

**DIGITAL FRANKENSTEIN:  
UK TABLOIDS ONLINE 2020 – 2022**

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This paper is part of the author’s ongoing research on the Frankenstein metaphor. Its usage in the nineteenth-century British press was characterised by a process of semantic expansion, which was imported into Bulgaria in the 1990s. Yet, for the period 2020-2022, there seems to be a semantic reduction of meanings in the Bulgarian papers, which begs the question whether the Frankenstein metaphor is falling out of favour in its native country as well. The examples here come from the online issues of three tabloids: the *Daily Mail*, the *Express*, and the *Sun*, and they clearly demonstrate that the digital Frankenstein of Britain does not significantly differ from its nineteenth-century predecessor.

**Key words:** Frankenstein, metaphor, *Daily Mail*, *Express*, *Sun*, online

This paper is part of the author’s ongoing research on the Frankenstein metaphor. It has been established previously that in the 1820s the name jumped out of Mary Shelley’s novel and Peake’s theatrical adaptation of 1823, “Presumption; or, the Fate of *Frankenstein*”, into the press, as a simile first (e.g. “that Northern Colossus, like Frankenstein’s monster” in the *Morning Chronicle* 1822: 3), and then it turned into a metaphor proper in the late 1830s (e.g. “the Frankenstein school of anatomy” in the *Morning Post*, 1837: 3). The meanings of the simile and the metaphor back then were expanding: they included references to monstrosity, as well as usage synonymous with talent and creativity, and Frankenstein was associated with both the creator and the creation. This process of semantic expansion was copied in the Bulgarian press in the late twentieth, early twenty-first centuries, and usage was partly imported from abroad, partly initiated by Bulgarian journalists. In the last couple of years though, there seems to be scarcity of Frankenstein metaphors in this country and a semantic reduction of meanings, which prompted this follow-up research, in order to check whether the Frankenstein metaphor is falling out of favour in its native country as well. The examples here are

limited to the period 2020-2022 and they come from the online issues of three tabloids: the *Daily Mail*, the *Express*, and the *Sun*. They do not cover the entire corpus of publications, but rather take a preliminary snapshot of the situation at hand, meant to establish whether previously recorded processes in the Bulgarian context of 2020-2022 might be indicative of the broader picture.

To begin with, let us pay our dues to the dominant topic for the last couple of years, the Corona virus. Proportionally, there are few mentions of the Frankenstein metaphor in this connection, but one of them has to do with the recombination of COVID strains. In November 2021, discussing the new (then) Omicron variant, a Dr Hoge refers to it for the *New York Times* as “a Frankenstein mix of all of the greatest hits”. The news is reported in the *Sun* under the heading, “MUTANT SHOCK: ‘Race against time’ to save Christmas as Omicron variant with ‘Frankenstein mix’ of mutations sweeps Europe” (the *Sun* 2021: 29<sup>th</sup> Nov.). Usage relies on the threatening connotations of Mary Shelley’s protagonist evoked by the context. The example above references natural processes but another use of the label has to do with human intervention and highlights that assembling bits and pieces has become an integral part of the two-hundred-year-old metaphor. In July 2021 there was a discussion about the involvement of US National-Institutes-of-Health funding in gain-of-function research.<sup>1</sup> Brett Giroir claimed that NIH grant money

funded researchers to go hundreds of miles away into the back of bat caves, extract dangerous viruses from bats that have never been seen by humans before, and bring them to a city of 10 million people in the Wuhan lab. Next, they chopped up those viruses and created new Frankenstein viruses to see if they could infect human cells.

(*Daily Mail* 2021b: 21<sup>st</sup> July)

According to the *Daily Mail* publication, Giroir “speculated that those ‘new’ viruses would be stored for use by China as bioweapons” (The *Daily Mail* 2021b: 21<sup>st</sup> July). Thus, we get a bit closer to Mary Shelley’s narrative but the name is applied to the scary creation rather than to the irresponsible creator.

Science easily lends itself to updated versions of the metaphor because uncharted territories are perceived as an existential threat. Another *Daily Mail* publication discusses “Frozen bodies and brains ... SNATCHED from

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<sup>1</sup> To clarify the term, “any selection process involving an alteration of genotypes and their resulting phenotypes is considered a type of Gain-of-Function (GoF) research” (Board on Life Sciences 2015).

Russian lab where they were stored in the hope of being brought back to life” and calls this a “*Frankenstein* technology”. In this case it is the departure from established norms that seems to have evoked the association with the prototype of mad science. (*Daily Mail* 2021e: 10<sup>th</sup> Sept.)

Journalists themselves pick and mix in a rather unpredictable manner – Frankenstein-like, I am tempted to say. Under the heading “Plumbers and teachers are invited to share their views on designer babies and genetically enhanced potatoes as part of a citizens’ assembly on ‘re-engineering’ the human species”, we unexpectedly find the following options: “Genetic enhancements could also safeguard important crops like potatoes and corn from disease and end world hunger – or alternately create weird ‘Frankenstein foods’” (*Daily Mail* 2020b: 18<sup>th</sup> Sept.).

With the discovery of DNA in 1953 and the research that followed it, the late twentieth century firmly established the link between food and genetic modification. The initial thrill and excitement, however, have long given way to anxiety, and these days the Frankenstein metaphor is used as warning against such practices – for example: “The government has also used Brexit to press ahead with the development of GM – Frankenstein food production – which could involve editing the genes of crops and farm animals” (*Daily Mail* 2021a: 10<sup>th</sup> Jan.).

The association of unhealthy foods with Frankenstein is triggered by the perception of the being as life-threatening. The “ethic of care” line of research in Mary Shelley studies<sup>2</sup> has not had any impact on how the metaphor functions – in 2022 the creature is still a dangerous and deadly monster. Needless to say, genetic modification is not the only fear in the food industry. In the *Express*, we find a recent publication on “The ‘Frankenstein foods’ that could ‘shorten your lifespan’” (*Express* 2022a: 11<sup>th</sup> June). The subtitle promises quite a range, “From fats to sweeteners, here are the worst offenders”. Weight expert Marisa Peer calls these foods “the real monsters that lurk in your cupboards”. This is not a story of origins; it is the effect that matters. The bottom line is that ultra-processed food is associated with cancer due to the “obscene amounts of sugar, salt and trans fats, making them the ultimate Frankenstein food”. (*Express* 2022a: 11<sup>th</sup> June)

Amongst the features of monstrosity is visual dreadfulness, and plastic surgery gone wrong evokes Frankenstein in the minds of sufferers

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<sup>2</sup> To shed some light on the phrase, the “ethic of care” goes back to Carol Gilligan “to characterize women’s approach to decision-making” and is associated with Mary Shelley’s novel due to Anne Mellor, who “persuasively argues that *Frankenstein* upholds this ethic in contrast to a Romantic model of male egotism” (Rochelson 1990: 261).

and commentators. A 37-year-old woman, horrified by the wrinkles and swollenness that her thread lift had caused, wrote to the *Daily Mail* about the procedure: “I’ll never forget waking up and feeling like Frankenstein. I had no idea if I’d ever be ‘normal’ again” (*Daily Mail* 2021c: 21<sup>st</sup> July). The metaphorical naming goes both ways: to victims but also to culprits, as demonstrated by another piece under the heading “‘Dr Frankenstein’ plastic surgeon who left her patients horrifically disfigured after operating on them in a Russian basement despite having no qualifications is arrested” (*Daily Mail* 2020: 9<sup>th</sup> March). This horror story takes us to the remote and generally unfamiliar to the British city of Krasnodar, establishing a parallel for the readers of the *Daily Mail* with Victor’s departure for “the remotest of the Orkneys as the scene of my labours” (Shelley 1831: Chapter 19) when he considers the creation of a female creature.

As with virus mutations, naturally occurring deformity can also be termed Frankensteinian, and we see the tables turned on doctors when a title announces “Woman who was in constant agony and struggled to walk for 30 YEARS because of her ‘freaky, Frankenstein foot’ has ‘life-changing’ six-hour surgery to correct overlapping toes” (*Daily Mail* 2020c: 29<sup>th</sup> Sept.). Here the doctors are the good guys who right the wrong and provide relief from monstrosity.

Size matters when it comes to Frankenstein. In Mary Shelley’s narrative, the protagonist discloses, “As the minuteness of the parts formed a great hindrance to my speed, I resolved, contrary to my first intention, to make the being of a gigantic stature, that is to say, about eight feet in height, and proportionably large.” (Shelley 1831: Chapter 4) As a result, various instances of unexpected enormity attract the Frankenstein metaphor. Such is the case with this goldfish:

An enormous goldfish weighing 9lbs, 15 times bigger than the regular pet, was found in a South Carolina lake. The ‘Frankenstein’ fish is about 15 inches long and was discovered during a routine fish survey in a lake in Greenville. The 15in-long creature, which has been compared to the Loch Ness Monster, leapt out of the 65-acre lake while the fishermen were electrofishing, because it was too big to be paralysed by the small voltage.

(*Daily Mail* 2020d: 11<sup>th</sup> Dec.)

Surely, it is the concept of electrofishing rather than the size of the fish that brings to mind Victor’s experiments with electricity in twentieth-century screen adaptations of the novel? Rhetorical questions aside, this use of the metaphor brings to mind that the nineteenth century press linked Brunel’s locomotives with Frankenstein because of their size (*Morning Advertiser* 1850: 3).

Monstrosity is often politicised and there is a long history of the bonds between Frankenstein and the world of politics. Let me illustrate this with a couple of examples. In the case of Belarusian athlete Krystsina Tsimanouskaya, the parallel with Mary Shelley's monster is aimed at character assassination. According to the *Daily Mail*, she was vilified by the official newspaper of Lukashenko's regime, *Belarus Today*, which claimed that "lack of intelligence (and) upbringing plus the excessive attention of the state...finally made her a monster"; therefore, she "is not a white and fluffy offended fairy, but rather a Frankenstein. A terrible selfish monster who, for his own benefit and personal interests, is ready to sell everything and everyone." (*Daily Mail* 2021d: 4<sup>th</sup> Aug.) Here the use of the metaphor is directly translated from the Belarusian (*Belarus Today* 2021: 2<sup>nd</sup> Aug.). The story takes us back to August 2021 when the sprinter was effectively prevented from participating in the Olympic Games. She refused to go back to Belarus and sought asylum in Poland. The mention of Frankenstein is meant to influence public opinion in the original context of the Belarusian newspaper.

Similarly, a commentator in the *Express* involves Frankenstein in Putin's war in Ukraine in order to express an attitude and shape up readers' sentiments on the English side of the ideological curtain. The piece is palpably dashed, but it makes a point of informing the audience that "With Russian weaponry also destroyed, the country is now functioning with slimmer ranks of demoralised 'Frankenstein forces'" (*Express* 2022b: 5<sup>th</sup> July). The reference very much relies on long-term awareness of the conflict. A couple of months earlier, the BBC popularised Jack Watling's analysis, according to which "Russia has tried to reconstruct and combine some of its already battered units – dubbed 'Frankenstein's Forces'" (Beal 2022: 20<sup>th</sup> May). Whether the phrase is Watling's or the correspondent's remains ambiguous but it has been widely echoed by the media. It is matching and mixing that invites the metaphor, with the horrors of war adding to the monstrous image.

The association with monstrosity is certainly sought and projected in the above report about the Russian troops, but recombinations are not always monstrous. A couple of recent publications confirm that the meaning of Frankensteinian collage as creative and productive is still in circulation. In the world of football, the perfect striker was nicknamed "Frankenstein's poacher" by the *Sun* (*Sun* 2020: 23 May): he would have Mbappe's right foot, Messi's left foot, Cristiano Ronaldo's heart, Lineker's instinct, Vardy's pace, Van Basten's elegance, Muller's opportunism, Brazilian Ronaldo's power and Santillana's head. The

formula was put forward by MARCA, a Spanish/ English online publication for sports, and taken up by the *Sun*. The most intriguing detail here is the peaceful coexistence of splendour and horror in the phrase, “a magnificent goalscoring version of Frankenstein’s monster” (*Sun* 2020: 23 May). Talent and skill are certainly at the centre of this type of usage.

Compared to such a dream of manipulating biological systems, a collage in the world of mechanics is much more feasible. Here is the description of an “easy slider” car that is not what it appears to be:

The car he’s driving is a Toyota GT86 sports car, but not the same one you can buy down at your local Toyota dealer. It’s had everything upgraded: its tyres, suspension, brakes, steering, engine and gearbox are custom built to withstand the high-speed sideways driving. As standard, the Toyota GT86 comes with 197bhp, but this Frankenstein drift machine comes with 800bhp.

(*Sun* 2022: 5<sup>th</sup> May)

Such examples are not exhaustive of the use of the Frankenstein metaphor in contemporary newspapers, as these are just a selection of what can be found in the three tabloids (the *Daily Mail*, the *Express*, and the *Sun*) examined for the purposes of this paper, but they clearly demonstrate that the digital Frankenstein of Britain does not significantly differ from its nineteenth-century predecessor in the British press. In the decades after the publication of Mary Shelley’s novel, the name was used in the papers to denote the creators of monsters and the monsters themselves. Gradually new meanings became associated with Frankenstein, and in the 1850s it acquired such translations as imagination and creativity. As we can see, the kaleidoscope of meanings persists into the twenty-first century.

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