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ONE FLEW EAST

The Monster and the Comics: Frankenstein, Mel Brooks, Gene Wilder and America Popular Culture

January 5, 2020



In 1939, when Mel Brooks was twelve or thirteen in Brooklyn and Gene Wilder was six or seven out in Milwaukee, they probably saw John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* starring Henry Fonda. They were both that kind of boy. Though sparked by the early life of our sixteenth president, the movie was a fanciful tale; it had little relation to reality.

The next year, the two would have seen Joseph Kane's *Young Buffalo Bill* starring Roy Rogers, a movie with an even weaker tether to reality. Given their age differences, Brooks probably laughed while Wilder ate it up. A few months

later, they both likely watched another Kane and Rogers quickie, *Young Bill Hickok*, one more of Hollywood's supposed histories with, in reality, little relation to actual events.

As much a cultural magpie then, I am sure, as he is now, Brooks must have filed these titles and their relations to the real world away in his commodious storehouse for the Americana of his time. Wilder must have smiled at the movies with what would become his signature half-smirk, seeming to dismiss them but, I suspect, also admiring them—and with a great deal less irony (at that young age) than that of his future collaborator.

Another movie that came out that year (1940), one more among the many bits of popular culture that the two would remember years later when they looked back to the thirties and forties to create their own 1974 movie *Young Frankenstein*, was the first effort in America by Alfred Hitchcock. Both boys probably saw that, too: *Rebecca*. That one also puts itself forward as

a history (though only internally: “Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again”). Brooks knew the difference. Wilder would learn it: Hitchcock’s film was an adaptation of a novel; author Daphne du Maurier determined its reality. Later in life, the two comedians would stir all of this together, and more, to hilarious effect.

By 1940, both boys had already seen the highly successful Universal Pictures production, directed by James Whale, of *Frankenstein* (not the first film of the novel, but the most famous) and, very likely (along with millions of others), had reacted with delighted fright. Released in 1931, the movie had embedded Mary Shelley’s story more firmly in American culture than du Maurier’s novel would ever be—not even after Hitchcock’s film. But the movie contained its own twists on the story, ones as fanciful in relation to the original as those of the “Young” movies the boys would see a few years later.

Today, as a result of the Whale version and its sequels, *Frankenstein* has become a cultural touchstone, as familiar to generations of Americans as, say, Monopoly. Unfortunately, though, the original book remains little more than a curiosity, a “truth” behind the stories that has as little cultural relevance as the realities of the lives of Abe Lincoln, Bill Cody and Bill Hickok. By the time Brooks and Wilder were teenagers, much from the Americanized version of the story was firmly embedded in the culture: the laboratory of the movie with its arcing electricity, the streaks of white in the hair of *The Bride of Frankenstein* in one sequel, and the hunchbacked character of Igor who evolved from Fritz in the first movie and a number of variations over the decade that followed—and much more. Even by the 1940s, these had become part of American popular culture—even if they had not become, by law, part of the commons, that is, available to everyone without permission.

The spoof that Brooks and Wilder would create in 1974 and name, with a nod to the silly (and otherwise forgotten) Rogers westerns of their youth, *Young Frankenstein*, was only possible because of the ubiquitous nature of this new *Frankenstein* manifestation, itself a monster cobbled together from Shelley’s novel, American feeble impressions of Eastern Europe, and Hollywood’s over-excited imagination in the early sound era.

Today, I suspect that more Americans know the *Frankenstein* story through Brooks and Wilder than through the collective movies from the thirties and forties and certainly more than through Shelley’s novel. This spoof has become our *Frankenstein* story. All of the others are simply antecedents, hardly causal in our casual consideration. Today, what we know (mostly incorrectly, in historical and literary, not cultural terms) as the Frankenstein story is a popular American tale that is as much a child of this country as *The Simpsons*. So whose story is it?

The American descendant of Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein and the Henry Frankenstein of the 1931 film, Frederick Frankenstein affects what he imagines is a European pronunciation of his name. Only at the end does he proclaim himself as carrying the name with the pronunciation we know, claiming his legacy—an American one!

The right one, given the popular conception of the tale.

The question is, who owns it? In the instance of Shelley, the answer is simple: Frankenstein has passed into the commons. The U.S. Constitution reads, "To promote the progress of science and useful arts, by securing for limited times to authors and inventors the exclusive right to their respective writings and discoveries." Shelley's "limited time" had long passed, if she had ever had it (American publishers in the 19th century often assumed American copyright only applied to American publications so pirated the British at will). Wilder's Frankenstein may claim this legacy, but who owned it in an American court of law?

Brooks understands the pastiche nature of American culture. In fact, he has made his career by parodying the willy-nilly cut-and-paste nature of much of our knowledge. Americans frequently mistake contingency for causality leading to hilarious misapprehension, and they often assume that the historical and the present are much the same—just in different clothing. And their laws protect only that clothing.

Playing constantly to an audience steeped in American popular culture, Brooks and co-writer Wilder (though I suspect it was primarily Brooks) dropped tidbits into the movie such as lines from the Glen Miller song "Chattanooga Choo Choo," which would be recognized not simply because of the song but because of jokes playing off the song's first line, "Pardon me boy, is this the Chattanooga choo choo," for their punchlines. One of these, in fact, features Roy Rogers: "Pardon me Roy, is this the cat who chewed your new shoes." In another instance, we find that the "walk this way" bit that would once again become an American commonplace in the 1970s was also used in the 1936 film *After the Thin Man*. Back then it was Dick Powell instead of Gene Wilder imitating the gait of his guide, but the effect was probably the same on an earlier generation of children.

Brooks and Wilder were certainly playing with the clichés of their childhood, many of them under copyright but others not, while writing this movie. Not only was "Chattanooga Choo Choo" a hit in 1941, but that is also the time of popularization of the phrase "a roll in the hay" for sex, a phrase used in the introduction of Teri Garr's character who appears, of course, in a hay wagon. Soon after, on seeing the huge doorknockers at the Frankenstein castle, Wilder, who is in the process of lifting Garr to the ground and has his face close to her breasts, turns his eyes to the doors and says appreciatively, "What knockers!" "Thank you," she responds, almost demurely. "Knockers," in the usage she assumes, also came to popularity in the 1940s.

Seconds later, we meet Frau Blucher, an homage to *Rebecca's* Mrs. Danvers, here played by Cloris Leachman—another reference to a copyrighted aspect American popular culture of the 1940s. Soon comes use of the game charades, still popular in the forties, and Pig Latin, a staple of thirties comedy, a parody of Groucho Marx and a bit of that quintessential American anthem "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

The authors don't spare the darker aspects of the 1940s: the police officer who stirs anti-monster sentiment has a German accent, bringing up the specter of anti-Semitism. Even more intriguing is the choice of Irving Berlin's "Puttin' on the Ritz" for a dance number starring Dr. Frankenstein and the monster. The song's original lyrics set it in Harlem, the people described as African American. It was used in a 1930 film with one of the first integrated dance ensembles. Later, revised lyrics were produced (by Berlin), moving the local from Lennox Avenue to Park Avenue and adding a line about Gary Cooper. This was for a 1939 version by Clark Gable. The Cooper line is used in the excerpt from the song in *Young Frankenstein* just before the audience starts booing and throwing things at the human/monster duo on stage. Brooks and Wilder keep it subtle, but here again they touch back to the American culture of the forties, reminding us of its racism.

Another aspect of the way Brooks and Wilder use popular culture and its icons is the implicit challenge to ownership of those icons in much the way that would soon be put forward by the fan fiction relation to *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter* and much more starting in the 1980s. The team was quite aware of how close they sometimes skated to the edges of Intellectual Property laws, often assuring permissions through negotiations and payments but sometimes ending up in legal wrangling such as was happening while *Young Frankenstein* was being made. Actress, director and inventor Hedy Lamarr sued Warner Brothers over the running joke relating to her name and that of a character in the just-released Brooks film (co-starring Wilder) *Blazing Saddles*, Hedley Lamarr. The name, after all, was her trademark, protected property.

The "limited time" of copyright has been expanding almost since the ratification of the Constitution. What was once a 13-year protection, renewable once, has become, depending on the particulars of ownership, around a century in many cases. It will be increased again, and soon, for Mickey Mouse will reach 100 late in the next decade and Disney is not about to lose control over that lucrative image.

Comedians in particular have never liked the restrictions of copyright. Grouch Marx worried by a Warner Brothers inquiry about his spoof, *A Night in Casablanca* of their *Casablanca*, shot off a letter:

You claim you own Casablanca and that no one else can use that name without their permission. What about Warner Brothers — do you own that, too? You probably have the right to use the name Warner, but what about Brothers? Professionally, we were brothers long before you were. When Vitaphone was still a gleam in the inventor's eye, we were touring the sticks as the Marx Brothers and even before us, there had been other brothers — the Smith Brothers; the Brothers Karamazoff; Dan Brouthers, an outfielder with Detroit; and "Brother, can you spare a dime?"

Everything is built on the past; all that is new is also theft. That's part of the concept of the Constitution's "limited time." The Founding Fathers understood that creation of the new depends on ability to use the past. They also wanted to ensure that creators could profit from

their work. So, they created their compromise, one that has been warped by every copyright extension—to the point where Mary Bono, who had replaced her husband Sonny in Congress on his death, could say at the Capitol:

Sonny wanted the term of copyright protection to last forever. I am informed by staff that such a change would violate the Constitution. I invite all of you to work with me to strengthen our copyright laws in all of the ways available to us. As you know, there is also Jack Valenti's proposal for term to last forever less one day.

Of course, forever minus a day is the same as forever. Bono's attitude is what every artist fights, even ones who later, themselves, become its advocates—Walt Disney coming first to mind. Comedians, on the other hand, are generally on the other side, fighting through their work to expand the commons. They do this through parody and spoof, taking all of the popular markers of a particular time and insisting that they belong to the people, not the creators.

Nothing in *Young Frankenstein* has much to do at all with Shelley's novel. It has all to do with the 1930s and the early 1940s. The movie shows that these items, some of them once the possessions of particular entities, now belong to us all. Implicit in the movie is that thirty years is more than enough for something to move from possession to commons.

There is no explicit reference to Mrs. Danvers in the Frau Blucher character of *Young Frankenstein*. There doesn't need to be. We all already "own" Mrs. Danvers.

Here's the thing: Shelley's novel was so old by the time the Whale film was made that there was no question of copyright protection. Even by today's standard, the book would be a part of the commons. Though the new movie was under copyright, the story was not.

Another movie from the thirties that both Brooks and Wilder surely saw in the days before World War II was *Naughty Marietta*. Based on an operetta already a quarter of a century old, it starred Jeannette McDonald and Nelson Eddy, a popular musical-comedy duo of films at the time, and it featured the song "Ah! Sweet Mystery of Life." That song, too, appears in snippets in *Young Frankenstein*. The line used is "Ah! Sweet mystery of life, at last I've found you!"

The mystery belongs to all of us, or should. As should the rewards of discovery.

I think both Gene Wilder and Mel Brooks, one of the greatest purveyors, promoters and expanders of American popular culture ever, would agree.

Thanks to Eric Rabkin for pointing out errors in the version of this paper that was presented at the Third Annual Science Fiction Symposium at New York City College of Technology (CUNY) on November 27, 2018.

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