

MODULE A
Comparative Essay
 FRANKENSTEIN AND BLADE RUNNER

How do the thematic concerns of your texts reflect the context in which they were written?

Intentionally or not, texts are universally shaped by the context in which they are written, and thus illuminate the values of their time. This is evident in the seminal science-fiction novel Frankenstein (1818) by Mary Shelley and the avante-garde film Blade Runner (1982/1992) directed by Ridley Scott. These texts, though born out of disparate contexts – one post-industrial and the other post-modern – nevertheless explore similar themes, including the nature of human identity and the loss of spirituality that may result from technological progress.

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein was written at a time when, as Frank Darvall describes, Regency England was facing "the most...dangerous disturbances, short of actual revolution...that England has known in modern time". This social upheaval, a consequence of the French Revolution and political activism of Shelley's time, had a fundamental influence upon her work, enticing her to explore the misconceived notion of the duality of human identity. Through character symbolism, Shelley delineates an initial ideological antithesis, depicting human identity as polarised, either Good or Evil, embodied by Victor and his monster respectively. As Lee Sterrenburg comments, the monster is introduced as a political symbol of human depravity in the wake of social revolution, heavily influenced by her mother's 1794 work on the French Revolution and rebel 'monsters'.

However, this conception of the essential 'Good' or 'Evil' of identity is challenged by the non-linear narrative structure of Frankenstein, which forces the reader to re-evaluate the existentially restricted perspective of Victor by revisiting events through the eyes of the monster. This reconsideration of identity is further encouraged by Shelley's use of stylistic reversals, such as the counterpoint of Victor's mad ravings and the monster's poignant observations: "No father had watched my infant days...". Thus, Shelley uses the notion of the subjective viewer to demonstrate that the monster's depravity was not innate, but rather that social misery "made [him] a fiend". In this way, Shelley undermines the notion of the polarity of identity, a commonplace of social thought in her time, by highlighting the nuances of the human condition.

Ridley Scott's Blade Runner similarly explores the question of human identity, though on a more fundamental level. This dystopic film, inspired by Fritz Lang's Metropolis (1926), represents an extrapolation of the technological obsession of its context, and plumbs the deepening disconnection of society from its essential humanity. Scott highlights this by blurring the line between the humans and 'replicants', challenging the audience's presumptive identification of real humanity and simulacrum in a similar manner to Frankenstein. This is achieved firstly through the reversal of archetypal roles, whereby the protagonist is represented as devoid of humanity and thus a villain. Scott emphasises this in the death of the replicant Zhora, using point-of-view shots to evoke sympathy for her as Deckard hunts her like an animal. In contrast, the replicant Roy assumes the role of hero, undergoing a pseudo-religious salvation conveyed through swelling non-diegetic music and a close-up of a biblical dove escaping from his hands. This transcendence proclaims his essential humanity.

Scott's intentional confusion of real and artificial is also evident in his inclusion of anti-narrative ambiguities, such as Deckard's possible identity as a replicant, signalled by Rachel's question, "Did you ever take that test yourself?" Such unresolved dilemmas allow the theme of identity to

transcend the classical narrative trajectory, leaving the viewer questioning the existential status of Deckard and, by extension, their own notion of identity.

In Frankenstein, Mary Shelley not only examines human identity but also warns of the loss of spirituality that may result from the unprecedented scientific advances of her era. Inspired by contemporary experiments with galvanism, Shelley reworks the Promethean myth through Victor's discovery of "the cause of generation and life", thereafter presenting a parable cautioning against the usurpation of God. She employs religious allusions to underscore this fatal disregard of spirituality, introducing the novel with a quotation from "Paradise Lost" that challenges the right to creation, and subsequently using this poem as an analogy to emphasise the peril of encroaching upon the domain of God. For example, Victor's creation of "a new species [that] would bless [him] as its creator" is compared to the original sin in Victor's suggestion that "...the apple was already eaten", thus intimating his tragic disconnection from God.

Furthermore, Shelley fuses elements of science fiction and the Romantic-inspired Gothic horror genre to examine the spiritual dangers presented by "the acquirement of knowledge". In addition to the use of a protagonist psychologically confined to "deep, dark, deathlike solitude", a Gothic convention also evident in Blade Runner, Shelley utilizes isolation at the beginning and end of the novel, immersing the reader in the barren arctic and so stressing the desolation of spiritual solipsism.

Scott similarly extrapolates from the scientific and ideological context of his own era, utilizing the 'tech noir' genre to expose the loss of spirituality he believes will result from the misapplication of technology. The use of perpetual shadow instills a pervasive sense of moral disconnection, compounded by the alienating foreign flavour of the film, itself a reflection of 1980s Western fear of Asian expansion. This loss of values is stressed by Roy Batty's misquotation of William Blake's "America: A Prophecy", describing how "the angels fell" rather than the original "the angels rose". As the poem celebrates the American Revolution, this intentional error highlights the deterioration of spiritual principles associated with technology also explored in Frankenstein.

Furthermore, in a reaction to the growth of consumerism in the 1980s, Scott presents a society that has adopted consumerism as its new and destructive religion. The ubiquity of this ideology is evident from the salience of artificial screens and logos in the establishing shots, amid the Dantesque 'inferno' of oil refinery flames inspired by the oil-shocked America of Scott's time. The acceptance of such misguided consumerist values is embodied in Tyrell, advocate of the motto "commerce is our goal". Thus, his gruesome murder symbolises Scott's rejection of consumerism and corporate hubris, and so challenges the audience's own ideological complacency.

CONCLUSION