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THE FRANKENSTEIN COMPLEX WITH A BULGARIAN TWIST

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This paper traces the path from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to artificial intelligence via Arthur C. Clarke's short story "Dial *F* for Frankenstein", in order to shed some light on the initial Bulgarian literary reception of the myth before the novel was translated in this country. It turns out that today's shortcut between Frankenstein and artificial intelligence was planted in the local context with the introduction of the Frankenstein complex, prior to introducing Shelley's protagonist. The reception framework was informed by science fiction, but also by the link between industry, on the one hand, and developments in technology, on the other.

Key words: *Frankenstein*, Arthur C. Clarke, Hitchcock, sci-fi, translation

Arthur C. Clarke's short story "Dial *F* for Frankenstein" is fascinating both in terms of text and context. It points towards telephone communications, dialling numbers with a rotary phone, and the use of letters to translate numerical place codes after the switch from operators to automatic dialling. In the USA, the first three digits of the seven-digit telephone number, which corresponded to the exchange, were translated into the first three letters of the name of that exchange; all-numerical dialling did not become the standard until the 1960s (Mercier 2023). In the UK, the Subscriber Trunk Dialling, which allowed subscribers to make long-distance calls directly, without an operator's assistance, was introduced in 1958; letter combinations corresponded to actual place names as a mnemonic for remembering telephone numbers (Horne, Emerson 2022; UK Telephone History 2025). The first telephone satellite, capable of relaying calls and images across the Atlantic, was launched from Cape Canaveral on 10 July 1962 and "could carry 600 voice calls and

one black-and-white TV channel from an elliptical orbit" (Satellite Spy 2012). These technological developments were the background for Clarke's "Dial *F* for Frankenstein", initially published in 1963. The short story featured in *Playboy* magazine in January 1965 and was later included in a *Playboy* collection of literary texts. The title echoed a 1952 play written by Frederick Knott and a hit on Broadway, "Dial *M* for Murder", made famous by Hitchcock's screen adaptation of the same name in 1954. It is also a nod to the title of what is widely considered the first sci-fi text, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818).

The narrative time of "Dial *F* for Frankenstein" is set in 1975, a decade into the future, and the story begins with all the phones around the world ringing at the same time. But when people answer the call, there is no one at the other end of the line. We are then told that a telecom satellite was launched a couple of hours before the malfunction and are taken to the cafeteria of the post-office research centre the day after. The engineers discuss the incident and one of them verbalises the hypothesis that, with the satellite launch, the telephone connections have become centralised and the system is very much like the human brain. This birth of a mechanical consciousness is gradually substantiated by accumulating evidence such as flickering lights, bank statement errors, airports closing down, traffic chaos, the silencing of the radio, jumbled newspaper pages, an explosion… The implication is that humanity has lost control over its creation.

This latter message explains the reference to *Frankenstein*. There are various interpretations of Mary Shelley's novel: the protagonist is seen as playing God, being involved in procreating without a woman, mismanaging the dynamics of parenthood, or rejecting otherness; the author herself may have been testing Locke's empiricism formula, questioning the Romantic ideals of the poets in her immediate circle, or putting together a cautionary tale along the lines of the Promethean myth. Whatever the nuances of the Frankenstein interpretations, however, the loss of control over the creature is at the heart of the metaphorical afterlives of the name. One wonders how the loss of control may have come about… In Hitchcock's screen adaptation "Dial *M* for Murder", a conversation between two of the characters elaborates on the discrepancy between the ideas in the mind of the creator and the way they actually pan out in the real world. One of the interlocutors is Mark, who writes detective fiction: he believes he can plan the perfect murder on paper but would not be able to follow it through because "in stories things turn out the way the author wants them, and in real life they don't" (Hitchcock 1954). The other interlocutor, Tony Wendice, has been planning the murder of his wife and believes he has devised the perfect plan. Needless to say, the

execution is a far cry from the intended result. The loss of control over the plan is not something the viewers are worried about as they are more likely to sympathise with the potential victim than with her murderer. When it comes to *Frankenstein* though, humanity recognises itself in the creator rather than in the creation, and the loss of control poses a threat.

In Mary Shelley's novel, Frankenstein finds out that he has lost control when he becomes convinced that the murderer of his brother William is none other than "the wretch, the filthy dæmon" to whom he has given life (Shelley 2017: 58). At the beginning of his project, he thought he was going to be revered by a new race: "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs" (Shelley 2017: 37). Of course, children are not grateful just because we expect them to be: in the best of scenarios it is the investment of care and upbringing that pays off. Frankenstein, as we are very much aware, is not prepared to make such an investment: he leaves his creation to its own devices. The violence it uses paints the picture of lack of control. Ironically, the actual evidence is not as persuasive to Victor as is his own thought experiment. When his creature asks him for a female partner, he starts putting a female body together, and then pauses to think:

> Even if they were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the dæmon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. … I shuddered to think that future ages might curse me as their pest, whose selfishness had not hesitated to buy its own peace at the price, perhaps, of the existence of the whole human race.
>
> (Shelley 2017: 139)

Independence comes at a cost: unpredictability. But female unpredictability is of a different order, prefigured by Eve's disobedience before the fall. Feminist criticism has made a lot of the destruction of the body of the female creature.

Creating or not creating life in *Frankenstein* is purposeful, and so is the criminal intent in Hitchcock's drama. The creation of mechanical consciousness in Clarke's story is unintentional – it is the unforeseen side effect of technological progress. Or is it? In his *2001: A Space Odyssey* there is the machine that turns against the human astronauts on the spaceship and resorts to murder, before it is eventually deactivated. Whether this is considered an accurate representation of the story depends

on how much context is brought in, but for readers back in 1968 no sequel existed to provide the background.[1] The motif had persisted ever since Mary Shelley outlined the rebellion of the creature against its creator in the early nineteenth century and it was indicative of human expectations. Reacting to the recurrent interpretation of robots as a destructive menace, Isaac Asimov coined the phrase "Frankenstein complex" to indicate the human expectation of robotic disloyalty. The phrase is meant to reference the rebellion of the creation against the creator in his story "Little Lost Robot" and character Peter Bogert uses it in dialogue with Dr Susan Calvin, while she unpacks it in the following manner:

> All normal life, Peter, consciously or otherwise, resents domination. If the domination is by an inferior, or by a supposed inferior, the resentment becomes stronger. Physically, and, to an extent, mentally, a robot – any robot – is superior to human beings. What makes him slavish, then? Only the First Law! Why, without it, the first order you tried to give a robot would result in your death.
>
> (Asimov 1983: 21)

Asimov's story, in which the Frankenstein reference occurs, was first published in Bulgarian in 1970. The phrase, however, did not make it into the Bulgarian translation from the Russian translation of the English original; it was rendered as "superiority complex" (Asimov 1970: 104) and Frankenstein narrowly missed an indirect introduction to Bulgarian sci-fi fans.[2] But the delay was only momentary. In 1972 the first Bulgarian translation of Clarke's "Dial *F* for Frankenstein" was printed in a weekly that specialised in science fiction. The text was preceded by an introduction, which shielded the author against ideological attacks. The

[1] Even before Clarke's *2010: Odyssey Two* (1982), interpretations of the plot varied. John Hollow, for example, did not see HAL 9000 as rebellious: "The computer does not rebel in Clarke's draft version of *2001*. There is some malfunctioning machinery and a problem communicating with Earth, but the computer does not commit premeditated murder. Even in the published version the fault is not the computer's but man's" (Hollow 1976: 124).

[2] Presumably, Asimov's story "Little Lost Robot" was translated into Russian before the Russian translation of *Frankenstein* in 1965 and, thus, the "superiority complex" might have come from the Russian source. In her introduction to the 1965 publication of Mary Shelley's novel, Anna Elistratova legitimised current usage: "In the age of cybernetics, atomic energy and nuclear weapons Mary Shelley has become particularly topical. References to *Frankenstein* are frequently to be found in today's periodicals, articles on current affairs, and speeches by politicians in Britain and the USA. The image of Frankenstein has begun to be associated with the problems of the modern world… (pp. 22 – 3)" (qtd. in Beattie 2013).

world was very much perceived as divided by the Iron Curtain: in the West writers would represent the future in the darkest nuances because their half of the world was dominated by banks and corporations but Clarke was not one of the misanthropic sceptics, the introduction claimed, his story was a humane warning against the side effects of full automation. The reference to Frankenstein was duly mentioned but as Mary Shelley's novel was not available in Bulgarian in 1972, this is how it went: "The author draws a parallel with Frankenstein in his very title – you remember the story about the robot that started destroying his creators" (Clarke 1972: 27, translation VK). In literary terms, Frankenstein was presented by means of science fiction and Clarke was instrumental in more ways than one: not only did the title of his short story spell out Shelley's protagonist but an abridged excerpt from his *2001: A Space Odyssey* had been translated in 1971 and had told the story of HAL 9000, the artificial intelligence that spurned the human race, an emblematic illustration of the Frankenstein complex. Thus, in 1972 the reception of Frankenstein was propelled along the lines of the creature–creator dynamics with a robotic twist. The gothic legacy was absent, technology and artificial intelligence dominated the newly introduced discourse.

Clarke's short story "Dial *F* for Frankenstein" enjoyed unfailing popularity for the next couple of decades. In 1973 a new translation was published in a journal dedicated to science and technology with a modified Bulgarian title, "The phone rang…" – no data about the translator is currently available (Clarke 1973). The same journal revisited the story in 1982 with a title along the lines of "Dial Frankenstein's number" in Alexander Hrusanov's translation (Clarke 1982). By that time Mary Shelley's novel had become available in Bulgarian. More significantly for the public interest in cutting-edge technology, with contracts endorsed by the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, the industry of memory-storage devices was booming in the country. Arguably, the government supported the publication of science fiction in order to generate interest in engineering within the younger readers, who might then choose a career path in said industry. In 1984 Maria Nikolova offered a seemingly new translation of the story to the *Orbita* weekly, where "Dial *F* for Frankenstein" had premiered in Bulgarian, echoing a previous modification of the title with a word-order twist, "And rang the phone" (Clarke 1984). On closer inspection it transpires that the published text largely reiterated the 1973 anonymous translation and the changes that occurred were rather superficial. The latest translation of the short story is Venelin Mechkov's and it appeared in volume 2 of Clarke's collected

stories in Bulgarian with a title that retained the Frankenstein reference (Clarke 1998).

After *2001: A Space Odyssey* Arthur C. Clarke was recognised as a global celebrity. But even before that, in an interview for the *Horizon* programme on the BBC, he had already predicted a world in which people would be able to be in immediate contact with one another, wherever they were around the globe; brain surgeons in Edinburgh would have the option of performing operations on patients in New Zealand; commuting would be replaced by communicating… (Clarke 1964). His vision of what our contemporary world would be like is striking, and the understanding of possibilities goes hand in hand with responsibilities, but safeguarding innovation has always been a challenge. It was a challenge for fictional Frankenstein to see what was coming. It was a challenge for real-life Sir Timothy John Berners-Lee, inspired by Clarke's story to create the internet in 1989 for the benefit of the academic community, to predict the rise of online artificial intelligence and its consequences. The link between Frankenstein and AI has been explored for a long time now. The productivity of combining the two testifies to Frankenstein's status as a myth capable of attaching itself to whatever is relevant at any given moment.

Recent research by Byrd and Paquette "explore[s] how a two-century-year-old [*sic*] tale provides a blueprint for understanding the conflict among humans and machines and provides a roadmap for harmonization in the past, present, and future" (Byrd, Paquette 2023: 331). Eileen Botting is more direct than that: she brings in the names of Charles Babbage and Ada Lovelace, who "designed the elements of the modern computer, or analytical engine", and goes on to claim that more than two decades before them "Shelley imagined the creature as an anthropomorphic AI – complete with the narrow yet driving prejudices, the deep yet mistaken thinking, and the strong yet contradictory feelings of human beings" (Botting 2018). Her argument links the origins of artificial intelligence to the literary description of "the creature as 'superhuman' in speed", explaining that "This speed was not simply physical. His cognitive and affective development after his assembly, animation and abandonment by Frankenstein was far more rapid than that of humans. …The creature is a superintelligence" (Botting 2018). The distinctions between biological and man-made components are insignificant, it is attitudes that matter. As twenty-first century journalists have phrased it, "Victor Frankenstein's sin wasn't simply bringing life to a grotesque creature. It was refusing to raise it, insisting that the consequences were someone else's problem. Every generation produces its Victors. Ours work in artificial intelligence"

(Greenbaum, Gerstein 2025). Commentators discuss "the profound ethical dilemmas faced by AI developers, policymakers, and society at large" that run parallel to the *Frankenstein* messages (Patowary 2023: 121). Ironically, even when they give warning, their writing might turn out to be AI dependent: an example of that is Amir Hossein's short online piece "Frankenstein and AI: A Timeless Warning About Creation Without Responsibility", edited by AI.

In 2017 the MIT Press published *Frankenstein: Annotated for Scientists, Engineers and Creators of All Kinds*. The project involved sending out copies of *Frankenstein* to students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics and asking them "to identify key terms and passages requiring elucidation and elaboration" (Shelley 2017: xii). With the suggestions in hand, the editors David H. Guston, Ed Finn, and Jason Scott Robert aimed at "bringing Mary, Victor, and the creature into the heart of conversations about contemporary science and technology" by means of "a deeply engaging cross-disciplinary exploration of the complexities of the development of personal and professional identity and of the rightful place of science and scientists in our rapidly changing world" (Shelley 2017: xvi, xiii). Charles Robinson provided his edited version of the original manuscript used for the 1818 publication and wrote the introduction, which ends with a discussion of the screen adaptation *Person of Interest* and this observation:

> Electricity, technology, and the "Frankenstein" myth seem to come full circle at this moment of the plot: from Benjamin Franklin's kites and electrical storms to Joseph Priestley's history of electricity that led to late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century scientific experiments, to *Frankenstein*, to Hollywood adaptations of *Frankenstein* that use lightning to power the electrical machines that generate the creature, and to the most recent adaptations that feature computers and codes and algorithms and hard drives and a final apocalyptic machine on which the fate of the world depends.
>
> (Shelley 2017: xxxii)

At the other end of the volume we find the critical essays that interpret *Frankenstein* in different ways. The last word is given to a discussion of "technical sweetness". The phrase alludes to Oppenheimer's notorious assertion, "When you see something that is technically sweet, you go ahead and do it, and argue about what to do about it only after you've had your technical success. That is the way it was with the atomic bomb" (qtd. in Ross 2010: 8). In other words, when a project is going triumphantly, with success within reach, this gives scientists an adrenalin

rush and makes them forget about contextualising the expected achievement morally or in other significant ways. As an antidote to that, perhaps we can rest assured that creators have Mary Shelley's messages translated into the very language that makes them tick.

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