Re-imagining Horror in Children’s Animated Film

Erin Hawley

Abstract

Introduction

It is very common for children’s films to adopt, rework, or otherwise re-image existing cultural material. Such re-imaginings are potential candidates for fidelity criticism: a mode of analysis whereby an adaptation is judged according to its degree of faithfulness to the source text. Indeed, it is interesting that while fidelity criticism is now considered outdated and problematic by adaptation theorists (see Stamm; Leitch; and Whelehan) the issue of fidelity has tended to linger in the discussions that form around material adapted for children. In particular, it is often assumed that the re-imagining of cultural material for children will involve a process of “dumbing down” that strips the original text of its complexity so that it is more easily consumed by young audiences (see Semenza; Kellogg; Hastings; and Napolitano). This is especially the case when children’s films draw from texts—or genres—that are specifically associated with an adult readership.

This paper explores such an interplay between children’s and adult’s culture with reference to the re-imagining of the horror genre in children’s animated film. Recent years have seen an influx of animated films that play with horror tropes, conventions, and characters. These include Frankenweenie (2012), ParaNorman (2012), Hotel Transylvania (2012), Igor (2008), Monsters Inc. (2001), Monster House (2006), and Monsters vs Aliens (2009). Often diminishingly referred to as “kiddie horror,” re-imagining of the horror genre is connected to broader shifts in children’s culture, literature, and media. Anna Jackson, Karen Coats, and Roderick McGillis, for instance, have written about the mainstreaming of the Gothic in children’s literature after centuries of “suppression” (2); a glance at the titles in a children’s book store, they tell us, may suggest that “fear or the pretence of fear has become a dominant mode of enjoyment in literature for young people” (1). At the same time, as Lisa Hopkins has pointed out, media products with dark, supernatural, or Gothic elements are increasingly being marketed to children, either directly or through product tie-ins such as toys or branded food items (116-17).

The re-imagining of horror for children demands our attention for a number of reasons. First, it raises questions about the commercialisation and repackaging of material that has traditionally been considered “high culture”, particularly when the films in question are seen to differ from sites of the literary Gothic such as Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818) or Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897). The classic horror films of the 1930s such as James Whale’s Frankenstein (1931) also have their own canonical status within the genre, and are objects of reverence for horror fans and film scholars alike. Moreover, aficionados of the genre have been known to object very strongly to any perceived simplification or dumbing down of horror conventions in order to address a non-adult horror audience. As Lisa Bode has demonstrated, such objections were articulated in many reviews of the film Twilight, in which the repackaging and simplifying of vampire mythology was seen to pander to a female, teenage or “tween” audience (710-11).

Second, the re-imagining of horror for children raises questions about whether the genre is an appropriate source of pleasure and entertainment for young audiences. Horror has traditionally been understood as problematic and damaging even for adult viewers: Mark Jancovich, for instance, writes of the long-standing assumption that horror “is morally sickening and worrying; that any person who derives pleasure from the genre is moronic, sick, and potentially dangerous” and that both the horror genre and its fans are “deviant” (18). Consequently, discussions about the relationship between children and horror have tended to emphasise regulation, restriction, censorship, effect, and “the dangers of imitative violence” (Buckingham 95). As Paul Wells observes, there is a “consistent concern […] that horror films are harmful to children, but clearly these films are not made for children, and the responsibility for who views them lies with adult authority figures who determine how and when horror films are seen” (24).

Previous academic work on the child as horror-viewer has tended to focus on children as consumers of horror material designed for adults. Joanne Cantor’s extensive study of children’s book store, they tell us, may suggest that “fear or the pretence of fear has become a dominant mode of enjoyment in literature for young people” (1). At the same time, as Lisa Hopkins has pointed out, media products with dark, supernatural, or Gothic elements are increasingly being marketed to children, either directly or through product tie-ins such as toys or branded food items (116-17).

ParaNorman is the second major film from the animation studio Laika Entertainment. Following in the footsteps of the earlier Laika film Coraline (2009)—and paving the way for the studio’s 2014 release, Boxtrolls—ParaNorman features stop-motion animation, twisted storylines, and the exploration of dark themes and spaces by child characters. The film tells the story of Norman, an eleven year old boy who can see and communicate with the dead. This gift marks him as an outcast in the small town of Blithe Hollow, which has built its identity on the historic trial and hanging of an “evil” child witch. Norman must grapple with the town’s troubled past and the spirit of the vengeful witch; along the way, he and an odd assortment of children battle zombies and townsfolk alike, the latter appearing more monstrous than the former as the film progresses. Although ParaNorman does not position itself as an adaptation of a specific horror text, as does Frankenweenie, it shares with Burton’s film a playful intertextuality whereby references are constantly made to iconic images within the horror genre— thereby enabling children to question long-held assumptions about pleasure, taste, and the boundaries between “adult” and “child”.

Frankenweenie and ParaNorman: Rewriting the Myth of Childhood Innocence

Frankenweenie is a stop-motion animation written by John August and directed by Tim Burton, based on a live-action short film made by Burton in 1984. As its name suggests, Frankenweenie reimagines Shelley’s Frankenstein by transforming the relationship between creator and monster into that between child and pet. Burton’s Victor Frankenstein is a young boy living in a small American town, a creative loner who enjoys making monster movies. When his beloved dog Sparky is killed in a car accident, young Victor—like his predecessor in Shelley’s novel—is driven by the awfulness of this encounter with death to discover the “mysteries of creation” (Shelley 38): he digs up Sparky’s body, drags the corpse back to the family home, and reanimates him in the attic. This coming-to-life sequence is both a coming-of-age rite and a defining moment in the film’s narrative. In Burton’s Frankenstein, the act of reanimation is a childhood act, and the animation of Sparky’s lifeless corpse is a child’s act of compassion and wonder. By the end of the film, Sparky has not only been brought back to life, but he has been reformed into the model of the perfect dog. In fact, Sparky is so eager to please his master that he sometimes forgets to listen to culture, and is often depicted as a千年 old boy who can see and communicate with the dead. This gift marks him as an outcast in the small town of Blithe Hollow, which has built its identity on the historic trial and hanging of an “evil” child witch. Norman must grapple with the town’s troubled past and the spirit of the vengeful witch; along the way, he and an odd assortment of children battle zombies and townsfolk alike, the latter appearing more monstrous than the former as the film progresses. Although ParaNorman does not position itself as an adaptation of a specific horror text, as does Frankenweenie, it shares with Burton’s film a playful intertextuality whereby references are constantly made to iconic images within the horror genre— thereby enabling children to question long-held assumptions about pleasure, taste, and the boundaries between “adult” and “child”.

Frankenweenie and ParaNorman suggest that the myth of childhood innocence is not a blanket protection whereby children are forever free from the dangers of watching horror films. On the contrary, ParaNorman argues that children are not innocent but are capable of making meaning of complex texts and unsuitable objects of pleasure for adults; instead, the films demonstrate that the act of re-imagining horror for children can imagines the child’s mature engagement with horror films is expected to be a site of negotiation.adults, and the potential enjoyment of other adult reviewers. Lou Lumenick, for instance, peppers his review of ParaNorman with language that indicates his own pleasure (“probably the year’s most visually dazzling movie so far”); the climax is “too good to spoil”; the horror is “deliciously twisted”), while warning that children as old as eight should not be taken to see the film. Similarly, Christy Lemire’s reviews of both ParaNorman and Frankenweenie illustrate the need for a character analysis to make the film suitable for a young audience. Lemire warns that certain elements of the film will “not be scary” and that “this is not really a movie for little kids”; she goes on to add that this scariness “is precisely what makes ‘Frankenweenie’ such a consistent wonder to watch for the rest of us” (emphasis added). In both these cases a line is drawn between child and adult reviewers, and arguably it is the film’s straying into the illicit area of horror that renders it an object of pleasure for the adult viewer. The thrill of being scared is also interpreted here as a specifically adult pleasure.

This need on the part of critics to establish boundaries between child and adult viewship is interesting given that the films themselves strive to incorporate children (and their child-viewers) into the horror space. In particular, both films work hard to dismantle the myths of childhood innocence—and associated ideas about pleasure and taste—that have previously seen children excluded from the culture of the horror film. Both the young protagonists, for instance, are depicted as media-consumers or makers of horror material. Victor is initially seen exhibiting one of his home-made monster movies to his bemused parents, and we first encounter Norman watching a zombie film with his (dead) grandfather; clearly a consummate horror viewer, Norman decodes the film for Grandma, explaining that the zombie is eating the woman’s head because, “that’s what they do.” In this way, the myth of childhood innocence is rewritten: the child’s mature engagement with
the horror genre gives him agency, which is linked to his active position in the narrative (both Norman and Victor literally save their towns from destruction); the parents, meanwhile, are reduced to babbling stereotypes who worry that their sons will “turn out weird” (Frankenweenie) or wonder why they “can’t be like other kids” (ParaNorman).

The films also rewrite the myth of childhood innocence by depicting Victor and Norman as children with dark, difficult lives. Importantly, each boy has encountered death and, for each, his parents have failed to effectively guide him through the experience. In Frankenweenie Victor is grief-stricken when Sparky dies, yet his parents can offer little more than platitudes to quell the pain of loss. “When you lose someone you love they never really leave you,” Victor’s mother intones, “they just move into a special place in your heart,” to which Victor replies “I don’t want him in my heart—I want him here with me!” The death of Norman’s grandmother is similarly dismissed by his mother in ParaNorman after he tells her “I know you and Grandma are in a better place now.” Norman objects: “No she’s not, she’s in the living room!” In both scenes, the literal-minded but intelligent child seems to understand death, loss, and grief while the parents are unable to speak about these “mature” concepts in a meaningful way. The films are also reminders that a child’s first experience of death can come very young, and often occurs via the loss of an elderly relative or a beloved pet.

Death, Play, and the Monster

In both films, therefore, the audience is invited to think about death. Consequently, there is a sense in each film that while the violent and sexual content of most horror texts has been stripped away, the dark centre of the horror genre remains. As Paul Veils reminds us, horror “is predominantly concerned with the fear of death, the multiple ways in which it can occur, and the untimely nature of its occurrence” (10). Certainly, the horror texts which Frankenweenie and ParaNorman re-imagine are specifically concerned with death and mortality. The various adaptations of Frankenstein that are referenced in Frankenweenie and the zombie films to which ParaNorman pays homage all deploy “the monster” as a figure who defies easy categorisation as living or dead. The othering of this figure in the traditional horror narrative allows him/her/it to both subvert and confirm cultural ideas about life, death, and human status: for monsters, as Elaine Graham notes, have long been deployed in popular culture as figures who “mark the fault-lines” and also “signal the fragility” of boundary structures, including the boundary between human and non-human, and that between life and death (12).

Frankenweenie’s Sparky, as an iteration of the Frankenstein monster, clearly fits this description: he is neither living nor dead, and his monstrously emerges not from any act of violence or from physical deformity (he remains, throughout the film, a cute and lovable dog, albeit with bolts fixed to his neck) but from his boundary-crossing status. However, while most versions of the Frankenstein monster are deliberately positioned to confront ideas about the human/machine boundary and to perform notions of the posthuman, such concerns are sidelined in Frankenweenie. Instead, the emphasis is on concerns that are likely to resonate with children: Sparky is a reminder of the human preoccupation with death, loss, and the question of why (or whether, or when) we should abide by the laws of nature. Arguably, this indicates a re-imaging of the Frankenstein tale not only for child audiences but from a child’s perspective.

In ParaNorman, similarly, the zombie—often read as an articulation of adult anxieties about war, apocalypse, terrorism, and the deterioration of social order (Platts 551-55)—is re-used and re-imagined in a childlike way. From a child’s perspective, the zombie may represent the horrific truth of mortality and/or the troublesome desire to live forever that emerges once this truth has been confronted. More specifically, the notion of dealing meaningfully with the past and of honouring rather than alienating the dead is a strong thematic undertow present in ParaNorman, and it is through a child’s lens that the zombie figures dramatise the connections between past and present. While this past/present connection is explored on many levels in ParaNorman—including the level of a town grappling with its dark history—it is Norman and his grandmother who take centre stage: the boundary-crossing figure of the zombie is re-realised here in terms of a negotiation with a presence that is now absent (the elderly relative who has died but is still remembered). Indeed, the zombies in this film are an implicit rebuke to Norman’s mother and her command that “move on” after his grandmother’s death. The dead are still present, this film playfully reminds us, and therefore “moving on” is an overly simplistic and somewhat disrespecting response (especially when imposed on children by adult authority figures.)

If the horror narrative is built around the notion that “normality is threatened by the Monster”, as Robin Wood has famously suggested, the attempt to domesticate the Horror narrative is an overly simplistic and somewhat disrespectful response (especially when imposed on children by adult authority figures.)

Conclusion

Animated film has always been an ambiguous space in terms of age, pleasure, and viewership. As film critic Margaret Pomeranz has observed, “there is a popular perception that if it’s an animated film then you can take the little littlies” (Pomeranz and Stratton). Animation itself is often a signifier of safety, fun, nostalgia, and childliness; it is a means of addressing families and young audiences. Yet at the same time, the fantastic and transformative aspects of animation can be powerful tools for telling stories that are dark, surprising, or somehow subversive. It is therefore interesting that the trend towards re-imagining horror for children that this paper has identified is unfolding within the animated space.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully consider what animation as a medium brings to this re-imagining process. However, it is worth noting that the distinctive stop-motion style used in both films works to position them as alternatives to Disney products (for although Frankenweenie was released under the Disney banner, it is visually distinct from most of Disney’s animated ventures). The majority of Disney films are adaptations or re-imaginings of some sort, yet these re-imaginings look to fairytale and children’s literature for their source material. In contrast, as this paper has demonstrated, Frankenweenie and ParaNorman open up a space for boundary-play: they give children access to tropes, narratives, and characters that are specifically associated with adult viewers, and they invite adults to see these tropes in a playful light. Breaking down such understandings about Frankenweenie and ParaNorman strive not so much to play with death (a phrase that implies a certain callousness, a problematic disregard for human life) but to explore death through the darkness of play. This is beautifully imagined in a scene from ParaNorman in which Norman and his friend Neil play with the ghost of Neil’s recently deceased dog. “We’re going to play with a dead dog in the yard,” Neil enthusiastically announces to his brother, “and we’re not even going to have to dig him up first!” Similarly, while critical Richard Corliss notes in his review of Frankenweenie that the film’s “message to the young” is that “children should play with dead things.” Through this intersection between “death” and “play”, both films present a particular child-like—and not necessarily child-ish—way of negotiating horror’s dark territory.

References


