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José Duarte & Ana Rita Martins

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José Duarte & Ana Rita Martins

Ulisboa (University of Lisbon)/ULICES

## "I don't want him in my heart. I want him here with me": On Tim Burton's *Frankenweenie* (2012)

**Abstract:** *Frankenweenie* (2012) is amongst the most personal films directed by Tim Burton because it reflects the director's visual aesthetics and thematic obsessions, while also being a composite of different bodies: monstrous, anomalous, literary and cinematic. In this sense, the film serves as a container for Burton's art and creative view. Basing our analysis on research developed by Salisbury (2000) and Weinstock (2013), this study looks at ideas of monstrosity (Mittman, 2016) and the monstrous bodies portrayed in the film, which are connected with the other "bodies" the director creates and reanimates. Victor and Sparky, but also the film itself, are constructions deriving from literature and cinema and, consequently, can be viewed as bodies produced from a palimpsest of ideas and concepts. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to look into the different bodies explored in the film, while trying to understand how the director has contributed to the ongoing discussion of what it means to be monstrous and, therefore, what it means to be human.

**Keywords:** Monster, *Frankenstein*, *Frankenweenie*, Tim Burton, Bodies, Cinema

### Introduction – "Now is the time of monsters": the monstrous context

In his seminal work *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996) Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests that looking at the monstrous bodies imagined, produced and/or reclaimed by a culture can be a useful method of reading that very same culture. The monster as a concept, idea or belief becomes a means through which we can gain a privileged outlook on human society. Yet, what one culture might deem monstrous, another may not. In other words, the others' monsters may not be our monsters, and vice-versa. Fabricating the monster as well as "imagining otherness necessarily involves constructing the borderlands, the boundary spaces that contain – in the double sense, to enclose and to include – what is antithetical to the self" (Uebel 265). What this implies is that how we construct monsters or monstrosity is deeply tied to how we identify ourselves, our place in the world and even our sense of what is normal and ergo what is not. In this sense, monsters help anchor our (or more broadly a culture's) sense of identity by establishing that 'we are not like *them*,' that is, we are not monsters. As a result, monsters are often pushed to the farthest corners of one's world; whether in discourse or geographically, monstrous and unusual bodies are located at the borders, which we build and they patrol, reassuring us of our own normalcy (or so we hope) while at the same time reminding us of their impending presence. A notorious example of this is the *Alien* (1979; 1986; 1992; 1997) science-fiction horror/action media franchise in which outer space is the outskirts, the final frontier, wherein all kinds of monstrosities and miscreations are possible and, hence, a suitable location for exorcising our fears. Further, by identifying monstrous geographies with far off locations it is possible to more easily think about what makes the monster from a safe, sheltered distance.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in particular, monsters can be found to dwell relatively undetected in human society, as can be seen in such fantasy works as the *Twilight Series* (2005-2008) by Stephenie Meyer, but also in crime novels like the Hannibal Lecter series (1981; 1988; 1999; 2006) by Thomas Harris, for instance. Although these are different examples from very distinct genres, they prove how the concept of monstrosity mutates and transverses literary and cultural boundaries. On the one hand, while in Meyer's novels vampires and werewolves—

creatures traditionally depicted as evil—can be friends or foes, they still remain marginal, as they are neither fully human, nor inhuman. On the other hand, Harris' work, along with its 1991 on-screen adaptation, does not feature fantastic beings, but explores the darkness in the human soul through the serial killers Hannibal Lecter and James "Buffalo Bill" Gumb. Harris' characters are, thus, actual men and women, but their actions are monstrous; theirs is a monstrosity that comes from within and is just as dangerous.

These are particularly relevant points since issues like 'what is a monstrous being?' or 'how can we define or distinguish the monster?' lie at the core of contemporary monster studies. To provide an answer to these questions has been difficult seeing as Cohen points out, that "the monster refuses easy categorization" (6). Monsters are neither fully beast nor human, they are hybrids for their incoherent bodies defy any attempt to somehow include them in an organized system. Therefore, they are also dangerous; their existence threatens hierarchical, geographical, economic, racial, and sexual classification, to name but a few categories. To apprehend or confine the monster into a complete epistemology is hopeless. If every culture is likely to build its own monster(s), then to come up with a definition that encompasses all possible variations is a nearly impossible task. Nevertheless, some features might be discernable, as monsters also seem to share a number of common characteristics.

First, monsters are not real, in the sense that they are creations of the human imagination which projects its fears and anxieties onto the monstrous, but also its most intimate desires. Having recently celebrated the two-hundredth birthday of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), the novel serves as an example of this concept, as it discusses a number of deeply modern themes, such as the impact of the development of science and the consequences of subverting the laws of nature. When the young and ambitious Victor Frankenstein decides to create a "new species," effectively taking on the role of the creator, he ends up "giving birth" to a monstrous offspring. Since Frankenstein's abnormal progeny is so bestial, the Creature's countenance horrifies its creator:

His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set...no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. (Shelley 34-35)

Instead of triumph and joy, Frankenstein sees in the Creature a being that is antithetical to himself: he does not recognize in it anything resembling a man, but a nameless "thing" (Shelley 35). Shelley thus explores one of the greatest fears surrounding the advancement of science, since, much like science-fiction novels, TV series, films and so on, have done throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, *Frankenstein* deals with the results of Man playing God. The author seems to invite her readers to consider what outcomes Humankind can expect from taking on such an unnatural (or ungodly) role. What will happen if Humanity is able to generate artificial life whose intelligence can match that of its maker? Intriguingly, this issue is still quite contemporaneous and keeps being addressed by science-fiction works, such as *Blade Runner* (Dir. Ridley Scott, 1982), *The Terminator* (Dir. James Cameron, 1984), and more recently the TV show *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-). In Shelley's work, Victor Frankenstein can neither see beyond his immediate goal nor anticipate the disastrous results of his experience—which will eventually lead to the deaths of his brother, William, his beloved Elizabeth and the De Lacey family.

However, in a riveting narrative twist, the Creature is not innately evil, instead he grows wicked, "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend" (Shelley 66), due to the lack of fraternal love, loneliness and the merciless behavior he is subjected to. Initially he does not seek to harm Frankenstein

but flees after being rejected by him. With the De Lacey he hopes for companionship and happier days but is struck by Felix who seems in him "only a detestable monster" (Shelley 90). Therefore, his creation is not the horrible, treacherous being Frankenstein deems him to be from the beginning. He effectively becomes the monster other characters expect him to be after being exposed to violent and cruel treatment. Because Frankenstein and the De Lacey are disgusted and frightened by the Creature's appearance, they behave harshly and inhumanely toward him, therefore, in a sense also becoming monstrous themselves.

As Sibylle Elre and Helen Hendry further discuss in their edited collection *Monsters: interdisciplinary explorations of monstrosity* (2020): "The Monster, to be clear, is ugly but kind and these qualities coexist throughout the story" (n/p). Elre and Hendry emphasize this idea when they comment that "[t]he Monster kills Frankenstein's youngest brother William but is not to blame because it was abandoned by its maker; it is a victim" (n/p). By offering a justification for the Creature's behavior, Shelley encourages the readers to truly consider the motives behind his terrifying actions. While, unlike what Elre and Hendry suggest, we do not believe readers are meant to "feel compassion" (n/p) for the Creature when he murders William, we agree that the ambiguous nature of Frankenstein's offspring and the scientist's uncompassionate conduct add layers of meaning to the story, allowing the reader/audience to ponder upon what the meaning of monstrosity is, inescapably begging the question: 'who is(are) the monster(s) after all?'

This question may help explain why some researchers have already implied that humankind produces monsters to be able to think about itself and its place in the world (Gil 2006). The monsters can then serve, as the etymological root (*monstrare*) of the term implies, to show, reveal or explore, as they can expose our concerns about ourselves and about others around us. Simultaneously, monsters (as *monstrum*, which derives from the root *monere*) can teach (what behaviors are to be followed) and to warn (about the consequences of not doing so).

Second, monsters can be distinguished by the place they inhabit, which is traditionally located at the borders of the known world, whether this means unexplored areas on planet Earth, like the depths of the oceans, or, more frequently since the second half of the twentieth century, in outer space. In addition, the monster's physical aspect equally marks it as different either because there is a bodily surplus, such as extra arms, legs or even extra height, as is the case of giants, or there is an absence, like a missing eye, as is the case of the cyclops for instance. The monstrous (body) may also result from a combination of a human body with that of an animal, such as mermaids, who are half woman, half fish or bird. Conventionally, the monster's physical form is at heart different from what a society may regard as normal, which clarifies why the monstrous' body can take on numerous shapes. Nevertheless, today this is not always so since, as already mentioned, for contemporary audiences the monster may well be the neighbor next door. In such cases, the monster is identified not by its guise, but by its actions, which denotes a clear transformation in how the monster is perceived. According to Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock: "When our monsters change, it reflects the fact that we – our understanding of what it means to be human, our relations with one another and to the world around us, our conception of our place in the greater scheme of things – have changed as well" ("Invisible Monsters" 275).

If in Shelley's text the readers are already faced with ambiguous issues concerning Frankenstein's experiment—did he create a monster when he infused "a spark of being into the lifeless thing" (Shelley 34) or after he rejected that life?—modern-day representations of monstrosity go one step further in depicting monstrous deformed bodies positively. Populated by strange and bizarre bodies, Tim Burton's films are, as we will further explore, an example of that for though the abnormal forms created by the director remain symbols of the "Other," the unknown, their nature is benign.

For the purpose of this essay, and given the difficulty in answering one of this article's key questions—"what is a monster?"—, we will take into account Asa Simon Mittman's theory in the

"Introduction" to *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (2012). In this text, the author claims that we can never fully determine what a monster is based on, its physicality or traits, but must instead analyze the monstrous body(ies) through its impact or effect, since,

Above all, the monstrous is that which creates this sense of vertigo, that which calls into question our (their, anyone's) epistemological worldview, highlights its fragmentary and inadequate nature, and thereby asks us (often with fangs at our throats, with fire upon our skin, even as we and our stand-ins and body-doubles descend the gullet) to acknowledge the failures of our systems of categorization. (8)

Mittman's work allows us to look at the concepts of monstrosity and the monstrous bodies presented in *Frankenweenie* and in most of Burton's works from a particular theoretic angle. Burton's films are intimately connected with the idea of the "monstrous" body, since his creativity is the result of many sources, a palimpsest of bizarre, strange and different influences (literary and cinematographic) that call our attention by questioning what is and what is not normal or different.

### **A very short introduction to the world of Tim Burton**

According to several sources (Salisbury; Odell and Le Blanc; and Weinstock), Tim Burton possesses a very distinct style to the point that the adjective "Burtonesque" describes a specific cinematic world with its own imagery and rules. Indeed, if one were to describe "Burtonesque," it would potentially include elements that vary according to the different periods of Burton's cinematography.

However, and since such a definition will help to better understand the author's creations, a possible interpretation would be the "... specific elements that make up the director's films, such as his frequent use of heroic loners, nightmarish sets, surreal humor or even scary clowns" (Horton). Included in this definition are, of course, his eccentric and marginal (as well as monstrous) characters. Vincent (Vincent Price), Beetle Juice (Michael Keaton), Jack Skellington (Danny Elfman/Chris Sarandon) or Edward Scissorhands (Johnny Depp), to name but a few, belong to a fantastic world clearly influenced by certain literary genres (as is the case of the world of Fairytales, the Gothic or the Horror stories by Edgar Allan Poe) or certain cinematic movements (such as German Expressionism and the Horror films produced by the Hammer Studios).

These are characters that allow the director to develop key motifs in his films: the grotesque, madness, science experiments, death, family or loneliness. Burton's stories create a particular intimate atmosphere between viewer(s) and character(s) that, upon entering his cinematic world, usually feel sympathetic towards the marginally, eccentric and unusual bodies that the director presents us. As Frances Pheasant-Kelly further comments (16), Burton's films work as spaces where the "everyday and the living" co-exist with beings that are different, as these defy the very definition of "normal." Evident examples can include innocent characters such as Edward Scissorhands, whose hands are replaced by scissors; tormented and deformed characters like Penguin (Danny Devito) and Sweeney Todd (Johnny Depp) or even unconventional and misunderstood characters like Ed Bloom (Ewan McGregor). Their physical characterization—scissor hands, extravagant garments, abnormal, deformed and abject bodies—, their emotional state—haunted, tortured, taunted—, or their adventurous, out of the box fantasy way of living, would be reason enough for the viewers to react negatively to their presence or existence. Instead, their marginal, slightly strange and monstrous condition is to be explored not as a negative feature, but as a virtue, an idea that the director mentions in an interview granted to Mark Salisbury, where he comments that when he watched monster movies, he "always felt most monsters were basically misperceived" (2).

As Burton further develops in the interview, there is a major concern with characters that lack a (cinematic) representation capable of revealing their true nature. In this sense, a closer look at Burton's

creations will show that characters who are usually perceived as villains in traditional narratives are presented as misunderstood heroes in his films. Therefore, and contrary to what is explored in traditional horror tales, the viewer is faced with stories about "honesty, openness, integrity" and the force of "creativity" (Weinstock, "Mainstream Outsider" 27). The greatest examples of these issues are short films like *Vincent* and *Frankenweenie* (the 1984 short),<sup>1</sup> works like *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), *Corpse Bride* (2005) or the 2012 *Frankenweenie*. In all of them Burton develops characters that break away from the apparent tranquility of the space they inhabit and, therefore, are presented as figures that disrupt normalcy.

Thus, "Burtonesque" also alludes to the fact that Burton's universe "employs a number of recurring themes that create a cohesive and personal vision" (Odell and Le Blanc 14)<sup>2</sup> where the amount of emotional and aesthetic involvement that the director devotes to his films is clear. As Barkman and Sanna (X) claim: "[h]is distinctive and personal touch justifies...the affirmation that Burton is truly a visionary director."

Likewise, his unique and unusual vision is what allows him to underline the potential danger of a normal world. By focusing his narratives on the eccentric universe of his characters, Burton puts the "Other" in permanent dialogue with the spectator while, at the same time, creating a space where stories about odd, marginal figures are at the center of the narrative. Thus, the director's strategy is, more often than not, to use classic stories to subvert and rework them according to contemporary issues and to his particular vision, focusing on them as heroes, not as villains.

As such, although his worlds are identified with the sinister and the macabre, Burton approaches these themes in a pleasant and inspiring way, as Weinstock further develops:

[...] in place of horror, Burton substitutes humor, sentimentality, and hope. Instead of dread, Burton's films arguably elicit a sort of free-floating postmodern euphoria as the viewer, floating in a sea of references to other texts and persistently reminded of the film's status as a film, experiences the pleasure of recognition and is invited to share Burton's celebration of Hollywood's traditional margins—the campy, the cult, the creepy, and the sublimely ridiculous. Burton's films invite us finally to be like him: lovers of stories whose tastes once were unorthodox and rebellious. ("Mainstream Outsider" 27)

Consequently, mad scientists, girls with pins in their bodies, skeletons, *freaks*, fragmented or incomplete bodies, corpses, among others, are not only recurrent in the director's films, but also the rule rather than the exception. This subversion lends a new meaning to the stories and opens the possibility of an integrative space for those who are usually portrayed as marginal and, because they are different, misunderstood. In a way, it is possible to claim that Burton's characters possess a self-reflexive feature—even in terms of physical properties, with the most obvious example being Vincent or Victor—which shows that the themes and motifs explored in his films are not foreign to him not only as a director, but also as a human being.

Taking this into account, in the next section of this study we will discuss some of the major ideas presented in *Frankenweenie* by looking at the bodies that are explored in the film (literary but mostly cinematographic). In order to proceed with our analysis, we will look into how *Frankenweenie* depicts the contrast between different ideas of monstrosity as well as how the director has continuously

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<sup>1</sup> Although we are referring to the 1984 *Frankenweenie*, the film under analysis here is the 2012 remake version of the short film.

<sup>2</sup> The introduction by Odell and Le Blanc (2005) to Tim Burton's work actually establishes a series of characteristics that are common in the author's films: genre subversion, classical horror and b-flicks, angst and the outsider, character's origins, the bastards sons of Frankenstein, disrespect for authority, stripes and swirls, weird sciences and domestic appliances, television, snow, dogs or Tim Burton himself are some of the examples.



contributed to the ongoing discussion of what it means to be monstrous and, therefore, what it means to be human. Thus, while the first part briefly considers the influence of Shelley's *Frankenstein* on the film, the second part singles out some of the visual/cinematic influences represented in *Frankenweenie*, and the third and last part considers the idea of (bodily) monstrosity in the film.

### A reading of *Frankenweenie* (2012)

*Frankenweenie* reflects many of Burton's visual aesthetics and thematic obsessions and is also a composite of different bodies, in particular in what concerns literary and cinematographic influences. Shelley's *Frankenstein* is essential to understand a great number of the director's films, in particular the works (e.g.: *Edward Scissorhands*, *Ed Wood* [1994]), where he focuses on themes like science, madness or monstrosity. References to the Frankenstein monster can be seen throughout Burton's oeuvre as well as his other projects (museum exhibitions, for instance) and work as producer. The 1818 text, and consequently its filmic adaptations by James Whale, *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), play a key role in the 2012 feature, as Burton also pays homage to classic Horror films<sup>3</sup> and to the actors of that period and later on—Bela Lugosi, Boris Karloff or Vincent Price.

This is the fourth stop-motion film by Burton and it tells the story of Victor (Charlie Tahan) who, inspired by his science teacher Mr. Rzykrusk (Martin Landau), who much resembles Vincent Price, finds a way of resurrecting his dead dog, Sparky. However, his friends also want to do the same to their pets and the imaginary town of New Holland, where the action takes place, ends up being invaded by uncontrollable resurrected pet-monsters as the science experiment of resurrection gets out of control. This very short description of the plot underlines the relationship of the film with Shelley's text. Besides the many visual allusions to *Frankenstein*, *Frankenweenie* is also a story about life and death, the uncontrollable power of science and its misuse (through unnatural modes of reproduction), and childhood vs. adulthood. It is in this last point that the film distances itself from Shelley's novel, or even from its most popular adaptations, as Burton sets the film within a world where children are the main protagonists,<sup>4</sup> maybe because they still represent an innocence that, contrary to adults, cherishes the true nature of things.<sup>5</sup>

Along these lines, *Frankenweenie* is much more than a story on monstrous constructions, as it is revealed that it is as a film in which love prevails at the time of creation. This is also what distinguishes both Victor and Sparky from all the other resurrected animals and the other children. For that reason, it becomes clear that wanting the animals alive is not enough for them to be properly resurrected; you have to love them as well and that is why Sparky, contrary to other pets, is loved as he is, even with its monstrous features.

This idea generates an interesting (creative) gap between Shelley's text and Burton's film. While the first is a text characterized by a lack of understanding and love (Mellor)—as Victor rejects his creation because he sees it as a monster—the latter is fixated on the importance of love when one is creating. Only by putting yourself into the object created, can you understand it and accept its true nature. As a

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<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Burton explores several references in the film that are important to register here. A list includes, among many other films, *The Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935) – Elsa Van Helsing's dog Persephone; *The Mummy* (Dir. Karl Freund, 1932) – Nassor's Colossus; *The Wolfman* (Dir. George Waggner, 1941) – Weird Girl's the Were-Rat; *Godzilla* (Dir. Ishirō Honda, 1954) or *Gamera: The Giant Monster* (Dir. Noriaki Yuasa, 1965) – the giant turtle; *Gremlins* (Dir. Joe Dante, 1984) – Edgar's sea monsters.

<sup>4</sup> Also, what sets this film apart from the original classical horror films is that "Victor is not the only unusual person in New Holland," as A.O. Scott demonstrates in his review of the film. Additionally, the children retain certain amusing and, thus, laughable features, which breaks with the typical environment of Horror stories.

<sup>5</sup> Contrary to this argument, Rebecca Lloyd (81) notes that the children are also aware of the problem they have created and that even Victor recognizes that it is necessary to destroy the other creatures.

result, *Frankenweenie* is not a story of rejection owing to the fact that, much like Burton, Victor accepts his creation, and acknowledges his new way of existing. Thus, although Sparky is no longer the dog he used to be, as he is an animal reanimated from different parts characterized by the embodiment of "the threat of the porous body," as Rebecca Lloyd points out (92), he is still accepted by Victor and the villagers at the end of the film. The "weenie" in the title, then, is considered to be a distinguishable feature that adds a new dimension to the film: while the director focuses his attention on telling the story of marginal characters, he also reduces their monstrous dimension when compared to the original creations.

Yet, for Burton, the film is also a way of referring to his other works and piecing them (back) together. Much like *Frankenstein*, *Frankenweenie* is composed of different assembled parts, which makes it the perfect metaphor for the act of creation. In this regard, and according to Weinstock, the film can be understood as a composite monster created from diverse sources:

...the film itself functions as a kind of textual Frankenstein's monster, a cinematic pastiche assembled out of the bits and pieces not only of Burton's cinematic career but of Hollywood horror more generally. To the viewer with the requisite Burton and horror "literacies," it quickly becomes clear that the expanded *Frankenweenie* engages in complex and persistent processes of citationality and adaptation as it derives its charge from its connections to other works – Mary Shelley's canonical Gothic novel, Burton's earlier works, and classic horror films. What Burton has done with the 2012 *Frankenweenie* is to take the original work from 1984, build onto it with pieces from his other films, and then shock it into life by connecting it to the whole history of cinematic horror. ("Mainstream Outsider" 1-2)

The revival of different parts of Burton's films, along with many other references we have seen, culminates in Sparky's character. Victor's faithful companion is linked directly to other *Frankenstein* filmic adaptations and is a crucial metaphor for the act of creation as well as a powerful metacinematographic device. Weinstock underlines this issue by drawing our attention to the three major influences used in the film: first, and as previously mentioned, the novel *Frankenstein*. Secondly, and also briefly explored in this study, Horror cinema. Finally, Burton citing Burton, which is a recurring feature of the director: there are several mentions to other Burton films in *Frankenweenie*, as if the director was trying to "resurrect" some of his earlier creations.

In this regard, a Burton connoisseur will immediately connect the 2012 *Frankenweenie* with the two early short-films *Vincent* and, obviously, the original *Frankenweenie*, both of which tackle themes that would be followed in future features. *Vincent* occupies a special place in Burton's cinematography with the main character, Vincent Malloy, acting as the director's alter ego. Both Vincent and Burton (scientist/creator) work on the margins of normality and prefer a world composed of shadows and darkness, but not in a negative way. Hence, the suggestion that, in Burton's films, the idea of monstrosity serves the purpose of putting the definition of normal into perspective. As we are confronted with the "Other," we are also reminded of our own monstrous condition. The original *Frankenweenie* continues some of the themes developed in *Vincent*, and it is the basis for the 2012 film: the same story and the same protagonist. Similarly, *Frankenweenie* is also a remake of James Whale's *Frankenstein*—Victor, the protagonist, struggles to make his neighbors understand his fascination with everything macabre.

These allusions are not isolated cases in Burton's cinematography. The director makes use of more or less of the same (visual and literary) influences throughout his other films. Such is the case of *Edward Scissorhands*, where Burton again employs the Frankenstein/monster motif to criticize suburban America (a continuous location in the director's works). Although at the very beginning of the film Edward is accepted by the community, he is quickly rejected when his (in)ability becomes a threat. Also, other films like *Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) or *Corpse Bride*—stop-motion films like



*Frankenweenie*—have an important influence on *Frankenweenie*: they are both stories about life and death and, much like Jack Skellington and Victor Van Dort, Victor Frankenstein is a loner. They are also very similar in terms of the story they tell, and the aesthetics used. As such, *Frankenweenie* is strongly shaped by the idea of reanimation: the reanimation of Shelley's novel; the reanimation of Burton's films that are themselves (already) reanimations of classical Horror films, and the reanimation of a variety of bodies.

A non-extensive list includes, for instance, in the case of humans, Mr. Burgmeister (Martin Short), resembling Finis Everglot from the *Corpse Bride*; Bob's Mom (Conchata Ferrel) who resembles both Mrs. Curtis, played by Hellen Boll in the original short, and similarly the Corpse Mom from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*; Susan Frankenstein (Catherine O'Hara) resembling Veronica Everglot from *Corpse Bride*, or Elsa Van Helsing (Wynona Rider) who, is not only the female correspondent to Victor, but also a potential allusion to both *Beetlejuice* (1988) and *Edward Scissorhands*. Consequently, and as Geal further expands, in *Frankenweenie* "the animation medium replicates the narrative's reanimation of the inanimate, with the diegetic male creator Victor both scientist and filmmaker, and both creator of reanimated life and reanimated film images" (272).

Likewise, and when considering that the film was inspired by a real-life dog (Pepe) that Burton had as a kid, it is also noteworthy how film (as a medium) is used here as a form of reanimation. An instrumental scene to better understand this is when Sparky dies and Victor's mother tries to comfort him by saying that, "When you lose someone you love, they never really leave you. They just move into a special place in your heart. He'll always be there, Victor." Inconsolable, he claims that, "I don't want him in my heart. I want him here with me" which not only points towards his future experiment with science in order to reanimate Sparky, but also as to how Burton, as a creator and director, uses film as a vehicle to infuse (cinematic) life to his long-lost dog. No longer able to recover Pepe, Burton utilizes cinema as a form of making him immortal, forever imprinted in this story.

The idea of reanimation is also key to understand the different monstrous bodies present in the film. When Edgar "E" Gore (Atticus Shaffer) finds out that Victor reanimated Sparky, he tells the other children about Victor's secret which eventually leads to the creation of more unruly animal bodies that are, in turn, the expression of their owners. Although Victor is considered weirder than his colleagues, in particular Edgar, Nassor (Martin Short), Toshiaki (James Hiroyuki Liao), Bob (Robert Capron), or even Weird Girl (Catherine O'Hara), they are depicted as physically bizarre characters. For instance, Edgar's character, who much resembles Ygor from *Son of Frankenstein* (Dir. Rowland V. Lee, 1939), has missing teeth and a hunchback. Similarly, this can also be applied to the character's personality because they try to steal Victor's reanimation secrets in order to win the school's science fair. Their intentions, thus, contrary to Victor's, are not good.

Consequently, when they experiment with reanimation, chaos reigns. The pet monsters created by them: the sea monkeys (Bob); Were-Rat (Edgar);<sup>6</sup> Mummy Hamster (Nassor); Shelly or Turtle Monster (Toshiaki) and the Vampire-Cat (Weird Girl's Mr. Whisker's and the main antagonist to Sparky) are examples of scientific experiments gone awry, but also of the perils science can present when the creators' intentions are not noble. The contrast between these monsters and Sparky is obvious on account of the dangers they present, becoming a menace to New Holland and to the creators themselves. Their bodies are excessive (the giant Turtle), impossible to tame (the Were-Rat), and active agents of mayhem. As a result, they increase the character's worst features: Bob's gullible personality; Edgar's troublesome and unruly nature; Nassor's jealousy towards Victor; Toshiaki's power hungry and competitive traits and, finally, Weird Girl's strangeness and eccentricity.

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<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Lloyd (90) also notes that, in Edgar's case, his first experiment with Victor causes his fish to disappear, thus accentuating the way the pet "fails to exist at all."

Sparky's reanimation, though, results in a process in which Victor uses different items from the kitchen, as Geal notes (265), thus emphasizing the domestic recognizable body of the dog. Bolts, stitches, and other objects compose Sparky's body but, in particular to the other bodies, he is neither too big, nor too little or scary. It is just a matter of perspective, and here of cinematic perspective specifically, since Sparky remains the same: a faithful dog and Victor's loving companion. A great example of this is the "expressionist" scene where Sparky's shadow is projected onto a wall making him seem bigger than he really is, which causes Bob's mother to be frightened by his shape.

Accordingly, and despite the many references to dark and bizarre worlds, Burton's cinematographic universe is not devoid of hope and heart (Cheu 3), particularly in the case of *Frankenweenie*, since, as a scientist/creator, Victor acknowledges his mistakes and seems more mature than the adults themselves. By placing Sparky, a dog and man's most faithful companion, as the monster, Burton is working with a character that is immediately recognizable to us as well. This further underscores the way New Holland's community rejects even what they already know, only to accept it at the end. Sparky may be a dog that was reclaimed from the world of the dead and, therefore, has a monstrous image after being reanimated from different parts, but the affections between him and Victor remain the same. Yet, this is not the case of the other children and their pets that indeed become monsters.

The final scene of the film, similar to the ending scene in Whale's *Frankenstein*, demonstrates a major difference between Victor and the other children and between Sparky and the other pets. Both Victor and Sparky are portrayed as heroes because they try to fix the evil that resulted from a misuse of science (the pet monsters). In this sense, and again opposed to Whale's film, Sparky does not die at the hands of the enraged population but is saved by them as they work together to reanimate the dog for the second time.

Accepting Sparky means also accepting his monstrous image and true nature. *Frankenweenie* may be a film in which Victor refuses to learn to cope with Sparky's passing and decides to bring him back to life, and this action brings monstrous consequences, but, much like the fantasy worlds Burton appreciates, the story cannot end in disaster. In Burton's unique cinematic vision there is hope to correct and learn from the mistakes we make. Within this context, by learning from his errors, Victor returns as a hero and Sparky is again welcomed to the community.

In this sense, there is a positive tone to the film that cannot be broken. Therefore, the film elevates and dignifies the image of the scientist/creator/author to a different level, one in which its depiction is not linked to madness, transgression or destruction. With this idea, Burton is sending us (viewers) a particular message: when the spirit and will prevail, it is possible to create something beautiful even if it does not match normal standards. That is why in Burton's grotesque, bizarre and weird world, the idea of monstrosity is inverted: the real monster, then, is the one who cannot accept or does not have the ability to love.

## Conclusion

*Frankenweenie* depicts a marginal and strange universe, displaying Burton's tendency to invert the rules and concepts by which we abide. Consequently, what is portrayed as marginal, abnormal and eccentric becomes genuine and true. In *Frankenweenie* it is possible to understand the complex relationship that the film establishes with Shelley's novel and some of its early adaptations, but also with Burton's other films, thus originating a great number of bodies that the author uses to give new meaning(s) to some of the themes explored in his previous works. Hence, the film functions as a vehicle for the director to reread his own production, reproduction and creation.

Additionally, and above all, *Frankenweenie* reveals Burton's ability to observe and reflect upon our contemporaneity and what it means to be a monster, thus contributing to a new way of looking at

monstrosity. For though Sparky's body may seem like that of a monster/monstrous creature due to its difference, especially if we consider that "[t]he monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us" (Cohen 7), and his "rebirth" an unnatural (or some would call it ungodly) experience, his behavior makes him a hero.

Monstrosity, therefore, cannot be read—like it was for so many centuries and often still is—as a mere set of bodily/physical characteristics, but as something beyond that. True monstrosity lies within, Burton implies. As Johnson Cheu remarks in the introduction to *Tim Burton: Essays on Films* (3), Burton has always tried to find a way to include the outsider, the marginal and the misfit in his films and "to find a way and a place for him or her to be," which is also what *Frankenweenie* is about.

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#### Authors:

José DUARTE teaches Cinema at the School of Arts and Humanities (Universidade de Lisboa). He is a researcher at ULICES (University Lisbon Centre for English Studies) and the co-editor of *The Global Road Movie: Alternative Journeys around the World* (2018). His main research interests include Film History, North American Cinema and Portuguese Cinema.

Ana Rita MARTINS is an English lecturer in the Department of English Studies at the School of Arts and Humanities (Universidade de Lisboa) and a researcher at the ULICES (University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies). Her main research interests include monsters and monstrosity, medieval romance, medievalism, fantasy and science fiction.

Contact: [joseaoduarte@gmail.com](mailto:joseaoduarte@gmail.com)  
[anna.rita.mart@gmail.com](mailto:anna.rita.mart@gmail.com)

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