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Source: *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 4, American Comic Books and Graphic Novels (2011), pp. 531-553

Published by: [Universitätsverlag WINTER GmbH](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23509428>

Accessed: 03-11-2015 00:53 UTC

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Marvel Comics' Frankenstein: A Case Study in the Media of Serial Figures

SHANE DENSON

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that Marvel's Frankenstein comics of the 1960s and 1970s offer a useful case study in the dynamics of serial narration, both as it pertains to comics in particular and to the larger plurimedial domain of popular culture in general. Distinguishing between linear and non-linear forms of narrative seriality—each of which correlates with two distinct types of series-inhabiting characters—I argue that Marvel's staging of the Frankenstein monster mixes the two modes, resulting in a self-reflexive exploration and interrogation of the comics' storytelling techniques. Furthermore, I contend that this process sheds light on the medial dynamics of serial figures—that is, characters such as the monster (but also superheroes like Batman and Superman or other figures like Tarzan and Sherlock Holmes) that are adapted again and again in a wide variety of forms, contexts, and media. Though narrative continuity may be lacking between the repeated stagings of serial figures, non-diegetic traces of previous incarnations accumulate on such characters, allowing them to move between and reflect upon medial forms, never wholly contained in a given diegetic world. Accordingly, Marvel's depiction of the Frankenstein monster leads to a self-reflexive probing of comic books' forms of narrative and visual mediality, ultimately problematizing the very building blocks of comics as a medium—the textual and graphic framings that, together, narrate comics' serialized stories.

Introduction

“It's alive!” cries the mad scientist in any given monster movie.¹ As if in reply, a figure in Marvel Comics' *The Monster of Frankenstein* #3 (May 1973) cries, “God help us! It's still alive!” (n. pag.). This exclamation simultaneously acknowledges a series of endlessly quoted, conventionalized representations, and ups the ante by signaling that the comic belongs to that series and that it is capable of both taking ownership of it and writing its continuation. The argument of this essay, for which this exclamation can stand as a concise example, is that Marvel Comics' appropriations of the narrative events and characters first developed in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* exemplify certain tendencies of serial narration that are both typical of comics in particular and informative with regard to the general dynamics of broader-based, plurimedial phenomena in the domain of popular culture. Mar-

¹ This paper has benefited greatly from discussions on the topic of seriality with fellow members of the DFG Research Unit “Popular Seriality—Aesthetics and Practice”; in particular: my collaborator Ruth Mayer, research group speaker Frank Kelleter, Andreas Jahn-Sudmann, Daniel Stein, and Jason Mittell. I also wish to thank the editors of this special issue, Daniel Stein, Christina Meyer, and Micha Edlich, as well as the anonymous readers, for their helpful comments, suggestions, and constructive criticisms of this text.

vel's Frankenstein comics of the 1970s, along with other appearances of the Frankenstein monster in various Marvel series from the 1960s onward, enact an interplay between moments of repetition and variation—an interplay that constitutes the basic stuff of seriality—on a number of different levels, including both the narrative and the pictorial levels of the comic book medium. That is, these comics draw, on the one hand, on the various established and even stereotypical narrative patterns and iconic visual representations associated with the Frankenstein tale, thus adding another re-telling to the endless series of adaptations, appropriations, and misappropriations of Shelley's hideous progeny. On the other hand, however, Marvel's appropriation attempts to go beyond mere repetition and to produce something new, for which purposes the oft-told tale is expanded and continued beyond the frame of both Shelley's novel and the Universal films of the 1930s. Thus, this interplay between repetition and innovation, in fact, involves a negotiation between two different forms of seriality that are co-present and that overlap in the graphic and narrative depictions of characters and events: a linear form of serial continuation and development and a non-linear form of 'concurrent' (compounding or cumulative) seriality. By blending these modes into a somewhat volatile mixture and oscillating between them, Marvel's re-telling and continuation of the Frankenstein tale involves an indirect probing of the comic book medium itself: The creature negotiates not merely his place between nature and artifice, or between human society and monstrous incommensurability, but also amongst the media that form the substrate of his narrative existence. Both his literary origins and the iconic visual representations of the cinema—the media that most centrally determine the parameters of his back-and-forth between repetition of fixed patterns and innovation—are acknowledged in Marvel's take on the monster, whose quest thus becomes an ongoing (that is, both continuing and cyclically recurrent) struggle against, and reworking of, preconceived narratives and images. Words and images—the basic building blocks of comics as a medium—become the central concerns of a serially self-reflexive monster.

What I hope for, in mounting this argument, is to demonstrate a necessary interconnectedness amongst the media of popular culture's serial forms—an interconnectedness that is only approximated in prevalent theories of literary adaptation and intermediality. At stake here is a nexus in which mediality and seriality inform and transform one another in the ongoing evolution of modern popular culture. To be sure, the Frankenstein comics investigated here are not in any way central to that evolution, but it is precisely my point that the popular mediality/seriality nexus lacks such a center and is composed almost entirely of 'marginal' phenomena: figures, themes, and stories that bleed across the margins of their medial instantiations, cross the boundaries between individual media, and institute a plurimedial field in which they promiscuously intermingle. Given this inherent 'marginality' of the nexus, we cannot afford to ignore marginalized media forms, such as comics have traditionally been, or even those instantiations, like Marvel's Frankenstein comics, that must surely be judged as marginal in relation to the dominant currents of cultural significance of their time. Indeed, these currents must be seen to take shape within a larger pool, in a substratal basin where chaotic flows and chance encounters give rise to the more visible, apparently central

couplings of media and cultural contents. In this broader arena of plurimedial popularity, Marvel's Frankenstein comics can be seen to probe the nexus between seriality and mediality in a particularly instructive way. Ultimately, the monstrous marginality that defines at once the thematic and the medial essence of these comics promises to illuminate the dynamics at work in popular culture's tendency towards serialization, or the recursive proliferation of contents beyond and across the margins that demarcate the media of those contents' instantiation.

Frankenstein vs. *Frankenstein*, or: Popularity and Seriality

It is not by accident that the phrase "Marvel Comics' Frankenstein" in the title of this essay lacks the italicization that would designate *Frankenstein* as the title of a work. Though Marvel Comics did, in 1977, produce a stand-alone comic by that title—an adaptation proper of Shelley's novel (Marvel Classics Comics #20)—my main concern lies elsewhere: not in a work at all but in a series of *Frankenstein*-inspired characters and narratives that span various story arcs across several comic book series, culminating in the Bronze Age² horror titles *The Monster of Frankenstein* (which debuted in January 1973 and was renamed *The Frankenstein Monster* from issue #6 to the final issue #18 of September 1975) and *Monsters Unleashed* (a black-and-white comic magazine that ran for eleven issues from August 1973 to April 1975 and, beginning with issue #2 and continued in #4 through #10, included an ongoing modern-day series, "Frankenstein '73"—later redubbed "Frankenstein '74" and finally just "Frankenstein's Monster").³ The main focus of

² The topic of comic book 'ages' is a subject of some debate among comics fans, collectors, and scholars alike. In the present essay, I quite conventionally assume the following progression: The Golden Age runs from 1938 (with the advent of superhero comics) to the mid-1950s (when the Comics Code went into effect, following a post-War decline in superheroes' popularity); the Silver Age witnesses a revival of superheroes and lasts until the late 1960s or early 1970s (ending around the time the Comics Code was revised and made less restrictive with regard to the depiction of horror and crime); afterwards, a somewhat grittier Bronze Age lasts at least through the 1970s, perhaps into the 1980s, and may be followed by one or more additional ages—the Modern Age currently being the leading contender to the title. Despite widespread acceptance, however, this schematization is regularly challenged as being too simplistic (e.g. the post-War/pre-Code era is distinguished from the Golden Age as a separate Atom Age, or the Modern Age is broken down into any number of ages: Copper, Lead, Chrome, etc.). On the other hand, a critic such as Geoff Klock is able to challenge the periodization from the opposite angle, effectively eliminating the Bronze Age altogether and reducing the ages of comics to three: Golden, Silver, and a contemporary age marked by what Klock calls "the revisionary superhero narrative" (3). Against the proliferation of ever finer-grained historical categories I, on the one hand, maintain that the rougher cut common wisdom is a better, more wieldy tool for most purposes; but against suggestions like Klock's, which would even further simplify the scheme, I can only point out that for my purposes here—which are concerned specifically with comics and themes associated with the horror genre—the notion of a Bronze Age helps to identify a significant development in the comics industry, marking out a space in which, among other things, the horror genre became possible again after a near total absence under the original Comics Code's policing of the Silver Age.

³ It should be noted that Marvel's rival, DC Comics, has its own history of *Frankenstein*-inspired characters and stories which could be interrogated along the same lines as Marvel's

these series, as well as of the present essay, is in fact the so-called monster, not a character named Frankenstein (though several different characters going by that name do make guest appearances). This is not to say that Marvel was guilty of the common confusion of creator and creature that has lent the latter the former's surname, but neither did they insist too emphatically on the difference. Instead, the ambiguity of 'Frankenstein,' I suggest, was approached less as an error to be corrected (presumably with reference to the 'original' by Mary Shelley) than as a central aspect of the popularization of 'Frankenstein' as it appears in the title of my essay: Neither the title of a work nor the proper name of a character, this Frankenstein is more a locus (at once thematic, figural, and medial) of a serially staged narrative complex.

The types of seriality and serialization processes that I have in mind here are indeed central parts of the popularization processes that, in modern societies, work to render narratives and characters ever adaptable and, thus, give them relative autonomy from the authors who created them and the literary or artistic works into which they were first born. Marvel's restaging in the 1970s therefore provides a case study, as indicated by my title, with regard to a larger process that, in the case of Frankenstein, began in the nineteenth century with numerous stage adaptations of Shelley's Gothic novel,⁴ continued in the twentieth century with further theatrical and above all filmic instantiations,⁵ but also branched out into radio, television, and such merchandising tie-ins as breakfast cereals, video games, and so on. This proliferation of the Frankenstein tale across a variety of media has charged it with a dynamic all its own, abstracted from the novel and its author to such an extent that Boris Karloff and other monster-movie embodiments exert a greater force today than Mary Shelley does on any new production.⁶ These more

various appropriations. DC's take on the tale begins in *Detective Comics* #135 (May 1948), in which Batman and Robin travel back in time to witness and intervene in the story that has little in common with Mary Shelley's novel. Later, in the 1970s, a figure known as "Spawn of Frankenstein" would appear in the pages of DC's *Phantom Stranger* (first in issue #23, February 1973, and continuing for over a year—thus running concurrently with the main Marvel Frankenstein comics). This creature was an artificial being whose early history parallels the events of Shelley's novel more closely, but whose narrative then went on to undertake previously untold adventures—much like Marvel's Bronze Age monster, with which DC's version may be seen as being engaged in a sort of serial competition. Even more recently, two Frankensteinian characters have made appearances in DC Comics: Frankenstein's Monster (sometimes referred to simply as Frankenstein) and Young Frankenstein (who may or may not be the same character in his younger years). These are matched in turn by contemporaries at twenty-first century Marvel: Frankenstein's monster is named Adam in the miniseries *Bloodstone* (#1-#4, December 2001-March 2002), and a certain Frank fights alongside the First Line superhero team in the series *Marvel: The Lost Generation* (numbered in reverse: #12-#1, March 2000-February 2001).

⁴ See Nitchie as well as Forry.

⁵ For detailed lists and facts about Frankenstein films, see Glut; Picart, Smoot, and Blodgett.

⁶ Karloff starred as the monster in the first three of Universal Studios' Frankenstein films: *Frankenstein* (1931), *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), and *Son of Frankenstein* (1939). Lon Chaney, Jr. took over the role in *Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942), followed by Bela Lugosi in *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943), and Glenn Strange in *House of Frankenstein* (1944), *House of Dracula* (1945), and *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948). Despite these changes, Karloff's image determined the appearance of his successors, and his portrayal remains iconic to this day.

modern manifestations provide the background against which any new figuration must appear, and this circumstance is no less true for ostensible attempts (such as Kenneth Branagh's conspicuously titled 1994 film *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*) to provide a 'faithful' adaptation or return to the 'original.' Though the novel *Frankenstein* is not unpopular, the popular Frankenstein is now far removed from the novel itself: The overall *series* of productions has largely absorbed the novel as just one more non-definitive version of a continually evolving tale.

In any case, it is telling that Marvel's one-off attempt at adaptation in the narrow sense of the word—namely, the aforementioned *Frankenstein* that appeared as a self-contained story in the proto-graphic-novel series *Marvel Classics Comics*—is itself marginalized in the Marvel Universe to the benefit of the company's far-less-faithful serializations.⁷ Significantly, in this regard, the fan-driven, Wikipedia-style *Marvel Comics Database*⁸ is able to account for every known appearance of the Frankenstein monster in the pages of a Marvel series—no matter how marginal or apparently contradictory to the major developments in Marvel's Bronze Age appropriation—by according them all a place within the Earth-616 continuity—that is, a place in the overarching 'world' in which all of Marvel's productions cohere (apart from those that explore one of the many alternate universes beyond our own reality that make up the larger Multiverse). The 1977 adaptation, apparently the closest thing Marvel has to the story's 'original,' is the *only* exception; this is what the *Database* currently has to say about it:

This issue is the official Marvel Comics adaptation of the 1818 Mary Shelley novel, *Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus*. Although the events detailed in this issue mirror those that correspond to the character of the Frankenstein Monster in the Earth-616 continuity, it represents its own singular continuity.

Thus, in a dramatic inversion of the original/spinoff hierarchy, the diegetic setting of Earth-616, in which *The Monster of Frankenstein* and "Frankenstein '73" are set, provides the true account of the history of the universe. It is thus Earth-616, and *not* Shelley's novel, that is the yardstick for faithful adaptation whether in letter or spirit. The monster's appearances in the pages of *The Avengers* (issues #131 and #132, as well as *Giant-Size Avengers* #3), *Iron Man* (#101 and #102), or alongside Spider-Man in *Marvel Team-Up* (#36 and #37), are thus more canonical, and closer to the truth, than a more or less straightforward adaptation, which only 'mirrors' or approximates the true reality of the Marvel Universe. (Furthermore, and perhaps even more tellingly, the 1983 "Marvel Illustrated Novel" edition of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which included the full text of the 1831 revised edition of the novel and a set of highly acclaimed illustrations by comic book artist Bernie Wrightson, is not mentioned in the *Database*.⁹)

⁷ Indeed, the publication format in which Marvel's adaptation proper appeared is interesting in its own right: In serializing (in terms of publication) a set of stories that are (diegetically) self-contained and offer 'remakes' of literary classics, the *Marvel Classics Comics* 'series' raises central questions about the interchanges between repetition and continuation, or about various types of serialization practices. In the next section, I return to these questions from a somewhat different angle.

⁸ The site can be accessed at <<http://marvel.wikia.com>>.

⁹ Recently, Wrightson's illustrated version of Shelley's novel has been reprinted by Dark Horse Comics.

Go Figure: A Tale of Two Serialities

The coherence of Earth-616, particularly as regards the Frankenstein monster's various apparitions within it, is far from obvious or unproblematic. Indeed, it is in part the problematic nature of rendering the character coherent, of constructing a continuous and non-contradictory biography that would contain and conjoin all the various appearances across the different series, that makes Marvel Comics' Frankenstein such an interesting case study.¹⁰ For it is precisely this tension between the various individual series (and the installments of which they are composed) and the overarching synthesis of a spatiotemporally consistent diegetic world that brings us face to face with the two types of seriality mentioned in the introduction: 1) a linear form of serial progression, continuation, and development; and 2) a non-linear form of serial 'conrescence,' snowballing accumulation, or compounding sedimentation. The difference between these two serialities may perhaps be explained most accessibly by way of the types of characters that each of them involves. The first type of character may be called a 'series character'; this is a figure that unfolds within a continuing narrative (in a soap opera, a novel series, or saga, for example), tending to take on an increased psychological depth and/or ever more complex social involvements in the course of this development. On the other hand, the second type of character, the 'serial figure,' is apt to remain 'flat' and, as Umberto Eco once wrote of Superman, to experience a repeated "virtual beginning" with each new production or installment, each of which is not absolutely bound by the events of the preceding one ("Myth of Superman" 19).¹¹ The serial figure is a stock character of sorts, who appears again and again in significantly different forms of adaptation, contexts, and in various media. The series character exists *within* a series, where he or she develops or evolves; the serial figure, on the other hand, exists *as* a series—as the concatenation of instantiations that evolves, not within a homogenous diegetic space, but *between* or *across* such spaces of narration. And because serial figures, in stark contrast to series characters, lead a sort of surplus existence outside of any one given telling, they are in a perfect position to reflect on the manner—and the media—of their repeated stagings.

¹⁰ DC Comics' treatment of the Frankenstein tale and related characters is no less interesting in this regard. Is the Bronze Age character "Spawn of Frankenstein" the same as the more recent "Frankenstein's Monster" (or simply "Frankenstein"), and is the latter merely an older version of DC's "Young Frankenstein" figure? It is far from clear, due to the complex nature of the DC Universe (with its varied continuities of Earth One, Earth Two, and so on), how these figures relate to one another, if at all.

¹¹ The series character/serial figure distinction was coined by Ruth Mayer and myself in the context of a joint research project on "Serial Figures and Media Change," part of the larger DFG-funded research group on "Popular Seriality—Aesthetics and Practice"; a more detailed exploration of the series character/serial figure distinction is provided in our co-authored paper, "Grenzgänger: Serielle Figuren im Medienwechsel." Also relevant in this regard is Eco's later essay, "Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics," in which he returns to his earlier observations about Superman and generalizes a large-scale change in narrative practice and reception.

Frankenstein's monster, speaking generally and with a view to the discontinuous and plurimedial stagings it has undergone over the course of its career, is—like Dracula, Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan, Superman, and Batman—a serial figure. But as any of these instances will demonstrate, the distinction between serial figures and series characters is not absolute. Though not confined to any particular (diegetically coherent) series, the monster enters into any number of such series, for example the Universal films of the 1930s and 1940s or the Marvel Comics series *The Monster of Frankenstein*, in which he temporarily becomes a series character. But like Batman or Superman, who are both capable of sustaining quite long-term linear serialities, the monster is also susceptible to the occasional 'reboot'—a radical revision of the character's history that amounts, effectively, to rebirth. What makes these characters serial figures, however, and not just disjointed collections or remakes of themselves as series characters, is that they carry traces of their previous incarnations into their new worlds, where the strata of their previous lives accrue in a non-linear, non-diegetic manner. This takes place, typically, in the realm of the figures' medial or material substrates, whether they are of a linguistic, graphic, photographic, cinematic, or other nature. Indeed, it is precisely as the measure of the difference between the media of a figure's various instantiations that the serial link is sealed—the extra-diegetic link that constitutes the seriality of the serial figure as such. Thus, for example, director James Whale's classic *Frankenstein* (1931) transformed the monster (portrayed by Boris Karloff) into a mute being, in stark contrast to the novel's linguistically eloquent creature.¹² Shelley's monster, it must be said, was already a highly self-reflexive figure, in which the ontological question of the human was cast, in part, as a question of media: The conceptual pair of humanity/monstrosity was treated in the book in such a way that it was inseparable from the tale of the monster's language acquisition through a small canon of literary works. But the iconic cinematic rendition updated this self-reflexivity and endowed it with a comparative dimension. In its new form, the monster still posed questions regarding the limits of the normal and the natural; however, in its historical context this excessively visual—that is, photographic—monster also embodied a media-technological question that was not only intimately tied to the shift from a literary to a visual culture but also more specifically connected to the transition from silent to sound film.¹³ In this context, the mute monster foregrounded the still problematic image/sound relations of the early sound cinema, though this capacity faded quickly over the course of its development in the Universal series. On the other hand, a series like the Hammer Frankenstein films of the late 1950s to 1970s, which took the creator rather than the creature as its central figure, reactivated the self-reflexive potential of the tale by highlighting the difference between the deep reds of its Eastmancolor blood

¹² I have dealt with Whale's Frankenstein films in "Incorporations: Melodrama and Monstrosity in James Whale's *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein*." They also play a major role in my *Postnaturalism: Frankenstein, Film, and the Anthropotechnical Interface*.

¹³ The most detailed argument for this thesis appears in Robert Spadoni's *Uncanny Bodies*. I make a related argument regarding the classic Tarzan films starring Johnny Weissmuller in my "Tarzan und der Tonfilm: Verhandlungen zwischen 'science' und 'fiction.'"

and the monochromatic world of its forebears.¹⁴ Thus, the monster of the movies, like the monster of the printed page, has continually oscillated between diegetic and non-diegetic roles and functions, articulating variable interrelations between narrative and medial liminalities which, due to the serial nature of the figure's repeated staging, are subject to historical—and indeed media-historical—comparison.

Because the Frankenstein monster is—and has long been—a truly serial figure, firmly established across the media of popular culture, this set of background relations did not, of course, disappear when the creature entered into the Marvel Universe. Marvel's Frankenstein had to contend with the fact—well known to Marvel's artists, writers, editors, and readers alike—that the iconic representations and revisions effected in the medium of film had come to color any and all subsequent perceptions that viewers or readers might possibly have of the monster and the act of his creation. Indeed, this fact was hardly new and had long pushed comic book appropriations into a parasitic relationship with cinema's images; hence the proliferation of bolt-necked, flat-headed, platform-shoe-wearing monsters hastily put together by mad scientists in the pages of the so-called funny books. Indeed, comics' subordination to cinematic Frankensteins was capable of assuming a wide variety of forms. At one extreme of the spectrum, we find a fumetti (that is, a photo-based comic) adaptation of the third installment in the Universal film series, *Son of Frankenstein*, released concurrently with the film in *Movie Comics* #1 from April 1939, which, due to the comic's technical means of production, was not only beholden to the film's narrative conventions (which were quickly becoming clichés) but also directly reproduced its raw images.¹⁵ On the other hand, a more diffuse influence was present in Dick Briefer's famous pre-Comics Code adaptations,¹⁶ which, between 1940 and 1954, put filmic stereotypes to work for the purposes of both horror and humor.¹⁷ Now Marvel's one-world

¹⁴ The British company Hammer Film Productions produced seven films documenting the continuing (mis)adventures of Baron Frankenstein: *Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), *Revenge of Frankenstein* (1958), *Evil of Frankenstein* (1964), *Frankenstein Created Woman* (1967), *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed* (1969), *Horror of Frankenstein* (1970), and *Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell* (1974).

¹⁵ The entire eight-page story can be viewed online at the *Golden Age Comic Book Stories* blog (see "Son of Frankenstein").

¹⁶ The Comics Code, based in large part on the Film Production Code, was an industry attempt at self-regulation in reaction to controversy over the allegedly negative influence of comic books, especially in their depictions of crime and horror, on the youth. As a result of the Code, which went into effect in 1954, a once booming horror comics market vanished overnight, until a 1971 revision of the Code allowed that "Vampires, ghouls and werewolves shall be permitted to be used when handled in the classic tradition such as Frankenstein, Dracula and other high calibre literary works written by Edgar Allen [sic] Poe, Saki (H. H. Munro), Conan Doyle and other respected authors whose works are read in schools throughout the world" (qtd. in Nyberg 172). For a detailed history of the Comics Code, see Nyberg.

¹⁷ Briefer's Frankenstein comics start in *Prize Comics* #7 (December 1940), kicking off a series that would shift from horror to humor after World War II, and continue in the pages of that comic book until 1948 (up to issue #68), in addition to spawning an independent title, *Frankenstein*, which initially ran for seventeen issues from 1945 to 1949 and was later revived as a horror series from 1952 to 1954 (issue #18 to #33), when the Comics Code spelled its end.

policy (only later dubbed Earth-616) provided an ingenious solution to this problem of influence. Under this policy, all aspects of 'our' world, that is, the real or non-diegetic world in which the reader consumes Marvel's comics, were absorbed into the diegetic world of the Marvel Universe, complete with its own Marvel Comics Group that prints comics that are presumably identical to those we read, with the sole difference that they chronicle non-fiction adventures of really-existing superheroes. With this narrative mechanism in place, the real-world influence of real-world media on real-world readers remains, without a doubt, a real problem, but it is one now capable of quite novel solutions—solutions that allow the comics to acknowledge the existence of serial precursors (of the non-linear, plurimedial, serial-figure variety), which are then taken up and repeated, and which are overhauled through this very act of repetition in order to synthesize and mark the innovation that drives serial figures onward.

Seriality and Mediality

Two pre-1970s Marvel takes on the Frankenstein tale hint at the range of possibilities opened by the one-world policy. In *The X-Men* #40 (January 1968, in a story entitled "The Mark of the Monster!"), the young mutants are pitted against a version of the Frankenstein monster that is clearly influenced by the Karloff/Universal depiction: a rampaging giant with a flat head and electrodes in his neck and the ability to shoot laser beams from his eyes. Rather than trying to conceal this monster-movie influence, however, the comic signals its awareness of it very clearly, thereby acknowledging that readers also know all about it. Thus, Professor Xavier summons the X-Men to tell them that "[t]he unholy creation known as Frankenstein's monster--has been found!"—to which follows the skeptical reply: "Frankenstein's monster? But he's just a myth--something you see on the late, late show!" (3). Rather than ignoring readers' incredulity, the comic thus gives it a voice in the diegesis, thereby laying the groundwork for its absorption and, ultimately, neutralization. Xavier continues, "But, I'm not speaking of a movie monster! Rather, I mean the eight-foot humanoid referred to in the novel by Mary Shelley! I've always believed the book was based on an actual occurrence--and now I'm sure of it!" (3). Xavier quickly educates his pupils (and the comic's readers) about the novel's arctic ending, which helps to explain why the monster was found frozen in a block of ice (a device that had also been employed in Universal's 1943 *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* to explain how the monster once again survives his apparent death at the end of the last film). When a hubristic scientist thaws and revives the monster, the creature goes berserk, and the scientist can only quote the movies in surprise: "He lives! The monster lives!" (6). Additionally, while the monster is full of the aggression typical of that displayed in B-grade monster flicks, he is true to Shelley's novel in one respect: He is an articulate speaker, in command of a large vocabulary, even if he puts it to questionable use, as in this characteristic rant: "Human worms! You have served...your purpose! [...] Now stand aside...or I crush you like fleas!" (6). Even in the heat of battle, the creature continues to deliver a blow-by-blow commentary on the action, in

response to which the X-Man known as the Beast quips, “You’ll bore us to death with your salacious soliloquies, my fatuous friend! Why can’t you be the strong, silent type--like Boris Karloff?” (13).

Clearly, this engagement with the Frankenstein monster is one that is aware of the figure’s extra-diegetic seriality, which the comic ingeniously puts to work for its own purposes by mobilizing visual and narrative aspects of a great variety of the figure’s incarnations. In other words, the comic pits the novel’s narrative and its characterization of the creature against not one but a whole range of cinematic associations, including the iconic image and melodramatic sentimentality of the Karloff creature and the killing-machine kitsch into which it devolved. The result is that the mediality of the monster is foregrounded rather than concealed: The payoff is that the comic book is able to claim its own superiority as a medium, one which combines literature and cinema—word and image—and is thus able to subject them to a synthesis unimaginable in either medium in isolation. Narratively, this triumph is consummated, and the to and fro between filmic and literary influences comes to an end when Professor Xavier, having probed the defeated monster’s mind, reveals “the real origin of the so-called ‘Frankenstein’s monster,’” which both the novel and its many filmic progenies have consistently gotten wrong (15). In fact, this monster turns out to be an android, “the creation of some alien race from a far-off tropical planet--which passed near our world 150 years ago”; meant as an “interstellar ambassador,” the android malfunctioned and ran amok, thus inspiring Shelley’s speculative account (15).¹⁸ With this revelation, the comic book effectively transcends both the novel and the movies by rewriting both of them into its own diegetic world.

This, then, is one way in which a self-conscious repetition of serialized tropes can be made to serve the ends of narrative and medial innovation through a sublimating absorption into the Marvel Universe. *Silver Surfer* #7 (August 1969) demonstrates another approach. The story, entitled “The Heir of Frankenstein,” opens with the title character, a descendant of the original ‘Count’ Frankenstein, lugging a corpse into his alpine castle laboratory with the help of his misshapen assistant. The latter establishes the seriality of the event right on the first page: “But, master...you have tried so often...and failed so often...” (1). And despite initial signs of success, this renewed attempt at animating a corpse fails as well. Alas, the obligatory torch-wielding villagers quickly gather outside the castle, break down the gate with a makeshift battering ram, and set fire to the building. With no alternative left to him, Frankenstein vows to go through with the mysterious “Experiment X,” which, his assistant tells us, is “the one experiment...which even you have sworn...never to attempt” and for which he will—gasp!—“need a

¹⁸ Compare DC’s *Detective Comics* #135 (May 1948), which similarly usurps Mary Shelley’s claim to authorial creation and integrity. In this issue, time-travel allows Batman and Robin to witness “The True Story of Frankenstein.” This is the story of the scientist Frankenstein’s assistant Ivan, a gentle giant, who is turned into a mindless killer by the combination of an electric shock compounded by adrenalin shock—a story, that is, involving no artificial creation. According to the comic, the notion that Frankenstein stitched together a monster from corpses was an embellishment invented by Mary Shelley, who fictionalized the true story upon hearing the details from Batman.

living victim!" (6). Meanwhile, the Silver Surfer notices the fire, interpreting it as the mob's injustice against their fellow man. Frankenstein takes advantage of the Surfer's gullibility and demonstrates to him the supposedly benevolent nature of his work, which is designed to help others, but is nevertheless met with mistrust and fear by the ignorant villagers. When the Silver Surfer departs, Frankenstein instructs his assistant: "Borgo! The films! Quickly, you grotesque non-entity! I must view them once more!" (12). While the sinister Frankenstein muses about his plan to trap the Surfer for Experiment X, Borgo threads the film he has retrieved into a projector, commenting, "Master...you have seen it far more times than I can count..." (13). A clearly crazed Frankenstein replies, "And I shall see it again...and again...and again...for I must never repeat the mistakes that my witless ancestors made!" (13). What we then see over Frankenstein's shoulder on the projection screen is a scene that we, too, have seen again and again and again: the 'original' creation scene, in which (according to this version) a white-haired scientist attaches cables to the electrodes on the neck of a grey-skinned monster, who is again presented in a Universal-style rendition with a flat head, and who even dons (as we see when he stands to attack his maker) Karloff-inspired high-water trousers and thick boots. After reviewing the film, Frankenstein goes on to conduct more experiments, and eventually succeeds in convincing the Silver Surfer to help him, whereupon an evil duplicate of the doubly 'duped' Surfer is produced. While the real Silver Surfer battles it out with his copy, the villagers again attack the castle, and Borgo, unable to tolerate Frankenstein's injustice any longer, pushes his master out an open window and jumps to his own death.

The interesting thing about this particular reimagining of the Frankenstein tale is the extreme way in which it countenances seriality as a basic fact of its subject matter while integrating the serial figure's mediality into the world it depicts, going so far as to insinuate that, far from being fictional productions, the films we all know and love are documents of the original act of creation. In a new twist on a self-reflexive trope that has long been employed by Frankenstein films, the monster's animation is itself a filmed and/or filmic event. In films ranging from Thomas Edison's one-reeler *Frankenstein* (1910) to CGI-heavy productions like *Van Helsing* (2004), the creation scene often serves as a showcase in which to display the cinema's own powers of creation: its ability to infuse lifeless photographs with life by means of ever-advancing techniques and special effects.¹⁹ The result is that the monster's existence, and the viewer's attention as well, is split between diegetic and non-diegetic (that is, media-technical) levels of articulation, between the depicted spectacle of technical creation and the spectacular creation of technical depiction. Only by means of this split can the tireless repetition of the creation scene be imbued with a feeling of novelty: Innovation resides not in the content but in the medial makeup of the scene, which strives to differ and improve upon its forerunners.²⁰ Again, this interplay of repetition and innovation is the

¹⁹ I explore the nature and historicity of this filmic self-reflexivity in detail in my *Postnaturalism: Frankenstein, Film, and the Anthropotechnical Interface*.

²⁰ As Daniel Stein has reminded me, it is also characteristic of the superhero genre to repeat, recycle, and revise 'origin stories' and 'origin scenes.' Though it is beyond the scope of the

very basis of the monster's continued existence as a serial figure. Significantly, when the monster appears in the pages of *Silver Surfer*, he does so as a filmic image—both highlighting the figure's medial constructedness (right down to the black-and-white film stock mimicked in the creature's pale grey skin and jet-black hair) and reframing that mediality as an element of reality (that is, the ostensibly unmediated 'real world'). The effect is less to eliminate the reader's awareness of the diegesis/medium divide as to aggravate this awareness by subjecting it to a hyperbolic compounding: a self-reflexive nesting of that divide, along with the cinema's self-reflexive awareness of it, into the diegetic side of the split—which, of course, immediately opens onto a new non-diegetic side or onto an intensified awareness of mediality as the motor of the serial figure.

In both the X-Men's and the Silver Surfer's run-ins with the Frankenstein tale, we find that repetition and conventionality are employed, and even recognized as such, in order to highlight a form of innovation that concerns the mediality of the serial figure—to the benefit of the comic book. Before going on to consider Marvel's more systematic elaboration of the monster in its Bronze Age series, it will be helpful to cast a theoretical light on the connection emerging here between mediality and seriality, and to approach this nexus with the aid of Niklas Luhmann's theory of media. Inspired by psychologist Fritz Heider's distinction between "medium" and "thing," defined as the difference between a "loose coupling" and a "tight coupling" of elements of a given sort,²¹ Luhmann approaches mediality as a *relation* between a given medial substrate and the forms that may be constituted within it.²² Substrate and form are always composed of the same basic 'stuff,' the same elements, whatever they may be in a given case. The difference between substrate and form lies in their respective organization of these elements: A substrate is a loose coupling, a relatively unordered mass of particles, while a form is a tight or strict coupling, a relatively ordered combination of elements. Thus, for example, the loosely coupled molecules of the air can be temporarily ordered into forms—in this example, wave patterns—by the tone-emitting action of a radio's loudspeaker; the tones that become perceivable by such means are themselves a medium out of which specific couplings or combinations can be formed to produce music. Similarly, the letters of the alphabet constitute a medium in which specific orderings—words as forms—can be composed; and words, in turn, constitute a medium for the construction of sentence forms, with sentences providing a medium for textual forms, and so on. As these examples show, the distinction between substrate and form is strictly relative. A medial substrate exists only in relation to the forms it enables and vice versa. Accordingly, a medium does not lead an independent, objective existence but is related to an observer or system as "the operative deployment of the *difference* of medial substrate and form" ("die

present paper, a more nuanced picture of popular serialization strategies could be attained by means of a careful comparison between the repetitions and variations of Frankensteinian and superhero *Urszenen*.

²¹ See Heider's *Ding und Medium*.

²² For a detailed treatment, see Chapter 3 (165-214) of Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (translated as *Art as a Social System*). See also Chapter 2 (190-412) of Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*.

operative Verwendung der Differenz von medialem Substrat und Form" [translation mine]; *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* 195).

Clearly, this manner of approaching media is very different from an apparatus-based approach that restricts media to empirical devices, infrastructures, and carriers such as film strips, television sets, or books. Luhmann's approach is more flexible, but it might also seem a bit vague and slippery. Can it, for example, help us decide whether comics, composed of text + image, are best considered a bi-medial compound, or whether comic books are a singular medium in their own right? In effect, Luhmann's theory licenses both approaches, depending on the circumstances of observation. Text can be treated as an independent medium, and so can the image; their combination can also be seen this way, though, for it demarcates its own unique distinctions between substrate and form that its components do not. In this way, the text + image compound enables the construction of a syntax of sorts that would regulate the spatiotemporal and narrative progression from one illustrated panel to the next. Moreover, the collection of such progressions into the higher-level medium of the comic book allows for the development of various logics of higher-order progressions: linear continuation between one issue and the next, for example, or cyclical, episodic iterations of a basic formula with variations on a theme. We arrive, then, at the serial modes I have been concerned with in this essay.

In fact, however, Luhmann's theory of mediality is even more intimately tied to a theory of seriality than has been assumed above: Luhmann notes on one occasion that one way to elaborate his distinction of medial substrate and form is "by means of the distinction between redundancy and variety" (*Art as a Social System* 105). He explains:

The elements that form the medium through their loose coupling—such as letters in a certain kind of writing or words in a text—must be easily recognizable. They carry little information themselves, since the informational content of an artwork must be generated in the course of its formation. The formation of the work creates surprise and assures variety, because there are many ways in which the work can take shape and because, when observed slowly, the work invites the viewer to contemplate alternate possibilities and to experiment with formal variations. (105)

According to this redescription, the substrate/form distinction that defines mediality for Luhmann falls into line with the repetition/variation distinction that characterizes the non-linear seriality of the serial figure. We can readily apply Luhmann's insights here to the case of the Frankenstein monster as he appears alongside the X-Men or the Silver Surfer. In both cases, the narratives employ a figure that is iconic, conventional, and thus "easily recognizable," as Luhmann says. "Variety," or innovation, arises not through the use of new materials but through the novel employment of the old, through repetition itself, conducted in such a way as to induce "the viewer to contemplate alternate possibilities and to experiment with formal variations." What if Shelley's novel were a misinformed account of true occurrences? What if the classic Frankenstein films were actual footage of artificial creation? As the very 'stuff' of the interplay between repetition and variation, the serial figure of the monster is itself the medium in which such speculation ('what if?') is generated as the endless play of an iconic or re-

peatable substrate and its novel graphic and narrative forms. Itself a medium in this sense—and thus itself articulating a distinction between a relatively formless (medial) substrate and the (diegetic) forms it is capable of assuming—it is no wonder that the serialized monster problematizes the mediality of those higher-level media, such as a film or comics, with which it comes into contact.

Framing the Monster, Framing the World

The foregoing examples underline the generative potential of the Frankenstein monster as a serial-figure-cum-medium, but they also highlight a problem to which I pointed earlier. If, as I have shown, the figure of the monster lends itself to a proliferation of non-identical ‘what-if’ scenarios—scenarios which draw their interest in large part from the unexpected innovation that results from a sublimating repetition of well-known elements—then it is hardly to be expected that these scenarios should converge or settle into a consistent groove. Would this not, indeed, contradict the impetus of the serial figure’s dynamic tension, which demands that innovation renew the basic substrate time and again, and which guarantees such renewal by ensuring that the material substrate is never completely absorbed or eclipsed by its formal expression? I am contending, in other words, that the mediality of the serial figure is never allowed to become wholly transparent, but that a recalcitrant margin remains in any crystallization into narrative, visual, or other forms of appearance. But if this is so, how could the various ‘what-if’ scenarios be synthesized into a coherent ‘world,’ as the Marvel Universe’s one-world policy demands?²³ Earlier, I suggested that it is here—in the domain of practices associated with what is commonly called ‘retcon’²⁴—that the two forms of seriality, the linear and the non-linear forms that characterize series

²³ With the appropriately titled series *What If...?* (original series running from 1977 to 1984, followed by a second series from 1989 to 1998 and a variety of more recent one-shots), Marvel Comics has repeatedly tackled these issues in its own way, exploring counterfactual scenarios such as “What if Spiderman had joined the Fantastic Four?” or “What if Captain America became president?” These scenarios, packaged as a series but inherently one-off narratives, are important pieces of the puzzle in understanding the dynamic tensions at the heart of the popular serial forms I am exploring here. They attest to the contradictory tendencies at work in both the production and reception of comic books: on the one hand, the tendency of narratives to proliferate and spawn alternative views and possibilities (mirrored in fans’ appropriations of stories and characters for their own ‘unlicensed’ purposes); on the other hand, the desire for coherence and continuity expressed both in production-side practices of ‘retcon’ and in the corresponding efforts of readers who, at their most extreme, engage in an almost Leibnizian exploration of the compossibility of possible worlds in the attempt to systematize the Multiverse (see, for example, the *Marvel Comics Database*’s entry for the term ‘Multiverse,’ which includes an overwhelming list of official and unofficial universes, with names ranging from Earth-0 to Earth-989192).

²⁴ ‘Retcon,’ short for ‘retrospective continuity,’ refers to a set of techniques for revising the history of the diegetic world, either by adding, subtracting, or changing past events. This can be done for various reasons and to various effects, for example: allowing an apparently deceased character to live on; bracketing out certain narrative arcs as illusory (often explained as a dream) in order to advance the narrative in a different direction; filling in a ‘behind-the-scenes’ view of previously narrated events; or disposing of unpopular storylines.

characters and serial figures respectively, come to a head most dramatically. It is only appropriate, then, that we turn now to the monster's entry, in the 1970s, into his own linearized, continuing Marvel Comics series, and that we attend carefully to the interplay between types of seriality.

The two cases I have considered thus far were one-off episodes that, though they fail to mesh overtly with one another, are capable of being integrated into the Marvel Universe through various ad-hoc explanations: Perhaps the android in *The X-Men* #40 was not the real monster after all, perhaps the filmstrip in *Silver Surfer* #7 was genuine, but maybe not a record of the *very first* creation scene (maybe it was the attempt of another forgotten member of the Frankenstein family, for example). The game of 'what-if' continues.²⁵ By way of contrast, Marvel's series *The Monster of Frankenstein*, which in its first four issues re-told the monster's origin story before moving on from there to trace his continuing adventures, was committed to providing an explicit and causally coherent continuity. And because it thus combined a re-telling with a continuing sequelization, this series alone provides a concise study in the dynamic interchanges between linear and non-linear serialities. Add to it a second series, "Frankenstein '73," published concurrently but set in a completely different diegetic timeframe, and throw into the mix Marvel's assurance that all of its productions, these two not excepted, take place in the same world²⁶—and someone's got some serious explaining (or retconning) to do!

Actually, it all boils down to a question of framing: a question of negotiating an overarching frame within which all of the various scenarios generated by the monster can be seen to co-exist in a single diegetic space.²⁷ Framing, indeed, is also what

²⁵ Such ad-hoc solutions remained vital well into the 1970s. For example, *The Avengers* #131 (January 1975), #132 (February 1975), and *Giant-Size Avengers* #3 (also February 1975) present a three-episode story arc in which the monster is plucked out of 1898 (the initial setting of *The Monster of Frankenstein*) and teamed up with a group of dead 'villains' as the "Legion of the Unliving" to fight the Avengers in a limbo realm before being returned, without consequence for the further course of history, at the end of the story.

²⁶ This is stated explicitly, for example, in response to a reader's letter in *The Frankenstein Monster* #16 (May 1975): "[A]ll the characters depicted in our mags—be they monster or superhero—do indeed inhabit the same magnificent, mind-bending Marvel Universe (or cosmos; we're not picky)" (n. pag.). At stake in this particular context was less the question of whether Marvel's two Frankenstein series were set in the same world (their convergence was made clear in *The Frankenstein Monster* #12), but whether the monster should be allowed to meet up with other Marvel monsters—as had already taken place in *Giant-Size Werewolf* #2 (October 1974)—or even with Marvel's superheroes, as would occur in *Iron Man* #101 and #102 (August, September 1977) or with Spiderman in *Marvel Team-Up* #36 and #37 (August, September 1975). The very idea of the latter pairing had been ridiculed in a reader's letter in *The Frankenstein Monster* #12 (September 1974), to which even the editor conceded in reply: "We tend to agree that a Spidey/Monster issue of MARVEL TEAM-UP would be a tad ridiculous (we think)" (n. pag.).

²⁷ Recent discussions of frames and framing often draw on one of two sources. The first is Jacques Derrida's discussion, in *The Truth in Painting*, of the picture frame as *parergon*, a supplement seen to stand outside the work when attention is directed at a painting, but seen to belong to it (as part of a figure) when one focuses on the wall (as ground). The other source is Gregory Bateson's metacommunicative concept of framing, developed in "A Theory of Play and Fantasy" and adapted by Erving Goffman in his *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization*

is at stake in Luhmann's theory of mediality: Since a medial substrate and its forms are composed of the same basic 'stuff,' it is merely the degree of organization, or the manner of framing, that constitutes their difference. Luhmann's forms are merely framed patterns, the various manners of framing a given substrate. For Luhmann, then, mediality *is* framing. This way of looking at things is also helpful for considering the difference between series characters (those that exist *in* a series) and serial figures (those that exist *as* a series): Ideally, series characters are formed or framed in such a way as to conceal their framing, so that their mediality is transparent and does not get in the way of their diegetic (psychological, etc.) development. Serial figures, on the other hand, thrive on the existence of an opaque or semi-opaque margin, a frame that is at least sometimes visible and that prevents these figures from being contained absolutely in the diegetic domain. The visible frame ensures that the medial substrate of which they are composed is never completely exhausted—and again, it is this excess of the apparent frame that allows serial figures to exist outside of a given narrative and to move between various media. The serial figure, in short, is a plurimedial and a many-worlded creature, held together only by the incomplete erasure of its non-diegetic medial framing, on the sole basis of which cross-medial comparisons, relations, and serial concrescences become possible. There is significant tension, then, between the framing strategy of Marvel's one-world policy and the many-worldedness of the serially framed monster.

With its frame-within-a-frame structure of nested narratives, Mary Shelley's Gothic novel provides a natural place in which to explore these issues,²⁸ and Marvel seizes the opportunity in an ingenious way in *The Monster of Frankenstein*. Establishing the definitive (i. e., Earth-616) account of the monster's origins, the first four issues of the series repeat, in more or less faithful fashion, the tale as told in the novel with one important embellishment: The novel's frame structure (with Walton's epistolary narration at the outer frame, containing Frankenstein's account of events as related to him, which in turn includes the monster's own account at the center) is expanded by an additional frame, which has both narrative and medial consequences with regard to the serial dynamics of repetition and innovation. It is now Walton IV, the great-grandson of the novel's captain, who narrates the outermost tale, set a full century after the novel and thus ensuring

of Experience. Recently, the latter has been at the center of attempts to apply cognitive theory to narratological ends; a prominent example is the essay collection *Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media*, edited by Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart. While there are points of contact with both Derrida's deconstructive approach and Bateson's and Goffman's constructivist perspective, my own use of framing pays no special allegiance to either one of them. Like Wolf, who unites a wide range of frame concepts with the claim that "all of the different approaches to 'frames' converge in one frame function, namely to guide and even enable interpretation" ("Introduction" 3), I am interested primarily in a pragmatic, if not commonsensical, notion of framing, which is not restricted neither to narrative or visual, nor cognitive or physical senses of the term. It is just such a pragmatic conception of framing, I contend, that illuminates the nexus that, following the leads provided by Luhmann, unites mediality and seriality. The concept of the frame, accordingly, is for me instrumental to the task of understanding that nexus—the home turf of the serial figure.

²⁸ In his "Framing Borders in Frame Stories," Wolf provides a useful discussion of literary framing in general with specific reference to *Frankenstein*.

that the nested repetition of the well-known tale, though agreeing in most points with the book, is already subject to a displacement that is both formal and, by laying the ground for a continuation of the tale from the fifth issue onward, diegetic as well. This re-framing thus performatively combines *both* forms of serialization: a non-linear compounding of the literary tale by means of its emplacement in a more inclusive frame, and a linearizing continuation enacted through the insertion of a century of diegetic history (with more to follow).

A closer look at the narrative structures of issues #1 through #4 reveals a deep-seated ambivalence between these serial forms. Having rediscovered the frozen monster, Captain Walton IV tells his cabin boy (and the reader) the tale that has been passed down to him through his forefather's letters. He recounts the story of Frankenstein's experiments, his success in animating a composite creature, his fearful realization of what he had done, the murder of his brother William at the hands of the monster, and the trial and hanging of the innocent Justine. As the narrative reaches Frankenstein's meeting with the monster in an alpine cave, and the monster is preparing to tell his famous tale, the narration is interrupted quite abruptly and returned to the outer frame, where a storm has broken out and Walton IV's mutinous crew demands that the monster be expelled from the ship. Below deck, meanwhile, the monster thaws, his hand curls into a fist, and the first issue comes to a dramatic close. Issue #2 opens with Sean Farrell, the cabin-boy addressee of the first issue's narrative, discovering the monster. When the monster carries Sean, now unconscious, above deck, Walton IV just manages to prevent the mutineers from firing at the creature, subduing them and evoking pity for the monster by repeating the creation story and continuing the narrative from where he left off before. Thus bridging the first issue's cliffhanger ending and repeating the story for the benefit of both the reader and the rest of the crew, the Walton IV figure proves a clever means of negotiating serial continuation and repetition, hence mirroring the historical proliferation of re-tellings in the comic's own ongoing serialized enactment of re-telling.

Now follows the monster's tale, prefaced visually with a close-up of the monster's face, which functions as a gateway or border between the external and internal narrative frames (between the cave setting in which the monster relates his tale to Frankenstein and the internal frame of the related tale) (6, panel 5). After he has told of his coming to his senses, of observing a blind man and his family, of learning their language, and of being driven from human society, the creature's narrative ends with a close-up of his yellow eye in a wavy-bordered panel that exists liminally between one narrative frame and another (18, panel 3): Spatially attached both to the (self-narrated) monster persecuted by a mob of angry villagers and to the (narrating) monster in the mountain cave, the eye stands between and links the two temporal frames of narration. From this intermediate position, the monster's eye also mirrors the reader's eye, the eye that moves from one graphic frame or panel to the next in the temporal process of reading. The reflexivity established by the eye—which emerges from the page in close-up and protrudes from the narrated world as well by linking two spaces of narration, transcending both of them to enter the space of the reader—is therefore a medial self-reflexivity in a strong sense: It directs attention towards the processes of medial construc-

tion at the same time that it serves a constructive medial purpose. Back, now, in the cave, the monster demands that Frankenstein create him a mate, which the scientist (unlike his counterpart in the novel) actually carries out before brutally destroying the female monster. The enraged monster kills Frankenstein's friend Clerval in retribution. Having discovered the corpse, the traumatized Frankenstein is arrested for murder, his face foregrounded with a blank eye (similar to the monster's discussed above) staring at—or through—the reader in a panel that transitions between this narrative frame and Walton IV's ship in 1898 (25, panel 4). Then, the ship suddenly rams an iceberg and begins to sink, bringing issue #2 to another cliffhanger close.

At the outset of the next issue, the sailors scramble into lifeboats in the belief that the monster, thrown overboard in the crash, is dead. But when the monster, whose hand juts ominously out of the water, boards their boat and begins wreaking havoc, one of the sailors exclaims, "God help us! It's still alive!" (3)—an intensification of the standard line in Frankenstein films, fully self-aware of its seriality. Sparing the captain, his cabin-boy, and his guide, the monster rows them to firm ice and a "rotting ship's wreckage" (5), which provides makeshift shelter. There, the monster insists: "The story, man! You must tell me the rest of the story!" (5). With his back turned, Walton IV prepares to continue the narrative, while the monster's face, set in profile, literally replaces the gutter between two panels and also forms the border between two spatiotemporal frames: the 'here and now' that he shares with Walton IV and the 'there and then' of Walton's story, where we see Frankenstein again stabbing the female monster (6, panels 1 and 2). Once again, the monster's face and eyes mediate the threshold between narrative frames, between temporal settings, and between the act (or the fact) and the content of mediation—between the constructed 'inside' of a tale and the 'outside' setting of its telling. The distinction is further complicated by the fact that Walton's tale is reported in a sort of disembodied voiceover, to which the monster adds, also in textual voiceover-type comments, his own recollections. Thus, the images we see belong to the interior of the narration, while the textual instances belong to the exterior, where narration itself is executed by means of a dialogue between the captain and the monster. We see, for example, the monster standing outside a window looking in at Frankenstein and Elizabeth setting their wedding date (12, panel 4). In voiceover mode, the spatially and temporally distant co-narrators engage in a dialogue over Frankenstein's state of mind: The monster insists that the scientist must have known that the vow to "be with [him] on [his] wedding night" (11) was meant in earnest, while Walton replies that he was blind with love (12). Set around the image of the monster at the window, this dialogue reinforces—both visually and textually—the meeting of inside and out as defining the space of narrative mediality, where the monster embodies an opaque mediality that contrasts ostentatiously with the window-like transparency often demanded of narrative media. In a series of panels, Walton explains Frankenstein's plan to spend his wedding night far away from home, and we see him checking the house and making sure no one could have followed him and Elizabeth to their secluded retreat (13-14). Then Walton addresses the monster directly: "Now perhaps you can best explain the horrible minutes which followed!" (14). With the monster's

face again marking a threshold for shifting gears between narrative instances and frames, the creature accepts the challenge (14, panel 5).

What we see in this cooperative back-and-forth between the two narrators, each complementing the other and filling in a picture that is not quite coherent but perspectively fractured, is an image (both a metaphorical and, with the monster's face repeatedly marking the shifts between narrative frames, a literally graphic image) of the serial process of cumulative, palimpsest-like repetition and variation that revolves around the serial figure of the monster. Here, the Frankenstein tale is repeated, but also expanded, revised, transformed, and transplanted in a manner that acknowledges and interrogates this telling's own place in the larger plurimedial series of tellings; it therefore focuses on the narrative's mediality more than its content, highlighting construction and multiplicity rather than imaging coherent origins and univocity.

When he resumes his part of the narrative, Walton IV takes us up to the end of the novel, covering the arctic pursuit, Frankenstein's discovery by the crew of Walton I, Frankenstein's narration to the original captain, and the scientist's death on board. Pushing the serialization of the narrative further, however, Walton IV demands that the monster explain what happened after the events recorded in his great-grandfather's letters (that is, after the novel): "There must be more...much more! How else can we explain your presence here?!" (27). How else indeed? But alas, a storm rises and destroys their makeshift shelter, a heavy beam falls on the monster, and the cliffhanger is complete: "Next: The end...or the beginning?!!!" (28).

Issue #4 brings us up to speed, detailing the monster's lone wanderings across the tundra, his encounter with a primitive tribe, among which he briefly finds communal acceptance, and the tragic loss of this acceptance due to war with a neighboring tribe. We learn, further, of the monster's fall into the icy waters, and of the century-long entombment in ice that led to his encounter with Walton IV. At the end of the story, Walton IV is dying, but he reveals to the monster an "urgent" piece of information (27): "A descendant of Victor Frankenstein—still lives—near the family birthplace—in Ingolstadt!" (28). This revelation ends the story arc begun in issue #1, and thus begins the monster's quest to find and kill the last of the Frankensteins.²⁹ This quest, which begins in issue #5, is more episodic in nature, bringing the creature into contact with werewolves, gypsies, a giant spider, Dracula, and eventually even a descendant of his creator, one Vincent Frankenstein, who takes the monster to London at the turn of the twentieth century. Concurrent with issue #5, however, the modern-day series "Frankenstein '73" also kicks off in the pages of *Monsters Unleashed* (issue #2, September 1973), a black-and-white magazine regularly adorned with movie stills of Karloff, and in which a very movie-inspired monster encounters mad neuroscientists, undergoes brain transplants, becomes increasingly bulletproof, and just barely escapes being

²⁹ The four-issue story arc, though not quite self-contained, does possess a certain unity—most obviously constituted by its overarching, cyclical narrative structure—that is lacking in the continuing sequelization that follows. Implicitly recognizing this, Marvel reprinted issues #1-#4, but omitted the rest of the series, in *Book of the Dead* #1-#4 (December 1993-March 1994).

enlisted in a voodoo-doll-wielding master's hideous corps of freaks. Meanwhile, issue #12 of the color comic, by now called *The Frankenstein Monster*, brings the two series together by plunging the monster once more into icy waters, thus preserving him through the world wars and technological advances of the twentieth century, until he is again discovered and put on display in a Midwestern freak show. Subsequently revived, he undergoes a variety of adventures, fighting chimeric clone monsters and international crime rings, and, eventually, meeting not one but two female descendants of Victor Frankenstein.

Though the two series cover different episodes in the life of the monster, it is clear that they both cover the same monster, leading the same life in the same world. Thus, the first installment of "Frankenstein '73" recounts the monster's origin story in a version that is highly compressed but consistent with the version told in *The Monster of Frankenstein* #1-#4. In addition, issue #12 of the color comic references events told in the black-and-white comic, going so far as to explicitly refer the reader in a footnote to issues #2, #4, and #6 of *Monsters Unleashed*. Together, the comics frame an increasingly unified monster in an increasingly unified world. They work, that is, to frame a linearized history that charts a continuous biographical development, thus transforming the creature from a serial figure into a series character.³⁰

And yet, the margin of the monster's medial framing, upon which a non-linear accrual of extra-diegetic seriality takes place, is never wholly eradicated. For example, the monster of "Frankenstein '73" is mute from the outset and, appearing in a magazine full of Karloffian images and articles on monster movies, there can be little doubt that this is a cross-medial nod to the classic Frankenstein films. The initially articulate monster of the color comic is also rendered mute (in issue #9, March 1974) when a vampire bites him and paralyzes his vocal cords. In issue #7 of the black-and-white series (August 1974), a different explanation is offered for his speechlessness: The fire that, in issue #2's first installment, woke the monster from suspended animation and freed him from the freak show, had damaged his throat. When, the following month, in *The Frankenstein Monster* #12 (September 1974), the continuities of the two series are brought together, this fire is depicted

³⁰ The significance and contingency of these acts of framing is ironically attested to by the German publication history of Marvel's Frankenstein comics. The Williams Verlag began publishing *The Monster of Frankenstein*, under the title *Das Monster von Frankenstein*, in January 1974. Beginning with issue #12, the German publisher began splitting the tales of the American comics into two issues, thus stretching the 18 issues of the American original into 25 German issues. Apparently, the German edition was more successful than the American turned out to be, for when the American series was cancelled and the final issue #18 ended with an unrequited cliffhanger, the Williams Verlag commissioned its own ending to the story, with no American model to go by. Effectively, the tale told in *Das Monster von Frankenstein* #26, "Baronesse von Frankenstein," provided a means of transitioning from the ongoing saga of *The Monster of Frankenstein* (a.k.a. *The Frankenstein Monster*) to the "Frankenstein '73" series from *Monsters Unleashed*, which Williams printed—in color rather than the original black-and-white—in *Das Monster von Frankenstein* #27-#33, thus spanning all but the very last story in that series before the German magazine was cancelled. William's publication practice thus re-frames the two concurrent American series as one continuous series, demonstrating the radical variability of serial narrative framings.

once more, and the vampire explanation is never mentioned again. Even if we can overlook the discrepancies in continuity, and even if we can suppress our knowledge of the mute movie monster's influence (which, after all, is absorbed and explained diegetically in an ingenious feat of framing), the point here is that the monster's muteness renders the act of framing visible by initiating a self-reflexive probing of the comic book medium. The monster's speechlessness translates into an inability to produce text on the page, a conspicuous absence that renders text all the more important, and which concomitantly highlights the importance of the monster's visuality—his grotesque, patchwork appearance not only functions narratively to explain his immediate rejection by humans, but also marks a specifically medial fact of his construction. In particular, this enhanced visual role recalls the monster's graphically and narratively liminal, quasi-syntactic functions in *The Monster of Frankenstein* #1-#4 whereby his image marked the border between the closing and opening of narrative frames and self-reflexively highlighted the fact of the comic book's graphic framing via sequentially ordered panels.

Even on Earth-616, then, the serial framing of the monster remains apparent: Its medial excess is never completely absorbed into the diegetic synthesis of a biography. And as a result, the two central framing media of the comic book—word and image—never quite recede from view and achieve total transparency. Constantly repeating the same old story in an unexpectedly innovative way, compounding re-tellings in concentric and cyclical frames while continuing along novel lines of development, the monster's negotiations of serial forms constantly pull the media of any particular articulation—such as Marvel's comics—back into a diffuse and plurimedial substrate: the slimy pool out of which the monster emerged and back into which he oozes to recollect himself as a serial figure, bidding his time before he strikes again—perhaps in another age, in another medium altogether. “God help us! It's still alive!”

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