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## Parodying the monsters...and loving it.

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### Cover Page Footnote

Panos Liakos has studied Ancient Greek Literature (BA) and Modern and Contemporary History (MA). His theses had to do with the work of the innovative Balkan cinematographers Manakia Brothers and Otto Preminger's film noir *Laura* (1944). He is constantly trying to interpret cinematic works through the lenses of history and the genre theory. His interests concentrate on the deciphering of every year's Academy Awards nominees and winners. Panos Liakos has worked as a freelance film reviewer in Greece. Many articles of his have been presented in CORECT magazine of Nefeli Publishing. He is currently attending the Cinema Studies MA program of NYU (Tisch School of the Arts). Ioannis Papadimitriou has studied History (BA) with an emphasis on Ottoman and Middle Eastern History as well as Military History. He completed his MA in Turkish Studies in the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London). Currently he is conducting his PhD at Royal Holloway (University of London), under the supervision of Dr. Paris Papamichos Chronakis, in the Turkish War of Independence. Apart from his interest in history, he was always fascinated by the utilization of history as a source of inspiration for cinema and the arts in general, as well as, the ways history itself was presented in said arts.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the very first inception of dramatic arts among ancient civilizations, comedy and tragedy were the two fundamental and often -mutually-complementary expressions of drama. Apparently, experiencing a performance of a story of enormous suffering or one that would evoke laughter respectively, is a vital need of any society. Stemming from this fundamental bipolar distinction, we begin to understand how “monsters” or, more precisely, creatures (often human-like) with a tragic background that cause horror, are often deconstructed and turned into comical beings, evoking laughter. This specific transformation of such a creature encapsulates the essence of parody. Since obviously, monsters are chiefly products of art, when another artist intervenes in the primary source and alters it to create a comedic interpretation of that source, the “horror parody” subgenre is established.

Although not necessarily the case with every single monster, it is safe to say that at least most cinematic ones were eventually parodied. While by no means an extensive analysis, in this article, we will try to offer some basic interpretation of how and why this happens. We will limit our scope to two films-parodies (*Young Frankenstein*, *Dracula: Dead and Loving it*) that, conveniently enough, were also directed by the same person. Thus, it is easier to also examine the mentality of the artist which undertakes the task of parodying an otherwise fear-inducing monster/element.

### **THE CASE OF FRANKENSTEIN**

Gothic Horror has always been dominated by two particular figures, Dracula and Frankenstein's creature. Both debuting as literary monsters in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they quickly found their way into the big screen and from then onwards, they had had more than one cinematic outing per decade. We can safely argue that, at least partially, Film History (with its various encompassing trends) becomes evident just by watching the countless adaptations of the story of these two monsters in the big screen. Indeed, movies featuring Dracula or Frankenstein are often more aligned with social trends of the era they were produced than with the spirit of their original novels. Moreover, after more than 200 years of continuous appeal, our perception of such figures is shaped as much (if not more) by their cinematic iterations rather than their literary equivalents. Thus, we state right away that when approaching a Frankenstein or a Dracula movie, the fidelity to the novel should not be of immense importance. After all, many such cinematic works use solely as an inspiration previous same-themed film (Jancovich). The 1994 *Frankenstein* film might have been promoted as "faithful" to the novel, but the story of Frankenstein was even then understood as belonging to more fields than just literature.

The 1970s were a decade when audiences became tired of well-established cinematic tropes. As a result, films became more violent, more extreme, more provocative, explicit and sexual. *Young Frankenstein* (1974), being a product of its

time, was affected by this trend, but it also added a new feature that would make it stand out. It became humorous. As with *Dracula*, the novel hyperbole is something that transitions well into both drama but also comedy (Friedman and Kavey 150), and a keen eye can observe the omnipresent subtle comic relief in any “serious” and gloomy cinematic adaptation of gothic horror. But for *Young Frankenstein* the aim was for pure laughter to emerge ie., Mel Brooks and Gene Wilder imitated past cliches at such an exaggerated level that the final product was comical simply by looking at. *Frankenstein*, in general, had seen many adaptations, translations and transitions. Each decade and each outing of the monster brought something new to the myth (Jancovich). So, why Mel Brooks’ parody had this tremendous success? Simply put, it was because a new tone was established, while the film remained very close to the original source (or sources).

There are many ways in which we can explain *Young Frankenstein’s* success. The first element to mention is the plurality of the humor inducing mechanisms. Just by establishing the different cultural backgrounds of the leading actors (in film – not in real life), a basis for further jokes and misunderstandings is achieved. The humor itself is being delivered in two forms; humor aimed at the actors from each other and humor aimed at the audience (in this second category we detect the key element of parody). Polite or impolite humor, aimed at either audience or the other actors, intentional or unintentional, is the main factor that establishes Frederick as the leading role, one likable to both his

co-actors and the audience (Giampieri). Of course, Gene Wilder's performance is so varied (ranging from extravagant to normal and from frightful to purely comedic) that other emotions emerge too. But if Frederick is the leading role, arguably the most comical performance belongs to Marty Feldman as Igor. We literally witness "the servant" having so much self-esteem, creating an original and funny paradox. From this paradox stem all of Igor's laugh inducing moments and the traditional stereotypical portrayal of the servant is torn apart. It is Igor, whose role is aimed at entertaining the audience (at times almost breaking the 4<sup>th</sup> wall). Much closer to a medieval jester (the medieval theme also comes to mind in the last sequence, where his posture closely resembles a gargoyle), Igor is stoic and at the same time self-aware of his role as the comic relief. And of course, his goofiness cannot but contradict Frederick's seriousness and scientific passion. Frederick is there to propel the plot and tell the story; Igor is there to turn this story into a parody. And he does not transform the story into a parody for his master to receive it as such. He does it for the audience.

We should note that humor, this difference in tone from previous iterations, is primarily achieved via the dialogues. They are dominated by puns, wordplay, innuendos and of course classic jokes. To a lesser extent humor also comes from the exact appearance and movements of the characters, exactly like in an Aristophanean play! By providing an otherwise authentic feel of a 30's horror movie, the verbal humor is enough to alter the tone in this

suitable context, without sacrificing the character and ambiance of the film (Crick 77) and without the movie becoming idiotic. But then again, the film is so self-conscious of what it attempts to achieve that humorous tones are spread throughout.

Naturally, the relation between creature and creator always lies on the foreground of any Frankenstein narrative. With a creature more comical, less terrorizing and even benevolent and baby-like, Frankenstein cannot but in turn be more like a father figure rather than a crazy scientist. The relationship here is funny, emotional and expectation-defying, also leading to a “happy ending”, another breakthrough of this movie. This relation and the choice of this specific portrayal of the monster additionally provide the film with a more philosophical sub-context. Initially, we can always argue that the monster itself has never been purely evil in any iteration. Then, the novel itself is full of philosophical allusions (see, for example, a discussion concerning the ethics of science) and here, despite the lighter tone, we gladly come across similar questions. For example, we cannot but wonder after the famous “Putting on the Ritz” number (a sequence which might as well summarize the whole film), if it is, after all, society’s tendencies and actions that turns the monster into “evil” (Friedman and Kavey 157). And it is not just the monster. The various characters of this horror parody seem to comprise of misfits and even the more socially accepted ones (like Elizabeth, Frederick’s upper social class fiancé), in the end find fulfillment only by grasping their very own “monstrous” urges



(Picart 44). Mel Brooks was aware of the idea that horror might as well stem from a hidden and oppressed by society urge (Jancovich) and of course, once more, plays with this exact idea. In any case at the heart of any Frankenstein narration is the monster itself, and here its comical portrayal could not have been done in a more sophisticated, multilayered and thought-provoking way. Apparently, Mel Brooks and the cast had a deep understanding of the novel and its themes and an incredibly brave vision at the same time (Brooks and Keegan).

Furthermore, we should contemplate upon the element of parody itself. It is not just the myth, the original story, which is parodied. Many well-established horror tropes are subtly mentioned and then deconstructed in the movie. For example, for what other reason other than to mock the tenacity with which Gothic Horror is almost always connected with Transylvania, does the film also take place there? In other cases, such as the creature's traditional fear of fire, the film is toying with our expectations and the clichés, well established over the decades. Concurrently, the movie seems to be conscious of its oversexualization, exactly in contrast with other similar adaptations at that time (see, for example, *Flesh for Frankenstein*). However, *Young Frankenstein* mostly drew inspiration from Frankenstein movies of the 30's (Symons 124) and is more than willing to say so. Through the direct reference to the black and white cinematography of the classic horror film -and other more subtle references, such as the use of the very same props used by the 1931 Universal movie-, a nostalgic base

was formed upon which parody was created. All the numerous references convey, moreover, a love for and deep knowledge of the subject (additionally, Mel Brooks and Gene Wilder admitted being left astonished by the 1931 movie) (Crick 71) and it is safe to say that every single portrayal of Frankenstein until that time is in some way parodied in the film. Mel Brooks's propensity to inject his films with elements from television and contemporary popular cultural media is equally evident (Symons 114). But the final product is not just a collage of ideas and references. On the contrary, it utilizes such ideas to create something new, at least concerning the tone through which the story is presented (Brooks and Keegan). Parody is therefore able to reach a wider audience, pay homage to the classics and explore a theme in innovative ways, while retaining untouched the core of the principal source.

There are, of course, many other details to mention about the film. Since not immediately relevant to alteration of the tone achieved in the movie, we will avoid extensive analysis, but let us just note that despite the length of the film, no sequence seems excessive and even the deleted ones (or some of the numerous cuts from the original script) propelled the plot and kept the action going, without the film becoming boring or relying too much on exposition. On the other hand, even with a lengthier run time, plot inconsistencies would remain. But as already pointed out by others, inconsistencies characterized previous adaptations too. It is a possibility that even the cast was completely aware of them and therefore deliberately

chose to pay homage to the classics in yet another way. Another intriguing aspect is that despite the hilariousness of the movie a certain emotional, serious and ambient tone is also conveyed (partially due to the violin leitmotif throughout the movie) (Brooks and Keegan). Plus, given Mel Brooks's previous works (*The Producers*), we can indeed look for anti-Nazi statements in *Young Frankenstein*. After all, we have already mentioned how the film carries a subtle social commentary, concerning society and misfits, society and science, society and creators/artists. What is even more fascinating and testifies to how well written the film is, is the reference to the actual level of development of the neurological science in the 30's (when the film takes place) (Riva and Perciaccante 16).

*Young Frankenstein*, with its cast of not-so-widely known characters and a limited budget, became an enduring success. Audience and critics received the film favorably. In the 1970s audiences were tired of the Classic Hollywood conventions and desperately sought something new. The advent of the New Hollywood was about to change the cinematic tropes once and for all. *Young Frankenstein* provided this fresh outlook into a legend already a century old. References to the popular culture had also done their work, and more people rushed to watch the movie in order to try and spot that little detail, which would spoof their favorite everyday media product, whichever it might have been. As in any parody, a degree of familiarity with the source material is also welcomed here (although not necessary). It allows a better understanding of the cultural references

(Brook's adaption is indeed a multilayered one) and at the same time it allows the audience to precisely understand the rift with previous efforts and the alternative directions that a cultural phenomenon is heading to. And how original indeed were those directions! Not only did *Young Frankenstein* pave the way for the subversive and way ahead of its time *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, it also established in a serious and more systematic way the horror parody subgenre (Friedman and Kavey 156). This trend, which was solidified with *Young Frankenstein*, not only helped to the "popularization" of the gothic horror by de-demonizing its prominent icons, it also pointed out the need of society for new horror icons or at least contemporary interpretations of them. It is only fitting that the legacy of the film was revived in 2007 in the form of a musical. Then again, only a year after the film came out, a Turkish remake was produced, before the novel was translated in Turkish or the original movie aired in Turkey (Öz).

Undoubtedly, it can be argued that the Frankenstein myth has been generally loosely adapted to the silver screen. As stated earlier, perhaps only the 1994 *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* was comparatively closer to the narrative and tone of the novel (Friedman and Kavey 152). This however is not always negative. *Young Frankenstein* was nominated for two Academy Awards, in one of the most significant years in the history of Cinema. In 1975, *The Godfather: Part 2* was awarded the Oscar for Best Picture -today it is considered to be among the best films of all time- while Robert Towne won the Best Original Screenplay Oscar for the way he

renewed the tropes of noir in Polanski's *Chinatown*. *Young Frankenstein* was nominated for the Oscar of Best Writing, Screenplay Adapted from other Material and for the Oscar of Best Sound (Brooks and Keegan). The members of the *Academy* recognized the way in which the two scriptwriters adapted the original myth of Mary Shelley and the genuine writing style that emerged. After all, turning a dark gothic horror story into a subversive parody was not a trivial task. Still, *The Godfather: Part 2* was considered a more preferable winner for the Oscar of Best Picture. As for the Oscar of the Best Sound, as already noted, the multilayered use of sound in the Mel Brooks movie was indeed an achievement. However, eventually the Oscar was awarded to *Earthquake*, a movie belonging to the action genre, another genre that was popularized in the 70's (it can be claimed that the sound in this movie was more influential to the development of sound in its genre and cinema in general). Let us note that *Young Frankenstein* in the Oscars is not something that will be frequently discussed in the relevant bibliography.

In conclusion, two were the film's chief contributions. Initially, it established the "serious" horror parody in cinema. Then, it transitioned the myth of Frankenstein from the gothic horror to the nascent horror parody genre (Friedman and Kavey 147). At the time *Young Frankenstein* came out, consistent horror parody was not yet that much established, and the novel approach must have taken the audience by surprise. Parody ultimately means that the new iteration will add a comic relief to an

already existing theme and in *Young Frankenstein* this was done mainly by alterations to the Frankenstein movies of the 30's. But of course, a parody film is not (or should not) be solely based on a sole cultural product. It is an innovative hybridization of more than one sources. Having recognized that, Brooks in his unique parodies was successful. It is possible then, that Frederick's persistence on a different pronunciation of his name alludes to the attempt of the movie to lead the myth of Frankenstein to new directions. Ultimately, however, just as the protagonist finally comes to terms with his heritage, so does the movie become a part of the various adaptations of the legend, despite its transition, having conveyed a much-needed fresh outlook. A different tone, a same theme... Frederick might claim that "this is the 20<sup>th</sup> century, monsters are passe' but in reality, they will never be out of fashion, contrary perhaps to some of their portrayals.

#### THE CASE OF DRACULA

Perhaps then, with *Young Frankenstein* as a reference point, we can also examine another case of a gothic horror icon being parodied, by the aforesaid director no less. When Bram Stoker published his *Dracula* novel in 1897, he could not have anticipated that a hundred years later his nosferatu (vampire) hero would become a kind of pop icon. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* has inspired throughout the years many artists and his story has been adapted to stage plays, movie scripts, animations (*Hotel Transylvania*) and even TV-commercials (*Duracell*). In order to be precise, we are once more going to focus on the parodies of this classic horror story and,

more specifically, on Mel Brooks's final work, *Dracula: Dead and Loving It* (1995).

Of course, Mel Brooks was not the first to transform Bram Stoker's story into a parody. By looking more carefully at the History of the Hollywood Cinema, we realize that even the comic duet Abbott and Costello parodied the myths of both Frankenstein and Dracula in their 1948 film *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*. Actually, it is a *Universal* comedy picture, having fun with the two archetypal monsters as portrayed in the classic earlier films of the studio (both of them released in 1931). In the *Abbott and Costello* movie, Bela Lugosi reprises his role as Count Dracula, the most striking feature of his performance being the seriousness with which he reinvents his most remembered character. This 1948 comedy is filled with humorous references to many gothic horror films of the era (primarily through its sets and props) and thus reminds more of a pastiche or a mash-up, rather than a well-structured and focused parody of a particular work of art (film/book).

Even the Roman Polanski parody, *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967), filmed almost twenty years after the above-mentioned studio picture, despite its superior directorial power and stunning direction of photography, still, as a script, blends elements from both *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* movies, trying to adapt them into an original story. According to Roman Polanski: 'Our basic aim was to parody the genre in every way possible, while making a picture that would, at the same time, be witty, elegant, and visually pleasing'

(Polanski 250). Revisiting this film, one could gaze in awe at sequences that combine slapstick comedy, mystery, the absurd (an integral part of the genre) and a Freudian interpretation of the myth, as far as the relationships of the two sexes is concerned.

Before taking a closer look at the last film of Mel Brooks, we should not overlook the aura that the 90's exude. Liberalism is at its peak and the audiences have the unique opportunity within the same decade to communicate with two radical approaches to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The first one is the 1992 operatic version of Francis Ford Coppola (and one of the most faithful to the initial source), a version which itself focuses on sexuality, refined references to the cinema of the Silent Era (Murnau's *Nosferatu*) and creates an expressionistic ambiance. The second one is the 1995 film of Mel Brooks, *Dracula: Dead and Loving It*.

A. Symons holds the view that this parody belongs to the concluding phase of Brooks' cinematic career, a phase in which his strategy is more film-orientated and his films lack 'any significant appropriation of television or other non-film media' (Symons 127). This trope of Mel Brooks was not popular with audience and film reviewers, but in our view, this does not mean that it is inept. On the contrary, in this way he is been given the chance to concentrate his comedic skills to a more manageable material, perhaps even being closer to the true essence of parody. What is more, the experienced audience and scholars alike are able to once more perceive Brooks' love and respect to the original sources - qualities of his art that someone



could understand even from *Young Frankenstein* as stated earlier. The subgenre of parody is as old as the comedy of Aristophanes. Mel Brooks, though, unlike Aristophanes who abhorred Euripides, does not despise the gothic horror genre. The scripts of Mel Brooks and his colleagues in both *Young Frankenstein* and *Dracula: Dead and Loving it* are not trying to deconstruct the original material in vain. All they are attempting to achieve, is to retell these horror fiction stories in an altered tone.

As many scholars observe, Mel Brooks in his final film tends to focus more on Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931), rather than the Coppola version. With such an old-fashioned initial source and a respectful approach, Brooks could not antagonize the modern parodies (*The Naked Gun* saga, for example) which relied increasingly on dirty jokes and comments on the television, a strategy that would result in television-film hybrids like *Scary Movie* (2000) (Symons 145). Rather than judging Brooks' tropes, it would be more fertile to accept them as the identity of an old-school comedian. A. Symons seems to concur with the view of the critics on the 'prolonged [...] old routines, puns, slapstick and farce' that can be found in Brooks's adaptation of *Dracula*. Though, looking back at the History of the Comedy, we understand that the great comedians tend to recycle their material, in order to affirm their comic personas.

In any case, as Mel Brooks states at the 2004 commentary for the Warner Bros DVD of the film, his (as well as co-writers' Rudy De Luca and Steve Haberman) intention was precisely for the film to be

based on the Tod Browning version and moreover to have this ‘artificial’, ‘studio’ look. He chose to film this parody in color this time, in order to pay a homage to the old *Hammer* pictures of Dracula. Interestingly, in the same commentary Mel Brooks explains that as this myth has to do with the lust for blood, the very same picture of it would be more impressive in color. Symons, also, locates the *Hammer* influences in ‘the way the sets were designed’ and believes that the whole atmosphere refers to the 1958 *Dracula*, starring Peter Cushing (Symons 141).

Let us insist upon the DVD commentary, as we support the genre theory. Mel Brooks justifies his choice of basing the whole parody upon the 1931 plot on the fact that this plot presents as one of the protagonists the character of Renfield, a lunatic, a hero that according to his view, could produce more laughter than any other of the myth. Peter MacNicol’s performance combines elements from the silent comedy (Harry Langdon) and even from the genius of Jerry Lewis (one of the most comedic moments of the film is the climactic sequence in which MacNicol tries to imitate the voice of Jerry Lewis).

Arguably, Leslie Nielsen as Count Dracula is also an excellent choice. As Bela Lugosi in the *Abbott and Costello* film, Nielsen, under the guidance of his director, is not trying to exaggerate his performance. According to Mel Brooks, ‘Nielsen stars as a very serious actor’. However, he is a flexible actor - parody requires flexibility- as Nielsen, as a comic Dracula, had to deal with satire not only of the genre

but also of the Victorian Era and the trend of impressionism (see for example the dream sequence, in which we feel the constant neurosis of the character about light).

Mel Brooks himself is an experienced comedian, as is evident in the tropes he uses to create puns, pseudo-languages and ‘intertextual conversation’ (Boerboom and Boehm 18) between his original sources and his parody. He keeps for himself the role of Abraham Van Helsing, a well-respected part of the Stoker novel. Mel Brooks creates an initial establishing comic sequence (Van Helsing and his students) regarding some internal body organs. It may be a disgusting notion, but comedy plays with our everyday fears -specifically here, with the fears of the first-year medicine students. Of course, in more than a single sequence, Mel Brooks seems to retain his directorial virtues. The first one is the dance scene between Dracula and Mina, while the second is the final one, when the Count is defeated. R. Crick describes it vividly: ‘all that crisp, quick cutting between tight shots of gripped forearms, flung beams, and upraised stakes reminds us more than a little of Alfred Hitchcock’s fight scenes: minimal maneuvering space, maximum excitement’ (Crick 209). It was a conscious choice of Brooks.

Concluding, we cannot but observe that Mel Brooks as an old-fashioned comedian does not only respect the works of Stoker, Browning and even Murnau but also instills in his work a firm political message when at the very last line, Dr. Seward advises Renfield to call no one ‘master’ and be his

“own man”. This kind of progressive ideas, along with Brooks’s choice to present in the closing freeze-framing credits the men as idiotic figures and the women as graceful and sexy, reassures us of the ethics that govern his work. Above all, Mel Brooks refuses to compromise with the “dirty comedy” era that rises. Brooks seems to be made of the fabric of the old vaudeville comedians. A lighthouse of kindness and veneration towards the great works of literature and, eventually, towards his very art.

A CONCLUDING REMARK

Summarizing, we can argue that the two above-mentioned parodies form a particular circle. *Young Frankenstein* introduces the notion of the consistent cinematic horror parody, while *Dracula: Dead and Loving it* marks the end of Brooks’ cinematic career while preserving his tenets, firmly established in his career. The brilliant comedian is playing with the everyday fears of the audience, its expectations and the stagnation of Gothic Cinema. Simultaneously, he retains a respectfulness towards the original sources. The comedian retells archetypal stories in a fresh and modern way, and we cannot but agree with his own comment that in the end, the parody genre is not lesser in aesthetic value to its parental horror genre. Still, as with horror itself so does parody ultimately has to evolve. If it does not, as is the case with *Dracula: Dead and Loving it*, the audience will start to tire. Undeniably, Brooks could have chosen to align with the parody trends in the 90’s but by not doing so, his films are preserving a refined art that we hope is not completely replaced by other forms. In any case, the

movies are there to those seeking to experience a genuine and elegant form of parody.

As for the “monsters” themselves, in cases such as Frankenstein’s creature and Dracula, inevitably once they fulfill their role as fear inducing beings, they are bound to be “defeated” by the same audience they once terrified. The way they are beaten is by turning them into a shadow of themselves, one that produces laughter. Such figures, with their infamous yet still extensive impact upon society, are the first targets of a deconstructing wave, once society feels the need to overcome its fears. Either they themselves must undertake a makeover (towards more frightening, or in our case, comedic directions) or they will be replaced. This “taming” of such figures, however, reinvigorates their often-stagnant sagas. After all, the “monsters” are multitalented. Not only are they capable to produce laughter of a sophisticated type, but they also can become tools in the hand of a creator to convey messages and political statements.

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kenstein and neurology

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\*Please also note that in this short essay the creator's commentaries of the two films were also consulted. To those interested, the versions of the films including said commentaries are "Dracula: Dead and Loving it, Werner Bros 06/29/2004" and "Young Frankenstein, Special Edition, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox 11/03/1998".