

ENGLISH: *FRANKENSTEIN/BLADE RUNNER*

In what ways does a comparative study accentuate the distinctive contexts of *Frankenstein* and *Blade Runner*?

Mary Shelley's gothic novel *Frankenstein* (1818) mediates the conflicting concepts of Enlightenment Rationalism and Romantic Idealism whereas Ridley Scott's sci-fi film noir cult classic film *Blade Runner* 1994 (directors cut) appeals to an audience of post-modern values, emerging at the other end of the Baconian revolution. The intimate connection between literary form and the central concerns of their context of composition, serves to highlight the distinctiveness of contexts, as reflected in variations of ideas and values. Shelley's prognostic, epistolary narrative warns against subtle but nonetheless emergent dangers of unrestrained scientific experimentation and its implications for the natural order. Scott's exaggerative dystopian future on the other hand epitomizes the complacency to exponential scientific expansion in a commercialized universe, where binaries surrounding artificiality and human life are blurred.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* challenges emergent values of hubristic and unrestrained scientific enquiry that permeate her experimentalist context. Shelley's tainted, gothic characterization of Victor Frankenstein, representative of late 18th and early 19th century enlightenment figures such as Galvani, Volta and Faraday, centers her critique of this rationalist paradigm. Victor's pioneering moral struggle over the ethics of creation – "I thought...I might...renew life" – illustrates philanthropic tendencies, soon to be superseded by selfish desires; "A new species would bless me as its source and creator". Imagery of creationism here voices Victor's challenge to established theological doctrine as he dares to usurp God's role through crude animal electricity experiments much like those of Galvani. This hubristic tone, deepened in Scott's *Blade Runner* by Victor's parallel in Tyrell, reflects also a desire to dominate the natural world. Conflicting with Rousseau's romantic ideal of unity with nature, Victor transgresses the natural order, he "pursued nature to her hiding places", the personification of nature reveals Shelley's Romantic affiliations and thus personalizes her retort to the anthropocentric paradigm that suffused her Industrial context. Thus, Shelley casts a prophetic warning to transgressive experimentalism that threatened to override the established theological and Romantic values of her context.

Contrasting the secretive, gothic experiments of Victor in "vaults and charnel houses", the overt, unrivalled dominance of science in *Blade Runner*, reflects an established societal complacency towards technological expansion that accentuates Scott's context. In Scott's post-industrial, post-Christian context, science has assumed divine status. Tyrell proclaims himself "God of Biomechanics", this self-divination reflective of a growing conceit in scientific progress that surpasses that of *Frankenstein*. Further, imposing wide-shots of pyramids and temples that suffuse the film's opening, portray a sense of the Mayan sublime. These egoistic images characterize the engrained attitude of scientific triumphalism of the late 20th century, an idea far subtler and less established in Shelley's novel. Moreover, the dominion of science has subsumed nature, the establishing shot of portraying LA in 2019 as a decaying megalopolis. The synthesized score and slow moving camera panning reveal a tenebrous, commercialized universe, a repository for the wreckage of man's progress. Dante-esque images of the Inferno further suggest man's fall from grace as his scientific acumen has outstripped his spirituality and morality. In these ways Scott challenges the self-reverence of scientists in a post-religious era, and presenting more serious implications than in *Frankenstein*, their scientific advancement is now fuelled by corporate greed, to the detriment of nature and the natural order.

In common with *Blade Runner*, *Frankenstein*'s subversive form and post-modern qualities enhance Shelley's enquiry into the nature and meaning of humanity in the context where man has the power to create life, albeit it primitively in comparison. Following Faraday's magnetic experiments with conductivity and the prospect of creating an independent consciousness, the definition of humanity could be questioned. *Frankenstein*'s creature is crude and grotesque – "His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles underneath" – confronting graphic imagery illustrating the creature's

inhuman appearance. This strongly contrasts the Aryan features of Roy Batty, which make him indistinguishable from man. However Shelley asserts that the creature's antecedent qualities, namely his Romantic sensibilities, affirm his humanity. His Byronic qualities of poetic eloquence and Rousseau-esque cast as the noble savage; "I shall no longer see the sun or stars or feel the winds play on my cheeks," romantic imagery here is used to challenge accepted notions of humanity – in a parallel to Batty's Shakespearean monologue in the final scene of Blade Runner. Compounding this, Victor's denigrating nomenclatural system ("Ugly monster...hideous wretch"), adopted also by the Police Force and Deckard in a continuity of Blade Runner, demonstrates his lack of compassion. The pathos here invoked for the creature, challenges Shelley's audience's accepted binaries of hero and villain, mirroring her ideologically radical context. The role reversal of protagonist and antagonist serves to highlight Shelley's challenge to her society, comparable to that of Scott; that humanity is a set of values open to question, more than merely physical in nature.

The ironic dispassion of the creator and compassion of the created is a mechanic paralleled from Frankenstein in Scott's post-modern hybrid Blade Runner, but the deepened ambiguity surrounding the nature of humanity accentuates his distinctive context. Blurring binaries of real and artificial, Scott reflects the explosion of genetic engineering and artificial intelligence in the latter part of the 20th century. This distinctiveness is represented by the Voigt-Komppf test as it inaugurates uncertainty with neo-noir, low-key lighting and smoke that clouds the scene, presenting the irony that to determine our humanity we now require a machine. The compassionate emotionality of the Replicants and Roy Batty adds to the dilemma; Batty's primal howl for his dead companion Pris a direct parallel to the creature's satanic "howl of devilish despair and revenge" in Frankenstein. This is again contrasted to a dispassionate human; synthesised, unemotional music mark the interchanging shots from Batty to Deckard. However, wherein Frankenstein the creature is ultimately powerless to affect the views of his human counterparts, the eloquence of Batty transcends accepted distinctions of spirituality through his apotheosis with Deckard. In the film's climactic sequence, Batty releases a white dove, symbolic of the Holy Spirit, reinforcing the inference of his Messianic status, and teaching and sensitizing Deckard. As a representation of distinctive contexts, Scott voices post-modern censure over the ambiguous status of humanity, extrapolating concerns over rationalist creators in Frankenstein and reinforcing the potential of created life to possess a deep and genuine humanity.

Ultimately the unique representation and reception of ideas of unmediated scientific advancement and the subjective nature of humanity accentuate the distinctiveness between an enlightenment and new-enlightenment context. Shelley's prophetic Frankenstein warns against gothic scientific transgression without due moral consideration, whilst Scott's Blade Runner more fervently challenges and criticizes his technologically complacent post-industrial audience to reconsider and reclaim their idea of humanity.