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Re-imagining Horror in Children's Animated Film

Erin Howley

Abstract

Introduction

It is very common for children's films to adapt, rework, or otherwise re-imagine 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 Indeed, it is interesting that while fidelity criticism is now considered outdated and problematic by adaptation theorists (see Stam; Leitch; and Whelehan) the issue of fidelity has tended to linger in the discussions that form around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" or "goth lite", this 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 pilfer 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 vehemently to any perceived simplification or dumbing down of horror conventions in order to address a non-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 moronic, sick and worrying; that any person who derives pleasure from the genre is moronic, sick and potentially dangerous" and that both the 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 work in this area has indicated that fright reactions to horror media are commonly reported and can be long-lived (Cantor; and Cantor and Oliver). Elsewhere, the work of Sarah Smith (45-76) and David Buckingham (95-138) has indicated that children, like adults, can gain certain pleasures from the genre: it has also indicated that children can be quite media savvy when viewing horror, and can operate effectively as self-censors. However, little work has yet been conducted on whether (and how) the horror genre might be transformed for child viewers.

With this in mind, I explore here the re-imagining of horror in two children's animated films: *Frankenweenie* and *ParaNorman*. I will consider the way horror tropes, narratives, conventions, and characters have been reshaped in each film with a child's perspective in mind. This, I argue, does not make them simplified texts or unsuitable objects of pleasure for adults; instead, the films demonstrate that the act of re-imagining horror for children calls into 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* re-imagines 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 re-imagining of the famous animation scene in Whale's film *Frankenstein* and a tender expression of the love between a boy and his dog. The re-imagined creation scene therefore becomes a site of negotiation between adult and child audiences: adult viewers familiar with Whale's adaptation and its sense of electric spectacle are invited to rethink this scene from a child's perspective, while child viewers are given access to a key moment from the horror canon. While this blurring of the lines between child and adult is a common theme in Burton's work—many of his films exist in a liminal space where a certain childlike sensibility mingles with a more adult-centric dark humour—*Frankenweenie* is unique in that it actively re-imagines as "childlike" a film and/or work of literature that was previously populated by adult characters and associated with adult audiences.

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 calm 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 films in the horror genre (including *Halloween* [1978], *Friday the 13th* [1980], and *Day of the Dead* [1985]).

Both films were released in 2012 to critical acclaim. Interestingly, though, film critics seemed to disagree over who these texts were actually "for." Some reviewers described the films as children's texts, and warned that adults would likely find them "tame and compromised" (Scott), "toothless" (McCarthy) or "sentimental" (Bradshaw). These comments carry connotations of simplification: the suggestion is that the conventions and tropes of the horror genre have been weakened (or even contaminated) by the association with child audiences, and that consequently adults cannot (or should not) take pleasure in the films. Other reviewers of *ParaNorman* and *Frankenweenie* suggested that *adults* were more likely to enjoy the films than children (O'Connell; Berardinelli; and Wolgamott). Often, this suggestion came together with a warning about scary or dark content: the films were deemed to be too frightening for young children, and this exclusion of the child audience allowed the reviewer to acknowledge his or her own enjoyment of and investment in the film (and the potential enjoyment of other adult viewers). 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 humour is "deliciously twisted"), while warning that children as old as eight should not be taken to see the film. Similarly, Christy Lemire warns that certain elements of *Frankenweenie* are 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 viewers, and arguably it is the film's straying into the illicit area of horror from the confines of a children's text 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 viewerships is interesting given that the films themselves strive to incorporate children (as characters and as 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-literate 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) grandmother; 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*. “I know you and Grandma were very close,” she says, “but we all have to move on. Grandma’s 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 Wells 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 *not 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 monstrosity 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-imagining 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 silencing the dead is a strong thematic undercurrent in *ParaNorman*, and in this sense the zombies are important figures who 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 Norman “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 disrespectful 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, *ParaNorman* and *Frankenweenie* re-imagine this narrative of subversion from a child’s perspective (31). Both films open up a space within which the child is permitted to negotiate with the destabilising figure of the monster; the normality that is “threatened” here is the adult notion of the finality of death and, relatedly, the assumption that death is not a suitable subject for children to think or talk about. Breaking down such understandings, *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 imaged 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 garden,” Neil enthusiastically announces to his brother, “and we’re not even going to have to dig him up first!” Somewhat similarly, film critic 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 propose a particularly child-like (although not necessarily child-ish) way of negotiating horror’s dark territory.

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 this 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 childishness; 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 fairytales or 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, narratives, and characters from a child’s perspective. Ultimately, it is difficult to determine the success of this re-imagining process: what, indeed, does a successful re-imagining of horror for children look like, and who might be permitted to take pleasure from it? Arguably, *ParaNorman* and *Frankenweenie* have succeeded in reshaping the genre without simplifying it, deploying tropes and characters from classic horror texts in a meaningful way within the complex space of children’s animated film.

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