Slide 1: Images of Horror: Tracing Frankenstein’s fear-myth through comic books and graphic novels

First I want to establish this: image is how humans create myth.

Slide 2:

It’s why Anubis has a dog’s head and Zeus has a really kickin’ beard. A myth has to be collective, accessible to a wide audience. And a single, agreed upon image is a way to unify said myth and by proxy, said audience.

Slide 3:

Additionally, “[the myth of] ‘a monster’ is something or someone to be shown” (Baldick 10). Any of these kind of image-myths, specifically those dealing with monsters, will have a large impact on a culture. These will mainly be expressed through the humanities, and in Frankenstein’s case, the combination of literature and visual art. Of course expressing these monster myths works well for works that already have an agreed upon image see Slide 2. But what about when a myth develops from a work that does not give a clear visual of the monster? Can an entire society interpret a nonspecific image and still create a visual monster myth out of it? I would argue that this is exactly what happens in Mary Shelley’s novel, Frankenstein.

For a character whose appearance is so pivotal to the novel, there’s surprisingly little information on what the Frankenstein monster actually looks like. There are a few partial descriptions, a few allusions that generally allude to what he looks like are all Shelley provides. Yet still her monster is still a part of the great “horror” mythos. And its image still manages to frighten audiences today. How can this be when the original text provides us with so little visual information? Does this disprove my Slide 3? Certainly not. The lack of an original concrete
visual simply resulted in the creation of several “canonical” images. Of course, these images eventually started competing with one another -sometimes even contradicting the few visual Mary Shelley did include. Reasonably, one would think that these competing images would result in competing image-myths. However, this is not true for Frankenstein’s monster. All images, even the weird ones Slide 4 stem from one central myth originating from Shelley. No matter how the monster looks, his body always represents human fears regarding death.

Mary Shelley was by no means the first writer to use this kind of image-myth to represent a particular human fear. Both Gothic and Romantic literature focused on how the body could be used to explore more abstract concepts, especially in the case of death and human mortality. While the Gothic tradition used the body to represent the limits of humanity, and the Romantics uses the body to represent humanity’s divinity the novel Frankenstein acknowledges both: using the weaknesses of the body as well as its mystical potential, to create the “monstrous”, death-representing figure. Subsequent adaptations could then present this monster-figure with superficial changes in appearance yet still be true to the original’s representation of fears.

Before I go into the adaptations, let’s examine how the original monster represents human fears concerning death. First of all, Frankenstein’s monster is made of humans, by a human Victor, and should logically have the same human limitations. Yet he can scale dangerous cliffs and withstand the Arctic climate. A superman made out of humans should call for celebration. However, Shelley’s monster represents not only our ideals but also our fears about nature’s and effect on the human body. While we may enjoy a being that bends or disproves limits placed on the human body, it is a temporary pleasure. Ultimately, we want to believe in the law, to have it proven and upheld and when this monster violently dismantles our
understanding of what is expected, natural, ‘lawful’ in a human, most humans react with fear.

Victor Frankenstein himself, actively seeks out unnatural, immortality-giving, devil-raising, knowledge. Yet when he first sees his creation he responds with fear. This fear yes, originates in the disproving of “natural laws” but specifically because his monster embodies the answer to Victor’s desire to find knowledge that should not be found out. The monster is the answer to Victor’s quest for “the raising of devils and spirits” as well as “the elixir of life”. Its immortality combats death by synthesizing death with a kind of life-force. Its body a combination of Victor’s goals: an immortal “devil” both ghostly and full of life. But there is no sense of achievement in finding and animating the unknowable, only terror. Because the monster tells us what we want to know, we fear it. Of course, we also fear a law-transgressing monster for much more practical reasons.

No matter how “good” or “beautiful” the monster could have been portrayed, the audience would still fear potential victimisation, the knowledge that monster’s strength may not be used for our own good, but against us. The creature is strong and massive and poses a physical threat. Even if he were as pretty as Superman, we’d still fear that natural-law transgressing body. So far the monster’s image inspires fear because: one, it transgresses natural law; two, it tells us answers we don’t want to know about how to transgress natural law, and three, its body poses a physical threat. But this last reason why the monster’s body imposes fear is what most visual representations of the monster (including graphic novels and comic books) focus on the most. What connects all visual representations together is the idea that Frankenstein’s monster constantly reminds us of our own mortality, the decay of the human body and its relationship with death.
As I’ve mentioned before, humans don’t like learning what they don’t actually want to know. So generally you can say, uncovering what is hidden then produces fear. This is literally our reaction when it comes to the human body. Slide 6 It’s why we’re scared of zombies and skeletons. So when the monster is represented in a state of decomposition, or the ‘uncovering’ of the body, we react with fear. The monster becomes a physical realization of this basic human fear --how decay affects the human body. Though generally, we don’t like to be reminded that we’re all going to rot in a grave someday, Helman describes another reason why we fear discovering too much of the human body. Slide 5: “With the aid of radiology you can ‘see through’ or into someone, but their selfhood is dissolved by your gaze...All that remains of the individual are the imperfections of form: a broken bone, a swollen heart, a twisted womb, a back hunched over like a question mark” (Helman 14). In the monster, we see our component parts, usually looking ugly, and we fear that’s all we are. No grand soul or scheme, just lungs/heart/brain/etc... Not only does death remind us of this fact, it then proceeds to disintegrate these organs of ours, highlighting how easily these separate parts can be eradicated. Before the rotting, piecemeal corpse of Frankenstein’s creation, the human species is shown disassembled and impotent before Death. Not only does the monster remind us of the frailty of the current human condition, it also presents to us the horrible alternative. To explain, this creature is literally birthed by assembling splintered, dead humans. In short it requires that one destroy weak beings in order to put together a stronger one. Victor Frankenstein realizes this and it’s why he refuses to make the monster a mate. When Victor claims that two monsters will result in the destruction of the human race, it’s not just hypothetical. Victor knows how they are made and it’s not through copulation. The proven way to create more monsters requires lots of human
parts, which won’t just be lying around.

So now, not only do we fear the decay and the “dissolving of selfhood” but with the added horror that you will in fact be “cannibalized” by your destroyer, strengthening the monster against the death that you yourself have to face, probably prematurely if face to face with the monster. All of these are reasons why the original monster’s appearance inspires terror. And it’s also why all visual depictions of the monster make sure to show the creature as either a dead person or parts of a dead person. Its how they both revitalize and retain the original novel, cementing the creature in our culture as a monstrous image-myth.

Slide 6 And the myth continues to thrive today in the media form most experienced in preserving the older traditions in the midst of developing innovations. These media forms are comic books and graphic novels. This playing with the popular myth is what comic book artists are continually trained for. New representations must continually reference more popular/older representations of the monster. The 1931 film would split the representation of the monster into two distinct canonical strains--one inspired by early illustrators, the other inspired by Boris Karloff. Funnily enough, these image traditions tend to split along graphic novel and comic book lines. Graphic novels tend to follow the older tradition established by the illustrators while comic books tend to take on Boris Karloff’s image. (For the purposes of clarity, I will define “comic books” as serialized works, while “graphic novel” refers to a single volume publication.) Both comic books and graphic novels present the monster as a reminder of the death and dissolution of the human body, just in different ways.

Slide 7 Whether the Frankenstein monster is the main character or merely a cameo in a larger series, syndicated comics will end up with the green skin, scars, broad shoulders, and high
forehead picked up from straight from Universal Pictures. These works depend on the popularity of the Karloff image. By merely including an approximation of Karloff, the work is able to recall all the fears associated with the original. However, by copying his image, these later portrayals do still represent the monster as an image of death. The green skin, though originally just a pigment shortcut for black and white film, is meant to invoke the death pallor of a corpse. The visible scars definitely hint at the monster’s patchwork origins. The hulking figure implies physical superiority (true) while the tall forehead is meant to imply mental superiority (not so true) or at least the presence of brain surgery (super true). From early comics put forth by Classics Illustrated in the 40’s and 50’s to the sanitized monster of the 1960’s, to the “gritty” comic reformation of the 1980’s and ‘90’s, all reinterpret the Boris Karloff image in a new way while still perpetuating the original’s image-myth. However, as this type of image became omnipresent, there was less and less room for innovation. Readers could no longer the “horror” behind the tradition, only the tradition itself. Fortunately, at the same time, there was a second tradition growing within the comic book and graphic novel industry.

Slide 8: In accordance with Frankenstein’s original frontispiece illustration, graphic novels tend to present their Frankenstein monsters as creatures with dark, tangled hair, drawn in extreme shades of black and white. The artists will make him “fearsome” by focusing on his powerful, superhuman physique and staring, corpse-like eyes, reminding him that yes, he is more powerful than us and yes, those arc are from a dead human. And though Boris Karloff’s monster is more popular, this “traditional” image has developed thanks to Bernie Wrightston, the guy on the left. In 1983, Bernie Wrightston connected the literary and graphic novel worlds by producing an edition of Frankenstein containing 47 illustrations. Though this edition contained no changes
to the original text and is not considered an actual graphic novel, it still pioneered the way for a
traditional representation of the monster in the comic book industry. This is due to one of two
things. The first is that Wrightston had previous worked on syndicated comics and it shows in
his artwork. The traditional image - athletic body with a monstrous face - works well with the
previous designs he had worked with for Swamp Thing. Even the exposed nasal bridge translates
over well, giving the monster a more cadaverous appearance. The second, reason why
Wrightston’s edition inspired so many other artists was because it was later reprinted by both
Marvel and Dark Horse Comics, exposing it to variety of comic book and graphic novel readers
who otherwise would have passed it by. In either case, it has inspired a slew of copycat novels
in the “graphic novel” genre, just like Karloff’s interpretation did for syndicated comics. And
because this kind of image is less familiar to the public, it fosters artistic innovation. So much so
that even artists from other countries feel comfortable making their own graphic novels,
reinterpreting the monster’s image to represent their own culture’s fears concerning death. Take
for example Junji Ito’s Frankenstein. Slide 9: It’s one of the most explicit depictions of the
monster as a rotting, pieced together corpse. But his images don’t just tap into the general fear
concerning the decay of the human body. They are inspired by Nakazwa Keiji’s work, which
graphically depicts the wounds and scarring suffered by radiation victims. Victims who look
remarkably like Junji Ito’s Frankenstein. Mary Shelley’s fearsome image of a powerful,
patchwork corpse tap into an image-myth so universal, that any country can use the monster to
represent fears specific to their country. We fear the monster not merely because he’s so unlike
“normal” humans. We also fear him because he’s so like humans. And any adaptation must find
ways to remind the audience of themselves in order to be a successful.