of course, there may be other concerns of the cinema which would lead to some modifications on the original text in order to make it adaptable and distributable. Kennet Branagh also changes what is suggested in the original text, yet he glorifies the pre-text by extending Mary Shelley’s teachings to the 20th century. In this way, he also promotes Mary Shelley’s work. Thus, literary adaptations such as Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein by Kennet Branagh both inspire cinema industry to produce culturally important films and emphasizes the importance of literature. That is, it is true to infer “A film is a film, and a novel is a novel.” From this point of view, Kennet

Branagh tries to remain loyal both to the novel and to the techniques in cinematography in order to carry Shelley's meaning into a new medium.

### **Diegetic Paradigm and Reference to Written Sources via Cinematography**

An eternal race of supremacy between books and films forces some to reach a conclusion. Firstly, it is true that literature maintains a great source to the cinema. In return, cinema can also help literature in many ways. Two-sided interaction has been proven by the films that are based on literary works, and by the literary works that are either introduced and spread by cinema or that are "novelized". This paper will discuss how films and especially diegetic paradigm help the understanding of the literary text behind. Leitch agrees that both films and literary works have their own conventions, and in some ways, films can have difficulties in creating complex characters as novels have independence to describe one as much as the author wants (Leitch, 2003, p. 158). This paper also confirms that characters can exceed their former complexity with the help of framing.

Films should be approached as texts, requiring to be examined carefully to experience the culture that creates them. Thus, examining the visuals, in film case frames, will help viewers comprehend more than what is in the surface of the cinema template. That is why, those images, the paradigm of the film, have to be examined, in other words "be read", in a very comprehensive way. Indeed, films can be approached as visual output of pre-texts such as screenplays and maybe novels. Leitch draws a parallel between films and novels as novels are verbal and films are speaking visuals (Leitch, 2003, p. 153). Indeed, cinema is an audio-visual product, still, even without audio, on-camera arrangements, in other words, framing, and visual output has been the first representative of what is written in the novel and screenplay since the beginning of silent era of the cinema.

The screenplay determines the plot and character development. It is an off-camera paradigm. Then, a shot list is created by cinematographer in order to visually tell the story inside the screenplay. In this process, cinematographers begin to express their art through the techniques and theory of cinematography, which is initially based on literary theory. Cinematographers decide to camera angles, lighting, colour, and composition on-camera. Different camera angles output different meanings, and can be more descriptive, more narrative or more expressive. In a very rough approach to camera angles, established shots are very wide-angle shots describing the scene. Long shots are used to both describe the setting and attracting more attention to what is happening. Medium shots are used to describe the event and give more insight about characters. Then comes close ups. They are named as medium close up and extreme close up, one picturing the character from shoulder to face and the latter is showing facial expression of the character, which is more depictive of what the character thinks and feels. So, wide angle shots are responsible for establishing the setting and action whereas close ups are more depictive of characters' inner world. In

other words, it would be correct to conclude that wide angle shots are more descriptive and pictorial while close ups are more narrative and abstract.

Reading the frames in film adaptations enhance viewers' comprehension. In this way, cinematography helps viewers obtain a status more than being observers, finally, they may even experience the culture. In other words, unlike the dispute of books being superior to films, cinematography may refer to elements in the books. Moreover, cinema may also contribute to literature by promoting the pre-texts. Thus, even in films that are loosely based on their inspired or adapted literary works, or pre-texts, directors can achieve the level of narration, description, language, and culture of the pre-text behind the films by transposing the literary works into cinematography. By the aid of cinematography, directors can even refer to literary devices that are utilized in the pre-text of films. I will compare Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, and Kenneth Branagh's film adaptation "Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*" (1994).

### **Frames to Describe Major Female Characters: Justine and Elizabeth**

The film portrays Justine close to Shelley's discussion. However, Branagh reworks Justine as a character in his film. Like Clerval, Justine is not a character to be a hero but more than that, she is to be an implied author, an outrage to patriarchal understanding of a manly hero, thematically one of the most important characters and a matron in order to prepare others to the society. Taking mother and motherhood into account as the main theme of the film, Justine's scenes are drawn highly impressively. Firstly, in the novel, Justine is matronly sister who is neglected by her mother. As Shelley discloses her background in Elizabeth's letter, she is the challenge to social classes. She is received by Victor as equal to a sister even though her mother is still stuck into the thought of her being a servant (Shelley, 1994). In the film, the camera always registers her in a higher angle. In other words, viewers look down on her. In the beginning scene where Victor invite her to dance when she plays the piano, she is portrayed in a cold light with her vibrant and warm clothes. Also, frame composition implies how others receive Justine. She is situated in the very bottom of the frame, while others, Victor's mother and Elizabeth are registered to the camera within their eye level. As Shelley already loads her with matronly attributions as being "protectress", Justine idolizes Caroline Frankenstein, the mother of all, who will have a big impact in Victor's life, as well. Such a character as Justine is accused by the servants who find the locket in her pocket (Shelley, 1994, p. 265).

First approached as a servant, Justine now embodies a vast amount of contrast to social structure. Shelley taunts the reader by portraying the society as real servants and superficial. In the novel, she shoulders the responsibility of murdering and gets herself charged of death sentence. She self-sacrifices as a matron character and she is a martyr figure who fails her self-inflicted duty to protect William, moreover, she does not feel

herself belong to the world of patriarchy. In film, she is seen being dragged to gallows despite her discontent. The film draws a powerful frame in the scene of her execution. While she is being dragged, the camera follows her in x axis (horizontally) in order to emphasize the speed of the movement. That camera movement completes the idea of her arbitrary accusation and penalty in the novel. The frame composition perfects the entirety of the novel and the film by registering an angry mob with bats, appearing extremely phallic figures. In the close up right before execution, she is in highly saturated blue clothes, and around her, rope, hands, men in grey clothes, all phallic figures, as well. Only asset in the frame that represents vitality is Justine herself, yet in the colour of eternity, the colour of motherhood, in blue. Lastly, as Brannon agrees, Victor and Elizabeth are registered in a high angle shot emphasizing their powerlessness against the situation (Brannon, 2012, p. 13). That scene altogether, finally, cries out the triviality and superficiality of patriarchal values, which is a must in order to show respect and pay homage to Shelley. Brannon concludes that Branagh remains silent to Victor's inner conflict as in the novel when Victor and Elizabeth meets Justine in the prison, yet the film reinforces the stance of novel that Victor is not completely responsible for his problems (Brannon, 2012, p. 13). As a matron and a martyr figure in the novel, the last thing Justine says to Elizabeth is "Learn from me". Justine suggests that she leaves the bitter world (Shelley, 2017). Branagh also omits that scene yet replaces martyr Justine with a motherly figure when she instructs Elizabeth to see Victor after unreturned letters, again in a face off situation after orbiting camera movement, finally resolving to the scene where camera registers them in close up inside the same frame. Güner (2009) suggests that such cyclical fashion of camera movement creating the visual equivalent renders the idea of homosocial desire, the friendship between Justine and Elizabeth (pp. 148-149).

Branagh (1994) problematizes Justine's execution by shooting a close up to her feet almost invisible under her skirt as William's death has not been interrogated thoroughly. As we examine scenes of death, of Justine and Elizabeth versus William, Alphonso and Victor Frankenstein, it is disturbingly obvious that women's death are portrayed either bloody or brutal, men die silently almost in peace. Indeed, Branagh tries to make audience more involved in the film by the help of blood and violence whereas most of the killing scenes takes place off-stage in Shelley's work. However, Branagh invokes the most traumatic images of death in our minds by showing lifeless feet, and women's dead bodies as an object of satisfaction. Carroll (1990) suggests that in Hollywood films where "the male gaze" reigns, scopophilia pleasure is met by fetishism, which is the attempt to relocate the lack of penis in women's body with resembling body parts, such as feet (p. 352). When Justine's execution is examined in the light of this suggestion, and likewise Mulvey urges that voyeurism leads to sadism, diagnosing the guilt which is immediately connected to lack of penis and punishing are all fetishist acts (Mulvey, 1975, pp. 20-21) Then, the film is shown from a male gaze on Justine's dead body, and the angry

mob, which is highly indicative of patriarchal order, gets satisfaction by punishing Justine.

While Justine represents female nature, Elizabeth is the ideal woman in the patriarchal society. The film seems to play around Elizabeth in order to satisfy the target audience and to draw a feminist figure in postmodern times yet remains somehow loyal to Shelley's characterization. She is introduced as lover and intended to Victor in the beginning of the film. In flashback scene where Victor meets Elizabeth for the first time, the camera closes up and zooms in to their handshake. Handshake scenes repeat through the film a couple of times, strongly indicating that Branagh takes men and women as equals. In this sense, Branagh extends Shelley's discussion of feminism in 20th century. Shelley introduces Elizabeth as an object for Victor to "...Love and cherish. All praises bestowed on her I received as made to a possession of my own." (Shelley, 1994, p. 30).

In the scene where she reads the letters from Victor, the transition to her scene reveals a lot about her nature. Victor writes the letters in his lab, a cold and dimmed setting, transition to Frankenstein mansion at night, still cold and dim, yet, when Elizabeth separates from others to read "P.S" part, she is next to fireplace, behind her the void sphere where a cold light illuminates her as backlight and fireplace, a strong and warm light illuminates her face and dominates the half of the frame while she reads that Victor misses her lips. In the novel, Victor and Elizabeth exchanges letters revealing their insights and sentiments about each other. When Elizabeth's letters remain un-replied, Clerval appears to Ingolstadt instructing Victor to care for Elizabeth. In the film, Henry exchanges his role with Justine. In the film, Justine instructs Elizabeth to take care of Victor. Elizabeth, from then on, assumes a highly active role in the narrative of the film. Güner (2009) suggests that Elizabeth not only acquires the axis of narrativity which has been assigned to Victor, but also challenges patriarchal authority of Alphonse Frankenstein by composing letters outside patriarchal manor of Frankenstein (p. 149). Arriving at Ingolstadt, Elizabeth reassures Victor for his extreme isolation from the family. The scene postulates Branagh's proposition to patriarchal set of rules and regulations especially over gender roles and binary oppositions. Victor sits on his couch, in a hunchback position, clearly overwhelmed by his scientific endeavour consuming his soul as it is an obvious case in the novel, too, Elizabeth confronts Victor. The shot of this scene is sutured between medium close-up and extreme close-up shots of Victor and Elizabeth respectively. Victor appears pale and blends into the background almost losing his subjectivity, illuminated by neutral light which also features the schemes of body parts hung on the de-saturated wooden wall. Branagh deduces the reason behind Victor's being a lost cause in Victor's shots by drawing such a frame. On the other hand, Elizabeth is registered by an extreme close-up, emphasizing her character. Lastly, the two shots being captured below Elizabeth's eye level and above Victor's, furthers Branagh's disagreement with gender roles in patriarchal understanding. As Caroll points out, especially Hollywood films, as opposed to Branagh's, feature men as active agents who ride the plot while women decelerate the action in narrative (p. 351).

Branagh (1994) receives Elizabeth as a strong and independent woman and makes connections between Shelley and Elizabeth and between “feminist and benevolent mothers” Caroline Frankenstein and Mary Wollstonecraft. In his article, Branagh suggests that Shelley, as a daughter of a feminist, should be represented by a figure who was not just a love interest (qtd. in Brannon, 14). Elizabeth meets Victor in Ingolstadt, as a free woman, completely aware of what Victor is occupied with. Even more, the camera registers her in a lower angle and Victor in a higher angle, asserting her prowess and power as a woman while Victor is powerless as he is consumed by his own lab work. However, in the novel, what we observe from Elizabeth is a gift from mother, moreover, a gift from father for Victor to make a bride “I confess, my son, that I have always looked forward to your marriage with our dear Elizabeth” (Shelley, 1994, p. 182). Also, Elizabeth conforms to father’s arrangement of marriage (Shelley, 1994, p. 230). Even though Elizabeth and Victor have consent, their marriage is still an arrangement. Branagh changes such Elizabeth into his rework as a strong and independent woman fitting into the perception of feminism in Branagh’s times.

### **Problematic Connection between Victor and the Creature**

The reason why Victor fails is that he fails to shoulder the responsibility of his creation. Through the novel and the film, Victor almost always seems to have another “better” option to avert catastrophe, even after animating his own creation. He, in the first place, is inspired by Cornelius Agrippa and other natural philosophers in order to “banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death” (Shelley, 1994, p. 36). Then, he is motivated by the loss of his mother. Branagh depicts his ambitions when Victor visits her mother’s grave, the camera creates an allegory by identifying Victor and the space he is in. The camera zooms in, from a wide angle established shot depicting the place and Victor, to Victor’s face as his posture evens up with the mountains in the background. He cries “You should never have died” as if he were defying higher beings.

Ignited by the loss of the loved one, Victor now has enough motivations to create. The novel suggests that nature philosopher is surprised by electricity and galvanism (Shelley, 1994, p. 37). However, Shelley leaves the complete picture of the creation process blank and it abruptly happens in a dreary November night (Shelley, 1994, p. 58). Branagh (1994) utilizes the space left by Shelley in order to further her discussion. For Shelley’s times, feminism was for women become a better members and mothers in the society. Branagh furthers Shelley’s point of view by adopting her ideas in contemporary times. In Victor’s lab, Branagh draws the scene of creation by both referring feminine and masculine symbols, such as the sarcophagus as a womb, amniotic fluid and body as feminine, the pipes, containers and electrical eels as masculine. Branagh totally acknowledges the equal

participation of both sexes in creation and re-creation, as Shelley later in the novel suggests that the Creature needs a woman in order to survive. Güner (2009) confirms that acknowledging the participation of both sexes in creation not only in creation scene but also in the scenes where Victor collects amniotic fluid from various mothers and where, in extreme close-up shot highly depictive of the action itself, Victor electrifies Elizabeth's finger after catching a lightning bolt- enables Branagh to further Shelley's ideology of feminism in today's understanding (pp. 144-145, 150).

Even after creation, Victor still have had another chance, as the title of the novel suggests, to be a complete "Prometheus" and fulfil ancient titan's duty not only by creating humans, but also stealing fire for them. Victor succeeds the first duty as Prometheus yet fails to make his creation civilized. Moreover, he becomes disgusted by his creation and leaves him alone. In the film, Victor fails to teach the Creature to stand upright, which was an ancient gift from Prometheus to humans. After some struggle, the camera registers him from a higher angle to zoom in to his facial close up in order to strengthen the emphasis on his self-awareness: "What have I done". Then the scene follows as he makes notes of the Creature as abomination, with the blurry background of lab where the Creature is hanged. The scene indicates that Victor is now developing an unpleasant relationship with his space and work. Afterwards, as Victor emphasizes the first change inside him blaming his work of diverting from dream of beauty to horror and disgust in the novel (Shelley, 1994, p. 59), Branagh (1994) registers Victor through his reflection in the mirror, strongly indicative of his delusive character, in that particular case, as a god. Of course, we observe Victor's tale from his deathbed in Walton's ship, from the lips of a complete and mature Victor Frankenstein. He could have completed his development if he had never attended such an adventure of creation in his studies, what is more, if he had been more careful about his creation, he could still have had a better option. Victor concludes in the novel just before the animation that "If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind." (Shelley, 1994, p. 56). Branagh also examines Victor's growth, especially in the scene when Elizabeth decides to leave Frankenstein mansion. Elizabeth is on the threshold; the interior scene is intentionally illuminated in order to even the exposure with the outside seen through the door. Elizabeth's independence as a woman is emphasized again in that scene which suggests another life available for her without dependence to men. Victor, on the other hand, is registered in front of the figure of Christ, suggesting the change happened inside Victor, after his encounter with the Creature in Alpine Caves, where Victor's shots are intentionally aberrated, suggesting "the rebirth" as a new self.

It is almost impossible for me to examine the Creature and Victor separately. Existence of the Creature may be problematic for Victor both in the film and the novel, likewise, God's absence is as problematic as his presence for the Creature. Victor fails to

realize that he actually creates a twin for himself. Whatever the Creature suffers is the anguish of Victor himself. The film highlights symbiotic relationship between Victor and the Creature in the scene where Elizabeth comes to Ingolstadt to visit Victor after Justine's advice. The shift in the focus between Victor and the veiled body of creature refers to an existing relationship between the two. Afterwards, what the Creature depicts in length in the novel is narrated by Branagh in the Creature's point of view. He learns from De Laney family. The scene is yet another strong visual created by Branagh depicting the creature in the darkness and his face is illuminated by warm light penetrating through the cracks on the wall. The scene agrees with Shelley's depiction, also, promoting the romantic idea that the nature is the teacher. Also, in Shelley's work, feelings are supported by the natural phenomena such as thunder and fire. The Creature burns the cottage to emphasize his vengeance both in the novel and in the film. The Creature also suffers from merciless society like Victor in the scene of execution of Justine. In the novel, the Creature justifies that "Why should I pity man more than he pities me" (Shelley, 1994, p. 174-175). Vengeance is also a mutual feeling of both. They both chase each other to revenge their love.

The discussion in the novel evolves between God and creation but film adapts another emphasis of the novel: mother and child. As Victor suffers from the lack of mother, the creature also suffers from the lack of motherly figure who can prepare him to the civilization. Both Victor and the Creature, then, become vulnerable to evil in the absence of matron. Moreover, lack of female companion results in their end. The creature lost in his vengeance reminds Victor in various occasions "I will be there at your wedding" both in the film and in the novel. Branagh builds the scene as tremendously depictive and terrific as the scene in the novel where Shelley (1994, p. 241) writes:

She was there, lifeless, and inanimate, thrown  
across the bed, her head hanging down and her pale and  
distorted features half covered by her hair. Everywhere I  
turn I see the same figure— her bloodless arms and relaxed  
form flung by the murderer on its bridal bier

In the film, the Creature is there to rip Elizabeth's still beating heart, abducting his hand with Elizabeth's heart to the camera. The frame emphasizes the tension of the situation as the Creature, in a way, becomes delusive on how to approach women in patriarchal understanding, just like Victor refers to Elizabeth's body as "distorted". Heffernan suggests that "Victor portrays the victim of a murderous rape: a complex expression of his own misogyny, of the creature's lust for revenge, and of his frustrated longing for a mate" (Heffernan, 1997, p. 153). Güner (2009) also points out that Elizabeth becomes the object of desire both for Victor and the Creature as the Creature replaces, so to speak, Victor's place on the top of Elizabeth in her marital bed with her still beating

heart, symbolically speaking, thrown at audience's face. Branagh (1994) both reinforces his film as a horror genre by victimizing woman, which is characteristic to horror films, so that the film should appeal to the audience, and also, he clarifies the connection between Victor and the Creature in terms of their approach to Elizabeth as a sexual object (Güner, 2009, pp. 161-162). The following scene where Victor re-animates Elizabeth, resulting in Elizabeth setting fire Frankenstein manor as well as herself, confirms doppelgangers' approach to Elizabeth as an object and Elizabeth's response as an independent woman.

Finally, in the ending scene of the film Victor lays dead in Walton's ship with the Creature weeping for him. In that scene, the camera is tilted to create a "Dutch angle", which narrates all the characters are troubled with disequilibrium or a high emotional state. Ending scene of the film emphasizes too much tension which resolves into the image of Victor's funeral. Branagh places the Creature away from the ship crew and Walton, alluding to his isolation just like in the scene where Elizabeth has visited Victor's flat in Ingolstadt, this time Victor under the veil inanimate and the Creature isolated. In the end, the camera registers Victor's body and the Creature burning from Walton's point of view as a regressing dolly shot, at the same time, zooming in to the fire. The final shot is highly indicative of suspense, as all the conflict is solved.

### **Conclusion**

This paper examines how an adaptation may become strong representative of the pre-text behind it. In this case of Shelley-Branagh agreement, Branagh re-works Shelley's novel but remains loyal to what Shelley discusses. Branagh introduces Shelley to his film audience by promoting her work. Moreover, he explicitly draws attention to what Shelley tried to raise an awareness. The plot in the film may or sometimes may not be identical and strongly loyal to the novel, yet Branagh succeeds to create a new art form by avoiding copying the pre-text. Garcia concludes that Branagh creates an artistic form in post-modern times by evaluating Shelley (qtd. in Brannon, 3-4). One can easily realize Shelley's intertextuality and Branagh's intertextuality in a multi-layered manner. That's why, Branagh's work is highly representative of the culture in romantic era and late 20th century. Even when Branagh diverts from Shelley's work, which is completely understandable in adaptation theory, he still manages to refer to the pre-text by utilizing cinematography. So, what makes this work a strong adaptation is not the fact that it copies the pre-text, but it elevates the discussion and themes behind the novel including its culture. Lastly and most crucially, this paper respects both mediums, the film and the novel, their value, and their unique conventions of narration.

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