

The Survival of Authorial Voice and Agency in American Film Adaptations of
Frankenstein & Pride and Prejudice

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Abstract

This essay explores the effect of American film adaptations onto the reputation and perception of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Though the full title of Shelley work is *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*, for continuity with secondary sources and research the work shall be referred to by its more common, shortened name. Utilizing the media theories of Guy Debord (1994), Jean Baudrillard (2014), Marshall McLuhan (2015), and Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), this essay demonstrates the effect of adaptational films onto the reputation and perception of their source texts. Concerning specifically female writers of the 19th century, this discussion also considers gender theories of Bell Hooks (2009), Judith Butler (2007), and Sonja Foss (2009).

Keywords: spectacle, hyperreal, literature-to-film adaptation, Romantic literature

Introduction

One of the reasons novels captivate readers is their capacity to be reinterpreted and revisited. Each reader of a book has a separate experience with the narrative, even multiple experiences over the course of re-reading and scholarly analysis. The form of communicating through the written word opens up a world of possibility for authorial presentation, narration form, and various levels of messages. However, when a piece is adapted to another form, by the very act of this translation the director or creator is required to reinterpret the narrative into another medium, resulting in a display of their *own* interpretation of the original artifact and contemporary connections. The creation of the adaptation itself does not affect the reputation of the original piece. Revisiting and translating a work into other mediums can enable new discussions and inspire continued study of the text. However, when the adaptation is elevated above or confused with the original, it has the propensity to affect the perception of the initial artifact. Sometimes the adaptation goes so far as to replace the original as the primary source for the narrative's reputation.

From the beginning of Hollywood, American films have continually turned to British literature for inspiration and source material. While this may result in more individuals knowing the names of characters, or recognizing the titles of the books, it does not result in the survival of the original form. In *Frankenstein*, through her authorial skill Mary Shelley crafts a commentary upon her Romantic contemporaries while simultaneously mimicking their style. Additionally, she subtly shares her opinion for women's rights and agency, and considers popular contemporary socio-political discussions. However, due to the sensationalizing of Shelley's work through its adaptation, American films have overshadowed this commentary in favor of scientific spectacles and contemporary connection.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has undergone similar treatment. Though Austen may be more well-known than Shelley, her status is often one of a celebrity, and not for her skills as a writer. Like Shelley, Austen's mastery comes from her control and complexity of narration. While presenting a novel of interpersonal relationships and romances, Austen's ironic presentation of events and satirical voice adds a crucial element to her work that is difficult, if not impossible, to translate to film. Certainly, in American cinema, it is not attempted. Escapist films do not necessarily affect the reputation of these works and their authors. However, when these films are presented as authentic adaptations, realistically depicting their source texts, audiences drawn in by the spectacle will associate the copy as the original.

For both Austen and Shelley, the trivialization of their work has turned their respective narratives into nothing more than backgrounds over which directors lay their own contemporary commentary. The original observations they made, in a time when women were not thought capable of intellectual writing, are hidden beneath the modern objectives and commentary of directors.

***End of excerpt. For the full paper, please contact: Ruth Oshlag, rfoshlag@gmail.com*