

GOTHIC HORROR, MONSTROUS SCIENCE,  
AND STEAMPUNK

By

ANTONIE MARIE BODLEY

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis of  
ANTONIE MARIE BODLEY find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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Anne Stiles, Ph.D, Chair

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Debbie Lee, Ph.D

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Michael Delahoyde, Ph.D

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Abstract

By Antonie Marie Bodley, M.A.  
Washington State University  
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Chair: Anne Stiles

Steampunk, as an emerging subgenre of Science Fiction, finds itself appearing in street fashion, subculture, movies, and books. With its motifs inspired from Gothic literature and the Victorian revival of Gothic, it is surprising to find that Steampunk maintains few of the frightening morals expected from the Supernatural and Horror foundation of Gothic. Instead, this new subgenre finds itself opposing and, ultimately, reversing the fundamental Gothic belief that uncontrolled science leads to dire consequences.

While this ideological shift may seem unorthodox and even offensive to the literary tradition, contemporary readers and viewers of Steampunk are enthralled with this change in attitude toward science. Expressing these new ways to indulge in their nostalgia of the Victorian era while simultaneously maintaining visual and thematic inspirations from the Gothic, Steampunk departs from those traditions with a reversal of the negatively romantic view of science, technology, and the monsters. Using a case study of the Steampunk film *Van Helsing*, the Gothic roots are examined using the inspirational texts *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* alongside an analysis of the changing ethos of wonderment toward and faith in “safe” science.

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my colleagues Richard, Sarah, and Ben. Even though it took me a while, I still couldn't have done it without them. They were my inspiration and a constant reminder that yes, indeed, this is possible.

I would like to thank my wonderful husband, Garrett, who supported me in the most difficult times. He was also an essential consultant for the aesthetics of Steampunk and spent hour after late-night hour watching movies and listening to my rants.

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# **GOTHIC HORROR, MONSTROUS SCIENCE, AND STEAMPUNK**

## **INTRODUCTION: STEAMPOWER'D PUNKS**

In a time when new and astonishing technological advancements are everyday events, audiences are seeking answers on how to react to these innovative, and potentially frightening, tools and technology. The Gothic genre offers one appraisal of a similar situation from the nineteenth-century when Gothic artists and authors shared their concern for the rapid development of science and industry which overwhelmed the Victorian era. From harnessing the power of steam to make the once motionless suddenly animated, to the surgical procedures of the autopsy, nineteenth-century Gothic authors expressed their growing fear of the use of technology and its potential threat to humanity. Following this precedent and identifying with the fears and reservations about technology, audiences of the twenty-first century find themselves inspired by the paradoxical attraction of the “era of inventors” which is both fascinating and terrifying. The Steampunk subgenre of Science Fiction (SF) finds optimism within the Gothic while simultaneously reversing the fundamental Gothic belief that uncontrolled science leads to dire consequences.

In this Nuclear Age, rife with nanotechnology, stem cell research, cloning, and other new discoveries of which the common person has little to no understanding, contemporary audiences find that the Victorian era and its anxieties don't seem so bad. In fact, this nostalgic attitude allows viewers to “play” and feel young again: play with the idea of more simple technologies, imagine how they might have lived in the distant past, and allow themselves to participate in the invention of new and safe contraptions. Viewers inherently know that in general their predecessors were apprehensive of the pace of the changes surrounding them, but viewers also

know that they survived and later were known to be amazing entrepreneurs and inventors. Looking back, it is easy for contemporary viewers to believe that what the Victorian scientists invented seems manageable in light of our current technology. This romantic view of the Victorian era offers an optimistic response to the current changes, a response that includes a secure nostalgia in the past while simultaneously invoking the “nightmare” of the Gothic in homage. What could allow for a more inventive, consequence-free return to invention than the *reinvention* of steam power in the hands of Gothic superheroes?

Authors such as Mary Shelley, part of the later Romantic Gothic, and Bram Stoker, in the Victorian period, used the conventions of the earlier Gothic writers who preceded them to graphically illustrate the threat of becoming modernized. Even though few people today are acquainted with the original texts that inspired these Gothic images, twenty-first century viewers feel at ease with these stories and characters as they have become indispensable “cinamyths,” as dubbed by Caroline Picart in reference specifically to Frankenstein’s Monster in *Remaking the Frankenstein Myth on Film*, and ideal images to use in the re-writing of a social memory of science. Steampunk uses the conventions of Gothic horror, from the monsters to the details of a setting and its scene, and mixes these images with more modern action/adventure themes in order to reinvigorate the Gothic with “a hopeful heart.” With this genre shift, these new artists and storytellers forget the warnings and moralizing of the Victorian Gothic writers, while re-imagining “what could have been” if we had stayed on the path of steam technology.

The dream of being forever inventors but never making the transition to dangerous/Dr. Atomic-like sciences and other environmentally ‘unfriendly’ technologies is graphically



illustrated in Steampunk.<sup>1</sup> Most horror and SF films are considered to “poignantly [express] the sense of powerlessness and anxiety that correlates with times of depression, recession, Cold War strife, galloping inflation, and national confusion” (Carroll, “Nightmare” 16). But nestled within the SF genre and borrowing from the conventions of Gothic and Action/Adventure, Steampunk perceives something altogether different in the Horror stories of nineteenth-century literature. For example, “Steampunkers” easily forget that Mary Shelley recalled a pre-Enlightenment time in order to illustrate the black magic of science and express the possible horrors of scientific overreaching. Rather, these Steampunk adventures tell stories of familiar Gothic characters using scientific apparatus to become heroes, not martyrs. Adhering to the graphic conventions of the Gothic, Steampunk uses setting, scene and anachronisms to give the feeling of “genuine” Gothic fiction while simultaneously “managing” the scientific apparatus used. Both viewers of Steampunk and the original audiences of Victorian-era Gothic share in a search for alternative ways to imagine the future: the Gothic with its warnings of what “could be,” and Steampunk with its enthusiasm for “what was.”

“Learn from me, if not from my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge,” Victor Frankenstein implores to the kind Captain who has let him on board (Shelley 31). By using an image like Frankenstein and his Creation in modern interpretations, it would seem logical to use this same plea. On the contrary, twenty-first century audiences see minimal threat in the tale of Frankenstein and show little to no memory of the implied moral content of such stories, especially compared to the very real and tangible threats they are faced with today. The Gothic novels which inspired the fiction budding from this new

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<sup>1</sup>*Doctor Atomic* is an opera by John Adams that dramatizes the story of Robert Oppenheimer’s making and testing of the Atomic Bomb. The opera opened in 2005 and quickly became known for its harsh and often oppressive operatic style that shocks and stuns its audience with the graphic and live depiction of the Atomic Bomb.

fiction/subculture painted a bleak and terrifying portrait of what could happen if humans were to use science for their own selfish ends. But Steampunk does quite the opposite. It shows viewers that, in retrospect, this antiquated technology was actually “safe” and “manageable” – at least in comparison to what viewers find today in their pockets (from cell phone to wireless internet) and homes (such as microwaves and speaking computers) – and can be used to save the day.

Audiences are reminded of a time in their childhood when tinkering and investigating how things work was safe and the boundless discoveries were innocent and without price.

Steampunk ironically uses images and storylines of the *negative* romantic Gothic Horror and turns them into *positive* romantic vessels that return viewers to the age of gadgets. This shift of optimism helps audiences forget the times when technology was used for terrorizing machines (from our own airplanes to the still present threat of a Dr. Strangeloveian apocalypse) and gives us a chance to imagine “what if.”<sup>2</sup> What if humans had not discovered the Bomb? What if we never made airplanes and weapons able to attack us on our own precious soil, and instead traveled the world in steam powered zeppelins? Forget Prometheus: fire is tame compared to the nuclear reaction of fusion, fission, and other obscure technologies that the average person cannot begin to understand, let alone make with his/her own hands. By returning to a time before the Bomb, Steampunk, both as a subgenre of SF and as an alternative subculture, delivers viewers to an imagined nineteenth century, a time when the technology was believed to be “in the hands of every man.” Or, as Margaret Killjoy explains in her poetic introduction to *The Steampunk’s Guide to the Apocalypse*: “We wave goodbye, on no uncertain Terms, to the invisible Workings

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Carter, in *Specter or Delusion? The Supernatural in Gothic Fiction*, explored how *Frankenstein* is a definitive example of Hume’s definition of Negative Romanticism: “Faced with a ‘barren and alien world’ in the absence of faith in the ordered universe of traditional religion, Negative Romanticism expresses, instead of hope, ‘bafflement, confusion, an despair,’ dealing with its disconnects by ‘posing paradoxes, dwelling on the writer’s pain’” (66).

of the cyberian World. Our Future lies within honest Technology, a Technology that is within our Reach, a Technology that will not abandon us . . .” (1). No matter how bleak a post-apocalyptic world with no automated machines seems, Killjoy replies to this pessimism with her “Steampunk motto”: “One who clings to Modernity will fall with Modernity. But one who builds water-powered Refrigerators will eat summer fruits in Autumn” (1).

In Steampunk, viewers remember a time in European history *without* the darker side of the British Empire and an “appreciation [for] the less subtle Technologies of Yesteryear” (Killjoy 1). “Steampunkers,” those who participate in the actual construction of this fashion/sub-genre, are men and women of many ethnicities and backgrounds which are very different from the actual professional people of the Victorian era. Women and men both participate in this reinvention. Never mind that the British Empire was one of the most imperialistic and destructive political powers that used its ethnocentric mentality to dominate much of the European, North American, and Indian continents. What really matters to this rewriting of the Imperialistic British Empire is the *imagined wonder* of science. In fact, the racism and sexism inherent behind the Crown becomes a minor detail that is easily forgotten as men and women of the twenty-first century to enjoy the images of steam power and innovation at their best. Steam power is nothing like the “super-destructive monster who has slept in the earth since prehistory,” as Susan Sontag describes her metaphor for the Bomb in “The Imagination of Disaster” (218). For Steampunkers, that monster has been put back to sleep, and instead the Gothic monsters are displayed to prove to audiences the possibilities of a new imagining of science, a science of hope.

Steampunk, as a subgenre of SF, is identified by its pre-industrial steam-based technology with which the characters perform unique feats of bravery and discovery, often with the backdrop of Queen Victoria's England, sometimes with foggy central European villages, but always with the power of science on their side. Complete with the top hats, corsets and Victorian "sensibilities," Steampunk characters are a mixing-and-matching of our selective memory of the nineteenth-century with a glossing of Romantic and Victorian ideals, plus the modern fast-paced action "accompanied by goggles, ancillary wings, compasses and DIY [Do-it-Yourself] accessories" animated (literally) in a whole new way with elaborate Computer-Generated Images (CGI) (Rowe).<sup>3</sup> Steampunk did not begin as a literary sub-genre of fiction. In actuality, it first attracted attention as a unique fashion trend: an updated (yet anachronistic) blending of Gothic street fashion (the corsets, black eyeliner and lace) emerging in the 1980s and melding with the DIY attitude of British Punk.<sup>4</sup> Imagine a man in a traditional suit and vest, pocket watch chain between the pockets, dapper shoes, a top hat and dreadlocks twisted with wire and handmade leather automobile goggles mixed in with the wires: this is the image of Steampunk on the streets of the twenty-first century.

The fashion is visible and arguably just blossoming in cities notorious for their fashion, from New York to London to Tokyo and on the runways for designers such as Jean-Paul Gaultier. Steampunk fashion and the DIY inventors have been featured in *The New York Times* and fashion magazines covering Victorian revivalist conventions, but when trying to pin a date

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted here that the goggles mentioned by Rowe are by no means unique in the Steampunk world. In fact, most images found on the internet relating to the Steampunk subculture ritualistically include some sort of aviator/automobile driver goggles held together with rivets and leather – and of course, were handmade and can be found on eBay!

<sup>4</sup> Whether or not the fashion *started* the Steampunk trend in fiction is irrelevant; however, the fashion movement is most referred to when trying to define this sub-culture/subgenre and it is often marked as the inspiration for the literature and films that follow.

on the actual “formation” or location of Steampunk fashion, the closest anyone gets is to say it’s “right now” or “cutting edge.” Online social networks and public Wikis are the most reliable way to track down information about this distinctive fringe fashion. “Steampunkers,” as labeled by author K. W. Jeter in a 1987 letter to a popular SF magazine of the time (*Locus*, published since 1968), are also well known for their love of fiction related to the Gothic (Steel).<sup>5</sup>

Many believe in living a minimalist lifestyle complete with oil-burning lamps and makeshift refrigerators. But they should not be confused with neo-luddites; their emphasis is on a creative and environmentally friendly lifestyle, not on abhorring all things modern. Sharon Steel for *The Boston Phoenix* shares her observations of the Steampunk sub-culture:

The Steampunk ideology is in no way uniform — like the culture itself, it can be taken apart and put back together to suit its makers — but it seems to be ingrained in a combination of radical politics, an anti-corporate, do-it-*completely*-yourself ethic, and an acceptance that we are already living in the dystopian future we’ve been warned about.

Those in love with the Steampunk movement share a “hopeful heart,” even in the face of this “dystopian future.” David Dowling, an architect, artist and entrepreneur who specializes in large-scale Steampunk-inspired building art, expresses his feelings on Steampunk:

[There is] a desire to stand on the cusp of the industrialized, mass-marketed, engineered, branded iSpend future and the labor-intensive, technologically impoverished, hand-crafted past and ask: where did we go wrong? What could

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<sup>5</sup> In his letter, Jeter prophetically suggested to *Locus* magazine that “Victorian fantasies are going to be the next big thing.” Of course he was a little early with his guess, but is likely pleased to see how far this subgenre has come since he first identified its qualities in books like *The Anubis Gates* (1983) by Tim Powers and James Blaylock’s 1986 *Homunculus* (Steel).

we have done differently? How can we re-imagine the fiction we will become in the future?” (Steel)

Those who have observed Steampunkers in action say that “on the surface, [they show] an embrace of the neo-Victorian, but deeper than that, [there is] a keenly felt reaction to the stark modernity that has come to homogenize a generation with iPods and Ikea” (Donahue).

As with many sub-cultures and alternative lifestyles in the United States, authors and publishers want in on the action, to share and/or profit from these unique interests.<sup>6</sup> As the fashion began to establish itself on blogs, internet social networks and at conventions in the late 1980s and '90s, tales of post-apocalyptic futures and historical fictions of Victorian London also appeared with images of “Dirigibles [that] rule the air, and [an] upper [class that] employ[s] clockwork servants to serve their meals” (Bebergal).<sup>7</sup> These new stories and books first arrived on bookshelves under the Science Fiction label. Even new reference materials began to appear; *The Encyclopedia of Fantastic Victoriana* by Jess Nevins is one such example. But, as far as literary genres are concerned, these new books are difficult to define. They do not fit in the Historical Fiction genre because of the unrealistic technology taken to an extreme, not possible in our documented history. Neither do these books fit in the Fantasy genre: they don't feature

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<sup>6</sup> Some books which are not Steampunk oriented, but still echo this growing ethos of “Do-It-Completely-Yourself” but deserve attention, include *The Freedom Manifesto* and *How to be Idle* by Tom Hodgkinson, *The Way of the Small: Why Less is More* by Michael Gellert, and *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture* by Amy Spencer. The movie *Fight Club*, inspired by Chuck Palahniuk's short story, is another example of a text/film that has gained popularity for this similar message of anti-corporate oppression and rebellion against the system while minimizing the “stuff” that one collects: “You are not your fucking khakis,” as Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) in the film memorably exclaims.

<sup>7</sup> Author of the *Aether Emporium* (a website/wiki dedicated to supplying curious researchers with background into Steampunk fashion and tidbits about where in Europe to travel for the best in Steampunk inspired buildings, boats, hotels, restaurants, etc.) asserts that “Steampunk is not a sub-culture, it is a community of folks around the world who enjoy a variety of pastimes and interests who share similar creative values bought together via the web,” making it all the more difficult to define as a subgenre, even though his definition sounds much like a subculture, if only a digital one.

dragons or faeries, they are more similar to the “history” recalled. The Science Fiction section seemed the most logical arrangement for these books.

Steampunk enthusiasts added to the demand of newer editions of works by Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and even stimulated the publication of contemporary Steampunk-specific fiction from authors such as William Gibson and Bruce Sterling. Gibson is most commonly associated as having started the “Cyberpunk” craze with his book *Neuromancer* and collection of short stories, *Burning Chrome* (which includes the well-known short story “Johnny Mnemonic,” inspiration for the 1995 film starring Keanu Reeves).<sup>8</sup> Together with Sterling, these authors are often credited with bringing Steampunk to literature with *The Difference Engine* (1991). With the introduction of this book, “Steampunk was properly introduced and brought to the forefront, legitimized as a literary movement all its own that would eventually grow into something much larger” (Steel). While Cyberpunk is more a future-looking, hyper-digital genre of SF, Steampunk looks to the past and “lo-fi” tech for its inspiration. “Like a beacon of light out of the cyberpunk scene,” Andrew Rowe for MTV explains, “‘steampunk’ is a sci-fi subculture that offers a fresh, romanticized view on technology by making it retro.” Ruth La Ferla for *The New York Times* explores the definition of Steampunk, asking connoisseurs what it means to them:

“To me, it’s essentially the intersection of technology and romance,” said Jake von Slatt, a designer in Boston and the proprietor of the Steampunk Workshop

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<sup>8</sup> Cyberpunk, also a subgenre of SF is characterized by its highly digital, action/adventure setting, commonly set in the “near-distant” (often dark) future, complete with “wetware” (implanted) technology and virtual realities. Popular examples of Cyberpunk include the book *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson and the film *Blade Runner*, 1982. Even though the movie was based on the 1968 book, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Phillip K. Dick, most audiences recall the film because of the unforgettable dark cityscape of the future as imagined by director Ridley Scott) and *The Matrix* series (1999-2003).

(steampunkworkshop.com), where he exhibits such curiosities as a computer furnished with a brass-frame monitor and vintage typewriter keys.

That definition is loose enough to accommodate a stew of influences, including the streamlined retro-futurism of Flash Gordon and Japanese animation with its goggle-wearing hackers, the postapocalyptic scavenger style of *Mad Max*, and vaudeville, burlesque and the structured gentility of the Victorian age.

Another way to look at this genre is explained by the lead singer of a Goth/Steampunk-inspired band called Abney Park from Seattle, Washington, who says, “Steampunk is not dark and spooky [as might be expected from its Gothic roots]. . . . It’s elegant and beautiful” (La Ferla). Notice that over and over again as critics and reporters attempt to add their voice to the evolving definition of this new genre/subculture, words like “romantic,” “beautiful,” and “fresh” continue to appear, words which are far from the often ominous language used to explain the Gothic depictions of science.

Some popular examples that the common audiences may recognize from the big screen include *Wild Wild West* (starring Will Smith, 1999), *Sleepy Hollow* (with Johnny Depp, 1999), and *The Time Machine* (2002).<sup>9</sup> Many of the films by Terry Gilliam (*Brazil*, *Twelve Monkeys*, and his more recent *Brothers Grimm*) are mentioned as some of the best Steampunk examples, not for their setting, but for the images of strange technology and the exposed workings of “things” Gilliam uses throughout. Some of the latest Steampunk films include *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003), *Hellboy* (2004) and *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008), *Van*

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<sup>9</sup>In *Sleepy Hollow*, think of the scenes when Ichabod Crane (Johnny Depp) uses his bizarre contraptions of “science.”



*Helsing* (2004), *The Prestige* (2006), and *The Golden Compass* (2007).<sup>10</sup> Even though each of these films appears very different in terms of characters and even setting, they all share amazing technological doo-hickies powered by steam or other outdated, sometimes supernatural methods. In most cases these amazing technologies save the day and add a unique aesthetic of bric-a-brac and thriftiness. Also, all these films have an action/adventure plotline, often including conflict between some greater evil and a down-right *bad* guy. Within the subgenre of Steampunk, a new cast of characters has joined the ranks of the entertainment machine, giving Gothic scholars something unusual to ponder. Inspired by the vision (not necessarily the popularity, for it is far from a mainstream media) of Steampunk, filmmakers are not only animating the nineteenth-century for audiences, but are also returning to the main characters to retell those stories. Audiences experience Dr. Frankenstein's lab as an evil tool for Dracula's despicable plans, and the well-educated Van Helsing romping across the rooftops of London, hunting down the brute that has become Mr. Hyde, and Captain Nemo's sword-shaped submarine navigates the canals of Venice. From this bizarre mix of test tubes, steam powered automobiles, monsters and top hats, how do today's filmmakers retell the classics and how do audiences react to these new versions of historical bricolage?

Utilizing Gothic archetypes to show the wonder of science on the popular screen, *Van Helsing* is particularly useful for understanding present day pop-culture reconstructions of

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<sup>10</sup> The films listed above are exclusively made in the U.S., but it is important to note that Japanese animated films include some of the most famous Steampunk images, and may have been inspirational to many of the U.S. ones. Films by Hayao Miyazaki are often noted for their Steampunk themes: *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Castle in the Sky* (1986) – which is based loosely on *Gulliver's Travels Beyond the Moon* – are two prominent examples. It is also interesting that these films have recently been re-released in the U.S. (in association with Disney Pictures) to welcome reviews.

Note here that half of the films listed above were based on graphic novels, emphasizing the *visual nature* of Steampunk.

Victorian and Romantic tales while still falling within the action/adventure Steampunk realm. Not only is *Van Helsing* one of the most popular big screen representations of Steampunk, but it conveniently uses the familiar Gothic characters, from Dracula and other vampires, to Frankenstein and his Monster. It is no surprise that filmmakers seeking a healthy monetary return would choose the Steampunk genre together with the Gothic for inspiration with some romantic imagination thrown in. If these stories were popular “back then” how then could they go wrong?<sup>11</sup> In fact, the number one reason for the popularity of Steampunk, as described by Stephen H. Segal in his column for *Fantasy Magazine*, is that “It’s the geekery the genders can share.” He goes on to explain one of the most likely reasons for film producers to be interested in this genre: “On the most basic, most appealing social level, steampunk is a way to masculinize romance. That is to say: Steampunk takes something stereotypically feminine that most boys hate – Victorian lace and frills and tea and crumpets – and says, ‘Hey, how about some *robots* with that?’”(Segal). Realistic social stories of nineteenth-century characters, such as *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Little Women*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and many other films based on their Romantic and Victorian novel counterparts mostly received attention from female audiences and had little success in the box-office. Steampunk films, on the other hand, catch the attention of action-craving young to middle age audiences of both sexes, generally attracting large audiences with the flashy graphics and adventure plots.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “Back then,” both as popular pulp tales and also as the images of the Horror genre. This can be seen especially considering how the Frankenstein and Dracula myths made Universal Pictures famous for founding the Horror genre in film with James Whale’s monumental *Frankenstein* films.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that *all* Steampunk films fall under the Action/Adventure category; in fact, some of the most definitive Steampunk films are much darker and sometimes difficult to watch with their dark twists and Horror themes (*Sleepy Hollow* is a good example, as is *City of Lost Children*) and yet they still continually fall under this subgenre because of their visual motifs and Jules Vern-inspired technology, or “Vernian” inventions, as Steampunkers call it.

For a little perspective: according to *Box Office Mojo*, *Van Helsing* grossed approximately \$120 million in domestic theaters and *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (another popular Steampunk film that was released just before *Van Helsing* in 2003) fell short with \$66 million, having spent over \$78 million for its budget, but both surpassed the popular period romances for overall ticket sales. *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) finished the box office season with \$43 million and *Emma* (1996) only made \$22 million. Even *Vanity Fair* (2004), with its sumptuous sets and a budget to match of \$23 million, only grossed \$16 million in overall ticket sales. While these “chick flicks” have the advantage of requiring a lower investment budget (yes, the costumes and set details of recreating nineteenth-century London is expensive, but it is minimal compared to the budget required for CGI), the triple digit millions of dollars is attractive to any filmmaker. Another interesting note about the popularity of films surrounding these Gothic characters is that in the '90s the famous directors, Kenneth Branagh and Francis Ford Coppola, offered their own more “genuine” book-based versions of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (Branagh 1994) only grossed \$22 million and *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1994) earned a healthy \$82 million. This illustrates that simply choosing to use these characters does not guarantee a blockbuster reaction, but *something* about *Van Helsing* worked for audiences in ways that neither the period pieces nor the “genuine” films did.

To emphasize the point that these Steampunk films help viewers forget their worries of science and allow a reversion to a safe tinkering, most film critics have reacted with praise for the “action” of the films and almost always mention the “fun”; “fear” appears as far from their criticism as possible. Joshua Tyler for *CinemaBlend.com* explains *Van Helsing* as “a fun summer movie that’s taking flack for failing to be a deep moving character study [and] for not

showing proper reverence to the classic monster it throws into its cauldron. But when it comes to classic monsters as big budget entertainment, Director Stephen Sommers proves yet again that he knows how to please.”<sup>13</sup> Tyler illustrates clearly the desire to not worry about the “proper reverence,” but to enjoy the “big budget entertainment.”

More than simply making money with a box-office hit, these Steampunk films attempt their own version of Dr. Frankenstein’s experiments. Taking bits and pieces from a graveyard of fiction, these filmmakers add the cutting-edge film technology to literally reanimate creatures of the past with a modern-day flare and renewing our wonder with science rather than reminding us of the horror and apprehension illustrated by the Victorian authors. Segal explores the interest in this return to the Victorian fiction as an entertainment vehicle that “lets us go back, at least in our imagination, and try again.” This is not simply a nostalgic longing to return to the past, but rather a way to re-envision our future and our science, bleak as it may be:

Today, that classic vision of the future – not only *hasn’t* happened, but right at this moment, as we stare down the barrel of resource shortages and rising global temperatures, the people of Earth don’t really believe it’s going to . . . . In effect, we were expecting *Star Trek* and we got *Blade Runner*.<sup>14</sup> (Segal)

Steampunk allows the viewers to imagine themselves as part of a new invention of technology: “the fact is that when you have to get your hands or brain dirty puzzling out *how stuff works*, you

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<sup>13</sup> Sommers started with much less action-based films like *The Adventures of Huck Finn* (1993), until “Victor Frankenstein must have strapped him to the gurney and turned on the juice,” as Rodger Ebert put it, “because he made a U-turn into thrillers” and gave audiences films like *Deep Rising* (1998) and *The Mummy* series. Overall, it seems Stephen Sommers has a bit of a fixation on recreating and “updating” old, classic stories; and not just *updating*, but *electrifying* these classics.

<sup>14</sup> Remember here that *Blade Runner* typifies the definition of *Cyberpunk* – the SF subgenre that *Steampunk* appeared in direct opposition to. Here Segal stresses the dichotomy between the clean and streamlined future portrayed in *Star Trek*, and the dark and frightening hyper-digital future of *Blade Runner*.

can't be blasé about technological miracles – you're forced to realize what miracles we've actually wrought" (Segal). Suddenly, the images of the Gothic become carriers of the brilliance and hope of science, reminding viewers that there are more wonders to come from science than just the Bomb if we can only allow ourselves some creative "play." This is important because, as Segal describes the "classic future" that *hasn't* happened, "[the] new discoveries and technologies would lead us to a glorious golden age, in which robots would free us from drudgery and we'd use rocket ships to colonize the galaxy, redeeming manifest destiny in the name of all humanity together." In fact, according to Segal, our current future seems quite hopeless because of those technologies.

The next chapter introduces the genre cohesion between the Gothic literature that inspired many of the Steampunk motifs and the section of Steampunk films that employ these Gothic images and archetypes. Separated by decades of change, from literary style to technological development, the Gothic and Steampunk would seem the most opposed genres, but in reality the two share some startling similarities. From the scene and setting to the emphasis on emotional involvement, this new SF subgenre does not stray far from its inspirational roots in Gothic literature. Focusing on the shared features of the two, specifically the portrayal of the well-known Gothic archetypes and the images of science, chapter two examines how Steampunk illustrates an altered ideology of science compared to its Gothic predecessors. Chapter three gives a case study of a particularly Steampunk-like film, *Van Helsing*, to explore how the Gothic is resurrected with new vigor on the modern screen.

## CHAPTER 1

### GOTHIC ROOTS AND GENRE SHIFTS

Before exploring how a film such as *Van Helsing* shifts the conventional Gothic assertion of the “evils” of science to its own Steampunk image, it is important to understand what makes a text “Gothic” and how its historical connotations shape the Gothic side of Steampunk. It is not only the characters which are drawn directly from the Gothic literature, but also other staple elements that literature critics identify as being fundamentally “Gothic.”<sup>15</sup> The Steampunk genre is broken into many subcategories, in much the same way Gothic proper is broken into many different subgenres, from Gothic Romance, Gothic Horror, to Supernatural Gothic. This makes it difficult to compare the two. Steampunk takes its inspiration most from the general conventions of the Gothic, but its blatant “pro-science” appeal comes as a direct response to the Supernatural Gothic, that is Gothic that features an uncanny event or fantastic creatures/beings that motivate the plot. Both the Supernatural Gothic and Steampunk find themselves within the galaxy of Science Fiction (and its many subcategories) because of their fantastic use of technology. Parallels can be drawn between the two subgenres in their shared visual motifs, a unique use of time (both in a chronological/historical sense and in the settings they use), and the importance of audience involvement.

While the Gothic genre as a whole may be a “staggering, limping, lurching form, akin to the monsters it so frequently describes,” it is also true that “no other modern literary form as

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<sup>15</sup> Even though there has been much controversy surrounding the Gothic tradition and its legitimacy in the literary canon, for the purposes of this paper, it is safe to assume that the Gothic is indeed a genre in itself based on the critics surrounding this discussion. In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980), literary theorist Eve Sedgwick wanted “to make it easier for the reader of ‘respectable’ nineteenth century fiction to write ‘Gothic’ in the margin . . . and to make that notation with a sense of linking specific elements in the passage with specific elements in the constellation of Gothic conventions” (2).

influential as the Gothic novel has also been as pervasively conventional” (Punter and Byron xix; Sedgwick 8). Eve Sedgwick, in her often cited work *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, offers one of the clearest statements about the Gothic:

Once you know that a novel is of the Gothic kind ... you can predict its contents with unnerving certainty. You know the important features of its *mise en scene*: an oppressive ruin, a wild landscape, a Catholic or feudal society. You know about the trembling of the heroine and the impetuosity of her lover. You know about the tyrannical older man with the piercing glance who is going to imprison and try to rape or murder them. (8)

Though each of these elements changes in one way or another from text to text, Sedgwick’s desire to define the genre inspired critics to do the same. The first Gothic writers were “faced [with] a disjunction between the novel form and the Gothic material” because, as George Haggerty explains, “the image of a nightmare is at odds with the emerging concept of novelistic realism” (3). Steampunk, in the same way, seems equally at odds with balancing the conventions of the Gothic and the desire to meet the contemporary needs of Action/Adventure in the SF genre. By examining the coherence of the Gothic form and its motifs, the parallels in Steampunk illustrate how these two seemingly opposed forms complement each other quite well.

The first convention that connects Steampunk fiction to its Gothic roots is the attention to the details of the *mise-en-scène* (everything presented before the camera for the audience to see). Obviously the costumes designed for the Steampunk films are instrumental in identifying Steampunk as such (note the top hats, corsets and dreadlocks from above). But the actual set pieces and the locations used to tell the story also add to the audiences’ identification with the

Victorian era and the Gothic texts. For Haggerty, “space is always threatening and never comfortable in the Gothic novel; castles loom with supernatural capacity for entrapment; cloisters induce claustrophobia; rooms become too small; vistas too grand” (20). Gothic literature uses “adjectives [that] are selected to establish mood rather than to describe in any specific way – they depict the scene less than they create a response to it” (De Vore et al.). This disjointed atmosphere of “the decaying, ruined scenery [which] implies that at one time there was a thriving world” (De Vore et al.) is characteristic of the both genres. Whereas the Gothic used these images as a prelude to horror, Steampunk finds a romantic appeal, using imagery to inspire a nostalgic reflection and graphic depictions of emotional places. Nothing is genuine or realistic in these emotionally charged Gothic and Steampunk scenes, but it is always “moody.” For example, a wooded grove filled with fog on a dark night suggests that the gnarled trees go on forever and that the castle backlit in the background doesn’t *need* to appear real. In the Gothic Horror films, the background was a painted canvas, presented to suggest the horror that the audience anticipated, simply the backlit form was enough. In Steampunk, that same image is computer generated, and this time the audience finds itself expectant . . . the stage is set for an action/adventure thriller. E. A. Baker’s 1907 introduction to Lewis’ *The Monk* explains Anne Radcliffe’s impact on the scenes of Gothic texts as a whole:

Mrs. Radcliffe [author of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian*] discovered one thing of unique importance, the value of atmosphere: landscapes, ruins, characters, costumes, light and shade, are subdued by delicate touches to the right



key of emotion; everything lulls the reader into the state of mind most harmonious with the incidents to be enacted.<sup>16</sup> (xi-xii)

Used in a Steampunk setting, each of these Gothic elements of the scene work in concert, allowing the viewer of a Steampunk film to enjoy the Gothic atmosphere without the moralizing of Gothic Horror.

Once the Gothic “scene” is established, the setting or *location* where the action takes place in a Steampunk film is also unique to the connection between these two subgenres. Steampunk, like the Gothic, finds itself set in many different times and places. They are set not “here” or “now” to the audiences experiencing the text/film. For example, in Steampunk the main characters often find themselves in a distant future but still on Earth or some Earth-like place, similar to the Japanese animated re-make of *Metropolis*, 2001. Perhaps it is set on a different planet colonized by humans, as seen in Disney’s 2002 *Treasure Planet*, based loosely on Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*. Sometimes a place familiar to the audience is used but with dark twists and changes, as presented in the dark cityscapes of Britain in the 2004 Japanese film *Steamboy*. Even familiar fantastic worlds are used, based on fairy tales, and then altered, such as *Sleepy Hollow* and *Brothers Grimm*. The actual *where* and *when* are less important than the clear differences presented, but they are still hinged in the imagined image of Victorian-era Britain wrapped in a Gothic atmosphere.

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<sup>16</sup> Notice how literary critics, as early as the 1900s, were critiquing on Radcliffe’s style versus other Gothic writers also using images of nightmare. Baker complains that “[Radcliffe’s] ghosts are all make-believe, and the reader’s alarm is carefully soothed before it exceeds the point of pleasant excitation” (viii). He quickly clarifies that “There is no mistake, on the contrary, about Lewis’s ghosts; they are the most bloodcurdling creations that a crude fancy can depict” (Baker viii). Value in this case is placed on the “realism” of the fantastic world created by the Gothic authors. “Writers like Walpole and Lewis,” James Preu explains, “went in for real spooks and authentic goblins” (245).

Both Steampunk and the Gothic conventions have the anachronistic nature of their settings as a prop within the elaborate scheme of creating a radical disjoint from reality and “somewhere, sometime.” Indeed, as Robert Mighall explains, this changing concept of time was part of the Gothic from the very first attempts to define it:

The mobility of the idea of the ‘Gothic’ is perhaps best appreciated by considering what it signified for the fiction that first became associated with the term. When Horace Walpole referred to *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) as ‘A Gothic Story’ he was pointing to the fact that it was set in (and in his original ruse, hailed from) some time between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. It was ‘Gothic’ because it was ‘Medieval’. (xvi)

It may seem necessary that Gothic tales, based on Walpole’s definition, should always be set in some *distant* and *foreign* place and time. But what is truly essential is that the time and place *different* from the contemporary. It is the difference between the now and then, regardless of what “then” is referring to (even a “then” yet to come) that is an essential connection between the Gothic writers and what is experienced in Steampunk today. In Gothic literature, readers are presented with a distant past in a distant land as a physical separation between how things were and how things are. Mighall again explains this concept well:

‘History’ reveals itself to be central to the Gothic mode even when it depicts a contemporary. . . . The Gothic dwells in the historical past, or identifies ‘pastness’ in the present, to reinforce a distance between the enlightened now and the repressive or misguided then. The tyrants and monsters of this mode represent an attempt to exorcize the ghosts of the past. (xviii)

Over a century later, audiences are still returning to the ghosts of the past to recreate an alternative world, only this time that alternative world features the hope and promise of using science wisely. As Sharon Steel describes Steampunk, “the Information Age collides with the Steam Age to create something equal parts frightening and glorious, and it’s within these paradoxes and purposeful anachronisms that Steampunk lives and breathes.” Robert Hume defines the requirements of the Gothic as including a setting, “sufficiently removed from the reader of 1800, moral norm[s] [are] present in the story [and] action derives from a complex villain-hero” (286). This setting is not only for the drastic disjoint between *here and now* versus *then*, it is also essential to the emotional experience. Anne B. Tracy explains her definition of experiencing the “fallen world” and that “we experience this fallen world through all aspects of the novel: plot, setting, characterization, and theme” (qtd. in De Vore et al.).<sup>17</sup> This feeling of “anachronistic anarchism” is one of the major connections between Gothic literature and Steampunk stories of today.

While time and setting are often mobile in both genres, three important elements of the *mise en scene* which tend to be consistent to both are atmosphere, scene, and characters all of which work together to involve the viewers. The writers and directors of these contemporary films make use of the visual conventions set forth by the Gothics. It seems essential to maintain the Gothic insistence on “making a profound impression on sensitive minds,” as E. A. Baker praises *Frankenstein* in his introduction to *The Monk*: Shelley “fully depicts the mental and

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<sup>17</sup> While there are many other critics who outline the “major” elements of the Gothic, these elements above will prove the most useful for the discussion of Steampunk. Charlene Bunnell, for example, in her essay for *Planks of Reason*, the 1984 edition, writes at length about what she defines as the four key elements of Gothic literature and their intimate connection to the diurnal worlds – the biggest threat to the human psyche: Setting (to establish mood and the existence of the dual worlds), journey (movement between these two worlds – physical, psychological, or both), double and supernatural (these allow movement into or perception of the nocturnal) (82).

emotional states of her principal actors” (xii). Bunnell insists this “full depiction” which readers experience is essential to the Gothic experience, and in Steampunk, viewers experience just as much of the emotional experience equivalent to readers of the penny dreadful. Directors of Steampunk films choose to enchant their audiences into their creative world by using the romanticized imagery of the Gothic to involve the audience in the action/suspense/drama.

From this combination of visual motifs borrowed from the Gothic conventions, Steampunk brings forth an emotional reaction to action just as the Gothics used these same elements to accomplish an atmosphere of horror. Hume expresses the importance of involving the reader emotionally: “The prime feature of the Gothic novel, I believe, is its attempt to involve the reader in special circumstances” (286). Haggerty, building from the work of Sedgwick and Hume, decides that the “technique that is common to Gothic [is that] the reader is drawn into participation with fictional events in a way that other fictional forms do not encourage” (22). But the question of *how* the reader is “drawn into” these uncanny, spectacular and often frightening worlds is where definitions of the Horror genre become particularly useful.

Gothic Horror dominated style, content and audience participation in the more modern Horror genre, from films to literature. Historically, tales of terror functioned as cautionary accounts of “something that happened to someone,” not necessarily stories of contemporary SF action/adventure/horror. These tales of terror inspired the characters who eventually became known as the three major Gothic Monsters, the Vampire, the reanimated Creature, and the transformation/Werewolf myth.<sup>18</sup> When faced with such a “slippery” genre as Horror, perhaps

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<sup>18</sup> Twitchell time and time again in *Dreadful Pleasures* explains the Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde conglomerate as being more akin to the werewolf/transformation myth, rather than automatically associating him with the Doppelgänger. Most literary critics explain Stevenson’s infamous schizophrenic as a symbol of the Double, the hidden other within an *unchanged* visage. Twitchell, clearly referring to the film versions of the story, explains Mr. Hyde as the

the best approach is to define the elements used among those that “fit” the genre.<sup>19</sup> In seeking a more timely definition of Horror, Douglas Winter, known for his work on and about Stephen King, began with describing the Horror genre simply as “an emotion” that connected the genre. Later, in *Revelations*, Winter states that “Horror is what cannot be made safe – evolving, ever-changing – because it is about our relentless need to confront the unknown, the unknowable, and the emotion we experience when in its thrall” (*Horror Writers Association*). These enigmas used to define the Horror genre also find themselves within the Gothic, but specific physical and atmospheric elements are used with exacting ability, “for ends which are fundamentally psychological,” to illicit the emotional experience desired – ranging from “terror and horror” to feelings of “dread and discomfort” (Hume 286). Indeed, Lilia Melani explains of the “first Gothic story”: “...contemporary readers [of *Castle of Otranto*] found the novel electrifying[ly] original and thrillingly suspenseful, with its remote setting, its use of the supernatural, and its medieval trappings . . . .”<sup>20</sup>

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“transformation monster” (7) and always in a list of “the major carriers of horror – the vampire, the werewolf, and the ‘hulk with no name’ – [who have risen] . . . up through folklore, into the printed text (*Dracula*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *Frankenstein*)” (10). It seems from his observations of the evolution of the Horror stereotypes, that audiences expect the werewolf when watching Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde, not the man who physically doesn’t change in the original fiction.

<sup>19</sup> Cynthia Freeland describes Horror as a “slippery” genre as “it blends at the edges with many other genres such as science fiction and the thriller” (10). Winter, in his anthology, *Prime Evil* (1982), points out that “Horror is not a genre . . . Horror is an emotion” (*Horror Writers Association*). And indeed James Twitchell echoes this in his definition of Horror when he writes, “Horror art is not . . . a genre; it is rather a collection of motifs in a usually predictable sequence that gives us a specific psychological effect – the shivers” (8). This effect of the shivers is something that the audience must gain by participation or more effectively through “conspiracy,” as Twitchell claims (8).

<sup>20</sup> Walpole dubbed *The Castle of Otranto* a “Gothic Story,” but critics from Mighall to Haggerty agree that this “story” “can reasonably be called the first Gothic novel” (emphasis added, Haggerty 1). Some critics list Walpole’s “story” among the first Gothic works and include works by Anne Radcliffe (*Mysteries of Udolpho*, 1794), and Matthew Gregory “The Monk” Lewis, but it seems appropriate when discussing the *supernatural* Gothic that *The Castle of Otranto* should be listed before Radcliffe and Monk. Radcliffe was notable for revealing the horrors in her stories as not supernatural, but rather caused by some human intervention, and Lewis “avowedly made no attempt to be original” (Baker viii).

Where the Gothic formulas differ with contemporary Steampunk is with *what* is being experienced emotionally. Rather than placing their emphasis on fear, as the Gothic Horror would, Steampunk, when using the Gothic Monsters, emphasizes the excitement and action suitable to the adventure subcategory of SF.<sup>21</sup> *Van Helsing*, *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *Back to the Future III*, to mention a few Steampunk films that fall in this category all feature an adventure that requires impossible feats to overcome the “bad guy” or some impossible situation. These journeys are also famous in the Gothic (the race to Transylvania to save Mina’s life in *Dracula* is one such example) but where the Gothic would stress terrifying urgency or eerie consequences of failure, Steampunk places its emphasis in the conventions of action SF. *Back to the Future III*, for example, concludes with a long drawn-out speeding train sequence, including a damsel in distress.<sup>22</sup> While the Gothic fate of *Dracula*’s Mina is graphically and gruesomely illustrated for readers as they see her friend succumb to the influence of the “dark lord,” Dr. Brown’s Steampunk damsel has the audience biting their nails, waiting to see *how* she will survive, not *if*.

The conclusion of *Back to the Future III* is a good illustration of the action sequences often featured in Steampunk films. Clara Clayton, school teacher and the Doc’s love interest clings to the side of a speeding train. The Doc, in order to transport himself and Marty back to the 1980s, needs to propel the broken Delorean time machine up to the necessary speed (how and

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<sup>21</sup> David Punter explains the uniting emotion among Gothic literature as fear: “Fear is not merely a theme or an attitude; it also has consequences in terms of form, style, and the social relations of the text; and exploring Gothic is also exploring fear and seeing the various ways in which terror breaks through the surfaces of literature . . .” (18).

<sup>22</sup> For those unfamiliar with the *Back to the Future* series (1985-1990) by Robert Zemeckis, Dr. Emmett Brown (Christopher Lloyd) finds himself in the Wild West after an accident with his Delorean/time machine in the third film. The previous two films do not fit in the Steampunk category as the first takes place mostly in the 1950s when Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) accidentally finds himself as his mother’s love interest, and the second film is about a trip to the future in order to return the 1980s to normal after a mishap from the future. This sounds complicated, but audiences agree it is entertaining, none the less.

why this works really does not matter, just as in *Dracula*, the how isn't important, the fact that stuff works, is) and using a "steampunked" train was the best way.<sup>23</sup> At this perilous moment, the audience is thrilled to see Marty pull his hover board from his trip to 2015 out of his backpack and, using that, Marty and Doc are able to save Clara. Again, the emphasis here is on the "wow" of using a futuristic hover board to save the beautiful woman from falling off the steam-driven train. Where the Gothic would emphasize the dark, lurking horror of the journey, Steampunk illustrates the "cool" possibilities of adventure.

One of the important ways that the Gothic writers attempted to involve their readers in the horror of the journey was with the use of supernatural imagery. These images and characters have been used by Steampunk writers and film directors to help build recognizable icons, aiding audiences' immediate identification with the Gothic. For the Gothic writers "the supernatural element was often considered an indispensable feature of medieval romances, which, as everyone knows, provided the inspiration for the first Gothic novels" (Carter 5). This element was used "to provide space for speculation about nonmaterial dimensions of existence, without demanding a positive act [from the reader] of either acceptance or rejection" (Carter 3). Bunnell expresses how important it was that the main characters interacted with these supernatural creatures:

The struggle to attain wisdom and self-awareness, to perceive the dual worlds of reality and the self, and to recognize good and evil without succumbing to the latter has remained consistent in Gothic literature even to the twentieth century,

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<sup>23</sup> Amusingly enough, there is an online interest in what is called the "Victorian Delorean" originating from the website *Silhouette Masterpiece Theater*, by Wilhelm Staehle. This art piece features a silhouette of Marty McFly getting into a stage coach, *Back to the Future* style – lifting his glasses to look at his wristwatch – an image immediately recognized by fans because this iconic image is used on the cover of each film in the series, plus or minus a few characters, depending on the film.

and as the genre expanded into the film medium so, naturally, did its thematic pattern and characteristics. (84)

Margaret Carter goes on to explain the omnipresent structure of the “mediated narrative and limited perspective” as a way “to invite the reader to identify with the protagonist’s uncertainty” without feeling too personally involved (3). “Thus,” using this structure of fiction, Carter clarifies that “an agnostic position regarding the supernatural is valorized” (3).

This same “indispensable feature” is used in Steampunk, but for the opposite intent. For the Gothic, invoking the supernatural was for “its use in symbolizing ‘psychological reality’; the isolated world generated by the Gothic novel is the ‘landscape of the mind’” (McAndrew, qtd. in Carter 15). Steampunk uses these supernatural images of monsters as a way to set the audience at ease. By recalling the characters of familiar fictional monsters, supernatural and horror-based though they may be, viewers recall the classics in a new way. The Gothic horror archetypes evolved from their foundation in penny dreadfuls as symbols of horror (Gothic Horror) onto the stage and film as *simplified images* of nightmare. In pursuit of profit, or perhaps artistic endeavors, these same characters emerge as *images* of the monsters, carrying the social memories of generations of filmgoers with little or no knowledge of their literary origins. Today’s audiences only remember that these same characters held some connection to “bad” science and “creepy” unknown technologies and a history of horror.

Noël Carroll explains in *The Philosophy of Horror*, the necessity of these supernatural characters in the development of horror as a whole: “of greatest importance for the evolution of the horror genre proper, was the supernatural gothic, in which the existence and cruel operation of unnatural forces are asserted graphically” (4). Carroll explains that these “uncanny events”



spurred by the supernatural, “causes a sense of unease and awe . . . . These events are constructed to move the audience rhetorically to the point where one entertains the idea that unavowed, unknown and perhaps concealed and inexplicable forces rule the universe” (Carroll, *Philosophy* 42). For Brantlinger, “this pattern of radical disjunction from the actual – what might be called the structural expression of the imagination of disaster” through the use of supernatural imagery, “lies the central bond between science fiction and the Gothic romance” (35). But, as we shall see, this bond is broken in Steampunk, even though Steampunk still finds itself confidently located within the SF genre proper.

In order to invoke the same atmosphere and add the familiarity of the Gothic characters, the well-known supernatural characters are logically used, but this time without invoking the conventions of Gothic Horror. The use of these supernatural creatures does not go unnoticed or come as a surprise to contemporary viewers and critics of film as they express the enjoyment derived from seeing these supernatural events and/or characters. In fact, they become an indispensable feature of *experiencing* a Steampunk film. An unnamed reviewer for the *Tiscali* web community opens their *Van Helsing* review with: “borrowing heavily from James Whale’s *Frankenstein* as well as the legends of Dracula, Dr. Jekyll and the Wolfman, *Van Helsing* has a familiar feel to it” that, according to Tyler for *Cinemablend.com*, “delivers all the fun you could wish for in a modern monster flick.” As if to emphasize this incentive to use the familiar supernatural simplified into archetypes of good and evil, the review continues, explaining that “the story is simple. It’s just good versus evil. The most surprising thing is how much fun we have getting to the inevitable conclusion.” In the case of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, Michael Brody for *CinemaBlend.com* points out that “[it] puts a new spin on an old

story . . . a meeting of several classic stories combined to create a fairly entertaining popcorn distraction.” This amalgamation is a “celebration of the origins of science fiction and fantasy,” says Matthew DeAbaitua for *Channel 4*, in a way that leaves room for amusing imagination:

British comics genius Alan Moore has had many fantastic ideas in his career, but never before had he come up with such a Hollywood friendly concept as this: imagine if all great works of Victorian pulp occurred within the same universe. If Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Sherlock Holmes, The Invisible Man, Dracula, Allan Quatermain and even Rupert the Bear are citizens of one vast steampunk empire.<sup>24</sup>

Unfortunately in the case of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, critics thought the filmmakers “[took] a blunderbuss to some of Victorian literature’s finest,” and “[jacked] the [graphic novel’s] energy with such an overbearing [twenty-first] century sensibility, it quickly dumbs down the proceedings with an overkill of action clichés” (DeAbaitua; *Week in Rewind*). In contrast, *Van Helsing* blends the monsters together in a way that “is like a Greatest Hits compilation” which “by the end, [Sommers] has somehow succeeded in assembling all his monsters and plot threads into a high-voltage climax” (Ebert).

Another important shared element used to establish mood in Steampunk and Gothic is seen in the time play that leads to the well-known climaxes of the Gothic stories. Both genres share historical time period as part of the setting, however they both emphasize the passage of *time itself* in order to elicit emotion. Haggerty, in explaining the many elements that add to the

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<sup>24</sup> Even though *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is currently popular for the recent film by Stephen Norrington, the fans know that this film was based on the collection of graphic novels which began in the 1990s by Alan Moore with artist Kevin O’Neill. Alan Moore is famous for other graphic novels including *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta* and *From Hell* (another Victorian era tale, and one that fits well in a modern “Gothic Horror” category for the dark overtones and less in Steampunk).

“terrifying aspect of the nightmare” in Gothic fiction, includes the passage of time to his list of essential elements of the Gothic: “time ... either ticks with threatening deliberation or flies with destructive rapidity: the durational demands of the novel are challenged, parodied, avoided, but rarely met” (20). The element of time is particularly important to any definition of the action side of Steampunk.

Displayed with this unique combination of Gothic setting, imagery and the comfort of a past we can all recall, if only in an imagined way, Gothic meets Steampunk. In the Gothic, readers see that without that stable vision of the world, writers sought new ways of explaining the world, while simultaneously expressing their feelings of isolation. Robert Hume explains this emergence of Gothic literature “as one symptom of a widespread shift away from neoclassical ideas of order and reason, toward romantic belief in emotion and imagination” (282). Following the precedent of the Gothic writers, audiences are always returning to the mysteries of science and monstrosity, and now, rather than emphasizing the horror, Steampunk reanimates Gothic images of science and supernatural in a unique way. A romanticized version of the Gothic emerges, reminding viewers what technology could have been in a youthful and adventurous way, contrary to the Gothic.

## CHAPTER 2

### MONSTERS AND MAD SCIENCE

In addition to the similarities of the mise en scene and the pacing of a film to attain the desired emotional involvement, Steampunk also utilizes the motifs of monsters and scientific equipment, but this time laced with a modern desire of enjoying the re-imagination of science. Punter and Byron express the importance of these shared motifs in the Gothic as a whole: “one can point to the extraordinary persistence of certain motifs – the vampire, for example, or the monstrous potential of science and technology. . .” (xix). According to Patrick Brantlinger, after Gothic Horror and Gothic romances there is “an important sense in which the whole development of science fiction from *Frankenstein* forward has been characterized by an anti-Promethean, anti-utopian, anti-scientific pessimism” (31). Steampunk challenges that cynicism toward science with that same “extraordinary persistence” of wild images of scientific gadgets and humanized monsters that “save the day.” Punter asserts that the advent of industry and a changing social and labor structure led individuals of the nineteenth-century to see “him- or herself at the mercy of forces which in fundamental ways elude understanding” and because of this, the Gothic was “forged as a response to social trauma” with “key motifs [of] paranoia, manipulation and injustice and whose central project is understanding the inexplicable, the taboo, the irrational” (112). Indeed, “[t]he Gothic novel began to emerge at a time when the forces of industrialization were transforming the very structures of society ... Emergent capitalism led to a growing sense of isolation and alienation, as increasing mechanization divorced workers from the products of their labour ...” (Punter and Byron 20).

To the writers of the nineteenth century, “Discoveries in science only served to aggravate a sense of alienation and further disturb violations of human identity” (Punter and Byron 20). The Gothic writers illustrated their fear of taking science to the limit of contemporary technology and the dangers of overreaching human boundaries. Crosbie Smith expresses this anxiety as illustrated in *Frankenstein*:

Mary Shelley expressed in prose fiction a dramatic shift from late eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophies of Nature [or “surface rationality”], society and man that emphasized Nature’s balance, stability and perfection, to early nineteenth century Romantic perspectives that probed beneath the tranquil face of Nature and man to confront the dark and passionate powers therein. (58-59)

Steven Bann insists that “what [Mary Shelley] has put together is not so much a series of narrative segments, as a congeries [or “collection”] of scientific and philosophical problems” (1). After the people of Victorian Europe passed the time of “enlightenment” and survived (relatively) unscathed, it becomes apparent that contemporary viewers identify with the same fears and concerns of the Gothic authors, but hope to mitigate those fears by showing science in an optimistic way. Steampunk tries to make light of the fears and illustrates the nostalgic science that audiences remember.

The authors of nineteenth-century Gothic (as opposed to the *classic* Gothic writers: Walpole, Radcliff, and Lewis) became well known for their Negative Romanticism and characters who embodied a shared social trauma. These sentiments were employed in the early films. Modern critics of the SF genre traditionally read these Gothic staples (the monsters and the science) in the same negative light, which makes it all the more surprising that Steampunk

finds itself placed in the SF genre. Sontag defines SF films as “a popular mythology for the contemporary *negative* imagination about the impersonal” (220).<sup>25</sup> A central feature of early SF films inspired by the Gothic archetypes is more detailed portrayals of the scientific procedures. Praz, though he lamented Shelley’s lack of detail in her novel, appreciates the early film adaptations: “the famous 1931 film offered its audiences far more scientific detail, mainly in the form of late nineteenth-century electrical apparatus, than did the original text, while simultaneously introducing human witnesses into Frankenstein’s laboratory” (Smith 40). But these details only added to the audience’s apprehension toward the scientific materials on the screen. Simply watching Elizabeth’s (Mae Smith) reaction when she enters Frankenstein’s laboratory, informs the viewer how he/she should relate to the material surrounding her.

In opposition to the Negative Romanticism which Gothic fiction and the SF films of the ’40s and ’50s presented, Steampunk appears on the modern screen contradicting its SF categorization. Steel vividly expresses the anachronistic romantic reading of the Victorian past when she states that “[t]he [nineteenth] century ushered in the era of the amateur: a wild-eyed tinkerer in a lab had the capacity to stumble upon a discovery that just might alter society, a common theme paralleled in Victorian and Gothic fiction and, now, in Steampunk.” However, in the Gothic, this “stumbled upon” discovery that altered society, did so in a dangerous and horrifying way. Steampunk serves as a reminder of the past which could have been better, which is in contrast to Mighall’s understanding of the Gothic. He says that, “the present thus challenges and comments on the past; but conversely, the past is resurrected for the present age to illustrate what has been gained, and as a reminder of what could so easily be lost” (10). Rich

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<sup>25</sup> Sontag was not referring specifically to the Gothic Horror inspired SF films, although there are a large number of SF films which were inspired by those Gothic tales, so it is not inappropriate to include her discussion here.

Nagy, a self-proclaimed Steampunk artisan, reflects the enthusiasm of looking to the century before for inspiration agrees: “I find the optimism of Steampunk rather refreshing . . . . Steampunk has a way of making technology, which is becoming more transparent and taken for granted every day, seem novel and fun again” (Steel).

While the Gothic writers of the nineteenth-century looked back to their “barbaric past” with an eye for the horrible to explain the scientific advancements, Steampunk looks to the Victorian era for the promise of ingenuity and invention regardless of the “actual” past. For example, the 1999 *Wild Wild West* film tells the story of Captain James West (Will Smith) and U.S. Marshal Artemus Gordon (Kevin Klein), who are ordered by President Ulysses Grant (very conveniently placing the film during the post-civil war years, when Americans clearly know of British Imperialism) to investigate the mysterious disappearances of world-renowned scientists. Early on it is established for the viewers that this “wild west” isn’t quite accurate according to “real” history. The fact that Will Smith, an African-American, plays the role of a Captain in a Southern town, post-Civil War America clearly shows that race is not an issue in this historical fiction . Beyond that, Dr. Arliss Loveless (Kenneth Branagh) is literally *half* a man – having been injured in the War, Loveless wheels around in a steam-powered wheelchair complete with steam stacks. While at first it may seem that “science” is the antagonist in this case, as Loveless is using the world’s best scientists to create massive high-tech tanks to divide the nation again, by the finale science helps the heroes save the day. To emphasize this idealistic vision of science on the popular screen, rather than closing the film with the traditional scene of riding into the sunset on their horses, West and Gordon ride a gigantic steam-powered metal spider originally

created by Loveless to kill the President. The romantic symbol of horseback-riding cowboys in the West is replaced by the far more “awesome” spider-machine.

Behind all these inventions and imagination there has always been the figure of the scientist, the creator of the “magic.” Horror films and Horror stories, starting with the classic Gothic novels have a long history of portraying scientists in a frightening light. The image of the mad scientist can be traced back to the sixteenth century with the publication and plays surrounding the German legend of the infamous Dr. Faustus and his dealings with the Devil. Later, Mary Shelley further popularized the image of Mad Science: “Victor Frankenstein himself [is] the progenitor not only of his monster but also of a long line of mad scientists, through Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Wells’s Dr. Moreau down to the Dr. Strangelove of the present” (Brantlinger 31). Science has been the infamous antagonist for many stories and realities; authors and film directors of the Gothic and early SF films “mine the raw material of these anxieties and then shape them into moral narratives that purport to explain when comes evil in the guise of science and how to repel it” (Toumey 411). While selling one’s soul for the answers of “black magic”/science seemed natural to the storytellers of the Gothic, many of today’s audience members find the questions of science less frightening than the nature of *mankind* itself. When Terrorists and Patriots can use equally destructive powers against each other, audiences expect the moral questions to be directed at the users of science, not the science itself.

Gothic Horror stories and specifically *Frankenstein*, which inspired our current reinventions, painted science and scientists as toying dangerously with powers that should not be altered. Bann explains that *Frankenstein* is “not simply about creation and monstrosity; it is also about the representation of the monster and his creator” (1). For as much as Frankenstein has



come to represent popular culture understanding of “the scientist,” for critics like Smith, “Frankenstein’s obsession, his isolation, his individualism and his egoism are strongly suggestive of Romantic images of the mad genius, the creative artist, and the natural philosopher *qua* natural magician” and therefore *not* representative of the average scientist. Smith goes on to argue “that the character of Frankenstein plays a very distinctive role, one which might be described as that of an ‘extraordinary’ rather than conventional man of science” (41). This is particularly important in Steampunk, for while “[He] does not conform to the image of orthodox practitioners of science in the late [eighteenth] century and early [nineteenth] century, still less to that of the modern scientist,” Frankenstein’s character is at least resurrected with the virtues of a more realistic, if not romanticized, scientist: one who is thinking responsibly about the products of his research and is even willing to give his life to prevent its abuse, as we shall see in the film *Van Helsing* (Smith 41).

Using *Frankenstein* as a pretext, Victor and his Creation embody a long history of tension surrounding scientific advancement. The films that followed Dr. Frankenstein’s story also emphasize the horror created by the men who performed these experiments.<sup>26</sup> Christopher Toumey, writing in 1992, examines the moral character of just such main characters in Horror SF films and comes to the conclusion that:

The moral character of mad scientists, as portrayed in fiction and film, has been changing, both in the process of text-to-film adaptation and in the process of

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<sup>26</sup> Bann discusses *Frankenstein* as a “pretext” and clarifies that “by a creative play on words, let us take that word to mean not merely an excuse, but a preliminary or founding text” (1-2). This definition of *Frankenstein* is particularly appropriate, especially considering that *Frankenstein* has been debated as being among, if not *the*, first SF novels. One such voice is British author Brian Aldiss, who “declares that the first science fiction novel was *Frankenstein* which happens also, of course, to be a classic of the Gothic romance genre,” setting it among the texts that help define SF (Brantlinger 30-31).

making film sequels . . . the mad scientist becomes madder as the adaptation process sheds much of the intangible quality of the moral character from the text, and he becomes [shallower] . . . (422)

Toumey suggests that there is no hope for scientists in film to escape this stereotype until we change the very “dark heart of Gothic horror” which is the source, according to Toumey, that “commissions its mad scientists to tell the world that science is evil” (434). It is important to recognize that Toumey was writing at a time when Steampunk had not yet emerged as a recognizable subgenre. Today however, Steampunk films are categorized as those that emphasize the technology, expose the cogs and inner-workings of every contraption. The “madness” and automatic negative connotations have been exorcised, but the Gothic flavor still remains. The Steampunk world is full of characters who are more human than Toumey suggests, but are still assembled from pieces of the “grotesque, monstrous, even sentimental, but rarely convincing” characters of Gothic Horror (Haggerty 20).

While the character of Frankenstein and other Mad Scientists in film have historically represented “the mischief made possible by modern medicine” (Toumey 412), they also offered contradictions and concerns surrounding the equipment of science. Viewers of classic SF films were offered an endless array of scientific “stuff” on the screen when shown the laboratory of the Mad Scientist, whereas in the original texts focusing on the Mad Scientist theme (*Frankenstein* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*), despite the novels’ obsessive attention to detail, the actual objects on the shelves were left to the readers’ imagination. These loosely explained tools are thus portrayed as “ambiguous, illogical and mysterious,” ultimately illogical to the point of undermining science in general for the audience members allowing them to accept the location of

evil not in the actual *tools* of the trade, but rather in the *heart* of the mad scientist (Toumey 414). Rather than taking part in Brantlinger's "Frankenstein pattern," the Steampunk technology is a tool, not inherently a threat.

Dr. Frankenstein is not alone in his appearances on the screen. In 1818 Mary Shelley could never have anticipated the momentum and mythology that eventually surrounded the protagonist and his creation in her dream inspired tale.<sup>27</sup> Despite the novel's initial apprehensive reviews and monetary failure, *Frankenstein* became one of the most recognized stories of man's dangerous desire to harness the powers of science, fear of going against the "natural order," and the mysteries of necromancy. While Jekyll/Hyde and Dracula are considered "generally popular," *Frankenstein*, on the other hand, has "attained a truly mythical status . . . [because of] the novels' riotously over determined nature. It is, as it were, a novel with 'too much' meaning . . . The monster himself has proved an enormously flexible symbol, capable of a great number of applications and interpretations" (Jones 61). One of those interpretations, Steampunk, has thrown out the *criticism* toward science and has reintroduced a child-like *exploration* of science. Steampunk heroes, such as the Victorian "James Bond" and his sidekick/Q-like inventor of cool science "stuff," appear this time as icons of the power of science in the hands of the protagonists.

It is important to notice here that there is little attempt in these films to explain how everything works scientifically. Steampunk films, however, pay particular attention to the visual details, no matter how well they may or may not work, whereas the early Gothic novels clearly

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<sup>27</sup> The first edition appeared anonymously and was not published with Mary Shelley's name of authorship until 1831. Edition used here is the 1818 republished by Norton Critical editions. Some critics believe that Shelley was not only inspired by the actual occurrence of a nightmare but also found a muse in Henry Fuseli's painting "The Nightmare." Maryanne Ward claims that "The gothic by tradition is a tale of the unspeakable, the horrible, perhaps the surreal, but for the most part the 'unreal', a work of the imagination." According to Ward, that imagination was sparked as Fuseli's painting "spoke to [Shelley] of the death of her mother" and shaped many of the scenes in *Frankenstein* (20).

lack the attention to scientific details. Crosbie Smith points out that in an introduction by Mario Praz to a collection of Gothic novels (including *The Castle of Otranto* and Beckford's *Vathek*), Parz expresses his frustration with the lack of details in *Frankenstein*:

. . . although Mary Shelley's novel surpassed the others [in the collection] 'in its capacity of stirring our sense of horror', it nevertheless had a 'fundamental weakness which seriously hampers the suspense of disbelief', namely, that the author neither described 'the materials of the experiments' nor 'the manner of the unholy operations'. (40)

Steampunk on the other hand pays extra attention to these details. Inspired by the nineteenth-century fear of scientific change and technology, many Steampunk films appropriate the same equipment and monsters to show the wonders, not the horrors.

An important feature of the shared Steampunk/Gothic motifs is seen in the many versions of the Frankenstein Monster and assorted supernatural creatures created and/or explained by the science used by the scientists. These Gothic Monsters have obvious differences from their Steampunk progeny. The Gothic tales were more about the monsters, not the workings of the science that produced them. Within only a few years of the publication of *Frankenstein*, stage versions were already appearing to stun audiences with its torrid tale, though altering the horror themes to become more appealing and simplified for "thrills and chills." Over time and with the invention of the cinema, Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein and his creation appeared to audiences all across the world and have since changed from the young and conflicted scientist from Mary Shelley's novel to something quite different. The horror of it has changed and morphed with the necessities of the audience, leaving the scientific quandaries to the readers of

the original text to ponder. Almost two hundred years later, audiences are familiar only with the Victor Frankenstein as seen in theatrical and film versions, the one known as a “mad” scientist, obsessed and ignorant of any possible consequences even when faced with a dismal fate caused by his own hand. Those same audiences are startled by the version of Frankenstein seen in *Van Helsing*, as they are only familiar with the popular “lobotomized” versions that Hollywood created. They are surprised to find a return to the “most erudite monster in all of Christendom” who speaks eloquently about life, death, and the Bible (Twitchell 164).

Most modern film adaptations of the Frankenstein monster were based on the 1823 stage production, *Presumption; or, the Fate of Frankenstein*, by playwright and London native Richard Brinsley Peake. In the first scene of *Presumption*, Fritz explains to Frankenstein’s friend, Clerval (at least the crucial character showed up in the stage productions, but not the film versions), how the Doctor has been laboring away at a mysterious experiment and “that I think as how he holds converse with somebody below with a long tail, horns and hoofs, who shall be nameless” (Peake). Already, the story of *Frankenstein* had been simplified for a more pedestrian audience; there is no hint of the Captain Walton astray searching for the North Pole. In fact, the story is transmitted to us through the opening song of a character named Fritz (who would become Igor in the later film versions from James Whale’s *Frankenstein* to Mel Brooks’ *Young Frankenstein*), but who does not exist in the original story.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Even *Van Helsing* falls into the trap of using the Igor/Fritz character for comic appeal. During the opening sequence of the film, the audience is introduced to Igor – the familiar hunchback lab assistant. Where in the early films/plays of the Frankenstein story show Igor/Fritz as the supplemental character for the audience, the “realistic” human who is the neutral observer, this time he is simply Dracula’s henchman with funny lines. For example, when Dr. Frankenstein calls out for help as Dracula threatens the doctor, rather than coming to his side and defending him, Igor replies with, “you have been so kind to me, Doctor; caring . . . thoughtful . . . BUT he pays me.” Hilarity ensues.

This production astonished audiences with a live action rendition of Mary Shelley's novel and quickly became the backbone for later retellings of the original. Very soon, the name of Frankenstein became associated with the classic image of "the scientist," though little remained of the original character. For example, the first major film adaptation by James Whale, turned Mary Shelley's focus of social allegory of the monster and the ill-fated Frankenstein to a simpler story of the malformed lab assistant Fritz. Christopher Frayling explains:

Instead of Mary Shelley's subtle allegory about cybernetic birth, social exclusion and the destruction of a family, the plot of *Frankenstein* now hinged on a lab assistant who tries to steal a 'normal brain' in a jar . . . only to drop it by mistake and substitute that 'abnormal brain' instead. (Frayling 116)

In the beginning, Gothic literature was ideal for the transition from paperback to the big screen because of its visual nature and already established popularity. Even the first play laid down the framework for the "horrors" of the monster to come. For example, in reviewing *Presumption*, the *London Morning Post* of 1823, the critic noted that "instead of creating that awful interest intended to arise from it, [the story of *Frankenstein*] gives birth to a feeling of horror" (Behrendt). Charlene Bunnell in *Planks of Reason* claims that the "distinctive and interrelated characteristics (of imagery) which distinguish the Gothic as a literary genre . . . facilitate its transition to film" (79-80). While this may at first have been a boon to the adaptations that began to appear in the early 1900's, the power of the visual allure of film quickly began to change the original interaction between audience and text. The first screen

visions of the Gothic Horror characters to emerge established the visual and moral stereotypes of the characters recalled today even though they may appear with very different genre standards.<sup>29</sup>

The picture of Boris Karloff's gaunt face with the jagged scars and metal bolts, still dominates as the first image that many people recall when asked how Frankenstein's Monster should look. With Boris Karloff's 1931 visually stunning portrayal of Frankenstein's Creature, the *image* of the Horror Monster was born. In 1964 the image of the haunting Creature appeared with new connotations and for a different purpose than exploring moral struggles with evil. Indeed, as Freeland explains, "Most *Frankenstein* movies are so clear about the Creature's horrible hideousness, violence, and repulsiveness that he has become one of our defining cultural icons of monstrosity" (25). Some critics felt that film using the monsters of Gothic horror were never really about science. Sontag, writing in 1965, explains this phenomenon in relation specifically to the SF films of the '40s and '50s: "Science Fiction films are not about science. They are about disaster, which is one of the oldest subjects of art . . . [They are] concerned with the aesthetics of destruction, with the particular beauties to be found in wrecking havoc, making a mess" (213). Now, in 2009, the Steampunk audience is participating in these tales of terror with excitement and empathy for the monsters.

This human element seen in the Monster is important to note since even a few years ago, critics of *Frankenstein* were still associating the Monster with, well, the monstrosity of science. Bann writes of Shelley's creation and the later adaptations:

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<sup>29</sup> It is amusing to remember here that the very first motion picture version of *Frankenstein* by Thomas Edison, 1910, very specifically tried to leave out any potentially frightening parts from Shelley's original. According to the *Edison Kintogram* advertising the film with the clarification that, "Edison Co. has carefully tried to eliminate all actual repulsive situations and to concentrate its endeavors upon the mystic and psychological problems that are to be found in this weird tale" (Drees).

We could say that the ‘image’ of the monster that appears, first of all, in the popular dramatic productions of the [nineteenth] century and acquires definitive form, for the [twentieth] century, in the person of Boris Karloff, is integrally linked to our concept of the man/machine relationship in an age of automation . . . (1)

Bann again helps place the discussion of monsters in fiction as a way “mid-point between scientific experiment and literary creation” to better understand cultural ideology about science and the “monsters” it can produce: “the issue of monstrosity, however rigorously scrutinized from the scientific point of view, habitually escapes into the province of the literary text. This, however, does not imply an escape into the irrational and fantastic, but a deeper engagement with the culture that has engendered it” (2). In fact, Bann insists that the image of the Monster, Boris Karloff’s Creature, “is integrally linked to our concept of the man/machine relationship in an age of automation” (2). Following Bann’s logic and other critics who use the monster as an image of social fear of technology quickly leads to a discussion of the *The Cyborg Manifesto*.

In the early 1990’s Donna Haraway defined the cybernetic being that humanity is becoming: part man, part machine as we are all so intimately (physically and psychologically) attached to our cell phones, laptops and music players. Her discussion sparked a variety of reactions of Feminist critics and other critics investigating societies links to technology and monstrosity. Frankenstein’s creature became linked with one of the first cyborgs in SF. However, for the sake of this discussion, the cyborg/golem/monster stands for the hope and possibility and the *saving* ability of science, rather than the *damning* and dehumanizing nature as suggested by Haraway. A discussion of this nature would go more readily with the SF “dark



future” worlds of Cyberpunk, especially films like *Blade Runner* (1982) and the Star Trek film, *First Contact* (1996). *First Contact* and the related episodes in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* series illustrates some of the best examples of the intersection of cybernetic machines and humanity.<sup>30</sup> Clearly, a story about the homogenizing and horrifying nature of mechanized beings with a consciousness is contrary to the Steampunk “honest” ethos of technology.

It seems antithetical to even consider the use of these stereotypically anti-science symbols to arouse interest, curiosity, even a new “romantic” feeling for science and yet Sommers’ *Van Helsing* and others have done just that. This is not to claim or even defend by any means the “quality” or mindful intent behind these films, but rather it is clear that these Gothic monsters are able to exist in the Steampunk world and to have contemporary audiences embrace them with zeal, exciting a need to change the image of science. Where the first film adaptations of the Gothic Horror novels presented genuine fears and concerns about the modernization of science and scientists, the namesakes featured in these films moved with Steampunk into the realm of inspirational action. Even though the Horror genre defined our interaction and understanding of Gothic Horror from novels to film, modern audiences interact with the vessels of traditional horror as heroes instilled with anticipation for the coming wonders of science (of course, using the old “safe science” of steampower).

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<sup>30</sup> In *The Next Generation* series Captain Picard (Patrick Stewart) is literally assimilated into a cyborg homogenous culture by a race called the Borg, the film *First Contact* follows up on this plot line, but Picard never really recovers from this horrifying experience. The Borg believe that the perfect race is one which is melded together by *all* species in a process of mechanizing the bodies and adding a collective consciousness. Even though the episode “I, Borg” addresses questions of individualism in the Borg collective, the Borg as a whole are seen as one of the greatest threats to the entire Galaxy.

While Steampunk finds its inspiration drawn from the images and characters of the Gothic, the fundamental anti-science appeal has changed. The twentieth-century tradition of the clumsy lab assistant, along with that of the mute and inept Monster may have informed the myth of *Frankenstein*, but even such stereotypes cannot hold the characters static in the Horror genre. Most twenty-first century audience members recognize the icon of Igor, and the gaunt, black and white, scarred and bolt-necked face of Karloff, but these stereotypes are changing, suggesting a greater shift in social acceptance of science. In the earlier film versions, Frankenstein is recognized as a misguided and overzealous immature student, but in Steampunk's *Van Helsing*, he becomes the paternal genius, unwillingly used for evil science. Viewers are given a peek into not only the inner-workings of where and how these monsters and "cool" contraptions are created.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CASE STUDY: *VAN HELSING*

*Van Helsing* is one of the best examples to show the intersection of the Gothic, the Victorian era and modern Steampunk. It illustrates the most appropriate youthful, child-like admiration of the Gothic and the fun that can be found in science as opposed to the horrors associated with its mother genre. As discussed earlier, Steampunk has many subcategories, but most interesting comparison with the Gothic is with the subgenre of the Supernatural Gothic. The instantly recognized characters from the Supernatural Gothic include Frankenstein's Monster and Dracula, who practically jump off the screen, drawing audiences with the "fun" promised from the "monster mash" style and the originality promised from every other film from Sommers. Some educated viewers will know the namesake Van Helsing from Bram Stoker's monumental novel, and if the vampire hunting character is not enough to draw audiences, at least the new James Bond-like Hugh Jackman can draw them to the theater.<sup>31</sup> Once there, audiences follow the story of the vampire hunter as he meets the well known Monster (Shuler Hensley) from Mary Shelley's classic and "a monster-kicking adventure of epic proportions ensues" (JoBlo). Of particular importance, Sommers' version of Frankenstein's Monster offers a unique view into contemporary audiences' opinion of the products of scientific endeavors. Following Bann's belief that *Frankenstein* is useful "for explorations that reach far into the collective memory store of Western culture," here that "collective memory store" of the Steampunk imagination is explored in Sommers' *Van Helsing* (Bann 1-2).

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<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, many critics mention the Bond-Van Helsing connection. Many film critics describe Van Helsing as a "Victorian James Bond." Tyler, Etherington, and Roger Ebert are just a few of the critics that point out this similarity.

Before the film even starts, as the Universal Studios logo appears across the screen, then fades from color into the familiar black and white of old films, the audience knows it is in for a “classic” monster flick. But this is not just any monster flick; the Universal Studios logo unexpectedly bursts into flames, reminding the audience that something new is afoot. As homage to the original Frankenstein horror, the film opens with a wild mob carrying torches and pitchforks, bent on breaking into Frankenstein’s castle. Online film reviewer and founder of *Ain’t It Cool News*, Harry Knowles explains his reaction to this opening: “When I saw that color Universal World go black and white... and suddenly burst into white flames... I laughed and howled... and as it became a torch, I giggled. This film isn’t about subtlety, atmosphere and reverence. This is about going into those worlds and just tearing it up... having fun....” Some viewers may be confused with this opening, considering the setting is labeled as Transylvania, 1887; anyone aware of horror mythology knows that Transylvania is the home of Dracula, not Frankenstein. But the plot thickens: the audience members are witness to the “birth” of Frankenstein’s Monster on that memorable “dark and stormy night” and this time there is another character present for the birth. Count Dracula is watching over the young doctor’s shoulder, anxious to see the reanimation of dead flesh.

Within the first few moments of *Van Helsing* the audience is transported to a new version of Gothic Horror, one with bits and pieces that can be recalled from our social memory, but which do not illustrate the original authors’ intent or vision. This opening also does not fit into the framework of the Horror genre; it lacks the intent to persuade the audience about the harms brought about by science, even while it clearly invokes images of classic horror. Instead, this new hybrid offers the action/adventure that is “in love with monsters and in love with the movie-

going experience,” says Tyler. Indeed, audiences enjoy the “fun” and “entertainment” of this kind of escapism that “for all the unintentional laughs and the cartoony CGI creations, [the movie] is actually entertaining” (Etherington). Rotten Tomatoes, a community run and publicly voted upon website which collects film reviews, shows the Rotten Tomatoes community voting in favor of *Van Helsing* 47%. A little less than half, and a similar rating on the Internet Movie Database (5.5 out of 10 stars) is not bad for a summer action film.<sup>32</sup> And with just that expectation JoBlo, reviewer for *Killer Movies*, points out that “this movie is not scary or tight in narrative, but it is fun, and despite its problems, extremely aware of the main factor that one should count on in any summer blockbuster: the ride.”

With this variety of “monsters thrown into the cauldron” and the display of CGI that appears in the first scene, the audience is lulled into a state of acceptance and excitement, anticipating which next gizmo will save the day for and from what monster. The “virtuoso” (as Ebert has dubbed it) opening of *Van Helsing* gives the audience the feeling that what follows will tell a new story of Gothic Horror. Knowles, famous for his influential online film reviews and behind-the-scenes knowledge of films, explains his belief that *Van Helsing* is a reminder of the innocent imagining that we all experienced as children. This interpretation came to Knowles after a conversation with a friend about Quentin Tarantino’s own explanation of where his writing inspiration comes from.<sup>33</sup> In paraphrasing Tarantino, Knowles writes:

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<sup>32</sup> On an interesting side note, it seems the “summer blockbusters” no longer need to be any “good” for audiences to come flocking. Take *Transformers* (2007) and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008), the summer big-budget hits for the last two summers, for example. The Rotten Tomato critics gave *Transformers* a 57% while it grossed a whopping \$319 million; similarly, the long awaited *Indiana Jones* received a decent 76% from the Tomato Critics and it grossed a comparable \$317 million. Clearly, a film’s overall rating from critics and viewers, isn’t necessarily an indicator of how well or how poorly a film will do in the box office.

<sup>33</sup> Tarantino is famous for his youthful imagination inspired films in which he makes a mess of everything. He certainly does not make films for children, but rather films that adults can enjoy as “fun” and “playful.” From films like *From Dusk Till Dawn* (co-written with Robert Rodriguez) to *Kill Bill*, his films are not meant to be taken

[Remember a time when] your friends are over for a sleepover and you're all hopped up on too much sugar talking about what the coolest episode [of your favorite show] ever would be? ... that Nine Year Old creative force is just shaking... running a thousand words a minute, spilling everything you ever dreamt of to your buddies and it feels like the greatest thing any of you have ever heard? Well that's where you have to write from.

This "sugar high," according to Knowles, is where Sommers is writing from: "[*Van Helsing*] is that hopped up eight bowls of Frosted Flakes with marshmallows sugar rush of a 9 year old dream of what the ultimate badass Universal Monster movie would be." This enthusiasm built into the film is exactly what audiences are looking for in reenactments of the Gothic in Steampunk.

The title character of *Van Helsing* first appeared in Bram Stoker's 1897 *Dracula* and has since been revisited by storytellers, each one offering their own version of Stoker's "seemingly arbitrary . . . philosopher and metaphysician, and one of the most advanced scientists of his day," Abraham Van Helsing (as described by John Seward, Helsing's friend, who doesn't even make it to the big screen this time). Members of the audience hoping to get a glimpse of this professor from Amsterdam with many impressive credentials, would be a bit surprised to discover that director Sommers has not only changed Van Helsing's first name to Gabriel, but at the same time erased everything of Stoker's original character, except the exciting title of "Vampire Hunter."<sup>34</sup>

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seriously. Even his more gruesome and deeply disturbing films, like *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs* (two films which made him famous) are reminders of creative imagination on the screen taken to the extreme ends of fantastic possibility while still remaining "realistic."

<sup>34</sup> Even though this name change may not make sense right away, Knowles explains that "well frankly, it's because Gabriel kicks ass for the Lord! LITERALLY. This Van Helsing is the mighty left hand of God, smiting those that offend the eye of God."

Smith describes the actor Sommers' version of Van Helsing, played by Hugh Jackman, as a man who has "had a bit of an extreme makeover since Anthony Hopkins played him in 1992's *Dracula*. Indeed, the only thing sagging on this Van Helsing is the brim of his hat; otherwise, he's buff and young, a swarthy tough guy who finds himself multi-tasking for the Vatican." This young and swarthy, Indiana Jones-like vampire hunter is described as a modern-day James Bond (. . . which makes him a bit of both).<sup>35</sup> Sommers' Gabriel Van Helsing is a strange mix of Vampire Hunter, outcast, murderer, Bounty Hunter, and buff dude. Film reviewer Jerry Saravia explains the significance of this change: "It isn't enough for someone like Professor Van Helsing to confront Dracula with a crucifix and a wooden stake, the good professor must also be able to fight mano-a-mano with the Count."

While some of the professional critics may be put off by this lack of "proper reverence" toward the books, it is this "fun" that makes these films unique and invites audiences to reminisce on youthful imaginings, setting them apart from their Gothic inspirations. "If you're going into this picture expecting an intricate characterization of the 'real' Van Helsing, flawless special effects, deeper insight into the monsters, a credible romance and believable action sequences," explains JoBlo, "please stay home and don't bother seeing it solely for the purposes of complaining about those very things afterwards. It's not that kind of movie!" These characters used by Sommers are no longer horrifying, but rather entertaining as they practically beg the audience to enjoy the ride. In fact, as Christopher Smith for *Week in Rewind* describes, "the decibel level on this CGI powerhouse . . . is jacked so high, there's the sense that the

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<sup>35</sup> Unlike younger audience's recollection of *Indiana Jones* in *The Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, I am thinking specifically of the young Harrison Ford in Spielberg's first three in the *Indiana Jones* series (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Temple of Doom*, and *The Last Crusade*) in which he is the strapping young man with a whip that Sommers himself may have seen as part of his inspiration for Hugh Jackman's image of Van Helsing.

filmmakers wanted everyone to join in the fun . . . perhaps even Stoker himself, who has been dead for nearly 100 years, but who has no doubt heard every word of this movie from his London grave.” With most of the budget obviously going toward the use of CGI and new, energized heroes and monsters, it is no wonder there are new images of the Gothic.

With CGI on his side, Sommers makes “everything bigger in *Van Helsing*,” explains Tyler: “Sommers is never content to settle for subtlety. When Dracula goes in to bite someone, he doesn’t just pop out a pair of fangs and bite a neck. His entire face distends to reveal a row of vicious blood sucking teeth.” By the end, however, it isn’t simply the use of CGI that makes the movie entertaining; it is how Sommers has used those graphics to tell the story. Roger Ebert defends Sommers and his production teams use of special effects, explaining that “*Van Helsing* is silly and spectacular, and fun.” Ebert even goes as far as to say, “[CGI is] used to create a visual feast, and here the cinematography by Allen Daviau (“E.T.”) and the production design by Allen Cameron join with Sommers’ imagination for spectacular sights.” Following in the footsteps of the classic “monster mash” movies of the 1940s (like *Abbot and Costello Meet Frankenstein*, 1948) which feature The Wolfman, The Monster and, of course, Dracula running in circles and fighting in films void of any meaningful plot, Sommers has no problem convincing audiences that this will be an enjoyable, not a serious, film.

As the film progresses, the audience is invited to experience a new history of nineteenth-century Europe. For example, when Van Helsing first arrives at Vatican City to report for duty, he steps in the confessional and the audience is introduced to a very different Vatican than might be expected. The priest in the booth pulls a hidden lever and the back of the confessional opens up, revealing a secret passageway into the hidden labyrinth of laboratories beneath the holy



building, the home of a secret Order that “does not exist.” With the simple pull of a lever, the audience accepts that what will come is not what *was* and they can now imagine *what could have been* to make history suit their creative interests. “Without us,” the Father explains to Van Helsing (which is essentially for the audience), “the world would be in darkness . . . We have kept mankind safe since time immemorial. We are the last defense against evil. An evil that the rest of the world has no idea even exists.”

As with the Gothic predecessors, the question of evil and monstrosity becomes an important part of Van Helsing’s journey. The Father’s definition of evil (essentially anything that is a “monster,” usually by some physical definition, must be evil) does not sit well with Van Helsing and this becomes a central concern of the plot. Remembering how important images of changing monstrous bodies were to Robert Louis Stevenson in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as well as to H. G. Wells in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, the “monsters” in the contemporary monster movies have changed. In an age when science is not automatically considered evil, the emphasis of a “greater evil” should be placed somewhere else, in this case, in the hearts of men. Especially in our “enlightened” age, the audience is acutely aware of physical abnormalities and how those are not always indications of evil. Van Helsing, echoing the audience’s own perspective, promptly corrects the un-P.C. Father, saying “to you these *monsters* are just evil beings to be vanquished, but I’m the one that’s standing there when they die and become the men they once were.” The struggle surrounding when monsters are monsters and men are just men, becomes an important part of the story, but rather than taking a horrifying turn, the man vs. monster conflict is part of the action. “No, despite [there] being monsters in the movie, it wasn’t scary, but I wasn’t expecting it to be,” expresses Shawn McKenzie for *Entertain Your Brain!*,

“[Sommers] changed around the various Universal Studios classic characters in order to make them hip and cool, which worked for me.” Again, this “hip and cool-ness” is exclusively for the fun of it; “if you have an ounce of a [nine] year old Monster Lover in you... This thing will kick your ass” says Knowles. “But it really is that [nine] year old thing,” Knowles reiterates, again reminding us of the importance of this return to childhood in Steampunk.

Carl (David Wenham) is a very important character for understanding Steampunk and its rewriting of science. When the first Gothic scientists would automatically be part of the Mad Scientist motif, Carl becomes the image of the romantic scientist that twenty-first century viewers enjoy.<sup>36</sup> When Van Helsing first meets his partner-to-be in Vatican City, the audience gets the full sense of how exciting and fun science can be, even while visually invoking the “dark heart of Gothic horror.” While inside the wondrous cavern/laboratory, the audience and Van Helsing share their awe while given this opportunity to see work that only scientists and experimenters would be busy with. Everyone in this massive room, lit with candles and roaring fires (the contemporary viewers’ ideal “Gothic” setting), seems to be tinkering with something. Despite what the audience might have thought about the church’s feelings toward scientific tampering, in *Van Helsing* this very tampering is used as the “good” weapon against “evil.”

It is on this adventure against evil that, even at the most perilous moments, the protagonists are more than willing to pull the next, even more exciting laboratory creation, literally from a bag. In *Van Helsing* the audience is introduced to these technologies (that

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<sup>36</sup> Of course these men would not have been called “scientists” at the time of many of the Gothic novels. In fact, as Ludmilla Jordanova explains, there was a “feeling of commonality well before the word ‘scientist’ was current among those who produced natural knowledge,” even though the term “scientist” did not appear until the 1830s (61). According to Jordanova, in *Frankenstein*, Shelley has created “a remarkably precise exploration of the internal conflicts felt by practitioners in a variety of fields” (60). These internal conflicts and complexities surrounding such practitioners are simplified in the traditional image of the mad scientist to an essentially manic doctor.

become more interesting) as they are used for good as Van Helsing peruses the laboratory belonging to The Order. Carl totes a bag with seemingly endless amounts of scientific “stuff.” The only possible way to combat the evil Dracula is with the astonishing technology of gas propelled crossbow-like guns, devices that explode with the light of the sun vaporizing all vampires, and hand-held spinning blades (used a bit like throwing stars held in your hands the way one might hold a discus, with handles to pump them with power). Here we note that the line between science and miracles begins to vanish. Actual concern and apprehension toward the scientific method and gizmos in the nineteenth-century are forgotten as Carl tosses the “awesome” steam powered crossbow/gun to Van Helsing who then skewers the sexy vampiresses tormenting the villagers. This is the same crossbow/gun featured on posters and the DVD cover of the film, emphasizing that it is the weapons and technology above all else that are advertised. Technology in *Van Helsing* becomes an intricate part of the plot, this time not as a reminder of the possible horrors of “playing with fire” (remember Prometheus), but as a necessary savior for the characters and the success of their adventure when placed in the right hands. The point has changed from “who has the moral high ground” to who has the “cooler” technology.

Naturally, the director does not take the time to explain how all of this works scientifically (neither the actual killing of the vampire nor the workings of all this “stuff” in the Holy Laboratory); what is important is that it *looks* as though it works. Just as in the Gothic, we don’t understand how it works; then it was frightening, now it is cool. Knowles clarifies that “Gravity, Torque and the physical realities mean nothing in Sommers’ universe. All those things are sacrificed to his personal God of Cool.” Where Bram Stoker’s Van Helsing painstakingly

researches and discovers how to kill a vampire, in Sommers' film the actual killing of a vampire comes only as a minor detail (unless, of course, that vampire is Dracula that is the target, and that becomes more complicated, as we shall see). For example, as Van Helsing is preparing to leave for Romania in pursuit of Dracula into a "cursed land terrorized by all sorts of nightmarish creatures," he is briefed by Carl about the best way to dispatch a vampire. As the two of them discuss the tools and weapons to take with them, Carl is busily putting "useful" things in the bag which audience members recognize as the correct choices for battling vampires. As a satisfying nod to fans of vampire fiction, Carl chooses a wreath of garlic, Holy Water, a silver stake, and a crucifix; all of which Carl has verbally listed off, partially for Van Helsing's benefit, but also for the audience to have a moment of realization that they actually know what it's for, in fact they likely know more than the Vampire Hunter himself. Suddenly, the two are interrupted by a machine gun going off in the foreground. "Why can't I have one of those?" Van Helsing asks Carl, clearly perplexed and uninterested in all the seemingly useless items that have already gone into the bag. Van Helsing clearly doesn't know what he will be facing in Romania, declaring: "Vampires, Gargoyles, warlocks, they're all the same! Best when cooked well!" Suddenly the scholarly, intellectual Vampire Hunter, Abraham Van Helsing needs to be accompanied by a gadget-man.

In fact, it seems that Gabriel Van Helsing has no scientific knowledge at all and doesn't even ask how things work. He relies on Carl to breathlessly explain quick fixes for vampire slaying and pick out which nifty thing will work best at the most crucial moment. For example, when Carl is first going through the list of weapons and equipment to bring along there is one in particular which Carl made, but doesn't know what it was for. It is softball-sized sphere with

two mechanical knobs on top. When asked what it is, Carl is able to explain what the contraption is made of in great detail: “it’s compressed magma from Mt. Vesuvius . . . with pure alkaloids from the Gobi Desert.”<sup>37</sup> Van Helsing doesn’t seem to care what it is; he is more concerned with it actually working. As long as Carl does his job, the superhero team is complete: action hero with his sidekick, in this case an amusing and dorky scientist.

Carl is the modern-day replacement of mad scientist and is sharply unlike what audiences once recalled as their role-models for science, he has moral qualms with killing a monster and is always eager to help others. According to Toumey, these embody the message that “science threatens our well-being” and that this “condemnation [of mad scientists] has become increasingly more critical in the sense that fictional mad scientists have become more depraved as their tales are repeated and reinterpreted” (Toumey 412). Indeed as Toumey says, “we have the litany of Dr. Frankenstein, Dr. Moreau, Dr. Jekyll, and numerous other irresponsible physicians” (412). For example, Mary Shelley’s presentation of the Mad Scientist, Victor, became an essential part of Horror films in the early stages of film.<sup>38</sup> Darryl Jones in *Horror: A Thematic History in Fiction and Film* explains, “the centrality of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to a modern horror tradition has made the creation of life . . . the major preoccupation of the classic mad scientist” (56). “The Frankenstein pattern,” as Patrick Brantlinger explains “in which the dream of the mad scientist produces monsters, is an unailing formula for catastrophe,” became

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<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, along with the thing that viewers actually see, readers of the original Gothic novels may recall the detail used by authors like Stevenson. For example Stevenson uses the most vivid details while explaining the scientific features of Dr. Jekyll’s experiment as Dr. Lanyon watches Mr. Hyde drink the potion: “The mixture, which was at first a reddish hue, began, in proportion as the crystals melted to brighten in colour, to effervesce audibly, and to throw off small fumes of vapour. Suddenly and at the same moment, the ebullition ceased and the compound changed to a dark purple, which faded again and more slowly to a watery green” (Stevenson 100).

<sup>38</sup> Even though Mary Shelley was, according to critics like Ludmilla Jordanova and Crosbie Smith, illustrating a shared insecurity surrounding the figure of Scientists at the time, there was no indication that she meant for Victor to become an archetypal figure for all scientists.

an essential part of the retellings of Victor Frankenstein and his Creature (34). Besides being a major part of the horror tradition, Victor Frankenstein's obsession with "usurping God through creating life" has become an "overstated" element in horror films (Jones 51). Perhaps as a reaction to this "overstatement" of the evils of science, Steampunk returns to these images of science with a romantic eye for the remarkable, especially when it comes to the tools of the trade.

Rather than portraying the "Modern Day Prometheus" that Mary Shelley, and even the subsequent revisions of *Frankenstein*, would have audience members reflect upon while reading or watching the story, Prometheus is cast aside in this twenty-first century revision. (This makes me wonder if the audience members even remember the story of Prometheus and what the connection might be.) No longer taking part in Brantlinger's "Frankenstein pattern," which is innate to most SF monster films in Brantlinger's opinion, the Steampunk technology is a tool, not inherently a threat. When used by Dr. Frankenstein, at the beginning of the film to animate his Monster, the mess of wires powered by lightening gives life to a kinder and gentler Monster. Only moments after the animation of the Monster, Dracula takes control of the technology and prepares to use it to give life to thousands of his slumbering spawn. Dr. Frankenstein's technology is simultaneously used to create the Monster, who becomes the character used in this case to demonstrate the humanized side of science.

In the character of the Monster, the intersections and departures of the Gothic and Steampunk become clear. Our twenty-first century visions of monstrosity have changed; the horrors of monsters and lo-fi science are far from our worries of the Atomic Bomb and Terrorists. These monsters are now freed from their intrinsic evil and are offered as hopeful

symbols of the vast possibilities of “old school” science. In watching *Van Helsing*, the audience has come full circle and is again asked to decide if the Monster is evil or not, but this time, the author/director has chosen a different path than Shelley, and Sommers has laid out the bread crumbs for the audience to easily follow. After first meeting the Monster, the Monster explains to Ana Valarious (Kate Beckensale) and Van Helsing that he doesn’t want Dracula to be able to use his body to bring flocks of Dracula’s progeny (miniature gargoyle-like blood sucking bat/vampires) to life by means of Frankenstein’s technology, but that he also wants to exist like anyone else. The Monster is no longer automatically evil, as Ana and the villagers first assumed, but rather genuinely sympathetic toward humanity, even though they damned him to the ruins of a burned windmill. In Sommers’ version, it is Dr. Frankenstein’s automatic love for his creation that seems to instill an instinct of *adoration* toward humanity, not *abhorrence*.

The fact that the Monster is decidedly not evil, according to Van Helsing, is an important difference between Mary Shelley’s Monster, the Universal pictures with the monster in the ’30s and ’40s, and the Monster that Sommers has created. Consider the Monster/Creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Shaped in a world of darkness, the Creature seems innately evil when discussed in terms of the nocturnal world. Much of Victor’s task is accomplished as “the moon gazed upon [his] midnight labor” and he “dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave” (Shelley 32) exploring the nocturnal and abhorrent nature of his obsession. It isn’t until that “dreary night of November, that [Victor] beheld the accomplishment of [his] toils” and readers are presented with the culmination of the “catastrophe” of Victor’s experiment:

It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-

extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. (Shelley 34)

Clearly, Mary Shelley is drawing the reader's attention to the dark nature of this pursuit of resurrecting the dead. With emphasis on what time the animation takes place to the detail of the "half-extinguished light" of the candle, the reader is participating in the nocturnal and unnatural experience of alchemy. At first it is a "breathless horror and disgust" that Frankenstein experiences, but it is not until the nightmare world brings his fear to fruition. "Disturbed by the wildest dreams," Victor tosses and turns in his bed after collapsing from exhaustion. Mary Shelley's creature is not immediately considered evil, but *becomes* evil in the eyes of Frankenstein through a nightmare experience, further proving the influence of the nocturnal world on the illustration of struggle.<sup>39</sup>

Sommers' Monster quickly functions not as a terrifying reminder of the cyborg, but as a lesson in not judging someone too quickly, for they might actually be a good person. When Carl first meets the Monster, he is horrified by the Monster's appearance. Later, as the whole group works together, the ultimate question about whether or not the Monster is evil is answered for the audience with Carl's help. Carl is ordered by the Vatican to destroy the Monster once his usefulness is over, Van Helsing is furious, retorting, "Have they met him? Do they know him?" Carl at first is inclined to follow the wishes of the Vatican, but once Carl gets to know the Monster, he has a hard time following those orders. After the Monster has selflessly stayed behind in Dracula's castle during the climax of the movie to defend Carl and Ana from the oncoming Harpy assault, Carl is in a difficult position. After much confusing action, running,

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<sup>39</sup> Remember here that this "evil" of the Creature is not necessarily an interpretation shared by the reader. In most cases, the reader shares moments of sympathy for the Creature, mixed with uncertainty faced with the enigma of where evil comes from when circumstances push an "evil" reaction.



swinging and jumping, Carl finds himself on a bridge over a deep precipice, the Monster barely holding on to a wire and imploring Carl for his help.<sup>40</sup> Rather than allowing the Monster to fall and be destroyed, Carl reminds the Monster that “you’re supposed to be destroyed” and then “let me swing you across.” Carl uses his ingenuity and his sense of “what’s right” to save the Monster when he finally decides he is not evil and should therefore not be destroyed.

With their past social knowledge of the story of the Monster, the audience knows that the monster is supposed to be destroyed, usually by the villagers. Their sympathies lie with Carl, as they are torn; having experienced the kindness of the Monster and hearing his appeal to live (aimed not only at the characters in the movie but also the viewers), it becomes a difficult dilemma. But as Carl swings the monster across the precipice to safety, our social memory of the monster has suddenly changed – this hulking “man” is no longer repulsive to look at but just someone who has been misunderstood. Perhaps another reason that Carl chooses to save the Monster and not let him perish is because the Monster does indeed become quite human. Sommers proves his defiance of the original stories of Frankenstein’s Monster by showing that he calls upon God in his moments of fear. While being carried by a horde of undead into Dracula’s clutches, he chants that “he will not be afraid as he walks in the valley of death,” quoting the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm in his moments of fear (as opposed to Shelley’s Monster who reads *Paradise Lost* and finds “Satan as the fitter emblem of [his] condition”). In comparison to the other characters of supernatural strength and courage, the Monster gives the impression of being the most human of all characters in *Van Helsing*. By the end of the film, he doesn’t disappear

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<sup>40</sup> All of the swinging and jumping are staples of the Action/Adventure genre, and Knowles believes is quite appropriate for this film: “Why walk when you can swing, [because] wouldn’t it be cooler if Frankenstein swings baby? ... The amount of swinging going on in this thing, for a bit you’d think this was influenced by Bob Crane’s life had he swung like Weissmuller.”

into the arctic to possibly wreck havoc by procreation, nor does he burn to death as a mindless demon; instead he waves goodbye to Van Helsing and Carl as he floats away on a raft to start a new life. The Monster is no longer evil because of the way he was treated by humanity (as seen in Shelley's version) or because he is simply Evil Science incarnate (as the classic horror films would have the audience believe); he is simply the product of amazing science that might have been used in evil ways.

Besides the characters used, *Van Helsing* does a unique job borrowing not only characters from the Gothic, but also the motifs of time and special setting. *Van Helsing* illustrates one of the best examples of the stress and strain of time within the plot of the Gothic/Steampunk that, in this case, adds to the action-based emotional response from the audience. Approaching the climax of the film the protagonist, Van Helsing has been bitten by a werewolf and needs an antidote from Dracula's castle to prevent his permanent transformation into a werewolf at midnight. However, the situation is not as simple as get into the castle, get the antidote, and get out; rather the only way to defeat the super-powerful Dracula is by killing him *while in werewolf form*. Van Helsing knows that he only has the time that it takes the clock to strike midnight before his transformation into a werewolf is irreversible. And so, in that one minute, between the first tick of midnight and the last gong of the bell, when Van Helsing transforms into a mindless beast, the audience watches as the second hand of the massive clock ticks ominously in slow-motion with loud reverberation. The scene cuts in a dizzying blur as Dracula (now transformed into his massive, bat-like monster form) and the werewolf/Van Helsing are locked in hand-to-hand (or tooth and claw) combat. If this battle sequence were not enough to add to the anxiety of the situation, Van Helsing's love interest, Anna is running, antidote in hand, prepared

to inject the werewolf/*Van Helsing* once Dracula is killed. As Anna runs, it seems to the audience she is never quite close enough, and time is passing with “destructive rapidity.” Fitting with the tradition of the action genre, the combat is resolved with the good guy defeating the bad guy, but in Gothic tradition, for that extended minute the audience is held captive, hyper-aware of time passing, simultaneously moving too fast and too slow.

The discovery of how to actually kill Dracula is another part of the Gothic conventions shared in *Van Helsing*. Carl cleverly uncovers the secret of how to destroy Dracula in a series of “animated” paintings and this discovery neatly connects with one of the many Gothic conventions. Sedgwick includes “unintelligible writings” as one of the staples of the Gothic tradition (8) and the paintings and necessary research that Carl has to conduct to uncover these mysteries helps place this element well with the Gothic. The importance of historical documents is emphasized in Mighall’s work: “The Gothic . . . testifies to a concern with the historical past, and adopts a number of rhetorical and textual strategies to locate the past and represent its perceived iniquities, terrors, and survivals.” One of the rhetorical strategies used to transplant this “historical past” into the story as a plot element is accomplished through what Chris Baldick calls the “tradition [of the] ‘homeopathic principle’” (qtd. in Mighall xviii). “Gothic writers have borrowed the fables and nightmares of a past age,” Baldick explains, “in order to repudiate their authority” (Mighall xviii). In *Van Helsing* it feels as if Sommers is channeling a shared memory of Gothic tales and novels by including a simple detail such as discovering secrets in an aged book and on spooky moving paintings in a castle.

Stephen Sommers’ *Van Helsing* is a unique example of how the Gothic appears on the contemporary screen in Steampunk. From the monster, to the scene and settings, the Gothic

appears updated and “Steampunked.” The character of the Monster offers audiences an insight into how Steampunk films like *Van Helsing* re-write the Gothic Horror stories in a way that brings science back into the sphere of inspiration, not horror. Sommers’ Monster is born into a world where the technology that gave him life is not automatically evil, but becomes evil depending on who uses it and for what ends. The heroes of twenty-first century Gothic now include the “hot piece of work,” Ana Valerious/Kate Beckinsale, who is “sporting Lara Croft’s body” and Van Helsing/Hugh Jackman, who was voted Sexiest Man Alive, for *People Magazine* in 2008.<sup>41</sup> Shelley and Stoker likely would not have imagined their main characters romping around in tight leather pants or fending off flocks of vampire spawn. Nor would they expect Gabriel Van Helsing, the Fallen Archangel, Left hand of God or even a werewolf. The Gothic appears in a unique combination of setting, imagery, and characters with the comfort of a “manageable” past and ambivalent technology.

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<sup>41</sup> Those unfamiliar with Lara Croft will want to know that this tomb raiding femme hero is one of the most well-know female action videogame heroes almost universally recognized by male game players of all ages called Tomb Raider. There have been about sixteen different videogames dedicated to the Tomb Raider stories (the first one appearing in 1996) and, more recently, two live-action films starring Angelina Jolie. The image of Lara Croft defined the fit and big-breasted figure of the gun toting and fearless sex kitten with an independent-woman attitude.

Apart from being the “sexiest man alive,” Hugh Jackman is also popular enough to have hosted the Academy Awards for 2009. This is one of the most prestigious events in Hollywood and it is truly an honor to be asked to host, further proving that the character of Van Helsing represents much more to contemporary audiences than simply a vampire hunter.

## **CONCLUSION:**

### **RETURN TO THE GOTHIC IN A TIME MACHINE**

Spark. Flash. A mysterious technology zaps to life with a green electric glow.

A young man in a dirtied white lab coat raises his arms in exaltation surrounded by twisted, chaotic wires; oil-burning lamps illuminate the crude laboratory.

“It’s alive!” he screams to the dark and stormy night through the open skylight of his Victorian mansion.

The year is 2009. Members of the stadium-seating audience crunch on their popcorn eagerly awaiting the most recent gruesome digital effects version of the Monster as they watch Frankenstein at work on the screen. This time, Frankenstein is performing a very different task than is traditionally expected. Rather than becoming a symbol of the evils that Gothic authors coupled with surpassing man’s “natural” abilities, this Frankenstein is reversing generations of scientific misconceptions. In a time when science is equally an ally and an enemy of popular culture, Steampunk films arrive on the scene with their roots in Gothic Horror but with optimistic stories of enthusiasm. This use of the Gothic does three important things: by allowing audiences a feeling of nostalgia – using characters they recognize – Steampunk infuses them with a romantic twist, and causes a reversal of the negative romanticism associated with the Gothic. Next, Steampunk uses the typical monsters to tell familiar tales; with this familiarity the differences become clearer. Third, Steampunk conjures images of science, once ignoble to the Victorian era, that are in this current age “manageable” and hopeful.

According to Segal, “[Steampunk] lets us tap into that sense of wonder at the unfolding universe that our grandparents might have felt when modern science was just beginning to open

up all its incredible new pictures of the world” that has been tempered with apprehension in recent times. With images of scientific advancements that are horrifying – from the Atomic Bomb to nerve gas and the mysteries of cloning – audience members are enjoying optional versions of science in film. It seems improbable that filmmakers can possibly hope to transmit that feeling of wonder and a message of optimism using the progenitors of horror and symbols of the “unfailing formula for catastrophe” (Brantlinger 34). This catastrophe is turned to comfort and identification as these Steampunk stories still uphold some of the visual underpinnings of the Gothic tales by which they were inspired. Sir Horace Walpole, in his preface to the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto* described the Gothic writer’s responsibility to his/her readers which is now shared by modern audiences participating in these “new Gothic”: “[I] wished to conduct the mortal agents in his drama according to the rules of probability; in short, to make them think, speak and act as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions” (48). He also believed that in doing so, following Aristotle’s logic on the necessity of tragedy in the arts, that when “faced with death, disaster, or unintended evil effects, a good person’s character should persist and not be ruined” (Freeland 5). Somehow filmmakers have made it possible: taking our deepest nightmares, fertile with images of vile mad scientists, and they have rewritten these monsters as heroes out of a long line of cinematic and literature based myth.

The animation of the Frankenstein Monster and stories of other well-known Gothic characters have been told time and time again since their creation in the nineteenth century. Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and many other early SF creations have grown and changed into a vanguard of twenty-first century monsters and nostalgia far removed from their original context.

Similar to Dr. Frankenstein's inability to keep his own creation under his control, so too have these fictional characters from Gothic tales escaped their bondage on the written pages and broken free on the modern screen. Where they began as tales of the terrifying nature of the supernatural and science, today's audiences experience them as action/adventure heroes wielding the remarkable power of steam as envisioned by writers like H. G. Wells and Jules Verne. Rather than resurrecting dead flesh from a graveyard, a century later our modern-day filmmakers are rewriting the fictional past of the nineteenth-century with their own action/horror/adventure filled fiction of Steampunk. Steampunk allows viewers a unique opportunity to think back and ponder "what if" and to reinvigorate the ethos of inventors.

Susan Sontag's influential article "The Imagination of Disaster" explained the power of SF films as a way to visually assert the horrors of science. Sontag insisted that these "collective nightmares cannot be banished by demonstrating that they are, intellectually and morally, fallacious. This nightmare – the one [of the Atomic Bomb] reflected in various registers in the science fiction films – is too close to our reality" (225). With Steampunk however, rather than the science that destroys, audiences are happy to see the fun and flash that comes with a return to the Victorian science from nearly two centuries ago. The weapons and gizmos used by the protagonists bring words like "fun" and "awesome," "inspiring" and "breathtaking" to the film critic's lips, ignoring the often deadly force used by these heroes to achieve their goal. Films featuring scientists that were "not about science [but were] about disaster" (Sontag 214), now remind viewers of the ingenuity of humankind and the wonders of science when used wisely. In order to "get them under control" these monsters are used in horror. It is not just the monsters

that are reigned in, but the science as well.<sup>42</sup> “Under the control” of modern audiences in the sense that these are comfortably familiar symbols of the Gothic, the Victorian past, and that in the context of the imagined Steampunk world, audiences know that this “monster mash” is just for fun. And in this visual anachronism comes escapism, or as Emily Donahue reports for *MTV Newsroom*, “Steampunk is really about stepping away from our everyday lives and having a good time.”

The emotional escape granted by Steampunk offers something more than simple nostalgia and romantic musings about the nineteenth-century paraphernalia. Audiences are still fascinated by the scenes and stories that “unveil nature” right before our eyes, just as attempts to classify and explain the strange and grotesque appear in reality television.<sup>43</sup> Steampunk helps change feelings of innate fear related to these monsters and scientific wonderings and charges these images with intrigue, not apprehension. From Dr. Faustus’ dark and magical deal with the Devil to gain universal knowledge, to Dr. Frankenstein’s nocturnal labors uncovering the secrets of life, whether written on the page or graphically depicted on the screen, audiences are seeking how to comprehend these mysteries. But in that desire to learn more, see more and understand the intangible, audiences are acutely aware of the dangers that these curiosities bring and this fear has significantly wounded the image of the Doctor and his Creation. As Susan Sontag and others have noted, there is a distinct theme of the “overreaching scientist” in most SF films and also the Gothic tales and myths that inspired the consecutive retellings. With the devastation of

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<sup>42</sup> As James Twitchell (author of *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror*) describes our continued interest in the “uncanny, images of the subconscious” (16).

<sup>43</sup> One particular example that illustrates the popular interest in the “oddities” of the world is in the TLC reality show *Little People Big World* which follows the Roloff family, who are all dwarves. Viewers are able to “tune in” to watch the family doing their everyday activities in their “made for little people” home and interact with all the “big people” around them, from boyfriends to co-workers.



the Atomic Bomb, it seemed that these cautionary tales had their concern confirmed and the SF fiction in the post-Atomic era continued to spout their warnings as audiences ate it up. But there is only so much “Be afraid. Be very afraid” and horrific stories of mad scientists that audiences can find entertaining before they turn to escapism.<sup>44</sup>

This antiquated escape appears as studios and other purveyors of pop-culture create more of these new, more familiar stories with their “fast-moving, audience-grabbing melodrama” (Frayling 116) and thus, bringing us to the Steampunk adventures appearing on the screen today mixing and matching the Gothic monsters. In order to more fully understand how a filmmaker can justify Dracula and Frankenstein working together with disreputable aims and more importantly, how an audience can feel satisfied with such patchwork pieces far removed from their original horror connotations, we must begin with the early development of these characters, their stories and the horror that spawned them. In our *Blade Runner*-like world, Global Climate Change threaten our future existence and the Promethean threat of the powerful Atomic fire curses scientific advancements from a long past of fear. With Mary Shelley’s precedent of the isolated creative genius who creates monsters in the hope of saving others, it is difficult to find inspiration for the science that may be necessary “as we desperately fumble for a way to throw this machine into reverse” (Dowling, qtd. in Steel). It is that machine that finds inspiration,

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<sup>44</sup> The phrase “Be afraid. Be very afraid” became popular from the 1986 version of *The Fly*, starring Jeff Goldblum as the mad scientist. Interestingly, Goldblum also became connected with the phrase “Nature will find a way” in the film *Jurassic Park* (1996), referring to the fact that the cloned dinosaurs will “find a way” to break their bonds and procreate across the island – a promethean prophecy that, naturally, no one listens to. While in *The Fly*, Goldblum is the creator of the monster; in *Jurassic Park* he acts as the more seasoned and wise scientist who voices the warnings shared by the audience. Some readers may also recognize “be afraid. Be very afraid!” from the Bush, Jr. presidential-era. This phrase is commonly used in connection with the “terrorist-politics” president George W. Bush implemented during his time in the White House.

rather anachronistically, in the Gothic that so infamously disparaged the not yet named intellectuals who wrought to find answers to the “balance of nature.”

From their creation, literary characters like Frankenstein and his Creature have been defined by the genre of Gothic Horror and stories of the threat of science, while shaping the stereotypes and expectations surrounding Horror by offering audiences the ultimate Horror – the unknown and the indefinable supernatural. But now filmmakers arrive at the Frankenstein’s Monster and others in SF as action/adventure superheroes. While this change from horror to action/adventure may seem inappropriate, it speaks volumes about our changing expectations of horror, monsters and science. Through reinvention and appropriation by different media these archetypes have changed. On the one hand, these appropriations attempt to respond to the changing needs of the audience, from changing technologies to understanding the complexities of the human mind. On the other hand, through such reinventions the conflicts these characters endure have transformed through the horror stereotypes and the parodies into the new heroes of SF. From Frankenstein to Frankenberry (the sugar-coated creature with no connection to the scientist who created him), to Dracula and the “Count” on *Sesame Street* (“Vun, two, three, bwa-haha”), and Mr. Hyde who turns into a Hulk-like monster in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, the Gothic archetypes are not what they once were and yet we know “what” they are by name and appearance.

As Twitchell explains, “the minute we see the incisors, or the neck bolts, or the hirsute visage, we immediately know what will follow. No one needs to explain them: they are drawn all over the walls of the modern cave” (258). The *visions* of these monsters offer contemporary audiences a comfort zone and with that, a unique reinvention of science that puts the “wonder of

science” back in the Gothic in a way that literature critics never would have expected; after all, these monsters were originally written to remind us of the horrors that science can bring.

Twitchell explains our necessity to return to these monsters because:

We will keep returning to watch the werewolf transform, or the vampire bite the virgin, or Dr. Frankenstein experiment in his laboratory, or Dr. Jekyll meet Mr. Hyde, and we will probably continue this interest until we resolve whatever it is in these myths that is unresolved within ourselves. (20)

In Steampunk, it becomes clear that we no longer “want and need [these monsters] around” as carriers of Horror, as Twitchell insists throughout *Dreadful Pleasures* (258). Now they can be used as a means of fighting our “imagination of disaster” while comfortably re-introducing audiences to the awesome power of science in the hopes of returning to an ethos of do-it-yourself innovation now absent in our automated world of internet, blackberries, and mechanized production. If the Victorian labor force felt alienated from the products of their production, contemporary audiences feel completely disconnected from what they use, consume and depend upon on a daily basis. This revision of “history,” while veiled in old-fashioned science fiction, becomes drastically unlike what the authors of original SF characters intended while challenging the very core of our social memory of the nineteenth century; this change becomes clear in a film like *Van Helsing*.

Even though the Monster has been used as an inspiration for discussion about cybernetic birth, androids and artificial intelligence, *Van Helsing* features much more than the Monster to illustrate science on the big screen. As the Gothic literature that inspired the character of the Monster and the imagery in these films drew inspiration of horror surrounding science,

Steampunk does exactly the opposite. The Gothic authors would have us believe that the selfish pursuit of science with an aim for God-like abilities would only get you burnt by Promethean fire, Steampunk ideology “accept[s] that everyday items can perform unconventional tasks,” as Rowe for MTV explains. Besides performing uncommon tasks, these inventions featured in Steampunk become entertaining, “for example, a pocket watch would double as a time machine, or a compass could navigate you through the stars” (Rowe) and also hopeful. These Steampunk stories almost always feature “a wild-eyed tinkerer in a lab [who has] the capacity to stumble upon a discovery that just might alter society” (Steel) and perhaps “the creative mind’s answer to a world that has flat-lined” (Brown, qtd. in Steel). Our universe is infused with both micro-level mysteries and macro-sized galaxies becoming more and more complex, adding fuel to these creative answers.

When many of these creative answers, our own imagined future, seem hopeless and impossibly bleak (from *Blade Runner* to *Twelve Monkeys* and *The Postman*), Steampunk gives us a chance to re-imagine the past and invent a new history in which science is the “good guy” leading us toward a more hopeful future. Even the fictional utopias have crumbled into dystopias and sometimes, for our own collective sanity, it is important to leave Freud on the couch and unimagine the disasters that humanity has brought upon itself.<sup>45</sup> Historically, “the conventions of both Gothic and science fiction involve a rejection or a symbolic putting to sleep of reason; they are both forms of apocalyptic nightmare fantasy” (Brantlinger 31). Goya’s terrifying illustration of the Sleep of Reason “that brings monsters,” is commonly associated with the origins of Horror, SF and the Gothic. It is not unusual for the Gothic to be linked to graphic

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<sup>45</sup> Especially the disasters that Susan Sontag describes in “The Imagination of Disaster” about 1950s and 1960s SF films and their obvious connections to the “black magic” of science in the post-Hiroshima American films.

renditions of nightmares: Maryanne Ward explains that “the Gothic is by tradition a tale of the unspeakable, the horrible, perhaps the surreal, but for the most part the ‘unreal’, a work of the imagination” and claims that Fuseli’s painting “The Nightmare” (which shows the ghostly figure of a horse standing behind a prostrate woman with an imp-like being on her chest) “spoke to Mary Goodwin Shelley of the death of her mother” and inspired many scenes in *Frankenstein* (20). Now Steampunk returns to this “sleep of reason” with the romantic appeal of our social memory (not necessarily the “actual” history) of the Victorian era. Viewers are returning to the classic imagery of the Gothic, but not to experience the lessons of the horrors of science notoriously embedded in the Gothic texts and their recurring multimedia versions, but to imagine a *past* that gives hope for the *future*. Shine up the tarnished title of the British Empire of the nineteenth century; forget the imagined horrors of the “sleep of reason” – this new generation of SF fiction fans is ready for hope. *The Steampunk’s Guide to the Apocalypse* illustrates it all, complete with DIY illustrations for a rainwater filtration system. Even when the world surrounding us seems most hopeless, innovations can be found by looking back.

A most appropriate conclusion to this thesis would be to explain the painstaking hours of lamp-light writing accomplished with my Underwood typewriter, circa 1895, studying Gothic literature and Victorian science, spelunking through the caverns of the library to glean answers to the mysteries of humans fear of scientific advancement and in doing so, I would have become the ultimate Steampunker. Ironically, this scenario is far from the truth. As much as the participants of this intriguing subculture/subgenre insist on the power of antiquated technologies and their power to save the world, the truth is that without the scaffolding of the cyber-world that goes unseen, none of this work and very little of their own Steampunk-ing would be possible. If

you were to ask “genuine” Steampunkers where he or she derived their inspiration and their interest in Victorian culture and pre-industrial science, it would be difficult to find any one of them who would say they were able to research and acquire the materials necessary without the power of the World Wide Web – taking advantage of blogs, online publications and historical databases available in almost every American living room. For as much as a return to a time of more “manageable” and “hands on” science before the Bomb is appealing, the cyberworld is so ingrained and intertwined into our modern existence that any such exorcism would be unimaginable, if not more damning than the disasters of science we so quickly try to un-imagine. But because there is no simple answer to the shared anxieties of modernity and new discoveries, why not escape into a fantastic history that wasn’t and re-imagine what might have been and wear really cool clothes at the same time?

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