A Totally Rad Mad Scientist*: Lisa Frankenstein*'s Queer Articulations of Victor Frankenstein and the Creature

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Screenwriter Diablo Cody's long-awaited return to the horror genre took up the highly influential science fiction novel *Frankenstein* (1818) with a synthy 80s soundtrack, a dynamic cast, and the comedic eye of director Zelda Williams. *Lisa Frankenstein* (2024) does not attempt to adapt Mary Shelley's classic with exact detail. Rather, the film reinvents it through a horror-comedy-romance-monster-mashup and uses the source material to capture the queer essence of Victor Frankenstein's monster. *Lisa Frankenstein*'s premise highlights the ways in which a high school social outcast can locate their confidence and sense of self through monstrosity. In turn, the film indicates that the monster's standing as a figure for selfhood and transformation is stronger than ever in the 2020s.

Lisa Frankenstein follows the titular character, a teenaged mad scientist portrayed by Kathryn Newton, as she navigates high school with her stepsister Taffy (Liza Soberano), a supportive beauty queen. As Lisa's biggest cheerleader, Taffy convinces her to go to a high school party where she is drugged and sexually assaulted, and then frantically runs home during a storm. As lightning strikes and green fog rolls in, much like Victor Frankenstein's monster, Lisa's monster ("The Creature," played by Cole Sprouse) reanimates from the electrical currents coursing through his once-lifeless corpse. The film's faithfulness to its source material ends here—excluding the attainment of body parts—but this is not without a point.

While fans of the true-to-form adaptation of a classic novel may be more in favor of a world where *Lisa Frankenstein* retains more of its source material, others may find that Cody and Williams's film breathes new life into this timeless creature. Predecessors such as Frank

Henenlotter's *Frankenhooker* (1990) and Yorgos Lanthimos's *Poor Things* (2023) have commonly taken up the possibility of Frankenstein's monster, rather than the doctor, being a woman. This subversion is important in and of itself, as it delivers new commentary on the creation of a creature. Rather than themes of patriarchal control and the debates on man versus science prevalent in Shelley's novel and resulting films, *Lisa Frankenstein* takes its time communicating teenage queerness, loneliness, and the confidence that comes with self-discovery through monsters.

The vibrancy of the set dressing as well as the props utilized throughout the film stray from the original source. Some even go so far as nodding toward the importance of queering a classic creature to represent the realities of the time period it represents and the relationality of creatures and queerness. In one particular instance, Lisa walks around her bedroom, and the audience gets the opportunity to see that she has a copy of trans* author Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls* (1992) on her shelf. This discrepancy between the book's publication date and the film's time period (the 1980s) may signal a mistake. However, the book's contents indicate an importance in its presence, as *Lost Souls* follows a social-outcast vampire growing up in a newly formed family, just like Lisa. Furthermore, her bedroom operates as a space where she expresses an exploration of her sexuality with the Creature via a massage wand. The book's anachronistic presence emphasizes this point, especially as it indicates a moment in time where creatures such as vampires had begun to carve out a clear cultural space for representing queerness.

Lisa Frankenstein is nothing if not a very self-aware film. It satirizes the gothic imaginary prevalent in Tim Burton's work with pastel pink and yellow houses, offers an 80s makeover montage, and embraces quippy dialogue familiar to teen flicks such as *Heathers* (1989). As Lisa spruces up her creature's aesthetic to match her own, her stepmother Janet (Carla Gugino)

interrupts with exclamations on the poor state of their home. Gugino's character offers viewers the villain that is driven to snuff out any joy in Lisa's life. She diminishes her trauma with insensitive remarks on Lisa's deceased mother, critiques her clothing choices, and actively attempts to institutionalize her. As such, Lisa and the Creature find their first victim in Janet. Luckily for the Creature, he also gets the opportunity to attain his first new body part—an ear.

The cinematic version of Victor Frankenstein brings his creature to life through volts of electricity caused by a storm. Lisa brilliantly and hilariously brings her creature's new parts to life through Taffy's partially broken tanning bed. The stitching and bringing to life of new parts has been discussed in scholarly circles, especially those focused on transness. In Susan Stryker's "My Words to Victor Frankenstein," the trans studies scholar articulates how hormone treatment and gender-affirming surgeries mirror the endeavors of Shelley's scientist (242). By analyzing her own transness through monstrosity, Stryker finds the monster a destabilizing figure to social, cultural, and political normalcy (238). This destabilization is important in *Lisa Frankenstein*, as the story itself disrupts the beloved classic in its overtly queer tone and setting as well as its use of the monstrous as queer allegory. In terms of Lisa's creature, he presents himself to audiences as male and heterosexual. Therefore, one may find it particularly easy to glaze over his queerness. However, analyzing the film alongside Stryker's essay paints a more nuanced picture of how we may interpret both the Creature and Lisa.

While we can absolutely point to scholarly discourse to discuss these themes in the film, they serve here to bolster the point that *Lisa Frankenstein* is an irrefutably queer film. This is especially true when one considers the attainment of body parts, and the sexual scenes shared between Lisa and the Creature. The film is brilliant in its approach to developing this queer relationship, as it uses the monster to showcase that the teenager's queerness has always been

present. As the film works its way toward the climax, Lisa discovers that her beloved sister has been sleeping with her crush, Michael (Henry Eikenberry), when she walks into his house. The Creature, furious at this discovery, barges into the bedroom and axes Michael's penis off.

Following this incident, Lisa proclaims her love for the Creature, and he confirms that he reciprocates her feelings. As a result, she requests that he have sex with her, but he shows Lisa that he does not have a penis. She tells him, "you don't need one of those to be a man. It's actually, like, the least important part." This scene can be read in two ways: as a statement on the various types of sexual contact and as a confirmation of Lisa's queerness. A queer reading of the scene relies on the subtext provided by the wide-shot scenes of her bedroom. As stated earlier, she has a great deal of queer media decorating her bedroom. Therefore, there is a queer undertone to her character that becomes overt in instances where she expresses sexual desires. Her assertion that the Creature does not need a penis to be a man is an act of gender affirmation that is further articulated by her continued desire for sex with him, in whatever form that may take. The Creature's queerness is elevated in this scene as well, as he requests that Lisa stitch Michael's penis to his body. Through a reading of trans and queer analyses on Frankenstein's monster, the act of suturing and stitching the penis to the Creature's body reflects just one form of gender-affirming surgery.

Lisa Frankenstein provides audiences with a rich and textured retelling of Shelley's classic novel. The vibrancy, dialogue, and queerness of the film offers the genre a fresh take on the undead. The story and its characters are so unique yet familiar that any viewer can approach this monster mashup of genres with assurance that they have never seen anything quite like it and still feel a strong connection to it. *Lisa Frankenstein* has a lush quality that intrigues viewers and provokes scholars to examine its countless themes—such as feminism and queerness, to name a

few. Throughout Diablo Cody and Zelda Williams's film, the queer subtext, themes, and overt text reinvigorate the genre and highlight queer monstrosity as a point of reference in understanding loneliness, teenage-hood, and self-discovery.

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