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The fatality of scientific monomania: a study of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige*

Rachel Smith

In this essay I will investigate the various links between scientific development, death, and monomania in an interdisciplinary analysis of Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* and Christopher Nolan's 2006 film *The Prestige*. This essay consists of three parts, focusing on the inventor, the invention, and the relationship between science and the arts. The first part of this essay discusses the inventor. It will compare the characters of Victor Frankenstein and Rupert Angier, contrasting and relating their motivations and behaviours in using scientific means to further their careers and reach their objectives. The second component of this essay pertains to the invention itself, primarily by contrasting the characters of Frankenstein's monster and Rupert Angier's Prestiges. This section will also discuss how the narrative structures of the film and novel subdue these voices within their respective texts while provoking the reader to formulate their own critical interpretation of the invention's existence. The third and concluding section of this essay hopes to create further discourse between the scientific discipline and the arts. It evaluates the relationship these artistic texts share with the science which inspires them and argues that they react to the public interest and fears surrounding science rather than aiming to provide an accurate presentation of the scientific subject.

The Inventor

By being victims of scientific monomania, *Frankenstein* and *The Prestige*'s principal characters offer an argument that science is an intrinsically obsessive pursuit. I will go on to discuss their motivations in identifying this bias against the sciences. *Frankenstein*, written in the early nineteenth century, was published at a pivotal moment in scientific development. Mary Shelley is said to have been inspired to write about reanimation through reading contemporary academic sources. This includes the "belief in spontaneous generation, meaning that life could arise spontaneously from dead animal or plant matter" and "the theory of epigenesis, which argued that the process of a single cell becoming a complex multicellular adult is controlled by a vital force unique to living tissue."[1] Shelley's use of galvanism—"chemical reactions involving metals with different infinities for electrons"—is said to reflect contemporary experimentation of electricity's relationship to life (and muscle contraction).[2] These developments progressed alongside changes in the practice of science wherein the introduction of theory surrounding monomania replaced accepted forms of eccentricity.[3] This scientific eccentricity is evidenced by German physiologist Johann Wilhelm Ritter, known for altering the voltaic battery, work on infra-red radiation, and "undefined 'galvanic' experiments with animals".[4] Despite the Prussian government criticising his experiments, Ritter still found a more "libertarian atmosphere" in Munich to continue his experimentation.[5] His ability to find a welcoming community for his work despite ethical concerns exemplifies the earlier standard in the scientific discipline of acceptable eccentricity, but his

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[1] Christopher Rose, "How to Teach Biology Using the Movie Science of Cloning People, Resurrecting the Dead, and Combining Flies and Humans," *Public Understanding of Science* 12, no. 3 (2003): 292.

[2] Ibid, 292.

[3] Lennard J. Davis, *Obsession: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 67.

[4] Richard Holmes, "Mary Shelley and the Power of Contemporary Science," in *Frankenstein*, ed. by J. Hunter (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), 186.

[5] Ibid, 187.

unfaltering compulsion to continue in his research demonstrates this shift into understanding "eccentric" behaviour as monomaniacal. The term "monomania" was originally coined by Jean-Etienne Esquirol, continuing a system of thinking which comes from theories of "partial insanity" and nerve theory in which the mind is divided.[6] Most elements of the brain are functioning well while one or two fail to do so, demonstrating the monomaniac's ability to reason alongside and against their obsessions.[7] Frankenstein exhibits this monomania within Shelley's text. Before creating "his" creature, Shelley has Frankenstein recall his addiction to the sciences:

> That application, which at first had been a matter of duty and resolution, now became so ardent and eager, that the stars often disappeared in the light of morning whilst I was yet engaged in my laboratory.[8]

And yet, this interest darkens before the "dreary night of November" in which Frankenstein's creature awakens.[9] Frankenstein's "human nature" causes him to "turn with loathing from my occupation, whilst, still urged on by an eagerness which perpetually increased, I brought my work near to a conclusion."[10] In this, partial insanity is recognised in his single-minded ambition as well as the ability to look at himself, as if from an outside source, and acknowledge the dangers of that obsession. As Davis remarks, "[t]hus there is a conscious 'I' who is watching an obsessed self instead of a deranged and unconscious self dwelling in a lunatic."[11] The argument could easily be made that the narrative voice retrospectively recalling the events of Frankenstein's life to the listening Walton causes this introspection. However, if the understanding is that Frankenstein is also mad when recounting the story, his own misgivings about his practice are still altogether relevant.

Frankenstein explores a complex idea of fulfilment associated with obsession—or rather, the impossibility of fulfilment. Mary Shelley's father William Godwin discusses this idea in his own novel *Caleb Williams*, in which "the insatiable desire of satisfaction […] promises itself in that satisfaction to unknown gratification which seems as if it were capable of fully compensating any injuries."[12] We are to assume as readers that Frankenstein's objective is the pure realisation of his creation, the awakening of his invention, and yet this does not seem altogether likely to satisfy him. Frankenstein shows respect for the early scientific experiments which sought "immortality and power", yet changes his adoration from the "masters of the science" to their modern contemporaries when Waldman convinces him that they have "acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows."[13] Frankenstein's interests—and, consequently, his obsessions—shift to wherever the world holds secrets that science may be able to divulge, and does so with an arrogance and superiority which intends to subordinate the natural order. Ultimately, Frankenstein's pursuit of destructive scientific designs leads him to madness. By equating madness with science, then, the text could be said to align science itself with disruption.

Despite similar monomaniacal tendencies displayed by *The Prestige*'s Rupert Angier, there is more ambiguity surrounding Angier's motivation than Frankenstein's. It seems to originate from a prevailing desire for revenge against the character of Alfred Borden for the death of his wife. How-

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[6] Davis, *Obsession: A History,* 38, 53.

[7] Ibid*,* 68.

[8] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. by J. Hunter (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), 30.

[9] Ibid*,* 35.

[10] Ibid, 34

[11] Davis, *Obsession: A History,* 61.

[12] William Godwin, *Caleb Williams* (London: Penguin, 1988), 128 as cited by Davis, *Obsession: A History*, 55.

[13] Shelley, *Frankenstein,* 28, 29.

ever, as the film progresses, this motivation appears to lose its clarity: increasingly, Angier's desire is not for a simplistic revenge or even to "take" Borden's life out of jealousy, but for competition and pride. There is a distinct impression that love for outperforming Borden as a magician eclipses the love he feels for his wife: "I don't care about my wife. I care about his secret."[14]

The use of costume, acting, and narrative allow for Angier's monomania to be communicated to the film's audience. There is no scene in which Angier, Borden, and Cutter—the third being a character defined by his relationships to the former two—do not appear. Their continuous presence in the narrative does not allow space for the audience to diverge from the rivalry, thus demonstrating its total encompassing of the characters' lives. Along the same line, by moving between three timelines, the narrative also presses the overarching idea that the focus of Angier's life—to outperform Borden—is omnipresent. Costume provides numerous reminders of Angier's pursuits; with few exceptions, Angier is seen with a limp—even before the narrative reveals its origins—and Borden with black gloves, reminding the audience of the antagonism between the two protagonists. Therefore, even when the focus of the dialogue or action is not on Angier shooting Borden or Borden orchestrating Angier's broken leg, their physical presence on screen is inseparable from their rivalry and the suffering which results from it.

Angier's motivation is what one would align with obsessive nature, as "obsession is precisely the disease in which reason and passion exist on the same level."[15] Reason speaks to his desire for revenge while the seduction of praise appeals to his passion. Despite contrasting interpretations of Angier's motivation, monomania unifies his actions. Yet, Angier himself does not display scientific monomania. Where Victor Frankenstein exhibits an insatiable scientific hunger, Rupert Angier uses the insatiable scientific hunger of another to meet his obsessions. Nikola Tesla—the famous scientist known for his contributions to electrical technological advancement—appears in a fictitious iteration which dramatises his time spent in Colorado Springs in 1899 and early 1900.[16] Angier's employment of Tesla's monomania does not disregard the capacity of science to be inherently obsessive. Instead, it underpins this same idea as science becomes the only way in which his desires can be realised, thereby showing its capacity for destruction when discovered. Even if we were to disregard Angier's discovery of science in furthering his own monomania, the scientific obsession shared between *The Prestige*'s Nikola Tesla and Frankenstein is blatant.

Tesla is wary of the machine he is building for Angier but completes it regardless of his own reservations, because he considers himself enslaved to his scientific obsession—"I am their slave, and one day, they will choose to destroy me."[17] Pleading the falsity of the phrase "man's reach exceeds his grasp", he successfully builds the mysterious machine in Colorado with his assistant.[18] The setting of Colorado where Tesla chiefly appears contrasts significantly with the Victorian London designed and built in a Universal backlot.[19] The former is cold, utilising a metallic colour scheme, and wires fall and drape across the space with origins out of the frame, emphasising their mystery. The animated electricity which sparks from the machine, coupled by a loud crackling sound of charged electricity, demonstrates a threatening side of Tesla's science in comparison to the glowing field of lightbulbs which precede it. The allure of science is more obvious in the latter, causing Tesla to use it in this new colder environment, placing a lightbulb in Angier's hand and watching it glow, to endear himself to his potential patron and to the audience. I would also be remiss not to mention the recurring motif of electricity in the arts' exploration of science. This is evidenced in Tesla's invention in *The Prestige*

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[14] Christopher Nolan, *The Prestige,* (California: Warner Bros*.,* 2006), Film.

[15] Davis, *Obsession: A History,* 64.

[16] Britannica Review, 'Nikola Tesla'

[17] Nolan, *The Prestige.*

[18] Ibid.

[19] Nathan Crowley, "Special Feature: Conjuring the Past," in *The Prestige* [DVD] (California: Warner Bros., 2006).

and in Frankenstein's youthful encounter with science when lightning hits a tree as well as other instances of storms in the text.[20]

The streets of London, on the other hand, are worn down and dirty. Extras and actors in period costume, steam and smoke, visible brickwork, dirtied ground, torn posters on walls, extras passing in horse-drawn carriages, and minimal artificial light all join to create a sense of realism *mise-en-scène*. Contrastingly, *The Prestige*'s Colorado is distanced from the populace, referenced as Tesla's "retirement", and demonstrates a likeness to Frankenstein's own enforced isolation when experimenting. Geographical and societal exclusion, for both men of science, indicates the sacrifices they have made. Instead, Victorian London, alongside Borden, symbolises a different kind of sacrifice; that of endurance and "getting your hands dirty."[21] Therefore, Angier uses scientific monomania—that which Tesla criticises for being all consuming and dangerous—in conjunction with his own monomania to choreograph his retribution against Borden.

It may appear that my intention has been to vilify the role of scientists. However, I would like to clarify I am not advancing this view. I have not argued that science is an inherently obsessive pursuit to those who are inclined toward it. Instead, I argue that the dramatised version of science in these texts creates or furthers obsession in the principal characters through self-inflicted victimisation. Victor Frankenstein, Rupert Angier, and Nikola Tesla characterise themselves as victims of science despite the roles they take on in their own destruction. This hypocrisy is recognised within *Frankenstein* through the creature. When given life, Shelley uses similar language of exploration and experimentation concerning the creature as she does earlier with Frankenstein's character. By positioning scientific methodology as a naturally occurring process by which we make sense of the world we inhabit, Shelley's science cannot be considered inherently dangerous. Additionally, I do not argue that monomania is threatening due to its pervading nature, only that it becomes harmful when combined with a disinterest in or willing disregard for moral consequences.

The Invention

These moral consequences are recognised in the figure of the invention: Frankenstein's creature and Angier's Prestiges are both products and victims of scientific pursuits. This comparison raises the issue of narration. In *Frankenstein*, the creature's voice is embedded within other established forms of narration—namely, the narrative Frankenstein creates when recounting events to Walton, who is writing letters to his sister. Therefore, due to the novel's epistolary structure, the creature struggles to be realised as a fully conscious being. Frankenstein creates the creature to be human, but, upon his being stimulated to life, refuses to see him as such.[22] The attempts to apply a species or title—the fiend/daemon/monster—in the text carry their own pantheon of negative allusion. The creature is not given a name, cursing him to the pop culture misconception of his namesake.[23] While this may first appear an easy insight in which the inventor becomes one with the invention—Frankenstein being considered so monstrous that he is inseparable from the 'monster'—it is another example of the creature lacking agency in his own right. A reading of the text which is more sympathetic to the creature allegorically imagines him as an abused child; the creature is viewed as a motherless infant, emphasising the importance of the female role in reproduction, and as a Creator's abandoned offspring, prompting a theological approach.[24] The latter is recognised explicitly within the novel wherein Frankenstein's creature relates his own situation to that of Satan in Milton's Paradise Lost:

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[20] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 23, 50.

[21] Nolan, *The Prestige*.

[22] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 33.

[23] Peter Brooks, "What is a Monster? (According to Frankenstein)," in *Frankenstein*, ed. by J. Hunter (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), 369.

[24] Joyce Carol Oates, "Frankenstein's Fallen Angel," *Critical Inquiry* 10, no. 3 (1984): 547.

> God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow devils, to admire and encourage him, but I am solitary and abhorred.[25]

The creature's isolation and physical appearance render him, in this instance, less than Satan. The desperation with which the creature attempts to make connections to others is pitiable. Rejected by his creator, he finds the De Lacey family and watches them, learns from them, sympathises with their misfortune and then, when he attempts to connect with them, he is beaten.[26] As a result, the creature pleads with Frankenstein to create a female creature so that, understanding the contempt humans consider him with, he can escape without being truly alone.[27] Following William's death, when the creature has exhausted his hope to be loved, he commits his life to destroying Frankenstein's. Each murder he commits is painted by the creature as a way of exacting against Frankenstein the punishment inflicted on him:

> I will revenge my injuries: if I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear, and chiefly towards you my arch-enemy, because my creator, do I swear inextinguishable hatred. Have a care: I will work at your destruction, nor finish until I desolate your heart, so that you shall curse the hour of your birth.[28]

The creature's intention is to sentence and punish Frankenstein in the stead of human institutions so that he may exact justice against his Creator. However, the simplistic idea that the creature only needed the love of Frankenstein to prosper conveniently ignores all other societal hatred his existence elicits. Frankenstein's "sweet and beloved Elizabeth", the "purest creature of earth", screams at the sight of him as does William, a child who as the creature hopes has "lived too short a time to have imbibed a horror of deformity."[29] Even the creature's own idols in the form of the De Lacey family—with the exception of the older man who cannot physically see him—faint, flee from, and attack him.[30] The scientific pursuit of bringing life to a composite of dead body parts is not what causes harm in the text; rather, it is society and Frankenstein's failure to understand and fulfil their responsibility to nurture the creature.

Furthermore, contrasting Frankenstein's creature and Angier's Prestiges presents a challenge. The latter do not speak more than once, in a cut off statement, and are then seen in the process of drowning and as drowned bodies. Yet, the Prestiges are assumed to be exact copies of Angier. Given the lack of voice, such a reading is only possible when deriving from Frankenstein's legacy; I argue that, almost two centuries after Shelley began writing *Frankenstein*, *The Prestige* uses the former's zeitgeist within popular culture to ease audience comprehension of its narrative. The audience's awareness of Angier's Prestiges, the willingness to believe in such a perfect cloning, exemplifies Frankenstein's teaching that a body of scientific synthesis can be fully realised as a "person".

The aforementioned cut off statement pronounced when Angier first tests the machine without Tesla, is: "No-No, no, I'm the-."[31] Of course, it seems clear that what the Prestige's speech suggests is that he is the 'real' Angier and not merely a clone, thus raising ambiguity surrounding the conscious-

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[25] Shelley, *Frankenstein,* 91.

[26] Ibid*,* 94.

[27] Ibid*,* 101.

[28] Ibid, 102.

[29] Ibid*,* 136, 140, 100.

[30] Ibid*,* 94.

[31] Nolan, *The Prestige.*

ness of Angier in his final trick. The character's understanding is that it takes "courage to climb into that machine every night without knowing if I'd be the man in the box or the Prestige", but that is only the character's comprehension of a machine he did not design.[32] It may be, as Angier deems, that his consciousness switches to either the Transported Angier in the audience of the theatre or the Angier which falls through the trap door into the drowning box underneath. Equally, it could be that the machine creates an exact double, complete with all nature and nurture that Angier himself has undergone to become individualised. The latter reading would suggest that Angier is simultaneously the Prestige of the trick and the Prestige who dies. Hence the title I have given them as a collective. The possibility of the Prestiges being exact copies eventually underpins the tragedy of Angier as his own murderer and victim.

Angier's dismissal of the Prestige in the box is recognised in contrasting two attempts at the same trick. Aspects of the final trick wherein Angier is the Prestige, who stands high in the audience of the theatre—outstretched arms, smiling face, pristine suit—mirror an earlier attempt which used a double instead. Root, a man chosen for his likeness to act as a double, also played by Jackman with the use of a dental prosthesis and false earlobes, steals the glory of appearing as the Transported Man.[33] Shots of Root and Olivia are interrupted by a shot of Angier beneath the stage, hands outstretched, head tipped back in rapture as stage light filters through the dusty space and while the sound of applauding grows louder in volume. The crucial difference between these two shots on a superficial level is their lighting. In the final trick, Angier is lit starkly by a theatre spotlight. The long shot shows his whole figure from an upward perspective, highlighting the spectacle of the figure and his action of looking down on the audience. Contrastingly, the earlier trick has softer tones of lighting, those stolen from the stage above, and Angier is backlit as he faces away from the camera. The key element here is the audience. The diegetic audience does not acknowledge Angier in the earlier trick, decreasing its value to him as a performer because he does not reap the benefits of the audience's recognition. The sentiment that "no one cares about the man in the box" is brought to the fore, demonstrating Angier's inability to recognise the Prestiges he creates in the final act to the degree of actualisation.[34] They are the men in the box, and therefore, just as he was, meaningless and unimportant.

Thereby, it is not the pursuit of scientific knowledge in *Frankenstein* or *The Prestige* which leads to corruption and disruption. It is not the monomania resulting from that pursuit, either; rather it is the protagonist's failure to fulfil a caring role for their invention. For Frankenstein, this is his inability to love what he created for its physical appearance and the resulting abandonment which is his ruination. For Angier, it is his desire to be loved and adored by a crowd which causes him to willingly disregard the death of his Prestiges, dismissing them as worthy sacrifices for the admiration he seeks.

The Arts and the Sciences

If we understand that scientific monomania is not inherently disruptive unless utilised by an unstable or unthinking force, then how are we reconcile this with the medium in which it is being discussed?

It is important to note that I do not contend that the science seen in *The Prestige* or *Frankenstein* is an accurate portrayal of the scientific process. It is well documented that popular culture has often been guilty of creating "a negative perception of science and scientists" and that their portrayals on screen especially focus on "going mad or else paying for their hubris—think Dr. Strangelove, Jurassic Park and A Beautiful Mind".[35] However, it is possible to acknowledge these inaccuracies and dramatisations while appreciating the power which cinema and novels possess in shaping the public

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[32] Ibid.

[33] "The Prestige FAQ," *IMDB*, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0482571/faq. [accessed 13 February 2018]

[34] Nolan, *The Prestige.*

[35] Rose, "How to Teach Biology," 289; Jascha Hoffman, "Science at the Movies," *Nature* 455, no. 7214 (2008): 734

understanding. Christopher Rose has identified "biology-based movies" as a useful instrument for "discussing the fundamental ideas, techniques, and societal implications of such topics as human cloning, genetic screening, human origins and evolution, artificial intelligence and recombining animals."[36]

Equally, following this line of thought, I do not think these dramatisations should be regarded as responsible for the negative shaping of public understanding. The gothic nature of Mary Shelley's novel does affect the way in which we imagine the science within the text. It is also accurate to state that the science of *The Prestige* is an afterthought and is not dealt with in any specificity, used as a means by Angier to further the competition to become a better magician than Borden. Science, in this instance, is even relegated to "real magic."[37]

And yet,

> [m]any of us have witnessed numerous cases in which scientists' reassurances about the safety of new innovations and the minimal dangers to society of such innovations have turned to ashes. Experts told us that living near a nuclear plant is safer than taking a bath—this was dramatically belied by Three Mile Island and, more tragically, by Chernobyl.[38]

Thus, *Frankenstein* and *The Prestige* were created in reaction to—and to explore the cost of—"value free science".[39] To accuse the arts of solely creating distrust of science is to deny the prevalent fears of severe scientific consequences which are borne of the discipline's own history.

The scientific objectives of Frankenstein and Tesla are eventually met, but at what cost? In *Frankenstein*, the scientific process is kept shrouded in mystery and secret not because Frankenstein is selfish and wants to keep the glory to himself, but because he, believing that the issue is in the "monster" and not in his failure to act as a parent, wants to keep another scientist from repeating his "mistake". Therefore, the truth of Frankenstein's creature, if discovered within the diegesis and to the audience of the novel, would be appalling. In *The Prestige*, the scientific process is glossed over for the sake of the protagonists' rivalry. The audience in the narrative is stunned and awed by "The New Transported Man" trick, but we, as the cinematic audience, are privileged to its inner workings. As in *Frankenstein*, if these consequences were known to the diegetic audience, they would be a cause for horror: "Think of sawing a woman in half."[40] This reflects the overarching idea in *The Prestige* that the reality of events within the diegesis is ugly and, crucially, not enough: "The secret impresses no one. The trick you use it for is everything."[41]

The same can be said of science in reference to these artistic dramatisations. Science is not foregrounded in either narrative for the reasons highlighted above—namely, the dangers of knowledge and the diversion from the central narrative—but it is also because we, as an audience, do not want to know. Showmanship is a recurring concept in *The Prestige* which separates Angier and Borden's success. If we were to allegorically understand Angier to symbolise the arts and Borden to stand for the sciences, then the former concerns himself with entertainment and awe, tricking the audience just as a novel or a film does, and the latter struggles to attain attention with the truth. Of course, these are simplistic characterisations, but they exemplify something important about these texts: they *showcase* science. Shelley uses gothic literary tradition to entertain the reader and Nolan utilises interlocking narrators and timelines, combining them with the drive to uncover the secret of the trick to motiv-

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[36] Rose, "How to Teach Biology," 289.

[37] Nolan, *The Prestige.*

[38] Bernard E. Rollin, *Science and Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 157.

[39] Ibid*,* 11.

[40] Nolan, *The Prestige.*

[41] Ibid.

ate his viewer. Glory and entertainment are absent from the truth. Frankenstein and Angier recognise this within the text—that the "monster" and the Prestiges must be kept secret—just as Mary Shelley and Christopher Nolan recognise this in their "dressing up plain and sometimes brutal truths to amaze, to shock".[42] In this case, "dressing up" science for entertaining and artistic spectacle. *Frankenstein* and *The Prestige* reminds us that the science they portray is inherently dramatised. Therefore, the value of these texts does not lie in their conception of science as a discipline, but rather in their reflection of the expectations, assumptions, and fears that we, as readership or cinematic audience, invest upon science. ■

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[42] Ibid.