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Cover Page Footnote

Kevin L. Ferguson is assistant professor of English at Queens College, City University of New York. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on college writing, film adaptation, and digital humanities. His film writing has appeared in Bright Lights Film Journal, Camera Obscura, Jump Cut, Scope, The Journal of Medical Humanities, and [in]Transition.

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Mad Monster Party (dir. Jules Bass, 1967) is a beguiling film: the superb Rankin/Bass “Animagic” stop-motion animation is burdened by interminable pacing, the celebrity voice cast includes the terrific Boris Karloff and Phyllis Diller caricaturing themselves but with flat and contradictory dialogue, and its celebration of classic Universal Studios movie monsters surprisingly culminates in their total annihilation in the film’s closing moments. The plot finds famous Dr. Baron Boris von Frankenstein convening his “Worldwide Organization of Monsters” to announce both his greatest discovery, a “formula which can completely destroy all matter,” and his retirement, where he will surprisingly be succeeded not by a monster but by something far worse: a human, his nebbish pharmacist nephew Felix Flanken. Naturally, this does not sit well with the current membership, nor even Felix, who is exposed to

monsters for the first time in his life and is petrified at what he sees. Thus, a series of classic monsters team up to try to knock off Felix and take over for Baron Frankenstein: Dracula, The Werewolf, The Mummy, The Invisible Man, Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde, The Creature from the Black Lagoon, The Hunchback of Notre Dame, Frankenstein's Monster, The Monster's Mate, King Kong (referred to only as "It"), Yetch (an ersatz Peter Lorre/Igor hybrid), and Francesca, the buxom red-headed secretary. Much of the plot's comedy is that Felix is so humanly clueless: glasses-wearing, naive, constantly sneezing, he fails to recognize the monsters' horribleness and manages to avoid their traps mainly by accident and dumb luck. Ultimately, Baron Frankenstein intercedes to do battle with his constituency, using his anti-matter formula in a suicide mission to destroy the monsters, leaving only Francesca and Felix to sail off to safety and get married. The last scene's surprising reveal, however, is that the two lovers in the new post-apocalyptic Eden are actually android creations of the Baron.

Why does *Mad Monster Party* complicate its celebration of classic monsters by destroying them and replacing them with technology? Why are the human and nonhuman alike threatened by technology, even though the benevolent version of technology is the only promise the film offers to continue to propagate human cultural norms like heteronormative marriage? *Mad Monster Party* initially establishes monsters as an organized threat to humanity (led by the traitorous monster-creator

The Machine at the Mad Monster Party

Frankenstein, who now has apocalyptic powers as well), only to argue that monsters and humans alike face the greater threat of technology, which paradoxically can both destroy all matter and ensure survival of human culture. Thus, the film's conclusion condenses the human and monster onto the axis of the organic and places the androids Francesca and Felix on the inorganic, privileging the replication of social structure over the organic body. Reading *Mad Monster Party* in this way reveals it to be a text that expresses basic mid-1960s cultural anxieties seen in other media productions of the time, but one that ultimately contradicts its progressive agenda by eliminating all threats to human heterosexual marriage: including the humans!

1960s Camp Monstrosity and Televised Domesticity

As with any repurposing of horror for youthful audiences, *Mad Monster Party* simultaneously addresses an adult audience familiar with the originals and a childish audience that should be protected from the true horrors of these creatures' existence. Thus, the classic movie monsters are tweaked so they are recognizable but friendly: the Hunchback has a shock of pink hair, the Monster is comically hen-pecked by his Mate, the Creature gets a face full of cream pie, and the Werewolf pants like a puppy. But the monsters' presentation does more than just make them safe for children; rather, *Mad Monster Party* fits with a larger 1960s trend of playful camp monstrosity. Reflecting on his

monster-loving childhood in the 1960s, media scholar Henry Jenkins points out how “[t]he idea of monster parties was clearly in the air in the mid-1960s, suggested perhaps by Bobby ‘Boris’ Pickett’s 1962 novelty song, ‘Monster Mash’” and the banquet scene in *Mad Monster Party*.¹ Whereas media critics speak today of the complexities of industrial strategies like “crossovers,” “convergence,” and “cinematic universes,” the 1960s monster party was a simpler straightforward play with ideas: an experiment in the ecosystem of monstrous behavior that allowed white middle-class America to compare and contrast the characteristics, traits, strengths, and weaknesses of various forms of monstrosity.

The monster party was surely on critic Lynne Spigel’s mind when she identified a new, related generic form of 1960s television programming, the “fantastic family sit-com,” “founded on the merger between the troubled paradise of 1950s domesticity and the new-found ideals of the American future.”² Specifically catalyzed around the televised spectacle of the Apollo 11 moon landing, Spigel sees this hybrid genre as one that mixes the

¹ Henry Jenkins, “I Was a (Pre-)Teenage Monster,” *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 1.1 (2012): 94.

² Lynn Spigel, “From Domestic Space to Outer Space: The 1960s Fantastic Family Sit-Com,” in *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction*, edited by Constance Penley, Elisabeth Lyon, Lynn Spigel, and Janet Bergstrom, 205–35 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991): 205.

The Machine at the Mad Monster Party

“conventions of the suburban sit-com past with the space-age imagery of the New Frontier.”³ That is, while these shows were structured around the conventional sit-com format, the presence of “good witches, flying nuns, glamorous genies, favorite Martians, humorous horses, motherly cars, and friendly ghosts” brought surprising juxtapositions to the screen that reflected new 1960s space-age techno-anxieties.⁴ Spigel particularly argues that two horror-themed shows that simultaneously aired, *The Addams Family* (ABC, 1964–1966) and *The Munsters* (CBS, 1964–1966, based on Universal’s monster properties), explicitly used the monsters to critique white middle-class suburbia, which was shown to be more threatening than the benevolent monster families.⁵ As a result, the fantastic family sit-com encouraged mid-60s television viewers to understand monstrous and alien characters as even more normal than the normal, skewering middle-class conventions and the hypocrisy of traditional social values. Identifying with monstrous families asks viewers to reconsider their own social values at the same time as they are encouraged to see these values as universal (that is, even monsters have car trouble and domestic arguments).

As part of a larger group of 1960s monster texts dealing with domesticity, does *Mad Monster Party* follow a similar strategy of invoking the benevolent monster family in order to critique the middle class?

³ Spigel, 205.

⁴ Spigel, 220.

⁵ Spigel, 220.

Not really. While the monsters in *Mad Monster Party* are initially friendly (they are excited to go to a party after all), their scheming to get rid of Flanken makes them villainously unlikeable. The film introduces three related objects of desire for the monsters to chase, which map onto middle-class values of career and marriage: the anti-matter formula, the position as “Head of the Worldwide Organization of Monsters,” and the sexy Francesca. Except for the Monster and his Mate, the monsters are romantically unattached, and so Francesca is the source of lust for all of the male characters except her creator, the Baron. The strongest images of middle-class domesticity surround the Monster and his Mate, whose unsentimental love is expressed in her song “You’re Different”:

Now let’s agree you’re not incredibly
handsome or even charming
But you can be so disarming.
You’re different, as unpredictable as rain
You’re an Easter candy cane
Like a snowy day in June.

Their relationship, functional but loveless, is based on never being able to negotiate an essential, unpredictable difference. In a scene just before the monster banquet, the Monster’s Mate criticizes the Monster, wearing an ill-fitting tuxedo, as a “poor invention of a man.” But in the next scene, Frankenstein begs a snarky Francesca to be polite to the two and “remember that we are all one happy family here.” Once we learn what Francesca knows in this scene—that she is also a creation of Frankenstein—we can better interpret the Baron’s

The Machine at the Mad Monster Party

sentiment as a clichéd response to sibling rivalry: “come on kids, play nice.” But when the audience, and Francesca, learn that Felix too is one of Frankenstein’s creations, they must uncomfortably consider how the film defines the “happy family” as one that is technologically incestuous. Frankenstein only says to Francesca that he hopes she and Felix will be friends, but Dracula understands the true dynamic of ownership, telling Yetch that “she is *his*, not yours.” More than just arranging a marriage, Frankenstein has created one.

Upward mobility is the other conventional middle-class theme that *Mad Monster Party* employs to dramatize Franken’s problem. In an opening scene that introduces him, we find Franken literally working for no pay in a pharmacy as an indentured servant. Felix’s bumbling makes him a curious candidate to take over for Frankenstein, who assures Francesca that he is “a mere human . . . [b]ut he also happens to be my nephew.” Felix is hesitant to accept the miracle promotion, but, emphasizing the importance of family over qualification, Frankenstein assures him that since “Frankenstein blood flows through your veins, you’ll do just fine. . . . This is a family business: there’s a tradition to uphold.” While Felix eventually decides to turn the offer down in order to run away with Francesca, the question is rendered moot for him when Frankenstein blows up the formula and the organization. Thus, by rehabilitating Francesca so that she falls in love with Felix, the film demonstrates the incompatibility of romance and career (the same

lesson taught in Shelley's *Frankenstein*). Thus, unlike the fantastic family sit-com, *Mad Monster Party* provides models of conventional domesticity that are ultimately destroyed by technology.

Technologies of Ambivalence

There is a variety of technology on display in *Mad Monster Party*, from the fantastical devices in Frankenstein's laboratory to his monstrous and robotic creations running around the castle. All of this technology is treated ambivalently, captured in the proud boast after the anti-matter formula is mastered: "I, Baron von Frankenstein, master of the secret of creation, have now mastered the secret of destruction." Frankenstein's feat closes the book on his career; we can understand his scientific interest in destruction as a kind of symmetry, but in the context of his family and career why would he work towards such a discovery? The anti-matter formula is an amalgamation of new and old science: a visual homage has Frankenstein raise the blue test tube through his lab's ceiling so it may be animated by lightning, but the effects of the formula are atomic: a single drop from the old blue vial results in a nuclear mushroom cloud. The theme of new-old science is further emphasized by a subtle sound effect during the first and final scenes: a simultaneous bubbling and modulated beeping sound pervades Frankenstein's lab, and this recurs in the soundtrack when we learn Felix is an android too. This mixture of new and old sounds suggests an uncertain embrace of different technologies. While the sounds of chemistry and electronics are mixed

The Machine at the Mad Monster Party

acoustically in the scenes of dystopian possibility, the sciences are not mixed visually in the film itself: the anti-matter formula is the realm of chemistry, the Monster of biology, Francesca of mechanics.⁶ There is, thus, not a coherent vision of technology in the film, but a patchwork of technology usage.

While atomic discourse and nuclear disaster are the most obvious anxieties hovering over *Mad Monster Party*, there is one smaller scene that introduces a magic television, noticeably at odds with the rest of the castle's antiquated decor. The Baron himself grabs a "bone-jo" to sing "Stay One Step Ahead," a didactic song encouraging Felix to take over as successor: "You gotta stay one step ahead. / Tune in to what's happening, boy, / and stay one step ahead." During the song, about a dozen small monsters suddenly appear, frightening Felix and causing him to bump into a screen. Pushing a button, the monsters suddenly appear on the television, which Felix watches in awe, not aware that another group of monsters is sneaking up behind him. At the final chorus, a monster pushes a button and Felix himself appears on the screen. More than magical utopian technology, this scene demonstrates the permeability of the screen: rather than unidirectional transmission of culture and

⁶ She tells Felix: "[b]ut where other women have a heart, I have a spring that will unwind. Where other women have lungs, I have a pump that runs on batteries which will run out. Where other women have elbows and knees, I have metallic joints that will one day grow rusty and stiff."

social norms from the screen outwards, we have a feedback loop between entertainment and reality. The threat of monsters is everywhere, and the lesson of Frankenstein's song becomes clear when we learn Felix is an android. For Frankenstein, the monster-technology battle is unresolved. That is, his technology (specifically Felix) is not guaranteed to win, and rather than being stronger, faster, or smarter, Felix must be strategic, "staying a step ahead." When Frankenstein throws the monsters a human skull to play with, we first see this as a veiled threat to the human Felix. Only later do we understand this as a distraction, that Frankenstein is pitting the monsters against humans so that his android can beat both.

That scene uses technology to instruct Felix about vision and progress, but what are the larger purposes for Frankenstein's technology? One small detail provides a clue: the film's final glitchy line of dialogue finds Felix accepting Francesca's confession that she is only a machine: "Well Francesca, [he sneezes], well Francesca, none of us are perfect, are perfect, are perfect" In repeating these last broken words with a jerky twist of his head, Felix reveals his true android nature, which is surprisingly not super-human, perfect, or timeless, but rather one that will also wear out and twitch unexpectedly. Having been invited to identify with Felix, what are spectators to make of this reveal, where humans are to be replaced by a flawed technology? Frankenstein had called Francesca his masterpiece, and was treating Felix as if he were a human. But rather than aiming for

The Machine at the Mad Monster Party

“perfection,” Frankenstein was more interested in replication. Felix himself seems unaware that he is an android when he expressed his desire for Francesca: “we’ll be married, and soon there’ll be the sound of tiny Flankens running around.” Rather than little robo-Flankens, what is being replicated here are middle-class values.

The surprise ending of *Mad Monster Party* argues that middle-class values are worth replicating even at the expense of human life; in other words, the ideology of reproduction within marriage is more important as a concept than the actual human (or even monstrous) experience of heterosexual marriage. Thus, unlike the serial nature of the fantastic family sitcom, *Mad Monster Party* concludes definitively with the apocalyptic image of expulsion and new beginnings. Whether the film presents this as a positive or negative is difficult to determine. On the one hand the film is deeply conservative, as in the scene where Felix slaps Francesca, resulting in her sudden decision to love him after all. But on the other hand, I suspect that a parodic reading, with the androids sailing off into their new techno-Eden, would have had to have been made subtle. An ecocritical approach taken by Robin L Murray and Joseph K Heumann disagrees, taking the fantastic family sit-com position to argue that *Mad Monster Party* “replaces the violent destruction of [human] ‘monsters’ like us with (apparently) peaceful android technology.”⁷ Their

⁷ Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann, *That’s All Folks?: Ecocritical Readings of American Animated*

reading sees the film's conclusion as offering a new tactic: "[w]hen humanity proves so destructive it destroys itself, it may be better if technology takes its place, rejuvenating a once-human world and its cultures and bringing peace to a war-driven civilization."⁸ I disagree with this reading, primarily by seeing *Mad Monster Party*'s ending as a riff on "The Lonely," a 1959 episode of *The Twilight Zone*, where a futuristic convict imprisoned on an asteroid falls, against his expectations, in love with a robot, only to have her destroyed in front of him when he is pardoned. While Felix and Francesca may seem peaceful in the final image, the projection of human culture onto the broken androids is a cynical mark of what happens when monsters disappear and culture comes simply to mean mechanical reproduction. Replacing organic monsters with inorganic technology is poor salvation if it means humans must disappear as well.

And what of our poor beloved monsters, whose insurrection is foiled first when the zombie bellhops betray them and second when "It" turns on them, holding them captive before Frankenstein's final strike? These monsters, so unprepared for the apocalypse, are unimaginable in the computer age. Contemporary cinema takes a different approach, plopping classic movie monsters into futuristic scenarios hoping that their essential monstrosity remains legible, as in recent tech-driven reboots like

Features (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2011): 118.

⁸ Murray and Heumann, 124.

The Machine at the Mad Monster Party

Van Helsing (dir. Stephen Sommers, 2004); *I, Frankenstein* (dir. Stuart Beattie, 2014); and Universal's announcement to create an action-oriented "cinematic universe" around their monster properties. But in 1967 it was a much more radical proposition to suggest the timeless qualities of monstrosity. Indeed, the fact that monsters could be radical is proven by the efforts of *The Munsters*, *The Addams Family*, Count Chocula, *Sesame Street's* The Count and other media texts that work hard to contain monsters as safe, humorous fishes out of water. The expectation of *Mad Monster Party* is for the monsters to also learn a life lesson, but they are never given the chance: the Baron gives, and the Baron takes away.

The extent of *Mad Monster Party's* uniqueness is apparent when considered in light of its closest contemporary version, *Hotel Transylvania* (dir. Genndy Tartakovsky, 2012), which pays constant homage to the earlier film but to very different effect. In honor of his daughter's birthday, Dracula throws a party, inviting all the classic monsters but also minor characterizations from *Mad Monster Party* like a skeleton band, a strong-willed chef, the nagging Monster's Mate, and an "It." Likewise, into this world one human character arrives, a backpacker who throws the monsters into disarray, but whose love for Dracula's daughter forces Dracula to come to terms with integrating human-monster culture. The traditional middle-class plot—father desperate to prevent his daughter from falling in love—thus serves a liberal agenda of embracing difference. For all their surface similarities, this is

decidedly not the ending of *Mad Monster Party*, which rather than reaching a resolution that allows for integrating humans and monsters, instead replaces them both with technology. In this way *Mad Monster Party* complicates its celebration of classic monsters in order to suggest a greater, shared threat to monsters and humans alike: the machine. Rather than privilege the replication of social structure over the organic body, the film implies, we must continue to root for the monsters to do their worst.

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The Machine at the Mad Monster Party

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