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Rafael Baledón's *Orlak, The Hell of Frankenstein*: Screen Monsters and Mexican Modernity

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Abstract

Director Rafael Baledón deploys horror film conventions combined with Mexican melodrama to critique monstrosity and humanize the 'monster.' Professor Frankenstein's hubris constructs an unnatural creature from formerly living body parts, but the real outcast is Jaime Rojas, a vengeful criminal unable to leave behind acts of cruelty. Rojas's vision is anchored in the past, challenging law and order, frozen in a world that has moved on with accelerated modernity requiring transformation. Frankenstein's creation, Shelley's prototype of the outcast, in mid-century Mexico is a figure of empathy attempting to overcome his origins. A potential victim of science *and* society, Orlak performs human acts, casting aside the control of others. The fire that takes his life parallels the self-sacrifice of Shelley's character, only the motivation has changed.

Keywords: Mexican melodrama, horror genre, modernity, the monstrous, Frankenstein

The hubris of Mary Shelley's scientist, Victor Frankenstein, produces an archetype of the social outcast in his alienated creation. Steven T. Asma proposes, "It is the failure of Victor Frankenstein and society generally to provide a space for him that turns the creature into a monster" (11). Born of human remains yet different from other humans, he lives among them and is forced always to be Other. Despite valiant attempts to initiate contact and communication, the creature is deemed a monster. The Latin *monstrum*, something strange or unnatural, indicates a warning sign of impending danger, of a future dystopia, or of nature's capacity to engender "difference." As an allegory of anxiety toward cultural classifications and social identities, the monster is a visual challenge to the inherited perception and understanding of the world. A result and an indicator of the imagination at work, an uncategorizable creature produced by a 'father' in the scientific laboratory becomes a monster. Rafael Baledón's 1960 film *Orlak, el infierno de Frankenstein* [Orlak, the Hell of Frankenstein]

centers on a twentieth-century iteration of that character who paradoxically becomes more human than those around him in a society marked by accelerated change.

Since the publication of Shelley's 1818 gothic novel, the narrative of Victor Frankenstein's scientific feat and of his creation's unfolding ostracism by society, this figure has stood in for "any human creation that has unintended consequences, … that unpredictable, uncontrollable force that cannot be reasoned with or persuaded" (Asma 153). Monsters may be created beings or humans who have relinquished their reason and resorted to unbalanced, irrational forces. Among the numerous literary and cinematic versions of this monster, Mexican director Baledón's film is a poignant specimen whose use of horror film conventions frames the cultural anxieties of a decade that would devolve into violence and repression. Illustrative not of an unnatural threat but of a political one, Orlak foreshadows the dangers lurking in a period of social and historical change in which secrecy and rejection are the two poles of official culture. These horror film aesthetics include the development of plot, character, and atmosphere in what Thomas S. Sipos has identified as two of the three basic subgenres of horror: the "monsters of nature and science…, and the human psyche's dark side" (Sipos 10). The "hell of Frankenstein" melds scientific experimentation and political darkness into a world of unpredictability despite the use of specific expectations of the audience about the "repetition and variation" of tropes (Leeder 91). The conventions of Frankenstein in both film and literature, on the one hand, and changes in cultural values related to incipient modernity, on the other, engage spectators with a combination of emblematic Hollywood productions and Mexican mise-en-scènes.

Doyle Greene situates the emergence of Mexploitation films, hybrids blending formulaic imported genres with the frustrations of "an era of intensive modernization" (15) in Mexican society between the mid-1950s and mid-1970s, as popular vehicles to reveal the tensions between the national past and the uncertain future of the nation. As Carlos Monsiváis concurs, "Thanks to the newness of language and customs, cinema offers one certainty: *that to persist in traditional ways is a form of living death*" ("All the People Came…" 150). In this case, the living dead acquire specific characteristics: they are oblivious to change. They are resurrected as tokens of a past that has expired in time yet is still alive in the national imagination. Both forces may offer simultaneously promise and danger as evidenced by the plethora of mad scientist films in which technologies and scientific exploits hold just as many threats to modern society as Aztec mummies, witches, Dracula, Frankenstein, and sorcerers [brujos]).[1] The

counter-narrative of horror films breaks open the threat of "an outmoded and dangerously obsolete form of existence" (Greene 22) through figures of death itself even as it proposes a simultaneous caution regarding new monsters of modern origin. Monsiváis notes that these decades of Mexican cinema offer a "dossier" of "the integration and the disintegration of traditional morality…and the confusion and terror invoked by the power of the new technology [of film]" ("Mythologies" 117) that catch Mexican audiences in the middle, between industrialization and tradition. Both coexist in an attempt to naturalize the "shock" (Monsiváis "All the People Came…" 151) of rapid and uneven transformation even though this desire may be unreachable. Culture critic Rubén Gallo uses five artifacts to encapsulate this moment in the media as "the other Mexican revolution…a struggle to synchronize cultural production to the vertiginous speed of an incipient modernity" (1). The project of creating a subject at home in such shifting terrain is the focus of the state, the goal of artists and cinematographers, and the elusive concern of many films. Faced with the realities of "massive population movements and dislocations and the resultant societal tensions" (Mora 106) of the 1960s, the one factor that directors could count on is the survival of Mexican myths interiorized into a collective unconscious that would now come face to face with icons of progress and new forms of existence. The monsters recycled from Mexico's past, added to those culled from Hollywood, serve as cautionary warnings of taking the side of one to the exclusion of the other.

Film itself as a medium is the emblem of modernity and a singular force for "the construction of a new national identity and the development of an industrial-consumer economy" (Greene 5) to sustain it. Ana M. López argues for "the diffusion of the cinema…[as] defined by its status as an import emblematic of modernity" (14) that accompanied and supported the growth of technologies as well as political and economic stability. Cinematic paradigms in Mexico exhibited the influence of imported films. As Monsiváis affirms, Mexican directors pursued "the 'nationalisation' of Hollywood" ("Mythologies" 117) with different generic emphasis and atmospherics. Mexican directors frequently turned to films with Dracula or Frankenstein—in combination with autochthonous figures such as wrestlers *El Santo* and *Blue Demon*, heroes from local folklore and myth, and pre-Columbian mummies—to embody a sense of local terror juxtaposed with the visual fascination of an imported look of modernity. The assimilation of Hollywood monsters—film versions of literary creatures to be sure—by Mexican producers and directors such as Fernando Méndez, Abel Salazar, Chano Urueta,

Rafael Baledón, Alfonso Corona Blake, Rafael Portillo, and others unites social commentary and commercial success that increasingly generations are eager to screen. With the rise of Hollywood-influenced films and a star system resembling California studios in the 1950s, Mexico's cinema industry mass-produced fare with new versions of recognizable horror conventions, especially hybrids. Melodramas and westerns were the most popular, but as horror films increasingly won over audiences, they were combined with wrestling (a Mexican staple), science fiction, and supernatural elements. The horrors of modernity—technological exploitation, uneven progress, gender inequality, ecological disaster, and class exploitation—are embodied in what Margaret Atwood terms the *ustopian* aspects of the Frankenstein narrative. Both promise and threat, the creature that becomes the monster to many is transformed into a very human hero in the last sequence of shots of the film. In "Dire Cartographies," Atwood invents the portmanteau term *ustopia* to designate the potential dystopia in every utopian vision, the seeds of an ideal's destruction embedded within it. Using the metaphor of a map, a cartographer sketches out the borders between, those lands not belonging to the known but on the edge of the unknown. As Atwood writes, "The known is finite, the unknown is infinite: anything at all may lurk in it" (67). It is true for both the monster and the modern in which "the imagined perfect society and its opposite" (Atwood 66) coexist in contention. The structure of *Orlak, the Hell of Frankenstein* is direct evidence of an ebb and flow of a conjunction of these forces. Notably, Baledón's film has not been the subject of critical study as have other Mexican 'monster' productions, despite its more nuanced and disruptive reading of horror film codes.

With his character Orlak (Joaquín Cordero), Baledón resuscitates what Mary Shelley calls the "mysterious fears" (7-8) inhabiting human nature that might have had to be repressed to achieve the nation's future-looking goals. Disorienting and often uncanny, hybrid life forms such as Orlak embody indecision and a lack of resolution, not a reassuring vision of the future but a more realistic one. Mixing science and melodrama, this version of the monster marks a problematic transition from robot to human as the criminal Jaime Rojas becomes less human. As Darryl Jones writes, the moments during which such constructions are undone (de-constructed) "give us a sudden glimpse into …a sense that the material world is…larger and more complex than we could have imagined" (19). The world becomes defamiliarized, "intellectually uncertain" (Freud 206) as to whether the monster is "a human being or an automaton" (Freud 202), dead or alive. Modernity is posited on the possible emergence from

the chaos of this complexity yet still strongly connected to revolutionary promises unkept. Eric Zolov offers the dead and the living, the created and the human, the past and the future as cinematic corroboration of two challenges to the state. Zolov proposes that "[t]he crisis of authority that the Mexican regime faced in 1968 had its parallel in the middle-class family, which also experienced the conflicts of youth dissent" (1). The cultural divide is generational as well as class-related, centered on "a cumulative crisis of patriarchal values" (Zolov 1). The stability of the family, as of the state, is an ideal shattered by encounters with Orlak and his double Jaime (both played by Joaquín Cordero) who sow disorder between parent and child as between scientist and society. Less than a decade after the film *Orlak* is released, the student massacre in Tlatelolco (1968) and subsequent imprisonment of dissidents made visible all the social and economic issues that had never been resolved. In its youth, Mexico finds new monsters and the state assumes a role less than humanizing.

Noël Carroll's astute observation that monsters "are beings or creatures that specialize in formlessness, incompleteness, categorical interstitiality, and categorical contradictoriness" (32-3) can be seen as referring to that unshaped, embryonic, and indefinite sense of what it means to be modern in mid-twentieth century Mexican culture. Frankenstein's monster evokes fear, empathy, foreignness, and the strangely familiar. Glennis Byron assesses the mode of gothic horror globally as "a product and symptom of modernity" (370) and even an attempt to throw off forms of colonization in its conscious use of Hollywood conventions with new twists. Victor Frankenstein and his progeny offer spectators a body to be feared yet sympathized with. The terrors of a monster like Frankenstein, not of national making, add a metaphorical level to these fears. If empathy disrupts our anxiety over his identity, spectators may assume a point of view unexpected by the forces of tradition. And what if the capital generated by the film industry becomes an economic weapon of true horror against those who do not join the celebration? Could Mexicans feel there was a mysterious purveyor of death in their backyard, one that might alter a recognizable way of being through the release of cinematic monster remakes? Hollywood offered Mexico both a threat and a vehicle for critique.

Cinematic retellings of the Frankenstein narrative that include a variety of what Shelley refers to as "hideous progeny" (10)—hybrids of horror, comedy, science fiction, the cabaret genre and even melodrama—began to appear in Mexico as early as 1936 with a production entitled *El superloco* [A Wild and Crazy Guy] (Juan José Segura) that presented a mad scientist

seeking eternal life by projecting all his negative emotions on a captive monster who will, of course, escape in the end and be released into society. This early film is followed in the Hammer era of the 1950s by *El castillo de los monstruos* [The Monsters' Castle] (1958, Fernando Soler), a film that combines humor and a mad scientist with a collection of monstrous inhabitants in a nearby castle including Frankenstein, vampires, werewolves, and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. A compendium of cinematic horror figures, this film reduces both time and place to a chaotic and anachronistic minimum. Paying lip service to real scientific feats of the time, the madman is named Dr. Sputnik. With *Frankenstein, el vampiro y Compañía* [Frankenstein, the Vampire, and Co.] (1962, Benito Alazraki), Mexican cinema extends its horrors to encompass the dark source of many of its woes: United States penetration of its culture through a parody of Universal's Pictures' monster series. Previously just a fleeting image in Mexican cinema, screenwriters Alfredo Ruanova and Carlos Enrique Taboada bring the scientist Victor Frankenstein and his creation to life in their screenplay for the first full-length Mexican feature film with these characters in 1960. Inspired by Shelley's literary work and by the popularity of horror films among young audiences, the general familiarity of the Frankenstein story and the international circulation of Hammer Studios and Universal Hollywood productions resulted in director Baledon's *Orlak, el infierno de Frankenstein*.

Baledón's film was initially shot as a Mexican TV series in four parts, later edited into a full-length film with the sequences stitched together with intertitles made out of human bones. Never released in the United States and never explored critically in film criticism, *Orlak* recycles the familiar monster figure of Dr. Frankenstein, then enjoys a boom in films from the United States and the UK. Baledón deploys all of the horror genre conventions to play on what Sipos terms "the visual language of fear" (5). These include settings that range from cemetery to medieval castle, from cabaret to apartment, and from wealthy bourgeoise home to prison cell and characters that pose the threat of evil in shifting forms. The historical period appears to be sometime in the nineteenth century as the horse and buggy, costumes, architecture, and music indicate that era. That would imply a cultural inheritance more traditional in nature than 1960 and a nod to the historical time of Shelley's novel. The characters are drawn from a mix of melodrama and gothic tales as a romantic triangle shifts to emphasize fears of changing gender roles and patriarchal authority in addition to the criminal manipulation of emotions to exact revenge from a justice system that has supposedly wronged one of the characters. A faithful laboratory assistant, Eric (Carlos Ancira) is the victim

of a previous scientific experiment gone awry that aging Professor Frankenstein proposes to remedy if successful in his current work. The story conventions are constructed from crime drama narratives, a partial gothic revival of the past that Fred Botting proposes "shadow[s] the progress of modernity with counternarratives displaying the underside of enlightenment and humanist values" (2), untamed and excessive revenge motifs, and domestic tension. At the film's core is the human body, its construction and destruction, and the possibly challenging identification of what makes us human. Lighting is of utmost importance to the film, particularly the use of low-key lighting to enhance the dramatic mood and darker shadows. Baledón's entire production is enhanced by chiaroscuro to enhance the concept of contrast between modernity and tradition, an anxiety about cultural and physical boundaries, and the creation of ambiguous emotions in both characters and spectators. The use of torches despite Professor Frankenstein's electricity-producing equipment reflects one of the visible indications of a coexistence of two ways of reading the world. Darkness and desire—to belong, to love, to exact justice—occupy the majority of the landscapes and interiors alike. A double narrative of evolution and regression plays out within the walls of gothic castles and towers where science is ostensibly at the center of a conflict between reason and the irrational, the human and the artificial. Botting concludes that any ongoing social reconfiguration may play out in a film's uncertainty about "the nature of power, law, society, family, and sexuality" (5), all of which form the core narrative of *Orlak*.

The film opens with the diegetic sound of digging. In black and white, credits roll across opening shots that slowly reveal two caped figures backlit in a cemetery in the darkness of night. Reminiscing about body snatching tales, plundering the dead for scientific purposes, and vampires and other creatures living off corpses, the scene fuses two of the ingredients central to the plot. In the process of grave robbing, the two men seek body parts for a scientist who spectators have yet to meet as the law interrupts their work in the trench they have excavated. The two figures pry open the lid of a coffin, concentrating on their deed, when a policeman who has been tailing them appears out of the mist. The shadowy mise-en-scène closes a backstory that will be filled in by a dialogue between two characters in a prison cell in the first scene.

A voice-over takes control of the narrative as Jaime Rojas (Joaquín Cordero) queries Professor Frankenstein (Andrés Soler) about his crimes. Set in a prison cell, the professor relates that he is a scientist in search of creating a human being. He has been imprisoned for

his work that, in religious terms, threatens the role of the creator and has been given a life sentence. He proclaims that he is not just a "vulgar ladrón de cadáveres" [common body snatcher] but a symbol of the future in which science may contribute to human life in unexpected and, for him, noble ways. If kept until he dies, science will be kept from disrupting the traditional laws of nature. Frankenstein recounts the accusations that led to his imprisonment, composing a discourse on science as he retells the prologue to his conviction. His desire to produce a hero for the times has sustained the doctor's search for the creation of "el ser más fantástico" [the most fantastic being], saying he is close to completing a powerful creation: "he descubierto la vida artificial" [I have discovered artificial life].

On the other hand, Rojas claims he has been imprisoned unjustly for which he seeks revenge. Like all prisoners, he proclaims his innocence and discovers the perfect vehicle for avenging his unjust punishment in Frankenstein's automaton. The question of evidence arises as the criminal bemoans his incarceration, and the professor extolls the wonders of his powers of invention. Rojas is about to be released as his sentence is up (lacking evidence for a murder, he is only in for assault). He considers Frankenstein a perfect implement for his justice, so Rojas offers to help the professor escape. Frankenstein sees the promise of the continuation of his experiment, and his acceptance triggers the rest of the plot. The two men will be working with different goals, which are only revealed to the scientist later in the film but, in dramatic irony, to spectators from the outset. Rojas wishes to return to the past and even the score with the system of justice. Frankenstein works toward the future, now freed from his life sentence to continue his interrupted work on the creation of human life. Flouting the notion of obeying the law, the doctor and his sidekick Eric have been driven by "la ciencia imperfecta" [imperfect science] to complete their experiment. This desire will be fulfilled after a series of crimes occur, placing the incipient science of detection on trial.

The inequalities of the justice system are never resolved. However, they become a mainstay of the film's narrative and a counterpoint between Rojas's version of crimes and the official version. The next scene will answer the question, at least partly, as it opens inside a police station, where Jaime Rojas will soon appear before he is released. The chief detective, Inspector Santos (Armando Calvo)—embodying the law's tenacity- denounces Rojas's liberation. He is convinced that an assassin has not been punished adequately but only slapped on the wrist for assault and robbery, as there were no eyewitnesses. The miscarriage of justice is a two-way street: Jaime feels he has been wrongly convicted, and Santos feels he has beaten

the rap. As Rojas enters the room, making cynical remarks about the system, the three legal figures—lawyer, police, and judge—stand to face him. He makes light of their accusations and then asks them, "what is guilt? And how good is the law?" Calling them sermons, he belittles their surveillance warnings and announces they will be sorry "por haberse topado en mi camino" [they ever crossed my path]. He promises that "la próxima vez" [the next time they run into him] he will be in control and swears to take revenge on those who put him inside. The scientist and his creation are the misunderstood victims, prosecuted by society and taken advantage of. The law is envisioned in this scene as both under threat and inefficient.

Revenge is a powerful element of melodrama, often used to re-establish social equilibrium after a romantic triangle has been dissolved. Forming what Caroline Joan S. Picart calls the "monstrous cobbling together" (2) of Victor Frankenstein and his childhood friend Victor Clerval in a triangle with the monster, Baledón's film presents a parallel of Mary Shelley's characters in the relationship of Rojas, Orlak, and Professor Frankenstein. The scientist is guilty of an excess of hubris, escaping prison to complete his experiment. Rojas is guilty of criminal acts and the cynical manipulation of the system. Orlak is unaware of their evils and only slowly becomes aware of their control, becoming the film's truly human and humane character. Before Jaime orchestrates Professor Frankenstein's escape from jail to liberate the creator of his vengeance, Rojas's release from prison sets up the scenario to exact two instances of personal retribution outside the law. Now on the streets, the first is a confrontation with his partner in crime to demand his portion of the take from a robbery, and the second is the elimination of a romantic rival. Demanding his share of the loot from partner Gabino (Carlos Nieto), who has turned honest and married, Rojas tries to strong-arm him but is taken aback when Gabino pulls out a gun. Rojas is forced to back off, but the scene only marks a delay in the action. Not only do human beings change and move on, but the past is left behind as a closed chapter. Rojas is unable to accept this disturbing development and, in the end, will exemplify the consequences of this choice. Rojas is unable to leave the past behind.

The second scene of the confrontation is shot in a cabaret setting. Estela (Rosa de Castilla) is a popular nightclub performer in a dive that contrasts with the elegant café that sets the stage for his new object of affection/revenge, Judge Dávalos' (Antonio Raxel) daughter Elvira (Irma Dorantes). As Jaime returns—lingering at the door and reflected obliquely in a Baroque entrance mirror—to recover his old flame as if time had not passed, he finds her

singing (appropriately) "acuérdate, acuérdate que una vez fui tu amante" [remember, remember that I was once your lover]. Rojas needs no help in remembering, of course, and confirms what the bouncer at the stage door tells him: "las cosas han cambiado" [things have changed]; the world has moved on since he was last there. Rojas repeats this phrase insistently, refusing to acknowledge that society has no role for him to play now. Unable to cope with change, a pitfall of those obsessed with the past, his only recourse is violence. Spectators realize Rojas cannot move on. That "things have changed" is a compelling statement that underlies the entire cinematic narrative; how characters deal with changing circumstances decides their fate. Modernity offers participation or repudiation.

In a panoramic shot of a dusty town, a violent jailbreak frees the professor, who, in a soft transition, is seen inside a ruinous gothic castle filled with shadows and shot from a high angle to give spectators access to the laboratory setting. It is hardly a typical structure in 1960s Mexico but familiar to film spectators from Hollywood productions. Dark interiors and dilapidated scientific equipment create an atmosphere of isolation from the outside world. The setting is timeless, indicating a world outside social transitions or cultural debates of modern times. Here, man and machine are amicable; they work together to pursue "systematization and control of magical possibilities" (Pomerance 4). As cinematic conventions demand, the locus of Frankenstein's laboratory fills a gloomy and obscure basement, in ruin and incongruously lit by torches. It represents both a throwback to the past and an evocation of Hollywood and Hammer horror film sets. In an anachronistic fantasy scene, torches share the frame with electrical devices, currents arcing into the darkness and illuminating the iconic lancet arches of gothic interiors. Past and present unite to confuse and conflate historical processes and propose monstrosity's timeless survival. The doctor is framed by gadgets and rising smoke, sulfurous fumes, and refrigerated chambers to preserve his creation.

Accompanied by assistant Eric, the now-freed professor confides to Rojas what the real reasons for his punishment were: resuscitating the dead. He frames his long speech with the warning "Los hombres no deben enterrar a sus semejantes" [human beings should not bury their own]. He proposes that all but the soul belongs to science, foreshadowing the film's closing scenes in which he reconsiders his philosophy of science. In a dramatic gesture, Professor Frankenstein opens a hydraulic door to reveal a covered body lying on a catafalque. Surrounded by grayish rising smoke, a mysterious atmosphere of creation and transformation shrouds what he calls his *muñeco* [robot, automaton]. We observe a collection of body parts

[*injertos* or grafts] stitched together with a bag over the head. The doctor explains he has placed inside a metal 'receptacle' that forms the body cavity of human organs and a clockwork mechanism that he believes will spring to life through the miracle of electricity. The doctor describes the twitching of the limbs in the same terms as Luigi Galvani did in the 18th century. Mary Shelley's fascination with radical scientific topics of the day—the solar system, microscopy, and electricity—is echoed in *this* Professor Frankenstein's appeal to harnessing electricity to resurrect the dead. But the charged secret of life will become the spark that brings this agent of *death* to life, as Jaime plots to steal Frankenstein's invention for his evil purposes. Karl Marx's warning to "let the dead bury their dead" (106)—then comment on social revolutions taking inspiration from the future and not relying on "the superstition" (106) of the past—now might turn to the generations coming of age in the 1960s to arrive at their conclusions. Hollywood monsters of the past were recycled into images embedded in new times and circumstances. In the end, the appropriation of this figure will have Frankenstein and Rojas meet in a bloody encounter over the potential use of science and the possible humanity of a creation. Where the true evil lies, and just who becomes the monster asks of all involved to engage with the transformation of social structures and new pathologies of "social dynamization" (Vostal 236).

Human blood is the missing ingredient for the animation of the creature who remains nameless. Rojas is seen emerging after dark to murder to drain the blood from his victims. In turn, his actions produce the social myth of the vampire, as bloodless corpses are found each dawn, and local newspapers report the presence of vampirism in the town. A headline in *El Monitor* appears on screen announcing that a vampire is stalking the streets, the old scapegoat used to explain new crime. With Rojas's blood supply, Professor Frankenstein is edified that he has all of his ingredients. Still, he emphasizes that the automaton is an incomplete project since it lacks a human head and brain. Spectators wonder how he will control the actions of his creation. Jürgen Habermas notably proposes that technologies of "societal modernization" and "cultural modernity" are not synonymous, with industrial modernizing having concrete technological components but modernity being "an incomplete project" (7) of changing values a society must assimilate. Professor Frankenstein's creation unites parts of a project that, lacking a head, remains incomplete. Having scientific advances does not mean that ethical and moral values have been incorporated. Baledón will have the 'monster' step in to articulate his

appearance at this moment. Orlak embodies the resuscitation of a past monster who his surroundings will transform.

Jaime speaks of "mi causa" [*my* cause, *his* revenge] as the doctor repeats insistently that "mi proyecto es crear, no destruir" [my project is to create and not destroy]. His pursuit of finalizing the experiment confronts two opposing projects: avenging the past vs moving forward with science and knowledge. Like Walter Benjamin's reference to Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* whose backward gaze witnesses with horror the accumulating rubble of so-called progress, the doctor's project may be added to the dual catastrophes of scientific and social history. Facing a 'state of emergency,' Benjamin's Angel of History "would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings…The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned while the debris pile grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" (Benjamin IX). A lost past can neither be restored nor resuscitated.[2] Jaime is incapable of turning to face the accumulation of debris and rescue a future-looking vision from the ruins, unlike the angel who "looks as though he were about to distance himself from something he is staring at" Benjamin IX). Unable to see the details of the events but only a single arc of history, he is paralyzed. At a loss to adapt to the acceleration of time and the transformation of society, Jaime is increasingly resolute that he is right and that his vengeance is the sole way to react to accusations of criminal conduct. He piles up more and more bodies—of women, of children, of rivals—on the trash heap of the past. He can have no future. His only motivation cannot embrace social change. The closing shots of *Orlak* produce the anticipated finale: Rojas cannot survive. Orlak has a choice.

Once it gets a brain from the morgue, Frankenstein's creature will be programmed to obey the doctor, not be autonomous. Using telepathy and a set of special glasses that emit radio waves and look like Google Glass, Rojas takes control of an apocalypse where judgments about science and ethics cannot be avoided. It is at this point that the creature is named: Orlak the Invincible. Weapons cannot destroy him, so Orlak is not human in this critical attribute. It does not seem a coincidence that the name echoes a 1924 Austrian silent horror film called *The Hands of* Orlac, remade in 1960 with Christopher Lee. Director Robert Wiene, the Expressionist filmmaker of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) uses Orlac to create the prototype of a monster who is the result of a botched medical procedure. A concert pianist, Orlac loses his hands in a tragic accident. They are replaced with those of a brutal murderer, producing an

obsession with the evil that the hands embody. Good and evil exist before the surgeries, of course, and the question continues as spectators deal with the pianist's condition, the surgeon's dexterity, and the criminal's possible survival. This narrative is reflected in Orlak as the potential implements of evil are embodied in two characters: Rojas and Orlak who has been imbued with the face of Rojas, becoming his double. Except for a lack of affect, the automaton is an exact replica. Orlak has one weakness: his face cannot withstand the heat emanating from flames. For Rojas, this is the perfect scenario as he can be in two places at once, take his revenge, and still appear to be innocent. Cordero plays both villain and automaton, complicating identification by his victims and the duality of the notion of power and control. Is this the perfect crime, or does crime has a double face? Spectators are provided the opportunity to meditate on the figure of the monster.

An extradiegetic ticking clock marks the acceleration of time as Rojas infiltrates the family of Judge Dávalos, invading both the institutions of family and justice simultaneously. As "The Nutcracker Suite" is heard offscreen on a piano, the next scene opens with a medium shot of a young woman at the keyboard. Since the Nutcracker story involves the animation of toys, and Orlak is the doctor's animation of life, this seems the perfect musical accompaniment. Elvira is used as a witness of Jaime's presence in the house, as his unwitting alibi. He weaves a narrative of the miscarriage of justice as Elvira empathizes with his story. The elegant mise-en-scène of the Dávalos home, a visible tribute to the rising Mexican bourgeoisie, is the product of a lucrative law career and a preservation of traditional values. The essential excess of the domestic interior—décor, accumulated objects, luxurious accoutrements—that surround and protect Elvira is invaded by discord and criminality. If ignored, Rojas personifies a threat to the future this mise-en-scène represents.

A rapid cut to Frankenstein's laboratory focuses on the scientist ecstatic over being able to finish his project. All his efforts will come to fruition with the human brain he will implant in his creation. After adding this last piece, he expects "Orlak podría pensar" [Orlak could think for himself]. That is just the opposite of Rojas's hope for a compliant creation. The dilemma of autonomy vs obedience comes to life. This scientific narrative accompanies the development of the romantic relationship between Elvira and Jaime, which plays out in a concert hall, in her home, and in an exclusive café. The public and private spaces of melodrama frame a courtship based on two different tales: one of (supposed) love and one of hate. Jaime claims that only Elvira can "salvarlo" [save him], but he does not specify from what. The line

of dialogue sounds much more like a stock comment from the conventions of melodrama as the suffering hero attempts to convince the object of his affection to reciprocate his feelings. With dramatic irony, the audience knows he is using her, but Elvira remains unaware. A cut to a parallel scene has Frankenstein announcing, "he derrotado a la muerte" [I have triumphed over death], as Rojas moves to use Orlak as an agent of death. Professor Frankenstein says he will educate his creation to make good moral decisions since it is now imbued with "un cerebro en blanco" [a clean slate]. This allows for a potential humanizing of the monster, perhaps a reversal of his ostracism and rejection. A warning about staying away from fire reminds spectators of the previous scene and foreshadows the film's final moments. Just as Shelley's monster chooses to sacrifice itself on a funeral pyre and "exult in the agony of the torturing flames" (225), so Orlak will seek peace in fire to end his suffering, rejection, and loneliness. Once he has learned to distinguish good from evil, it is his ultimate moral choice.

Rojas and Orlak appear simultaneously in the same frame, so the law can prosecute the real criminal. Inspector Santos warns Elvira that her life is in danger, but Rojas assures Elvira she is safe: "Tranquilo—no le pasará nada" [Don't worry. Nothing is going to happen to you]. The triangle of Elvira-Orlak-Jaime must be worked out to establish a resolution of the "forbidden longings" (Hayward 205) of the woman. All of the conventions of melodrama are in place to indicate an upcoming apotheosis: dramatic music, tears of desire, extreme closeups, false happiness, and long takes. A juxtaposition of Orlak being ordered by Jaime to kill former lover Estela immediately follows his declaration of love to Elvira. Elvira reassures her father that Rojas "es un hombre bueno" [is a good man], but audiences know she is under the spell of his words. The extradiegetic ticking clock returns, the police close in on him, and the wounded Rojas proudly proclaims he is still a criminal, that "todos lo pagarán" [everyone is going to pay]. He uses the judge and his daughter as instruments against the society that condemned him. Soon after, bloodcurdling extradiegetic screams bridge to Rojas's confession. Stopped and beaten by the police to extract a confession, Jaime loses his glasses. All connections to Orlak are temporarily suspended, and the automaton has become independent of human control. Recovering his remote-control glasses from the floor, Rojas orders the monster to kill. The situational irony is that Orlak has removed his glasses and no longer obeys Rojas and has already moved toward independence.

As Orlak approaches Elvira's house, we hear her crying as she refuses to leave Mexico with her father, the only way he has found to separate her from Rojas. Traditional family values

cannot accept the independence of children. What looks like Elvira and Jaime –but are Elvira and Orlak—meet in the garden of her home, an idyllic space. Like the Garden of Eden, Elvira's backyard affords a primal scene. She has no idea Orlak is a human creation. A jump scare sets up the same effect in spectators that Elvira is about to experience. The dark mise-en-scène is accented by focused lighting that illuminates Orlak's face. Surprised by his unannounced visit, Elvira reaches out to embrace him. Orlak answers her questions slowly and mechanically, without emotion; then, he tenderly touches her face. The scene is shot entirely in extreme closeup to emphasize the melodramatic encounter of evil and victim. Viewers are engaged with the scene in full knowledge that they know who the figure with Elvira is, but she does not.

Shortly after, in a scene reminiscent of the Golden Age of Mexican melodrama, Orlak and Elvira are seated before a fire, lamenting their shared sorrow. Their solitude—also the cause of Shelley's creature's most significant unhappiness—links species and time. The fireside closeup is a conventional cinematic ploy to foreground a confession, whether of guilt or love. However, it has rarely, if ever, been a moment shared by a human being and a scientific creation. Thinking she confides in Rojas, Elvira softly murmurs, "yo te quiero" [I love you], to which Orlak responds, "no sabes quién soy yo" [you don't know who I am]. In an ironic twist, Jaime could have uttered the same words, as Elvira has no idea who he *really* is either. The look on Orlak's face reveals that he is caught in a dilemma: he feels something for her but knows that it will never be possible. They share a fundamental sadness, as Elvira says: "Yo necesitaba la paz" [I needed peace in my life]. Elvira says she has found peace with Rojas. Orlak comes to the recognition that what has kept him from living an untroubled life is "una fuerza infernal que me domina" [an infernal/demonic force that controls me]. Both narratives—Elvira's obedience to patriarchy and love of Rojas; Orlak's obedience and desire for autonomy—are revealed as dependent on the control of another. Each has found the object of their affection, but a lack of free will impedes any happy ending. For the first time, Orlak realizes his life is not his own, and that in the confluence of science and revenge, he has fallen victim to both. First, the doctor, then the criminal made his decisions. Now, he has a conscience and is liberated from Rojas' commands, just as Elvira must free herself from both Rojas and her father. Like Orlak, she has never been able to think for herself.

As they sit near the fire and commiserate, Orlak confesses all of his secrets to Elvira. The past is revived in order to explain the present in a moment of reconnection. The worst

aspect of his identity is that he considers himself inhuman; that has separated him from everyone else. This condition has kept him apart and alone. Yet he has more heart than the man ordering him to kill or his creator seeking recognition and glory. Orlak represents an orphaned present, the monster of modernity relegated to misunderstanding. The logic of his conclusion is stunning: "Sólo los hombres conocen la tristeza" [only human beings know sadness] but "yo no soy humano" [I am not human]. This moment of recognition requires some subsequent action. Condemned to solitude, Orlak confirms what Shelley wrote two hundred years before about Frankenstein's creation as both contemptible and deserving of empathy: "All men hate the wretched; how then, must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things?" (102). Shelley introduces her creation as "my hideous progeny" although, unlike the doctor, she expresses "an affection for it" (25). Although unrecognizable—the living created from the dead—Orlak is a human creation, owing his identity to Professor Frankenstein whose hubris has driven him to defy the limits of life.

Once he has felt human emotions, Orlak is miserable, heartbroken, and filled with melancholy. He has touched the face of Elvira only to know that this is where it will end. The two misunderstood beings, Elvira and Orlak, sit facing the fireplace as they gaze at the flames. Elvira murmurs "todos están en contra nuestra" [everyone is against us]. A conventional phrase of melodramatic torment, Elvira is unaware of who this creature really is. Absorbed in his sorrow, forgetting the doctor's warning, Orlak moves closer to the fire. Science has failed to create a material that will not burn, and the humanized monster becomes a victim. His innocence for thinking he can be human and be loved by Elvira creates a bridge back to Shelley's text once again. Dr. Frankenstein's decision to refuse the creature's plea for a mate—a return to the process that made him—establishes the curse of loneliness that Orlak continues to suffer. In a visible sign of his grief, Orlak's face begins to melt and turn into a hideous, misshapen mask. No longer human, his eyes droop and bulge, and his mouth becomes a distorted grimace. His heart is one thing, but his face is another. Elvira screams in fear of the monster before her with whom she has shared deep confidences, mistakenly believing it is Rojas. Elvira is left without either Rojas or Orlak.

Some of the traditions of cinematic versions of *Frankenstein* are kept—the evil human, the presumptuous scientist, the suffering—but the pathos of monstrosity is shifted in the shared loneliness of woman and monster. Compelled to act against their wishes, Orlak and Elvira share a fundamental sadness neither can overcome. The contrasting black and white of

the fireside scene focuses on the flames that flicker brightly, framing an emotional breakdown represented in the tears running down Orlak's cheek. In an extreme closeup, he seems more human and compassionate than Rojas ever did. The gender of the monster now looks more feminine than masculine as he peers into the flames as if in a mirror, reflecting on the limits of his life. He has a past but no future. Disillusioned by what he sees, Orlak concludes that as a new type of being formed from the parts of other creatures he is relegated to the same marginal social role as Elvira. The trope of the gothic houses them both in spaces of imprisonment where the bonds of traditional concepts of identity entrap women and (as) monsters in equal measure.

Restrained by the laws of the father—both judge and paternal authority—Elvira falls under the spell of Jaime Rojas who uses her as well. Rojas similarly manipulates Orlak to circumvent the police in which a "dynamic confrontation between the known and the unknown…the definable and the indefinable" (Friedman and Kavey 91) takes place. The law of the father and the laws of the nation have been set, but modern times require new thoughts. Given the chance to react differently to Orlak, Elvira reveals her bond with the past; she does not know how to accept difference. Like generations of young Mexicans who rejected the paternal restrictions of family and state during the 1960s, Elvira and Orlak stand poised at the brink of radical social transformation but, like Shelley, find it difficult to come to terms with such impulses. If Dr. Frankenstein or Professor Frankenstein gave in to their creature's longing for companionship, for sympathy, would that indicate "ceding control, passing his power to create life to the creature" (Smith 16)? Society would be irrevocably changed.

This suddenly humanized creation attempts to tell Elvira the truth, to confess they share social rejection. Now his interlocutor rather than his victim, she finally sees him for the imperfect creation that he is. The spectacle of masculinity haunted by the monstrous gives us a new moment of uncanny terror as it depicts a confusion of categories we have thought long resolved. A faceless being and a rebellious daughter have no place. As Mexico transitions from a traditional society to the challenges of modernity, what Fred Botting calls "the loss of human identity and the alienation of self from the social bearings in which a sense of reality is secured are presented in the threatening shapes of dehumanized environments" (Botting 157) are made visible. The dehumanization is visible in the settings, the characters, and the actions. The return to a black and white aesthetics in the era of Technicolor and widescreen productions and to a recognizable imported monster places the spectator at a crossroads.

In the laboratory, Professor Frankenstein confesses that he has tried his best, but there are no "milagros" [miracles] to create a perfect being. This is a peculiar word for a scientist to use as it reverts to a pre-modern conception of the world and an abdication to some sort of divine intervention. There are limits to science: he cannot fix Eric's deformed face, nor has he perfected one for Orlak that will resist fire. Rojas arrives to assert that from that point on he will take over Orlak. He has not realized that Orlak has assumed control over his own life. When Orlak walks in, creator and creation meet. When Rojas tries to shoot him, he fails, since Orlak is, as we know, invincible. Jaime takes Elvira captive and runs from the building. Orlak pursues them; it will be left up to him to act with compassion to save her. As they run through the gothic castle, up and down staircases, and across steep parapets, flames shoot into the sky, illuminating the pursuit of evil. The camera places spectators at ground level, watching the character's feet move to and fro, running frantically on geometric stairs. This low angle of running feet—the police, Orlak, and Rojas—makes telling them apart more difficult. The Gothic architecture dominates the scene, with the shadows of human figures dwarfed by manmade constructions. In Baledón's film, the castle and the landscape are darkly foreign, a timeless time as good attempts to vanquish evil. Human creations are just one piece of the social landscape, single figures in the night. Professor Frankenstein finally informs the authorities that "Jaime Rojas fue el asesino" [Jaime Rojas was the killer], even if he supplied the technology for the criminal's actions. The experiment proceeded as the man of science was thrilled to be supported in his work; the ends justified the means. Does the same hold true for modernity?

As fire rages inside the building, one-eyed Orlak, still deformed from the fire, loses his second eye. He runs blindly toward the heat of the flames. Rojas turns increasingly violent, Orlak increasingly calm and quiet. Both must choose a closure to suit his needs; his surroundings have molded each. Once blinded, Orlak can now 'see' what he should do. The city folk are seen gathering *en masse* at the foot of the castle to destroy the danger, much as they do in other film versions of Frankenstein. Society must be seen as opposing evil, even if it is uncertain—or confused—about where evil is housed. The monster—Orlak as the good man Elvira has always sought—chases Rojas—the man of evil—up and down, over and under the stairs and through the labyrinthine hallways. Evil must be vanquished, so as Rojas falls from the castle to his death he admits "tenía que vengarme" [I had to be avenged] as his justification for everything he has done. After his initial crime—either robbery or murder—

Jaime has taken the lives of many innocent people, with the law as the ultimate enemy. With his last words, Rojas orders Orlak to kill everyone. Orlak disobeys and saves Elvira from the flames as the townspeople pelt him with stones. Professor Frankenstein calls out to Orlak, but the monster runs back into the fire to save a young girl about to become the next innocent victim. He then disappears into the inferno. The misunderstood creature is sacrificed to purify and maintain the status quo; his disappearance indicates an end to the difficulty of dealing with difference.

A fatal attraction to the flames takes the life of Orlak whose last act has been quite admirably human. Seen in silhouette against the consuming fire, Orlak retreats into the castle's ruins. Alone, without Elvira, he finds nothing but death. Yet he chooses it himself, not under orders from anyone. There is an irony in Orlak's self-sacrifice. Professor Frankenstein closes the scene with the words of the scientist as well as the philosopher: "era casi humano, muerto Jaime él no habría hecho nada malo" [he was almost human, with Jaime's death, he would have never done anything evil]. In other words, the source of all immorality was the criminal Jaime Rojas, who was motivated by a personal sense of justice. He was an icon of the past. The professor articulates the moral message of the film: you are a product of your surroundings. Professor Frankenstein takes stock of all that has occurred and finally concludes that no one should delve into the mysteries of life. Neither he nor the criminal Rojas whose story he so naively believed ever had the right to "descubrir la vida artificial" [discover artificial life] and use the results to personal ends. The docility of Orlak was his downfall, as was the blind faith of Elvira. Will she remain under the control of her father or learn from experience to find her own answers? The ending is left open.

Mary Shelley's text offers another connection with Baledón's film. In chapter IX of the second volume of her novel, Victor Frankenstein and the monster sit in a hut in the wilderness of Switzerland. Deep in conversation, the monster proposes that the doctor returns to his scientific processes one more time to create a female companion to ameliorate his desperate loneliness. Not in sexual terms but in the language of solitude, he makes his case for a mate: "Oh my creator, make me happy; let me feel gratitude towards you for one benefit! Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing; do not deny me my request!" (148). His tone is subdued and plaintive, expressing gratefulness as a link between beings. The happiness that dawns in Orlak—the creature doomed to *el infierno* [the hell of the title]—mirrors the same desire as Shelley's creation. Finding solace in another human being, Victor

Frankenstein's creation would potentially cure the "incompleteness" of his condition. Such an opportunity does not arise for Orlak; the men who create and use him to their ends never ask his advice or wishes. They do not converse with him. His death signals a moment of paradox as the scientist's vanquishing of death by technology ends not in life but in extermination. The rejection of the result of his work cannot be allowed to continue by a society that has no place for him or for Orlak.

Shelley's Victor Frankenstein at first reluctantly agrees to his creation's request for a companion. However, working on a second being on the remote Orkney Islands he is plagued by a premonition of disaster. Once started, he then destroys the female version of his creation when he sees the monster looking avidly into the laboratory through the window. The creature eagerly awaits the completion of a human being's desire: that science could fulfill humanity's dreams. At Frankenstein's initial acceptance of his request, the monster is overjoyed and makes a promise that both reflects the debt he feels he owes Frankenstein and the impossibility of continuing to live among human beings: "If you consent, neither you nor any other human being shall ever see us again: I will go to the vast wilds of *South America*" [Emphasis added 149]. The creature's contentment will flourish where—in the early nineteenth century at least—there are few inhabitants, and the monster and his companion can "make our bed of dry leaves; the sun will shine on us as on man…the picture I present to you is peaceful and human" (149). His utopia is a new beginning in a new geography, far from social structures inherited from the past. Nevertheless, such is not the case with Orlak. There is no mythical *terra incognita* in which to seek refuge. The moment he discovers happiness is the exact moment he is destined to die in the sacrificial immolation of a humanized self. The creature disappears back into the fiery margins from which it came.

Orlak embodies the human fear of a disappearing history, or of disappearing out of the historical narrative, of not being recognized as human. His face becomes a hideous mask, melting in the flames of society's misunderstanding and subsequent rejection. Again, he dies alone and abandoned, misunderstood as a force of love and goodness but taken instead for evil owing to his appearance. An escape to "the vast wilds of South America" has not made one difference, as no more wilds can be found. As Rodríguez-Hernández and Schaefer conclude about the gothic genre in Mexican cinema, "At moments of technological progress but social instability such as revolutions, dictatorships or transitions cross centuries and millennia, fears and anxieties surface with extraordinary persistence" (273). Faith in what has

been known is questioned, so the past returns as monstrous. That includes the cinematic past. Family melodrama, beauty and the beast, and gothic horror all play out in Orlak as he inhabits what is for some the 'hell' of mid-century Mexico. In 1960, Orlak's 'hell' might be a space of admonition for Mexicans to be wary of a coming decade of radical upheaval and unpredictable change. Just as Mary Shelley created a frozen and "unearthly landscape" (Hay 64) for Frankenstein's creature to confront the horror of its origin and existence, the element of fire now illuminates "the disparity between the powerful and the marginalized" (Hay 70), between Elvira and Orlak whose hell offers spectators a closeup of such a moment of crisis.

Notes

1. While Mexican horror films representing social transformation have integrated alien monsters such as Frankenstein and Dracula into Mexican settings with popular *luchadores* or wrestlers, the ambiguities of the moment required that the real-life hero vanquish the Hollywood intruder. Greene notes the "sudden and unprecedented proliferation" (8) of mexploitation films starting in 1957, although the films of Abel Salazar, Rafael Portillo, René Cardona, Fernando Méndez, Chano Urueta, and Rafael Baledón focused on witches, La Llorona, vampires, magic mirrors, and resuscitated Aztec mummies will last well into the early 1970s. A brief look at the titles of these films shows the popular success of Abel Salazar's vampire franchise—*El vampiro* and *El ataúd del vampiro*, both from 1957, *El mundo de los vampiros* (1960)—and its influence on other directors and producers including director Benito Alazraki's *Santo* films (1961-73). Combining the scenes of *lucha libre* wrestling heroes with zombies, female vampires, witches, Dracula, Martians, the daughter of Frankenstein, and the Wolf Man offered variations of the Mexicans *vs* monster formula. The codes of Hollywood were disrupted by local cultural icons.
2. Ronald Beiner concludes that Walter Benjamin's theses on history are fragments of an argument related to successive generations' relationship to a historical process, but as agents of integrating that past into their contribution to the future. "Radically fragmented" (Beiner 424), the debris of history must be made whole through both "remembrance" and action. Mexico's youth finds itself in the bind of negotiating the remote past, the recent revolutionary past, and the mid-century challenges of "carrying forward the revolution" (Beiner 425) by "seizing hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin V-VI). The decade of the 1960s present the uncertainty of modernization as a pivotal time of "restlessness" (Zolov 1) accompanied by the middle-class's acquisition of imported consumer products related to "the promise of a batter life" (Zolov 5). Hollywood cinema fed that hunger.

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