Text and Intertext: James Whale's *Frankenstein* in Víctor Erice's *El espíritu de la colmena*

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Víctor Erice's use of clips from James Whale's *Frankenstein* as the basis for actions by his young protagonist, Ana, in *El espíritu de la colmena* has led critics to speculate on the symbolic meaning of the monster within that Spanish film. For Virginia Higginbotham the monster represents Franco's Spain, a country that has lost both its memory and its moral sense (116–20). For Marvin D'Lugo the monster stands for the mysterious, the unknown, the different, and the deviant, all of which Ana identifies with as she defines herself as an oppositional spirit (2862). Carmen Arocena sees Ana's rebellion as an elaborate initiation ceremony through which the girl adopts the forbidden social values embodied by the monster (114–40). Other critics associate the monster with Ana's father, and Ana's search for the monster is viewed in Oedipal terms as a love-fear relationship based on a patriarchal authority that by extension symbolizes the Franco dictatorship (Kinder 60–61, Edwards 136–45, Curry 274, Riley). Taking a less political orientation, some critics primarily see Ana's fascination with the monster as a celebration of the imagination and a declaration of the power of fictional creation (Arata, Harper).

In this study I will not posit yet another symbolic interpretation to explain the presence of *Frankenstein* in *El espíritu de la colmena*. Rather, I will explore the complex intertextual relationship between these films. I propose that this intertextuality exists on two levels—one overt and the other covert—resulting in a sophisticated adaptation of the *Frankenstein* myth that rewards viewers who are familiar with Whale's film without penalizing those who are not. That is, Erice's double-layered references to *Frankenstein* do not require any previous knowledge of Whale's film by the viewer, but they do provide a richer viewing experience for those who have seen the 1931 American film in its entirety. The presence of key scenes from *Frankenstein* establishes the overt level of intertextuality, and Erice's direct references to those scenes raise issues that are developed throughout *El espíritu de la colmena*. Consequently, the thematic concerns common to both films are accessible to viewers who have not seen all of *Frankenstein*. However, the covert level—which evokes images from *Frankenstein* that are not included in *El espíritu de la colmena*—is available to be perceived only by those who previously have viewed Whale's film. Although these indirect allusions to *Frankenstein* add an artistic dimension to Erice's film, they are superfluous to the complex working out of themes on the overt level. Thus, *El espíritu de la colmena* engages its audience regardless of the degree of extra-textual knowledge brought to the work by each individual viewer.

The Overt Level of Intertextuality

Erice inserts three visual clips from *Frankenstein* into his film: the prelude warning to the audience delivered by Edward Van Sloan; the scene by the lake with the monster and little Maria; and the scene where María's father carries her drowned body through the town. In addition, a sound clip of spoken dialog from Whale's film is presented without visual accompaniment. This auditory segment, which has received scant attention from critics, provides the thematic link between *Frankenstein* and *El espíritu de la colmena*. In Erice's film this sound clip emanates from the make-shift movie theater where Ana is watching *Frankenstein*, and is heard by her father, Fernando, in his home. In order to better understand what is being said, Fernando goes out onto the balcony of his study. As the camera remains fixed on the open door to the balcony, no movement is recorded. Thus, the viewer's attention is focused on the sound clip with no visual distractions. The dialog on the clip records a conversation between Dr. *Frankenstein* and a colleague who is trying to persuade him to stop his experiments due to the danger involved. Dr. *Frankenstein*'s answer indicates his rejection of the warning: "¿No ha deseado usted nunca hacer algo peligroso? ¿Qué pasará si nos fuéramos más allá de lo desconocido? ¿No ha ambicionado nunca mirar más allá?" He goes on to explain that he has an inner need to explore the unknown despite the consequences. Thus, this sound clip directly relates the quest for personal fulfillment with a disregard for danger. This concept, established through the *Frankenstein* intertext, becomes a theme that is developed in Erice's film as well. But the character standing out on his balcony listening to Dr. *Frankenstein*'s words will not be the vehicle for carrying out this theme. Fernando is a passive observer—of his bees and of events—content to learn about the world through his magazines and his short-wave radio. As John Hopewell notes, "Fernando clearly embodies what Erice has called 'the emptiness of Spaniards who fought in the war'" (207). Indeed, Erice describes the survivors of the Civil War as a presence that also was an absence:

Estaban—los que estaban—, pero no estaban. Y ¿por qué no estaban? Pues porque habían muerto, se habían marchado o bien eran unos seres ensimismados desprovistos radicalmente de sus más elementales modos de expresión... Exiliados interiormente de sí mismos... hubo en ellos, para siempre, algo profundamente mutilado, que es lo que revela su ausencia. (Erice and Fernández Santos 144)

Fernando and his wife Teresa, who lives in the past with her memories of better times, both belong to the genera-

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1 Peter Evans notes that the framing of this scene suggests Fernando's adherence to conventions and authority. Although Fernando's position on the balcony technically places him in the freedom of the outdoors, his is visually defined by the interior of the house and the stifling values associated with it (15).
tion of Spaniards who lived through the war but were irreparably damaged by it. Ana, however, is too young to have had her spirit broken by the war, and thus it is through her character that Erice explores the pleasures of pursuing knowledge and adventure without regard to the perils involved. As Erice explains, Ana

cree en el monstruo, y lo busca firmamente, hasta sus últimas consecuencias. . . Hay algo hermoso, y quizás también autodestructor, en Ana: su necesidad absoluta de saber. (Erice and Fernández Santos 148-49)

Ana’s personal odyssey begins when her sister Isabel misleads her into believing that the monster she had seen killed on the screen is actually a spirit who is still alive, able to take various physical shapes, and capable of magically appearing when his friends call him by chanting their names. Spurred on by Ana’s questions, Isabel further embelishes her story by showing Ana an abandoned building where the monster supposedly lives. Thereafter Ana frequently visits this site, first by day and then by night, in hopes of seeing the monster and becoming his friend. Her attempts to conjure up his image in the nearby well are futile, however. She only sees her own face reflected in the water below.

Meanwhile, everyday elements of Ana’s life feed her sense of adventure and her growing fascination with danger. A mushroom-hunting expedition with her father and sister not only teaches her to identify deadly mushrooms, but also tantalizes her with the prospect of a future excursion into the far-away mountains, shrouded by mist and mystery, where her great-grandfather used to hunt the most elusive mushroom of all. Fernando’s comment that his grandfather preferred looking for mushrooms over eating them emphasizes the concept of the search as an activity worthwhile in itself, despite being fraught with potential danger. Later, Ana encounters another hazardous location close to her home—the railroad tracks. Both she and her sister put their ears to the rail to listen for an approaching train, but whereas Isabel runs off as soon as she sees the train in the distance, Ana stands firmly on the tracks, staring at the train bearing down on her, and retreating only at the last minute. The look on Ana’s face during her encounter with the train shows her defiance of danger and her willingness to take chances. Soon afterwards she finds poetic expression for these feelings, both restless and reckless, in a poem by Rosalía de Castro, which is read aloud by one of her classmates in school:

Ya ni rencor ni desprecio
ya ni temor de mudanza;
tan solo sed . . . una sed
de un no sé qué, que me mata.
Ríos de vida, ¿do vais?
¡Aire!, que el aire me falta.

—¿Qué ves en el fondo oscuro?
¿Qué ves que tiemblas y callas?
—¡No veo! Miro cual mira
un ciego la luz del sol cara a cara.
Yo voy a caer en donde
nunca el que cae se levanta.

Although the other students simply read along in their books as this poem is being recited, Ana voices the words along with the speaker, thereby indicating her identification with this need for personal fulfillment through perilous adventures that can destroy as well as satisfy.

All of the above experiences prepare Ana for her ultimate encounter with the Republican renegade who is identified by Ana as the monster’s spirit because he takes refuge in the abandoned building. Although his gun poses a real threat to her safety, Ana is unafraid and befriends him. The scene in which their first encounter takes place visually mimics the clip from Frankenstein, shown at the beginning of Erice’s film, of the monster and little María by the lake. The physical positions of the characters in the scene—Ana crouching on the right and the renegade’s larger figure on the left—simulate their counterparts in Whale’s film. The direct correlation between the two scenes is completed by Ana’s act of handing an apple to her companion, just as María had done with a daisy. Thus, the overt intertextuality of this scene underscores the potential danger of Ana’s quest, but the absence of violence toward Ana by the renegade affirms the value of continuing that quest. The renegade’s status as a political fugitive also recalls the words spoken in the auditory clip to Dr. Frankenstein by his colleague, who concludes his warning by stating that the brain implanted in the monster belonged to a criminal. Thus, Erice’s identification of the renegade with the monster gives a subjective political dimension to Ana’s actions. Her desire for knowledge of the unknown has taken her into the realm of the politically dangerous because the aid she provides the renegade constitutes a challenge to the dictatorship that defines him as a criminal.

When the renegade eventually is killed by the authorities, Ana undertakes a solitary journey to the lake to reestablish ties with his spirit. On the way she encounters a poisonous mushroom, which she has been warned not to

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2Vicente Molina Foix states that the photo of Fernando with Unamuno indicates his background as an intellectual and suggests that he had Republican sympathies that led to his family’s forced seclusion in the countryside by the authorities after the war (113).

3John Gillett mistakenly transforms the statement “Soy Ana” into what he calls the magic word “Soriano” (56).

4Although this poem originally was written in gallego, Erice chose to use the castellana version found in a 1942 textbook (Erice and Fernández Santos 90), thereby subtly alluding to the post-war repression of regional languages.

5It is interesting to note that in the film’s script the second stanza of this poem is presented as a voice-over for the scene where Ana is playing by the abandoned building while Isabel secretly watches her (Erice and Fernández Santos 91). Thus, Erice’s original plan had been to link Ana’s private longings more directly to her pursuit of the monster.
touch. In a blatant act of risk-taking, she reaches out her hand and rests a finger on the cap of the mushroom before continuing to her late-night vigil by the lake.6 When she arrives, she looks at her face in the water, but this time her reflection dissolves into that of the monster’s. In her mind she sees him coming toward her, looking as he did in the Frankenstein film.7 Having seen the monster kill little María by the lake in the film, Ana is aware of the danger she faces, but she accepts it as the price she must pay in order to explore the limits of the unknown. As the monster reaches for her, Ericie cuts away from the scene, just as was done in Whale’s film.8 But unlike María, Ana survives her night of discovery and is returned to her home.

During her convalescence Ana retreats further from her family, and despite the doctor’s assurances to Teresa that Ana “poco a poco irá olvidando,” she continues her explorations into the unknown. The final scene opens with a close-up on a glass of water, from which Ana eagerly drinks. Like the voice in Rosalía de Castro’s poem, Ana still has a thirst for adventure. Having drunk the water, she rises out of bed and walks out onto the balcony of her room. Unlike Fernando, who simply listened to Dr. Frankenstein’s words on his balcony, Ana lives those words as she calls out to the monster to join her. While she stares out into the night, the sound of a train echoes in the background, recalling Ana’s earlier defiance of danger and affirming her continued commitment to that course of action. Ana is the one unbroken spirit that exists within the metaphorical beehive of conformity and isolation in post-war Spain, and as such, she represents an element of hope for the future and an inspiration for others to dare to take chances, both personal and political.

The Covert Level of Intertextuality

In speaking of El espíritu de la colmena, critics repeatedly have used adjectives such as elusive, mysterious, ambiguous, haunting, and evocative to describe what Ericie himself calls its “fundamentally lyrical, musical structure . . . whose images lie deep in the very heart of mythical experience” (Schwartz 93). Contributing greatly toward this ethereal quality are three aspects of the film frequently cited by critics: Luis Cuadrado’s cinematography, Pablo G. del Amo’s editing, and Luis de Pablo’s music. Through the artistry of sight and sound, the atmospheric quality of the film is created: the use of color and design to suggest the beehive motif in the house; shooting the countryside from low angles to emphasize its flatness and desolation; the chiaroscuro effect of shadow and light to add to the mystery and danger; the elliptical editing to cause temporal confusion; the use of children’s songs and drawings to establish the point of view; the simple melodic lines conveyed by few instruments to reinforce the loneliness; and the sound of the wind to stress the isolation. But an important additional factor in creating the film’s overall atmosphere involves Ericie’s use of intertextual references to scenes from Whale’s Frankenstein that are not included as clips in El espíritu de la colmena. Interspersed throughout the film, these references are visual echoes that evoke Whale’s film in the minds of those viewers who have seen it in its entirety. I will discuss each of these indirect references separately, in the order of their appearance.

1. In Ana’s school is a life-size wooden cutout used to teach the parts of the body. Dubbed don José, this doll is pieced together by students who place his lungs, stomach, etc. in their proper positions. Thus, don José is reminiscent of the monster, who too is made up of isolated parts. Indeed, Dr. Frankenstein repeatedly stresses that his creation is not merely a dead corpse brought to life, but rather, it is a new being composed of portions of various dead bodies. Significantly, during the anatomy lesson Ana is given the task of putting the eyes on don José’s face. Ericie’s choice to focus on that particular body part recalls the opening credits of Whale’s film. First, the title is superimposed over a sinister-looking face with rays of light coming from the eyes, and then the remaining credits feature a dizzying array of disembodied eyes revolving around the screen. After Ana settles the doll’s eyes into place, the camera closes in on them, and don José’s face fills the screen. This visual progression from a full-body shot to a close-up on the face is also the way the monster’s first appearance is handled in Whale’s film.

2. One afternoon Isabel frightens Ana by pretending to be dead. The scene begins with a scream from their bedroom, which is heard by Ana in another part of the house. Ana immediately goes to the bedroom and finds the immobile body of her blonde sister on the floor and the window to the balcony open. After checking the balcony, Ana tries to console her sister by saying “Ya no estás. Se ha ido.” This scene parallels the one in Whale’s film where the monster attacks Dr. Frankenstein’s fiancée, Elizabeth, who is also blonde. Like Ana, the doctor hears a scream and rushes to the bedroom where he finds Elizabeth lying
motionless near an open window that the monster had used for its entry and exit.9

3. One evening Ana watches intently as Isabel and her friends entertain themselves by jumping over a small bonfire that is lit in the back yard.10 Shot from the ground level, each girl appears to be engulfed in flames as she jumps through the air. Also seen in the background is the outline of the other children awaiting their turns. This scene alludes to the important role fire plays in the *Frankenstein* film. Torches are used to frighten and control the monster while he is in captivity, and after his escape, he is killed by a crowd that sets fire to the windmill where he is hiding. Furthermore, the scene visually recalls the monster’s imminent death. Standing atop the windmill, the monster is surrounded by flames while the townspeople look on, their outline visible against the burning structure.

4. When the renegade Republican soldier jumps from the train, he hurts his foot, and this injury results in a lumbering gait reminiscent of that of the monster. Running toward the abandoned house, he looks like the monster fleeing his pursuers. This physical similarity foreshadows Ana’s identification of the renegade with the monster later in the film.

5. The morning after the renegade’s assassination, his corpse is laid out on a rectangular table and covered with a sheet so only the outline of the figure is seen. In *Whale’s* film the monster’s body is shown in an identical manner just before it is brought to life. Thus, this scene suggests an ironic contrast between life and death. The relationship between the renegade and the monster is further implied by the placement of the renegade’s corpse under the movie screen that had been used to show the *Frankenstein* film to the townspeople.

6. The night of Ana’s disappearance, there is an organized search for her in which members of the town use dogs to comb the countryside. A similar search is undertaken for the monster in *Frankenstein*. Both these scenes feature the contrast of bright lights—torches in Whale’s film and lanterns in Erice’s—against the dark sky, and the sound of barking is prominent in both cases. Also, both search parties are shot from afar to emphasize their numbers and common purpose.

7. During Ana’s prolonged recovery at the end of the film, the doctor consoles Teresa by telling her “*Lo importante es que tu hija vive, que vive.*” Both the choice of words, and the doctor’s emphatic repetition of the last phrase, recall the most famous line of *Frankenstein*—“It’s alive, it’s alive”—spoken by Dr. Frankenstein when he sees the monster stir for the first time.

Taken together these allusions constitute a covert presence within *El espíritu de la colmena* that extends its intertextuality beyond the clips from *Frankenstein* that are used in the film. Nevertheless, viewer recognition of these covert references is not necessary for an appreciation of the themes of exploration and risk-taking that are directly derived from those clips. In *El espíritu de la colmena*, Erice’s subtle political message is conveyed through the film’s overt intertextuality, and as such, it can be perceived by all viewers. But a more select audience is privy to the covert intertextuality that enhances the mythic quality of Erice’s film by delving deeper into Whale’s rendering of the Frankenstein tale. These hidden references add to the enjoyment of the viewing experience for those who perceive their presence, but do not detract from that experience for those who do not. Herein lies one of the keys to the success of Erice’s classic film.

Works Cited


