Book Reviews

Picart, J. C. ***Remaking the Frankenstein Myth on Film: Between Laughter and Horror.*** Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003. Reviewed by John W. Howard, III, East Carolina University

Caroline Picart's *Remaking the Frankenstein Myth on Film* offers scholars of gender, culture, and communication an engaging and fascinating analysis of the power and popularity of this mythic narrative in the popular imagination. She explores both the hybridity of cinematic genres in recent examples of the Frankenstein cinemyth – the blurring of horror and humor or horror and science fiction in such films as *Young Frankenstein* or the *Alien* and *Terminator* series – and the deeply resonant psycho-cultural mythic elements that these films exploit. For Picart, these hybrid films offer us a more complex and promising vision of the monstrous other and in particular, a liberatory (if somewhat ambivalent) vision of the monstrous feminine.

Picart is fascinated by the hybridity of Frankenstein on film, that is, the overlaps and intersections of genres and personas that characterize the various filmic renditions of this cinemyth. Classic renditions of Frankenstein as a horror film flatten and conflate the multi-dimensional tensions of the narrative – good/evil, normal/abnormal, human/monster, masculine/feminine – and diminish the original novel's critique of gender politics. In hybrid horror genres, Picart finds evidence of conservative, progressive, and even radical representations of gender/otherness /power/science which, like the original novel, invite sociopolitical scrutiny and critique. Her focus is on the cinematically-framed political relationships among gender, technology, power, sex, and sexuality.

Picart's analysis of the relation of laughter, awe, and horror suggests in part why such hybrid films invite complex yet ambivalent responses. This analysis informs her insightful psychoanalytic-feminist analysis of the Frankenstein cinemyth. She adopts the concept of the "shadow" as that which the psyche represses or wants to disavow and extends the work of communication scholars Janice Rushing and Thomas Frentz (1989; 1995). For Rushing and Frentz, the Frankenstein cinemyth engages the dynamic tensions of two categories of shadow. The "first" or "inferior" shadow is the realm of the feminized, the corporeal, the non-rational. The "second" or "overdeveloped" shadow is the realm of the "hypermasculinized," the demonized, the "technologized," that which attempts to control the "Other" via ego extensions (i.e., technology and tools). In the classic Frankenstein films, the ego bifurcates. Part of the ego grows overconfident in the human/technology connection. The other part becomes like the "inferior" shadow with all its devilish insecurities. To these two, Picart adds a third, that can be expressed by either of two cinematic characters: the "female monster" and the "feminine-as-monstrous." The female monster is the "unnatural" female, destructive and devouring. The "feminine-as-monstrous" perverts feminine sexuality and erotic power into forces of control and manipulation, casting the feminine as threatening, dangerous, and dominating. Picart argues that in classic Frankenstein films, this third shadow becomes the scapegoat whose sacrifice resolves the tensions of the narrative. In the hybrid genres of the Frankenstein cinemyth, these three types of shadows are blurred, casting the characters of these films as simultaneously heroic and monstrous. The third shadow often survives, leaving the narrative open. Thus, in *Aliens*, the female character, Ripley, exhibits both a "first shadow" vulnerability (particularly in the focus on her body as female) and a "second shadow" overconfidence in her technical mastery. Yet Ripley and the alien constitute a third shadow, the feminine-as-monstrous, a shadow that blurs the monstrous and the maternal. Her survival problematizes, complicates, and empowers that which is feminine.

In blurring genres and shadows, these hybrid horror films unsettle the entwined myths of male self-birth and scientific progress at the heart of the Frankenstein cinemyth. The polarized, gendered antagonisms of the first and second shadows are blurred and the repression of the powerful female/feminine other, the third shadow, is undermined by laughter or fascination, heroics, and ambivalence. In the end, Picart argues, the hybrid versions of the Frankenstein cinemyth offer a postmodern ambivalence that loosens the conventions of genre, gender, and power.

Picart's writing makes this book a difficult one to summarize. The text is jargon-laden, allusions to philosophical, psychoanalytic, feminist, and literary references abound, and analysis often assumes familiarity with a plethora of contemporary and classic films. In addition, Picart's scholarship is intense and thorough. She avoids monolithic views of the Frankenstein cinemyth by discussing not only the released films but original and revised scripts, directors' cuts, interviews, critical reviews, and scholarly treatises. This is not a book intended for an undergraduate audience nor for those with only a passing interest in cinematic analysis.

Yet the book makes inviting and challenging contributions to the study of communication, gender, film studies, and feminist theory. *Remaking the Frankenstein Myth on Film* invites readers to explore an innovative take on horror film genres and gender. Picart's exploration of the three shadows as well as her claim that hybrid forms of horror create opportunities for empowerment pose for the interested reader a challenge: to expand and adapt her insights in our own hybrid explorations of gender and film.

Remaking the Frankenstein Myth on Film: Between Laughter and Horror is available from SUNY Press for