Parodic Transitions to Corporeal Reality: The Spectator's Experience(s) of Mel Brooks' *Young Frankenstein*

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1. Introduction

In line with Paul O'Flinn's idea that "there is no such thing as *Frankenstein*, there are only *Frankensteins*, as the text is ceaselessly rewritten, reproduced, refilmed and redesigned" (O'Flinn 114), Francesca Saggini underlines that "*Frankenstein* is undoubtedly among those texts that have succeeded in staying alive and assertive due to an enduring cultural impact and an extraordinary adaptive capacity that could well be termed biologico-discursive" (Saggini 5). Recent collections dedicated to the legacy of Mary Shelley's novel (Cutchins and Perry; Saggini; Parrino) productively highlight the need for a more open, interdisciplinary and transmedia approach to all those adaptations and after-readings that constitute "an integral part of Shelley's novel from its conception" (Saggini 21). Both Maria Parrino (3) and Dennis R. Perry (138) agree that Shelley's readings (of, for instance, Plutarch's *Lives*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*) radically influenced the rich intertextuality of her novel. Indeed, Perry underlines the analogy between the patchwork body of the monster and the system of references in the novel with the effective image of "intertextual monster" (138). In addition, scholars' fascination with the character of the creature has resulted in a huge proliferation of literature on a considerable variety of topics such as (uncanny) otherness (Tropp; Gualtieri), the blurring of human boundaries (De

Michelis; Colombani), the disruption of parental relationship (Heholt), the double (Botting; Buenza), gender and sexual issues (Young; Picart) and political references (Baldick).

In this article, I would like to focus on Mel Brooks' *Young Frankenstein*, a film parody of a trilogy of film adaptations of Shelley's novel: James Whale's *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein* and Rowland V. Lee's *Son of Frankenstein*. Mel Brooks (and his co-writer and star Gene Wilder, who first came up with the idea during the shooting of *Blazing Saddles* in 1974; see Brooks, *The Story of the Making of* 24; Gehring 151) wanted to spoof another film genre, after his parody of western movies, and decided to target (gothic) horror and specifically the iconic Universal 1930s trilogy.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the role played by the implied spectator of this parodic film. Parody is a practice that explicitly sheds light on the essential role of readers or spectators as figures involved in the process of meaning construction. This article aims to answer the following questions: what is the role of the meta-cinematographic discourse that *Young Frankenstein* conveys on gothic horror as a genre? What is the influence of film parody on our cognitive and aesthetic approach to genre films? To answer these questions, I will demonstrate that *Young Frankenstein* is a parody which exploits the features of the parodied genre for the purpose of displacing the genre itself into its spectator's corporeal reality. The most original part of this paper lies in its methodological approach. I will be applying part of Wolfgang Iser's reader response criticism to the case study of *Young Frankenstein.* This type of research method is usually mentioned as useful (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*; Harries), but not applied in scholarly work on film studies or film parody. The lack of connection between Iser's reader response criticism and film studies could be due to a combination of factors. Firstly, Iser focuses mainly on literary examples, as his work on the implied reader in prose fiction demonstrates. Secondly, there is a

general rejection in film studies of approaches that are classified as literary. However, as Carole Berger points out, the methods outlined by reader response critics such as Fish and Iser are strikingly cinematic (144). Berger, for instance, convincingly points to analogies between Iser's interest in the textual gaps and Eisenstein's theory of montage (148). Another analogy, which is mentioned but only loosely developed by Berger (145), concerns the dynamism both in the process of viewing and in the proliferation of a range of possible responses. A similar argument has been developed by Martin Barker who, adapting Iser's concept of the implied reader for film, coined the term 'implied audience' and demonstrated the usefulness of Iser's concept for a discussion of filmic blanks. While the works by Berger and Barker illustrate the relevance of Iser's theory for film studies, they remain slightly underdeveloped (Berger) or problematic in assuming a qualitative difference between the more automatic activity of gap-filling for spectators of a film in comparison to that of readers of a book (Barker). This article therefore rather aligns with Richard J. Murphy, who demonstrates that the ideas of film theorists such as David Bordwell and his co-author Kristin Thompson form interesting connections with Iser's (Murphy 122), thus showing that Iser's work is compatible with film studies. This article's primary goal too is to demonstrate the potential of Iser's theory in film analysis, by focusing on the specific case of film parody. As I will demonstrate, concepts such as wandering viewpoint, implied reader and negation that are generally applied to non-parodic literary texts show close similarities with highly influential studies on parody, such as Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody* and Margaret Rose's *Parody/Metafiction*. Combining these contributions allows me to argue that the efficacy of a parody lies not only in the spectator's degree of knowledge but also *between* degrees of knowledge.

In the following pages, I will first analyse how *Young Frankenstein* uses the exact same features of the parodied texts, without extraneous elements that are typical of both modern film

parodies and Brooks' other genre parodies, by referring to Rick Altman's work on film genres and Dan Harries' study on film parody. Then, I will focus on the application of Iser's theory in order to illustrate the complexity of intertextual relationships with the target films, and finally I will refer to how corporeality collides with the abstract mechanisms of film genres.

2. A Parody of the Gothic Horror Genre

The trilogy of movies from the 1930s re-tells the story of the ambitious scientist who dares to bring a dead body back to life, which eventually becomes his worst nightmare and a menacing threat for all. Even if many crucial episodes of the novel are represented in these movies and reinvented by Brooks, the trilogy plays freely with the contents of the novel. Several aspects are substantially altered, from the omission of the frame narrative and the multiple viewpoints to the addition of Frankenstein's servant.[1] Scholars like Hutcheon (*A Theory of Adaptation*) as well as J. D. Connor, embrace the idea that fidelity to the source text should not be an urgent issue in adaptation studies and advocate instead for seeing an adaptation as fully independent. However, when approaching the analysis of an intertextual or intermedial product such as a parody, references and comparisons to the materials targeted by the parody become unavoidable. Whether *Young Frankenstein* is considered a film very close to the novel (Brennan), a multi-layered parody of previous films (Elliot), or a parody of the 1930s adaptations (as I will maintain), the ultimate system tackled by Brooks' adaptation is the gothic horror genre, if not the horror genre in general. As outlined by Irina Rajewsky in her distinction between intertextuality and intramediality (where the former becomes a subcategory of the latter), references can be both to an individual film and to a filmic (sub)system (54), which both is the case in *Young Frankenstein* as it aims at the 1930s trilogy as

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[1] On the introduction of the figure of the assistant see Saggini 24.

well as the latter's genre. I argue that the gothic horror genre is both the means or repertoire (Iser 69) through which spectator's expectations are shaped and the target of *Young Frankenstein*.

Defining genres and classifying texts accordingly has been a cultural practice since Aristotle. As Altman argues, film genres are "industrially certified and publicly shared" (16). Altman asserts that the repetitive nature of genres allows us to predict the plot development of a film (25). He agrees with Francesco Casetti, who refers to shared sets of laws that establish communicative formulae and organise a system of expectations (292). Barry Langford agrees with this view but at the same time extends it by seeing genres as constantly evolving, flexible categories. This approach to film genre is in line with Barry Grant's, who avoids genre fixity and argues that genres are non-prescriptive and always combinative (28). Langford also partially agrees with scholars who propose to analyse genre development in historical phases, from an experimental, to a classical and then to a saturated stage, and he modifies existing models into his own evolutionary, flexible one. He refers to John Cawelti, who argues that when genres move from a phase of conscious self-awareness to a phase in which generic patterns become too predictable "it is at this point that parodic and satiric treatments proliferate" (296). The reiteration of familiar traits makes film genres very attractive targets for parodies because they meet what Hutcheon identifies as an essential requirement of parodic codes (*A Theory of Parody* 93). More specifically, the gothic horror genre seems to be a particularly suitable target because its literary and filmic tradition relies on the reiteration of a set of canonical characters, situations, settings, and plots. However, as Altman duly points out, even the interpretation of parodies of canonical genres may vary owing to the multiplicity of their audiences.

Mel Brooks' parody is an interesting case because it embodies and accurately displays a significant feature of parody, that is the paradox of parody (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* 69).

This concept, elaborated by Hutcheon from Mikhail Bakhtin's work, implies the coexistence of authority and transgression in a single text, which "can be normative and conservative, or it can be provocative and revolutionary" and show "reverence and mockery" (75-76). Being able to express "complicity and critique", parody "paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 11).[2] Indeed, even if the gothic horror repertoire is constantly spoofed in *Young Frankenstein*, the intertextual and intermedial relationship between *Young Frankenstein* and its target films is so strong that it would be incorrect to see the parody as a complete rejection of the gothic genre's aesthetic conventions. *Young Frankenstein*, when compared to other film-genre parodies directed by Brooks, proves to be a very sophisticated and subtle genre parody because *Young Frankenstein* literally "incorporates" its targets. Its references to the 1930s trilogy concern not only the contents, but also the structure and the style: in other words, targets become a fundamental and active part of the parody itself. This allows *Young Frankenstein* to be both a parody of the 1930s trilogy and gothic horror genre.

Michela Vanon Alliata points out that Brooks' parody is mainly achieved by means of incongruity (182), which concerns expectancy violation (184) and "involves a moment of surprise or shock that results from the clash of two contrastive meanings" (187). She interprets *Young Frankenstein* as an example of burlesque, "a humorous imitation . . . that depends on an extravagant incongruity between a subject and its treatment" (180). However, she does not compare it with other genre parodies directed by Brooks. In these parodies, Brooks largely employs the strategy of the "extraneous inclusion", that is the introduction of elements that all "fall outside of the target text's general conventions" (Harries 77). Consequently, Vanon Alliata fails to observe that *Young Frankenstein* is the least incongruous of Mel Brooks' film genre parodies,

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[2] In a similar way, also Elliot focuses on the coexistence of conflicting aims of parody in the specific case of gothic film parodies (27).

if we consider its close relationship with its targets. It is the one that embraces and displays Hutcheon's paradox most effectively, because it respects the codes of its targets more than any of his other parodies.

Harries takes inspiration from Altman's terminology in his study on film parody and coins a helpful terminology to describe film parody techniques. His term "lexicon" refers to "elements that populate any film text, such as the setting, the characters, the costumes, and the various items comprising the film's iconography" (8). What he calls "syntax", in turn, includes "the narrative structure in which the lexical elements reside, and functions by regulating the ways in which lexical units can be combined. In other words, the syntax is the film's plot" (8). Then, with the term "style" Harries designates what "(including sound effects, camera movements and dialogue subtitles) waves itself throughout the lexicon and syntax to add additional sets of expectations based on that particular type of film text" (8). While there is a close correspondence between Harries' concepts of lexicon and syntax and Altman's semantic and syntactic categories, Harries' "style" and Altman's "pragmatics" refer to two different aspects. For the purpose of my analysis, Harries' definition of style is more suitable than the category of pragmatics used by Altman. In fact, Altman's study *Film/Genre* focuses on an extremely wide range of practical and actual audience implications,[3] and thus clearly falls outside the scope of this article, which remains text-focused. Following Harries' terminology, my analysis focusses on lexical, syntactical, and stylistic elements to scrutinize the proximity of *Young Frankenstein* to its target movies and the gothic horror genre.

Applying Harries' terminology to Brooks' parody, it transpires that features of the classic gothic horror trilogy are reused with great accuracy. Not only does *Young Frankenstein* parody

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[3] According to Altman, "pragmatic analysis treats . . . a feedback system connecting user groups" (208; 211).

conventions of the gothic horror plot, but also other codes and the mechanisms of the genre that are deeply rooted in the literary tradition of British pre-Romantic and Romantic poets and writers.[4] Among the many gothic semantic/lexical elements that appear in *Young Frankenstein*, the prevalence of night scenes and the omnipresence of thunder, the sound of which is identical to the one we hear in the classical trilogy, are recurring aspects that evidently show a very close relationship to the parodied genre. Other relevant gothic details emerge from the setting. In the opening scene, we are introduced to the story through a gradual zoom towards an almost abandoned castle (00:00-04:55). As we notice later in the movie, it has thick walls and stairs (20:01), a huge wooden gate (18:31), hidden passages (24:21; 26:37), and rooms with human skulls (27:16). The cemetery from where the corpse of the creature is exhumed is another typical semantic/lexical gothic element (see Whale's *Frankenstein* 02:00-06:25). All these details allow us to immediately recognise the gothic horror ambience because they are typical and distinctive traits of gothic literature and cinema. Their constant presence in this film leads us to consider the gothic horror as a fundamental aesthetic feature, even though – and exactly because – it remains the parody's target.

One of the most interesting syntactic elements that *Young Frankenstein* shares with its targets is the encounter between the creature and Elizabeth – a passage that is fundamental for the development of the plot both in the novel and in *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein*. In Shelley's novel (195-6), the monster kills her before she and Victor Frankenstein can spend their wedding night together. The scene is adapted in Whale's *Frankenstein* (48:33-53:14) with Elizabeth surviving the encounter. This change allows Brooks to imagine a sexual encounter between Elizabeth and the monster. To do so, Brooks establishes a close dialogue both with the

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[4] See Punter for further information on gothic horror literature.

novel and with the parody's two filmic targets. In *Young Frankenstein* (01:27:56-01:31:32), as we see in *Frankenstein*, the monster enters Elizabeth's room and scares her; then, he kidnaps her and carries her into a cave, as we see in *Bride of Frankenstein*. There, the monster seduces her. So, the crucial, extremely dramatic original passage remains the aesthetic and narrative reference, but it is also completely overturned by Brooks' parody, since spectators do not expect a narrative twist in which Elizabeth becomes the monster's lover.

In *Young Frankenstein*, creating a certain degree of suspense by playing with what remains off-screen, i.e., a narrative dynamic that is highly characteristic of (gothic) horror movies, this episode also represents a significant example of style. When Elizabeth is in her room, we see the monster's shadow while he walks the streets of the city and we hear his moans, but we do not see him. This happens after Elizabeth's arrival and after a dialogue between her and Frederick on their imminent first wedding night; therefore, we have enough elements to infer that we are about to see an adaptation of the episode described in the novel and represented in Whale's movies. Then, the monster enters the room, and we hear a dreadful scream off-screen in the exact moment when the camera frames the full moon, recalling the details portrayed in Shelley's description of the episode. Another stylistic feature of *Young Frankenstein* with a similar effect is the film's use of black-and-white images which reproduces the atmosphere of the classic trilogy, as stated by Brooks himself (39-40). Wes Gehring agrees with the fact that Brooks wanted to recreate the style of the 1930s trilogy by shooting in black and white, using optical devices such as wipes and iris-outs (154).

As we have seen, the nature of the bond between Brooks' parody and its target films becomes paradoxical if we consider the strong similarities that occur and are reiterated at different levels. The codes of the parodied genre are reused accurately whilst being simultaneously overturned, as I will be discussing in the next section, by unexpected narrative developments and

outcomes that disrupt the spectators' expectations, allowing at the same time a respect and a transgression of generic conventions, as Hutcheon states. This is also in line with Gehring, who considers *Young Frankenstein* as a parody that reaffirms (7) and gives tribute to its targets (166). He argues that, with *Young Frankenstein*, "Brooks accomplishes the most difficult of tasks, a horror spoof that somehow manages to remain amazingly close to the original material" (169).

3. Experience(s) of *Young Frankenstein*

The paradox of parody, described by Hutcheon as a coexistence of respect and transgression of conventions, is well displayed in *Young Frankenstein*, since it reuses and parodies material and mechanisms from both the 1930s trilogy and the gothic horror genre. However, the close relationship with the target movies emerges even more forcefully if we look at the system of references through the use of Iser's theory.

Iser claims that the act of reading is a process and consequently a text cannot be grasped as a whole in a single moment, but through "phases of reading" (108-9), i.e., only gradually from one point to another, paragraph by paragraph, chapter by chapter. This is why he refers to the notion of "wandering viewpoint" as an inevitable condition of the reader (109). As Iser points out, the semantic fulfilment of a text does not take place in the text, but in the reader, who must rely on his/her synthetizing activity (109; 111), a specific form of creative activity that allows the reader to create a certain degree of coherence in what s/he is reading. Both the act of reading and the act of viewing take place in time, and therefore readers and spectators share the inability to grasp the whole text in a single moment. Iser explains that the reader's experience is characterised by a continuous movement from one part to another, by a constant progression and by an accumulation of information. It is here that the synthetizing activity allows the reader to gradually elaborate an

interpretation of the text, by connecting what is already known with new information coming from the progressive act of reading. Even though the act of reading generally (but not necessarily) requires more time than watching a film, the act of viewing works exactly in the same way. Similar to what happens while reading a text, watching a film implies a progression from one scene to another and the very same act of understanding that a scene is connected to another. Both reading a text and watching a film require acts of synthetizing activity, acts of creating meaning from their readers or viewers, with the only difference that a spectator's synthetizing activity operates to create coherence on the basis of audio-visual narrative information that a film's moving images gradually convey. This similarity between reading and viewing as synthesizing and coherence-creating acts makes Iser's proposal suitable for film analysis and facilitates to look at the experience of watching a film and at spectators' meaning construction as dynamic processes (cf. Barker, Berger, and Murphy).

In the case of Brooks' parody, it is important to consider that Brooks himself had been a spectator of the classic trilogy and therefore a reader who operated a synthetizing activity in his experience of these movies. In fact, Rose claims that the parodist "is to be seen in the dual role of reader and writer", as a "decoder" and "encoder" (*Parody/Metafiction* 69). Hutcheon agrees with Rose when she insists on the necessity of focusing on the "inferred encoder and encoding process" because parody is characterised by a self-referentiality "by which art reveals its awareness of the context-dependent nature of meaning" (*A Theory of Parody* 85). In *Young Frankenstein* the dual role of Brooks as both a spectator (decoder) of the 1930s trilogy and director (encoder) of a film parody emerges from the complex system of references to the target texts, whose scenes, semantic/lexical elements and their style have been selected from different moments in the three different movies and put together in a new, original order, which is the final cut of the movie. The

synthetizing and coherence-creating activity enacted by Brooks consists in a reorganisation of the target movies' narrative material and has determined the final version of *Young Frankenstein*.

How does a spectator grasp *Young Frankenstein*'s intertextual and intermedial references? Hutcheon evokes a "pragmatic ethos" that refers to "an intended reaction motivated by the text" (*A Theory of Parody* 55) when she discusses the different pragmatic outcomes of irony and parody. Referring to the importance that parodic codes be shared both by the encoder and the decoder, she argues that "the reader has to decode it [the parody] *as a parody* [emphasis by Hutcheon] for the intention to be fully realized" (93). She agrees with Rose, according to whom "the reception of the parody by its external reader will depend upon the latter's reading of the 'signals' given in the parody text which relate to or indicate the relationship between the parody and the parodied text and its associations" (*Parody/Metafiction* 41). However, Hutcheon seems not to be interested in a more systematic analysis of techniques of parody but in their pragmatic functions, as she states at the beginning of her essay (*A Theory of Parody* 24-25). She refers to the fact that "if the decoder does not notice, or cannot identify, an intended allusion or quotation, he or she will merely naturalize it, adapting it to the context of the work as a whole" (34), a situation that is likely to undermine all the communicative parodic scopes. In other words, she claims that if the decoder does not identify the parodic signals (allusions or quotations), then parody simply does not work, but she does not offer any additional observations on the experience of the decoder. So, Hutcheon gives a superficial analysis of the responses that could differ from the one intended by the text, and this results in a lack of consideration for the range of what Altman calls "multiple conflicting audiences" (208), i.e. the different cases of reception, which are nevertheless explored by Rose. Indeed, Rose describes four possible degrees of knowledge that determine the reader's experience of parody (*Parody/Metafiction* 27). These cases show that the reader might (or might not)

recognise intertextual and intermedial references according to his/her knowledge of (the existence

of) the target texts. What Hutcheon does not consider is what lies between understanding and

missing a parodic allusion, even when she mentions Iser's contribution after having briefly

considered the case of misinterpretations (*A Theory of Parody* 88-89). But then how come a

spectator of *Young Frankenstein* laughs even if s/he does not understand the allusion? In fact, there

are several comic scenes that cause spectators to laugh just because their dynamic is funny, as

Gehring argues (158; 159-60; 164). Rose's taxonomy of the (in)ability to decode the "signals" in

a text resembles Iser's hermeneutic proposal. In fact, not only does Iser's proposal meet the cases

examined by Rose, but it also expands them by allowing in-between possibilities. He refers to two

types of readers diametrically opposed to each other that have been proposed by other scholars,

i.e. the real reader (28) and the ideal reader (29). Instead, Iser proposes the notion of implied reader

to account for the range of all possible effects caused by the text:

> He embodies all the predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect –
> predispositions laid down not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself.
> Consequently, the implied reader as a concept has his roots firmly planted in the structure of
> the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader (34).

The implied reader is described both as a textual structure (the instructions given by the text, the

emergence and the combination of the different perspectives on the fictional world put together by

the author and the "vantage point" from which they are observed) and as a structured act (the

mental, imaginative and creative activity of connecting information and creating mental images)

that constitutes the vantage point of the reader and the "meeting place of perspectives" to become

interrelated, towards the elaboration of a meaning of the text (35-36). In other words, the

communication between text and reader is determined and enabled by structures of indeterminacy

(blanks and negation) that mobilise the reader's comprehension of the text and prompt him/her to fill gaps or react to negations by creating new mental images and meanings.

How can the concept of the implied reader be applied to *Young Frankenstein* and, especially, what are the advantages of applying this concept as an operating category? Firstly, doing so is useful as it allows to include contradictory interpretations. The construction of meaning has already been addressed in film studies through reception, cognitive and phenomenological approaches. Iser's terminology, however, provides a range of concepts that account for and describe what happens when spectators are exposed to a variety of experiences.[5] In the case of film parodies, the creative activity of the spectator consists in the ability to identify the existence of a reference and to decode it. However, if a spectator is not able to do that, Iser's differentiation between the implied, the ideal and the real reader makes it possible to understand the co-existence of two meanings that are equally valuable, do not exclude each other and are to be distinguished from the general notion of polysemy, according to which texts and films can have different meanings. The productivity of the Iser's approach, hence, lies in the fact that it allows different degrees of knowledge to coexist and to generate different experiences. In particular, applying the concept of the implied reader to *Young Frankenstein* reveals that Brooks' adaptation does not just generate a complex system of references with its target texts and, as a gothic parody of gothic horror movies, does not just embrace the paradox of parody, but that it also keeps an autonomous comic structure that can be appreciated by those who are not familiar with the target movies. The following analysis of two scenes serves to substantiate this claim.

After the monster's escape from the laboratory, the creature wanders in the countryside and meets a little girl intent on throwing flowers in a well. The naive child ignores the dangerous nature

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[5] I am aware that this is not the *only* valuable approach, as the reviewers of this article, whose contributions have been extremely productive for the development of my argument, have underlined in their fine comments.

of the creature and invites him to play with her. This scene (01:02:16-01:03:50) is edited with a cross-cutting that shows the child's parents, who are desperately looking for the girl. When the girl and the creature finish throwing the flowers, she asks: "What shall we throw in now?" Then, the creature looks directly at the camera with a glance that establishes a complicity with the spectator. So, if the spectator is familiar with the repertoire and therefore with the target texts, s/he may be aware that the scene refers to Whale's *Frankenstein* (45:46-48:32).[6] In the latter, the creature meets the little girl, plays with her throwing flowers into a lake but then he naively throws her once there are no flowers left, causing her death. In the scene in *Young Frankenstein*, the monster's camera-look is an explicit way to refer to Whale's *Frankenstein* in which the young character dies. However, even for spectators unfamiliar with Whale's film, the editing of this scene still enables them to appreciate its comedy. Indeed, through the editing, the monster's camera-look insinuates that the answer to the girl's question could potentially be the girl herself. These two interpretations can co-exist, and a comic effect is achieved in both cases.

The same situation occurs in the scene that represents the encounter between the creature and the blind hermit (see Shelley 132-135). In Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* (33:23-42:49) the creature is drawn towards a cottage in which a blind hermit is playing the violin. He stays there for a while, and both characters enjoy each other's company. The blind man cannot see the creature's disturbing physical appearance, and he is genuinely happy to have someone in his humble cottage and kindly speaks to him. He offers him some soup and some bread and allows him to stay for the night. The next day, while they are sitting at the table, the hermit gives the monster some bread and some wine. Then, the monster is also invited to smoke a cigar: at first, he is scared by the fire, but after being reassured that it will not hurt him, he enjoys his smoke.

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[6] A similar episode can be found in the novel, see Shelley 71; 142.

Therefore, they spend a cheerful time together until a group of countrymen enter the cottage, who immediately and violently make the creature run away. In *Young Frankenstein*, the scene (01:03:51-01:08:22) is very similar to Whale's adaptation. Even though the hermit does not play an instrument (see Shelley 108-109; 132), the music he is listening to attracts the monster. The monster enters the cottage just after the hermit concludes his prayer by saying "A visitor is all I ask". The dynamic of the scene is similar for many reasons. Again, the hermit is blind and cannot perceive the exterior monstrosity of his visitor and he sincerely enjoys the company of another person. Again, he offers the creature some soup, some wine and a cigar. However, the monster cannot enjoy these gifts. In fact, in Brooks' adaptation, their encounter is not interrupted by someone's arrival but by the damaging clumsiness of the blind man, who unwillingly pours the boiling soup on his host, crushes his beer mug while making a toast and lights up his finger instead of his cigar, thus making the creature leave. Hence, even the spectator who does not recognise how Brooks is overturning Whale's adaptation can appreciate the comedy of the encounter.

The different spectatorial experiences depend on the degrees of knowledge described by Rose and can potentially coexist. Therefore, we can argue that the "general meeting point", that is the meaning of the text, cannot be identified within one specific degree of knowledge. It can only be placed *between* degrees of knowledge that determine the spectator's creative activity of synthetizing and coherence-creation described above. *Young Frankenstein* can be appreciated both by those who are able to recognise every single reference and by those who are not (or are only partly) familiar with (the existence of) its targets. Hence, parody unfolds through a range of possible processes of understanding the text, rather than through the construction of one single meaning. However, for spectators who are not or only partly familiar with the targets, the experience may be closer to slapstick or pure comedy: in other words, spectators enjoy their

viewing by appreciating the fact that *Young Frankenstein* is funny and presents many a comic situation. However, even in the case of uninformed spectators, the experience of *Young Frankenstein* is driven by parodic dynamics for two reasons. Firstly, gothic horror is a very stereotyped genre that relies on the reiteration of canonical features, characters and situations that can be easily recognised by the majority of spectators when reused in a parodic context. Secondly, as I have observed above by referring to Rajewsky, a parodic text can refer both to an individual film and to a filmic (sub)system at the same time. Indeed, *Young Frankenstein* does not just spoof its specific targets, namely Shelley's novel and the 1930s trilogy through the reiteration of characters, settings and scenes, but also the gothic horror genre in general through the reiteration of lexical, syntactic and stylistic codes that are typical of it. For instance, the tense, ominous and menacing soundtrack and the suspense generated by shadows and allusions to the offscreen characterise gothic horror films in general and are decodable even for uninformed spectators. Hence, even if the experience is therefore closer to comedy, it is very unlikely that spectators are unaware of the horror genre's general features and not able to recognise that *Young Frankenstein* parodies this genre's codes and conventions. Therefore, even if some spectators will not recognize the individual targets of *Young Frankenstein*'s parody, it is still likely that all of them are able to appreciate not just its comedy but also its genre parody.

We have seen that Hutcheon's paradox of parody allows for the coexistence of imitation and transgression of the targets and that *Young Frankenstein* embodies the gothic genre tradition by reiterating specific semantic/lexical, syntactic and stylistic elements of its targets and of the gothic horror genre in general. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider how the parody of genre conventions is handled. Since genre defines the spectator's horizon of expectations (see Jauss), a parody of genre reveals how these expectations result from a "dynamic interaction between text

and reader" (Iser 107), characterised by a dialectic interplay between retensions and protensions (111-112) that can cause the modification or even the frustration of the reader's expectations (111). Indeed, what emerges in a parodic text is another fundamental concept analysed by Iser as one of the "basic structures of indeterminacy" that shape the dynamic interaction between text and reader: negation (182). Negation regulates the relationship with the repertoire, the familiar, by invalidating the selected conventions and by making them appear as obsolescent (212-213).

> […] there are carefully directed, partial negations which bring to the fore of the problematical aspects and so point a way to the reassessment of the norms. The partial negation is aimed at the sensitive spot of the norm, but retains it as a background against which the meaning of the reassessment may be stabilized. Negation is therefore an active force which stimulates the reader into building up its implicit but unformulated cause as an imaginary object (213).

In other words, a parodic text underlines structures of indeterminacy that characterise the literary communication and, as a result, readers are invited to reformulate their relationship with the conventions of a genre.

In the case of *Young Frankenstein*, spectators' protensions are generated by the reiteration of gothic horror features and by its system of references. However, these expectations are not satisfied but thwarted. Moreover, in *Young Frankenstein* negation acquires a distinctly corporeal dimension. The majority of scenes in the movie are characterised by unexpected outcomes that cause damage to the characters' bodies or awkwardly or sexually involve them. For instance, when Igor and Frederick go to the cemetery and unearth the corpse from the grave, Igor comments that the dirty job they are doing could be even worse, because it "Could be raining!" (35:05-35:25). Immediately after this line, an unexpected downpour of rain soaks their dirty and tired bodies. This episode reproduces the exact same dynamic that we see in *Frankenstein* (02:00-05:05) and underlines the centrality of corporeality, which is a core topic in the original novel. In its paradoxical fidelity, *Young Frankenstein*'s spectators' expectations, triggered either by the

seriousness of the moment or by the knowledge of the original trilogy, are disrupted with a display of bodies suffering not only their unearthing but also the harsh (and typically gothic) weather. Similarly, in the scene of the blind hermit discussed above, the gifts that the blind hermit offers end up harming the body of the monster, and therefore the original dramatic tension dissolves into a series of awkward and damaging physical contacts. Another hilarious moment involving corporeality takes place just after the cemetery scene (35:26-37:00). Having unearthed the massive coffin, Frederick and Igor place it on a wooden chariot, similarly to what Victor Frankenstein and Fritz do in the second scene of *Frankenstein* (05:06-06:25), and they transport it through the little town. Because of the remarkable weight of the corpse, Frederick and Igor lose control of the chariot, and the coffin falls to the ground. When a police officer approaches, the two try their best to hide the corpse, but they do not manage to fully cover one of its arms, so Frederick pretends that that cold, rigid hand is his. The insistence on corporeality is also underlined by the dialogue between the police officer who asks, "Need a hand?" and Frederick who replies, "No thanks, have one!", thus ridiculing the macabre detail of the dead body.

The negation of the spectators' expectations through characters' irruptive corporeality also involves the sphere of sexuality. As already demonstrated for the encounter between Elizabeth and the monster, instead of the violent or aggressive behaviour the monster displays in the classic trilogy, in Brooks' parody, the creature seduces Elizabeth, who unexpectedly experiences pleasure. As Gehring observes, Elizabeth embodies the repressed sexuality typical of the Victorian age that constitutes a basic horror genre motif (156; 164). In addition, the introduction of the character of Inga, Frederick's sexy assistant, constitutes a disruption of the original plot since Frederick marries her and not Elizabeth. Inga and Frederick, who develop a strong attraction for each other, are involved in a series of misunderstandings and linguistically ambiguous puns throughout the movie

that keep evoking the topic of sexuality. For instance, when Frederick arrives at Transylvania train station, he is invited by his new assistant Igor to get on the chariot, where Inga is lying down on a pile of hay. When she sees Frederick, she naively invites him to have "a roll in the hay" (17:00), as she literally starts rolling on the hay, unaware of the sexual meaning of that expression. Another awkward dialogue unfolds when they are about to start the experiment of bringing the corpse back to life. Since for this purpose the table on which the dead body has been placed needs to be elevated to the open ceiling, Frederick tells Inga: "This is the moment. Well, dear, are you ready? […] Elevate me". However, she misunderstands that he is asking to literally elevate him and the table, but she realises this after Frederick comments "Yes, raise the platform" (41:16). In addition, their final sexual encounter replicates the one between Elizabeth and the growling monster, who appears to be unexpectedly well-endowed, during which Elizabeth sings "Sweet Mystery of Life" out of joy and pleasure. Similarly, when Inga and Frederick get married and they are about to spend their wedding night together (01:37:39-01:40:40), we hear Frederick growl like the monster and Inga sing "Sweet Mystery of Life". The parodic aspect of this scene (that exceeds its merely comical dimension) lies in the fact that Inga's and Frederick's sexual intercourse ensues after Frederick transferred some of his intellectual skills to the monster. Therefore, when Inga asks Frederick "You know, in the transference part, the monster got part of your wonderful brain, but what did you get from him?", spectators who are knowledgeable of the *Young Frankenstein*'s targets can easily deduce that Frederick has become well-endowed as well. Hence, Brooks' insistence on corporeality is persistent and allows him to highlight the relevance of this topic in *Young Frankenstein*'s targets (see Friedman 2022) and to modify spectators' experience with the target genre. In so doing, *Young Frankenstein* orientates its viewers towards a meta-cinematographic reassessment of the gothic genre: spectators are invited to see the gothic not as an abstract and

fixed category that regulates their horizon of expectations but rather as a flexible aesthetic category (Langford; Grant) exposed to unexpected modifications just like those bodies that undergo unexpected corporeal experiences.

4. Conclusions

In sum, this article has demonstrated how the spectator's experience of the gothic horror genre is modified by *Young Frankenstein* and that the film's meta-discursive potential consists in a substantial reassessment of the notion of genre itself. We can therefore conclude that the more a parodic text embraces what Hutcheon calls the paradox of parody, the more a re-evaluation of the parodied genre ensues. *Young Frankenstein*, when compared to other film-genre parodies by Brooks, embodies this paradox most clearly, thus prompting to reconsider the notion of a single experience of a text by insisting on the idea of a range of possible *experiences* that can coexist vis-à-vis within a single text. This reconsideration has been partly enabled through the application of Iser's reader response criticism, which will hopefully be reconsidered as a productive approach in film studies.[7]

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