

The “Frankensteinian Process” in Young Adult Novels: The Double and Monstrosity in Anthony Horowitz’s *Alex Rider* Series

Adaptations of what may be considered classical literature are pervasive in contemporary society. Novels from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) have found their way into modern film and book adaptations. This includes films such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2016) and *Twilight* (2008). In fact, *Dracula* is so culturally influential that there are adaptations of its adaptations, such as the film *Twilight* (2008) and the TV show *Vampire Diaries* (2009–2017). Although these adaptations seem to be subpar compared to novels such as *Pride and Prejudice*, they may carry more cultural weight than originally assumed.

When it comes to adapted novels being culturally imbedded—or sewn—into society, however, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) “[a]rguably . . . has a greater presence in popular media than any other single narrative over nearly two centuries” (Cutchins and Perry 2). However, *Frankenstein* itself was not critically acclaimed until 1974 when “James Rieger, a professor of English at the University of Rochester, New York, took a risk among colleagues by presenting *Frankenstein* as a novel significant enough to justify bibliographical examination” (Hitchcock 276). Slowly *Frankenstein* found its way into the university, and as it gained more academic weight, publishers even decided to make an “easy reader” edition for a younger audience (Hitchcock 276). Now, *Frankenstein* is not only analyzed in high school and colleges, but the creature and his creator are often employed as metaphors for scientific or technological disasters (cloning, GMOs, nuclear power, etc.)—or seeming disasters—as well as political strife (such as the 1854 cartoon “The Russian Frankenstein and His Monster”) (Hitchcock 106-112).

Moreover, the novel's characters, particularly Victor Frankenstein's creation, are imbedded in mainstream pop culture.

In fact, Boris Karloff's portrayal of the creature in the 1931 film *Frankenstein*, directed by James Whale, is so woven into current societal trends that green skin, black hair, a square face, and a creature created by means of electricity became the new standard for Frankenstein. Moreover, Whale's cultural phenomenon inspired sequels, such as *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) and *Son of Frankenstein* (1939); parodies, such as *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948) and *Young Frankenstein* (1974); and TV series, such as *The Munsters* (1964-1966) and *The Frankenstein Chronicles* (2015–). Frankenstein not only has a hand in films but in theatre. Almost immediately after the publication of Shelley's work, Richard Brinsley Peake adapted it to the stage in 1823 in his play *Presumption*. Many elements of the play, including a mute creature, the assistant Fritz (later Igor), and the creature's inability to control his body, still exist in adaptations of Frankenstein (Jellenick 52, 55-56).

Despite Frankenstein's popularity, *young adult adaptations* of Frankenstein seem to have drawn limited responses from the academic community. Exceptions to this are Karen Coats and Farran Norris Sands, who discuss "*Frankenstein* [as] a peculiarly apt vehicle through which to explore certain anxieties and trends in both children's and young adult literature" (241). They emphasize the elements found in *Frankenstein* that appeal and apply to young adults and children (241-242). Another duo who address literature that appeals to young adults is Véronique Bragard and Catherine Thewissen. They focus on graphic novels that are adaptations of *Frankenstein* (271). However, even though graphic novels often appeal to young adults, Bragard and Thewissen do not focus on young adults but on how graphic novels adapt Shelley's work and sustain a "dialogue with other cultural intertexts" (275). Moreover, Coats and Sands focus on

direct adaptations of *Frankenstein* (as do Bragard and Thewissen) such as, “*Mister Creecher* (2011) by Chris Priestly[,] . . . Kenneth Opiel’s novels in *The Apprenticeship of Victor Frankenstein* series, *This Dark Endeavor* (2011), [and] *Such Wicked Intent* (2012) . . . (252). In this paper, I will focus on Anthony Horowitz’s young adult series *Alex Rider*, specifically *Point Blank* (2001), the second novel in the series, and *Scorpia Rising* (2011), the ninth novel. In these two books a fourteen-year-old spy, Alex, encounters a clone that is surgically altered to look like Alex. Although these novels, written by a British author, can almost appear as counterfeit James Bond novels, they reflect something more akin to Kyle Bishop’s notion of “the Frakensteinian process,” mixing elements of Bond novels and *Frankenstein* (“Assemblage Filmmaking” 269). I argue that although *Alex Rider* may seem to be a collection of teen novels written solely for entertainment, in actuality, they draw on themes found in *Frankenstein*, such as inept or neglectful parents, monstrosity, and the double, tackling complex societal and adolescent issues to a higher degree than just a typical James Bond adaptation.

Alex Rider is not a direct adaptation of *Frankenstein*, rather it is what Kyle Bishop terms “an adjacent adaptation” or “the adaptation of a recognizable text interwoven within a serialised narrative” (“The Frankenstein Complex” 111). In Bishop’s view, adjacent adaptations are a single novel or episode in a book or TV series that reference an original text (112). The *Alex Rider* series does contain Frankenstienian elements in two novels instead of one, and much like the creature in Whale’s *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), the creature appears to die by fire at the end of *Point Blank* only to reappear in a future sequel, *Scorpia Rising*. However, because only two out of the eleven novels in *Alex Rider* seem to contain “key characters, back story, plot points, and themes” that relate to *Frankenstein*, both novels fulfill most of Bishop’s requirements for adjacent adaptations (112).

The eleven-book series begins when Alex, a fourteen-year-old living in Chelsea, England, discovers that his uncle, a spy working for MI6, was killed by a Russian assassin. MI6 then recruits Alex and asks him to take his uncle's place in the field. In the novel *Point Blank* (*Point Blanc* in the UK), Alex infiltrates Point Blanc, a school for troubled, rich fourteen-year-old boys in the French Alps. Posing as the son of a billionaire, Alex arrives at the school and mingles with several teenagers, sons of wealthy and influential people from around the world. Eventually, he learns that the director of the school, Hugo Grief, cloned himself sixteen times. Grief tells Alex this in the classic bad-guy-catches-protagonist-and-reveals-his-secret-plot way that is very familiar to James Bond fans. Grief plans to give his clones plastic surgery and switch them with the troubled boys brought to the school. Julius Grief is one of these clones. This novel is not only a direct adaptation of *James Bond* and an adjacent adaptation of *Frankenstein*, but it is also part of Bishop's Frankensteinian process. *Alex Rider* is "constructed from preexisting pieces, pieces drawn from a complex system of related texts" (Bishop, "Assemblage Filmmaking" 269). Horowitz's series is not just a melting pot of ideas and themes that resemble reused sludge, but a new link in the intertextual chain surrounding and interweaving young adult literature, James Bond novels, and *Frankenstein*.

Before I move into the meat of the paper, it's worth noting a few minor elements found in *Alex Rider* that allude to *Frankenstein*. In *Point Blank*, MI6 asks Alex to pretend to be the son of a billionaire, David Friend, in order to convince the directors of Point Blanc, the school for troubled teenage boys, to accept him. While living with the Friends, Alex meets Fiona, who seems to be a mix of the hot, sexy assistant and the bumbling assistant. She is a combination of Inga and EYE-gor in *Young Frankenstein*. However, Fiona is not a terrible assistant because she is bumbling but because she is arrogant. Instead of teaching Alex about her family and helping

him adjust to the life of a son of a billionaire, she convinces her friends to play a prank on him and shoot at him with rifles. She also briefly serves as a love interest, who Alex rejects (Horowitz, *Point Blank* 50-80). Another prominent female character is Mrs. Stellenbosch, who is like Frau Blucher in *Young Frankenstein*. She is more masculine than feminine, and she does whatever Hugo Grief tells her to. Furthermore, the school, Point Blanc, reminiscent of Mt. Blanc, lies “right on the French-Swiss border . . . South of Geneva. Just above Grenoble, in the French Alps” (44). It was built “by a lunatic,” who strung together a bunch of buildings (100-103). One of the settings in *Point Blank* is the same as one of the settings in *Frankenstein*, the French Alps, and the school Alex attends is itself a Frankenstein: an inexplicable mix of hallways, classrooms, and uneven floor levels.

Arguably, *Alex Rider* is one of the best adjacent adaptations of *Frankenstein*. This is partially shown through the idea of the double or doppelganger. The clone who is surgically altered to resemble Alex would have taken Alex’s name and lived Alex’s life if Alex had not discovered his existence. In fact, the clone resembles Alex so much that when he attempts to shoot Alex, he’s unable to pull the trigger. The narrator in *Point Blank* observes that “[t]he fake Alex [or the clone] couldn’t quite bring himself to do it [to shoot Alex]. They were too similar. The same clothes, the same bodies, the same faces. For the other boy, it would be like shooting himself” (Horowitz, *Point Blank* 211). The clone appears to struggle with his own identity. He’s a clone of a mad scientist and a look-a-like of a teenage spy, and later in the series, he’s given the name Julius after Julius Caesar. This means he is quite literally a patchwork of several people: Alex Rider, Hugo Grief, and Julius Caesar. Julius is left questioning who or what he is and where his place in society is.

Similar questions can be asked about Alex Rider. In *Scorpia Rising* Julius again attempts to shoot Alex, but Alex kills Julius instead. Referring to this event, the deputy head of MI6 says, “I’ve talked to the psychologists and they say that for Alex it was almost as if he were killing himself. After all, the two of them were identical. What it boils down to is that part of Alex Rider died with Julius Grief. He shot himself . . . or perhaps a part of himself that should never have been born.” This observation clarifies who the real monster is in the series. The monster is not Alex or even the clone but MI6. MI6 is responsible for Alex becoming a liar (as all spies are) and a murderer. Julius is merely a representation of Alex’s inner turmoil, and like Julius, Alex loses his place in society. As a fourteen-year-old murderer, he is unable to relate to his peers or reveal his actions to them. He also struggles with knowing who he is and how to move forward with his life. In Mary Shelley’s novel, the creature is physically harmed and socially isolated, and Victor Frankenstein holds some of the blame. In Horowitz’s novel, Alex and Julius are both physically harmed and socially isolated, and the one’s responsible are the adults. Although Alex has more autonomy than most teenagers, MI6 forces him to work for them, ultimately claiming authority and power over his life. Like Alex, Julius had some autonomy, but because he was created as part of a plot to take over the world, his ability to chose was restricted by his creator.

Obviously, the *Alex Rider Series* contains strong themes of inadequate parenting and God-like forces that are similar to themes found in *Frankenstein*. Alex is raised by his housekeeper, Jack, who supposedly dies at the end of *Scorpia Rising*, truly leaving Alex alone. Like Alex, Julius lacks parental figures because his creator and only father-like figure is killed. However, as previously mentioned, the lion’s share of monstrosity is given to MI6. At the end of *Scorpia Rising*, the head of MI6, Alan Bunt, is in the processes of retiring. He tells his successor, “A German philosopher once wrote that he who fights monsters must take care that he doesn’t

become one himself. Our work is often monstrous. I'm afraid there's no escaping it" (Horowitz). MI6 workers recognize their own faults, and in a way, they are Alex's guardians because they make sure he goes to school, when he's not working for them, and has food and money. However, because MI6 is an intelligence agency and often works in the shadows, it appears to be god-like and omniscient, often placing Alex in dangerous situations, sometimes without Alex knowing. Throughout the novels, Alex himself becomes a little more monstrous, ultimately shooting Julius at the end of *Scorpia Rising* as previously stated. However, Alex has been responsible for several of the villains' deaths throughout the series. Killing (although usually indirect) is hardly new for him. By being surrounded by monsters, including MI6, Alex has become one himself.

The *Alex Rider* series reveals how similar teenagers are to Victor's creation. Teenagers are often a patched-together collection of parental expectations, schooling, and social norms. Because of this, perhaps Shelley's novel pertains to adolescents more than any other demographic. In fact, the question of what makes a man a man or a woman a woman is something every adolescent struggles with. Because of this and because *Point Blank* and *Scorpia Rising* build off of and expound upon elements found in *Frankenstein*, they may carry more cultural weight, especially for teenagers, than previously assumed. It took years for Shelley's novel to be recognized as a literary phenomenon by universities. Perhaps by ignoring or dismissing adaptations like *Alex Rider*, we run the same risk of overlooking impactful and valuable novels.

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