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Kitchen Sink, or the postmodern Prometheus: Alison Maclean's reimagining of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* via the cinematic horror genre

ABSTRACT

Kitchen Sink *imaginatively combines traditional horror film conventions with images of stereotypically feminine domesticity in order to create a postmodern reimagining of Mary Shelly's* Frankenstein. *Through this, I argue, the film posits what* Frankenstein *might have been if Shelly had told it today, from a woman's perspective.*

KEYWORDS

Frankenstein
postmodernism
feminism
domestic space
genre
horror

Mary Shelley's classic Gothic novel *Frankenstein; or, 'The Modern Prometheus* is the story of Doctor Victor Frankenstein, a scientist who creates a man-like monster out of cadavers' body parts. Repulsed, he shuns the monster, who in turn kills Frankenstein's brother, becomes civilized through the observation of an exiled family, then reunites with his creator, begs for a mate and eventually

kills Frankenstein's beloved wife. One hundred and seventy years after Shelley published the first edition of the work, Alison Maclean retells the story from a woman's point of view in *Kitchen Sink*. The textual and formal similarities between Shelley's and Maclean's work are multiple: each main character creates a monster/man, then shuns him; each monster/man is domesticated (Frankenstein's through observation, the Woman's through her own actions); and each creator's story is told through a mediator (Frankenstein's through the diary of a sailor, and the Woman's through the cinematic apparatus). Yet, in this article, I will argue that the most intriguing similarity between the two texts actually comes through textual and formal *differences*. On the one hand, as Mary Poovey (1980) and Johanna M. Smith (2000) have argued, Shelley's story of a male protagonist uses the conventions of the male-dominated literary Romantic/Gothic genre to critique both the essentialist notions of private and public spheres in her time and the Romantic genre itself. On the other hand, I argue, Maclean reimagines Frankenstein as a female protagonist, while using the conventions of the male-dominated cinematic horror genre to critique both the essentialist notions of women in the domestic space and the horror genre itself.

Entrenched in the Romantic literary scene of the early nineteenth century, Mary Shelley was keenly aware of the conventions of Gothic literature, combining horror and romance. In fact, not only was her lover-cum-husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, already an established Gothic novelist when they met in 1812 (Smith 2000: 10), but as she points out in the introduction to her 1831 edition, she actually narrated the story of *Frankenstein* to a group of Britain's most well-known Gothic writers at the time – Percy Shelley, Lord Byron and John William Polidori (Shelley [1818, 1831] 2000: 22). Simultaneously, however, as the daughter of early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, she was only too aware of the constraints placed on women in her time. In short, she was torn between the often contradictory expectations of her as a woman and those of her as an artist writing in a male-dominated genre (Poovey 1980: 332). In *Frankenstein*, then, Shelley incorporates the conventions of the Gothic – a monster, a virginal woman (Frankenstein's fiancée Elizabeth) and a blend of the macabre with the sublime – while also asserting the problematic role of the domestic sphere in shaping the character of both men and women. On the one hand, Frankenstein discovers his own intellectual curiosity in the domestic space through his discovery of Cornelius Agrippa's occult speculations, leading him to create the monster, which then leads to his own downfall. On the other hand, domestic relationships with women keep him, if only for a short time, from expressing his intellectual curiosity, and instead he expresses tranquility and love (Poovey 1980: 333–34). Hence, through Frankenstein and his pseudo-scientific fascination with nature, which the Romantic poets such as Byron and P. Shelley explored in their writing, Shelley critiques the very genre in which she writes, while also positing that the domestic sphere that she occupied is both oppressive and liberating.

Oddly, Shelley stages this critique of her own social situation through a male character, seemingly bowing to the pressures of womanly roles within the domestic, rather than intellectual, world. Maclean, on the other hand, takes not only Shelley's groundwork, but also the cinematic transformation of *Frankenstein*, and reworks it through a female character, thus resituating the classic tale in a postmodern deconstruction of both gender and genre. Intriguingly, Maclean arrived at *Kitchen Sink* in much the same way Shelley arrived at *Frankenstein*. While Shelley wrote her tale in response to

a contest among the four writers to craft a ghost story, Maclean created her film in response to a call for a thirteen-minute short from the New Zealand Film Commission. She is also, like Shelley, keenly aware of the genre in which she works, even consciously having been influenced by *The Fly* (Raskin 2002: 104). Still, there are, of course, major formal and narrative differences between *Frankenstein* and *Kitchen Sink*, even aside from the gender of the protagonist, and the most important difference actually points to the major similarity between the two works. Whereas Shelley used the Gothic genre to critique the gender roles of her time, Maclean uses the horror genre to achieve much the same. From the start, Maclean uses black and white film stock and eerie, percussive music to establish a particular form of horror, simultaneously recalling early, classic adaptations of *Frankenstein* (most notably, Universal's 1931 version starring Boris Karloff as the monster) and the 1960s minimalist expressions of the uncanny via audio-visual tension.

On top of this, Maclean utilizes classic types of horror shots to express the terror of a situation that leans more towards the grotesque than the purely horrific. For example, Shot 15 is a conventional moment of almost-reveal in which the character misses a vital hint of the terror-to-be, while the audience is left to contemplate what might come out of the bulging pipe. In Shots 26–38 too the revelatory moment occurs with a shrill peak in the music, coinciding with the initial 'pounce' of the movie monster. Then, as we expect to see the monster-baby crawl away, as occurs in so many horror films (perhaps most terrifyingly in *Alien* [Ridley Scott 1979], to which this scene is, perhaps, an unconscious homage), Maclean plays with our expectations by cutting between terrified reaction shots – creating and emphasizing our own moment of terror – with the monster-in-motion. This same type of reaction shot is used again in Shots 63–71 to create a sense of identificatory terror in the audience. Later in the narrative, the Frankenstein/Woman suddenly becomes the 'final girl' of slasher films. Just when she has received control over the situation and goes to take a bath, the monster comes to life. As the conventional terrified, virginal teenager (established by her cuddling, rather than having intercourse, with the monster), she wields the phallic knife (Shot 116) and moves to assert sexual control over the monster. But when she falters, he comes back to life and wrests the phallic object away from her. At this point, however, the Woman ceases to be the 'final girl' and instead – because at this point we have been conditioned to expect the traditional horror film follow-through – the long, point-of-view tracking of Shot 142 shifts her into the position of the unknown monster, as though when she turns around, she will be something horrific. Yet here, we are denied the expected reaction shot and scream of the beholder of the point of view, and instead, Maclean suddenly shifts into a romance genre close-up kissing sequence (Shots 143–145).

It is this generic shift that ultimately reveals Maclean's critique of the male-dominated horror genre. By visually and psychologically rupturing conventional expectations, she reveals the cinematic construction of genre. Importantly, every major cinematic adaptation of *Frankenstein* has been directed by a man. Furthermore, when Maclean made *Kitchen Sink*, the dominant horror film directors who utilized and mastered the conventions discussed above were all men, including Alfred Hitchcock, John Carpenter, Ridley Scott and Wes Craven, to name a few. Simultaneously, when the Woman reasserts control by destroying the monster, Maclean not only breaks free of the *Frankenstein* narrative trajectory, but also forces the audience to recall the initial site of the monster's creation – the kitchen sink. This return

to an awareness of the domestic space thus calls attention to the juxtaposition of the feminine, domestic setting and the masculine genre of the film, revealing its ideological incongruities. The domestic space is no longer the place of womanly love, as it was for Shelley. Rather, as the Woman shifts rapidly from feminine housecleaner to victim to domesticator to, finally, aggressor, the domestic space becomes a site of critique of the idealization of the stable gender norms reinforced in horror films. In this way, Maclean has taken Shelley's initial sense of critique and resituated it within a postmodern context of self-reflexivity, deconstruction and gender performativity.

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