

Žižek's *Frankenstein*: Modernity, Anti-Enlightenment Critique and Debates on the Left

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Abstract

In this article, I examine Slavoj Žižek's Freudian-Hegelian interpretation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), and argue that Žižek's critique of Shelley's ambiguous and contradictory attitude toward the French Revolution and its regime of terror remains central to the debates about the revolutionary and Enlightenment ideals today. For Žižek, Shelley employs the family myth not only to obfuscate the social reality of the French Revolution, but also to subvert the bourgeois family from within, through its transgressive sexual politics. Although Shelley manages not simply to dismantle modernity, she expresses a radical commitment to a "pure Enlightenment subjectivity". Nonetheless, Shelley fails to articulate the speculative identity of the Enlightenment and revolutionary terror. Žižek's analysis of Shelley's ambiguous position on emancipatory politics has major implications for his critique of Leftist debates about Muslim refugees in Europe and transgender sexuality. It is still urgent, Žižek correctly insists, to interrogate the ways in which identity politics and the human rights regime can be readily appropriated and commodified in late capitalism.

Keywords: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; dialectic of Enlightenment; family myth; monstrosity; modernity; French Revolution; Enlightenment subjectivity; authentic universality; refugees; transgender subjectivity

Resum. *El Frankenstein de Žižek: modernitat, crítica antiil·lustrada i debats d'esquerra*

En aquest article examino la interpretació freudiano-hegeliana de Slavoj Žižek de la novel·la *Frankenstein o el Prometeu modern* (1818) de Mary Shelley i argüixo que la crítica de Žižek a l'actitud ambigua i contradictòria de Shelley envers la Revolució Francesa i el seu règim de terror continua sent avui dia un punt central en els debats sobre els ideals revolucionaris i de la Il·lustració. Segons Žižek, Shelley utilitza el mite de la família no només per ofuscar la realitat social de la Revolució Francesa, sinó també per subvertir la família burgesa des de dins a través de la seva política sexual transgressiva. A més d'aconseguir desmantellar la modernitat, Shelley expressa un compromís radical amb una forma «pura de la subjectivitat de la Il·lustració». No obstant això, Shelley no aconsegueix articular la identitat especulativa de la Il·lustració i del seu règim de terror. L'anàlisi de Žižek de la postura contradictòria de Shelley respecte de la política d'emancipació té una gran repercussió en

la seva crítica als debats d'esquerra sobre els refugiats musulmans a Europa i la sexualitat transgènere. És imperatiu, Žižek reitera correctament, interrogar les maneres en què les polítiques identitàries i el règim dels drets humans poden ser fàcilment apropiats i mercantilitzats.

Paraules clau: Mary Shelley; *Frankenstein*; dialèctica de la Il·lustració; mite de la família; monstrositat; modernitat; Revolució Francesa; subjectivitat de la Il·lustració; universalitat autèntica; refugiats; sexualitat transgènere

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1. Introduction

In so far as the question of modernity is central to Slavoj Žižek's oeuvre (La Berge, 2007), this article examines Žižek's engagement with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), a text that embodies the "myth of modernity" par excellence (Turney, 1998: 8; Reese, 2009: 22). Shelley's classical novel stages not only "the deepest impulses of modernity to control nature, perfect social existence, and produce new forms of life" (Best and Kellner, 2001: 159). It also diffracts the contradictions and anxieties that emerged in the transition from agrarian to industrial capitalism at the turn of the nineteenth-century British empire (Montag, 2016).

Throughout his work, Žižek makes recurrent references to Shelley's *Frankenstein*. While it might be hyperbolic to claim that Shelley's *Frankenstein* is central to Žižek's oeuvre, Žižek has appropriated the novel to exemplify various psychoanalytic and Hegelian concepts.¹ These concepts include the fantasy/gaze nexus (Žižek, 1991c), the acephalus subject (Žižek, 1999), the "identity of opposites" of the divine (Žižek and Milbank, 2009), and the "neighbor thing" (Žižek, 2008b). However, Žižek's most extended treatment of the novel is developed in the context of his critiques of the liberal left (Žižek, 2008a: 72-81). Although Žižek does not interweave all these interpretations of Shelley's *Frankenstein* in his most extended critique, these interpretations complement each other and could be seamlessly integrated into one comprehensive interpretation.

1. For more on Žižek's appropriation of literary texts, see Sbriglia (2017: 1-32).

In his Hegelian-Freudian interpretation of the novel, Žižek examines Shelley's ambiguous and contradictory attitude toward modernity, especially the monstrosity of the French Revolution, in the context of his critique of the Hollywood family myth (Žižek, 2008a: 72-80). Žižek correctly problematizes the standard Marxist readings of Shelley's *Frankenstein* and identifies it as an antecedent to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's "dialectic of Enlightenment" (Žižek, 2008a: 79). However, he suggests, Shelley fails to articulate the speculative identity of these contradictions, and consequently, she was able to resolve these contradictions only by narrativizing them through the family myth/Oedipal drama (incestuous desire). To this extent, Žižek's critique of the novel exemplifies his critical modernist position, which can be distinguished from both simplistic rejections of the Enlightenment and the appropriations of postmodern theory (Žižek, 1991b: 25-26).

In what follows, I first interrogate Žižek's interpretation of Shelley's ambiguous position towards modernity and its excesses in the context of the anti-Enlightenment tradition, or more precisely, in the context of Horkheimer and Adorno's "dialectic of Enlightenment." Although Shelley does not simply dismantle modernity, as Žižek points out, she inscribes a "pure Enlightenment subjectivity." Nonetheless, Shelley fails to articulate the speculative identity of the enlightenment and revolutionary terror. Consequently, she employs the family myth to obfuscate the social reality of the French Revolution. Second, I examine Žižek's Freudian analysis of the novel within his larger argument about Hollywood films and the way these films fetishize family narratives to obfuscate the social reality of revolutionary and other catastrophic events. Unlike these films, he contends, Shelley manages to subvert the family myth from within through transgressive sexual desire. However, I show, neither the French Revolution nor incestuous desire is completely obfuscated in the novel. Instead, I demonstrate that the unconscious wish in the novel involves homoerotic desire.

Finally, I explore the implications of Žižek's analysis of Shelley's ambiguous positions on radical politics to his critique of leftist politics today especially, in the debates about Muslim refugees in Europe and transgender sexuality. While he weaponizes the novel in the former, using it to attack the left's liberal subjectivization of fundamentalist Muslim terrorists and their elevation to an iconography of victimology (Žižek, 2016a), Žižek does not directly invoke Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the latter. However, Žižek's arguments in these debates makes it possible to shift the attention from the fetishization of identity politics and the representation of the monstrosity of queer desire and transgender bodies to the ways in which identity politics can be readily appropriated and commodified in late capitalism. This critique remains central to the debates about the revolutionary and Enlightenment ideals today and the need for an authentic universality around which the left can rally.

2. *Frankenstein*, modernity and anti-Enlightenment

“I am modernity personified!!”
(The Creature, *Penny Dreadful*, 2014)

In his Freudian-Hegelian analysis of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Žižek attributes Shelley's obfuscation of the novel's historical references to her “deeply ambiguous and contradictory” attitude towards modernity and the French Revolution. He shows that Shelley holds clearly ambiguous attitudes towards progress that lead her to endorsing science, while justifying the “fear of progress” (Žižek, 2008a: 79). Indeed, in one of her letters from 1816, Mary Shelley writes that “notwithstanding the temporary bloodshed and injustice with which [the revolution] was polluted, [the revolution] has produced enduring benefits to mankind” (Bennett, 1980: 20). Consequently, Žižek contends, Shelley does not only repudiate “the destructive potential of modernity” (Žižek and Milbank, 2009: 50) and the darker side of the Enlightenment. Equally important, he argues, she installs the Creature (monster) as the “pure subject of the Enlightenment” (Žižek, 2008a: 79).

Žižek thus situates the novel in the anti-Enlightenment tradition, or more precisely, in the context of Horkheimer and Adorno's “dialectic of Enlightenment” (Žižek, 2008a: 79).² For Horkheimer and Adorno, the aim of the Enlightenment, broadly speaking, has been the emancipation of “human beings from fear and installing them as masters” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 1). However, they remark, “the wholly enlightened earth” does not radiate under the signs of consistent progress and the “advance of thought,” but “under the sign of disaster triumphant.” This does not mean that Horkheimer and Adorno simply reject the Enlightenment *stricto sensu*, as is commonly believed. Rather, they propose that the relationship between myth and enlightenment is dialectical; that, as they write, “Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: xviii). They are two sides of the same coin, so to speak.

In their Hegelian argument, therefore, Horkheimer and Adorno demonstrate the identity of enlightenment and myth, rationality and faith. As J. M. Bernstein correctly notes, “The antagonists of the Enlightenment are pure insight and religious faith. The speculative proposition orienting the dialectic is that pure insight and faith are one; that is, enlightened rationality and faith turn out to be necessarily dependent on one another, and when that mutual

2. Diana Reese offers a succinct summary of the debates about the Enlightenment in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, noting that it has been “variously regarded as a repudiation of Enlightenment projects for political liberation, an incendiary extension of them or as the record of a vexed ambivalence with respect to notions of progress in general” (2009: 21). Ironically, though, Reese rejects any reading of Shelley's *Frankenstein* in terms of Horkheimer and Adorno's “dialectic of enlightenment,” the way Žižek does, because she mistakenly associates the Frankfurt School simply with “technology critique or problems presented by the scientific penetration of the secrets of life” (Reese, 2009: 9).

dependency is repudiated, they become equally and analogously empty forms of the self" (Bernstein, 2006: 22). The identity of these opposites coalesces around their resistance to change – the idea, as Lambert Zuidervaar (2015) states, "that fundamental change is impossible."

Although Žižek does not directly apply this critical trajectory of the "dialectic of enlightenment" in his analysis of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, he has developed this line of critique in his analysis of the opposition between myth and quotidian reality in modernism and postmodernism (Žižek, 2001: 35-38). Žižek maintains that whereas modernism stages "a common everyday event in such a way that some mythical narrative resonates in it," postmodernism hinges heavily on re-presenting the "mythical narrative itself as ordinary occurrence" (Žižek, 2001: 35). For Žižek, this explains the falsity of the postmodern gesture: postmodernists tend to supplant "the return of barbaric, pre-civilized mythic patterns" that permeate "the very process of modernization, in its violence" (Žižek, 2001: 36). Instead, they fetishize the magic of myth in the disenchanting modern experience and ignore how this mythical structure is constitutive of contemporary quotidian life.

Žižek thus states that myth/primitive barbarism is continuous with modernity, because "the very violence of modern industrial life, dissolving traditional 'civilized' structures, is directly experienced as the return of the primordial mytho-poetic barbaric violence 'repressed' by the civilizing customs" (Žižek, 2001: 37). There is no possible synthesis or reconciliation between myth and modernity here, but as Hegel makes clear the inevitable "mutual debasement and bastardization" of both. Žižek thus states that "with the advent of modernity, the magic of the enchanted universe is forever lost, reality will forever remain gray" (Žižek and Milbank, 2009: 58).

Unfortunately, Žižek does not address this continuity between myth and modernity in Shelley's *Frankenstein* either, even though the novel is set in a transitional period from agrarian to industrial capitalism in which the dialectic of enchantment and dis-enchantment is clearly played out. Warren Montag, for one, argues that the world that Victor Frankenstein inhabits is "not modern at all," but is rather "a world without industry, a rural world dominated by scenes of sublime natural beauty in which not a single trace of Blake's 'dark satanic mills' is to be found" (Montag, 2016: 479). There are no "significant descriptions of the urban world" in the text. Hence, London, a center for explosive growth and development, is absent and "there are no workers or work." Moreover, the peasants are engaged in recreation and some peasants turn out to be not peasants at all (the aristocratic French family, the de Laceys). This "suppression of this urban and the industrial" in Shelley's *Frankenstein* is significant in the context of the debates about Romantic ideologies and their contradictory attitudes towards modernity and the enlightenment, as well as their attempt to restore the glory of medieval civilization (Löwy and Sayre, 2001: 29-42).

Žižek thus examines three different ways in which this ambiguity is articulated in the novel. First, Shelley's ambiguity is expressed in her liberal subjectivization of the Creature – in the novel, the Creature is not reduced to the

status of a Thing, a “horrible object no one dares to confront” (Žižek, 2008a: 78). Rather, Shelley devotes the inner embedded narrative of the text to the Creature, subjectivizing him, giving him a voice and elevating him to the status of victim. Some critics praise Shelley for this subjectivizing gesture. Allan Smith, for one, states that:

The nobility and sensitivity of the Creature makes it apparent which side of this debate Mary Shelley would take; he is so sympathetically presented that despite his atrocious crimes, many readers have shared the view expressed by Kari J. Winter, that although the monster may be borne away by the dark waves, his remaining alive as the novel ends “leaves us with a faint hope that at some future time he will find a voice and place in the world.” (A. Smith, 2016: 553)

For Žižek, however, Shelley’s narrative strategy here is ideologically suspect, since it embodies “the liberal attitude of freedom of speech at its most radical: everyone’s point of view should be heard,” and every one has the right to “present himself as the ultimate victim.”

What’s more, Žižek contends that Shelley blames the socio-historical context for the Creature’s “identity as a rebel and murderer.” She seems to suggest that the Creature is not innately evil, but the product of an unjust and oppressive society. Similarly, Margo Perkins contends that Shelley holds society culpable “not only in the creation, abuse, and eventual destruction of the monster-as-Other, but equally in the devastation, terror, and misery the latter inflicts because of his detested status” (Perkins, 1991: 27). The Creature turns out to be a “philosophical rebel,” who “explains his actions in traditional republican terms” – that he was driven to rebellion and insurrection “not because they are infected by the evils of the godless radical philosophy, but because they have been oppressed and misused by the regnant order” (Žižek, 2008a: 78).

David Collings explains the Creature’s rebellion against an oppressive society in Lacanian terms. He claims that the Creature desires to enter the Symbolic and be integrated in it through family, social relationships and sexual partnership, but his desires are blocked. Thus, he states, “If Victor creates the monster in order to revolt against the Symbolic, the monster protests against being excluded from it” (Collings, 2016: 332). To this extent, Collings argues that *Frankenstein* represents the Other’s desire not to be considered a monster. Quoting Donald Musselwhite, Collings suggests that Mary Shelley tries to show that the “monster is not ‘in itself’ monstrous, [for] there is no inherent monstrousness,” adding that monstrosity is “only whatever fails to fit into ‘the facile categorizing of the social and cultural order’” (Collings, 2016: 331).

Finally, Žižek links this political ambiguity to the transgressive sexual fantasy at the core of the novel. He notes that rebellion in the novel is redoubled in such a way that Victor rebels against the paternal order and the Creature rebels against the rebellious son, but contends that Robert Walton’s and Victor’s transgressive acts are, nonetheless, more ambiguous than they look. Their adventurous pursuit of scientific discoveries, and their desire to “penetrate into

the recesses of nature and shew how she works in her hiding places" (Shelley, 2012: 59), can be attributed not to "some pathological blasphemous ambition," but the urge to "escape the incestuous stuffiness of their home," because "there must be something wrong at home" (Žižek, 2008a: 79-80). Shelley, however, was unable to resolve the contradiction between "the stifling and oppressive home and the murderous consequences of our attempts to break out of it" (Žižek, 2008a: 80-81). Therefore, she could only tell it as a family myth, since this form allows her to "neutralize this contradiction" (Žižek, 2008a: 76).

The ambiguity in Shelley's fidelity to radical revolutionary politics notwithstanding, she does not dismantle modernity or repudiate it altogether. Žižek thus maintains that Shelley establishes the Creature as the site for the construction of "pure Enlightenment subjectivity" (Žižek, 2008a: 79). Žižek notes that Shelley frames this Enlightenment subjectivity within the philosophical fiction of Locke and Rousseau.³ Indeed, as Diana Reese points out, "the anguished cry of the monster comes forth in such tight allusion to the Enlightenment texts championing the project of freedom" (Reese, 2009: 44). For Žižek, the creature is represented in terms of both Locke's "*tabula rasa*," who has to "re-enact the Enlightenment theory of development" on his own, and Rousseau's myth of natural man, whose innate goodness is corrupted by society. For Rousseau, in particular, the use of "cultivated reason" guarantees that the "savage man dazzled by enlightenment" would make the transition from a primeval state of nature to civilized society, becoming eventually the subject of Enlightenment (Rousseau, 1984: 80). Indeed, for many Romantic writers and philosophers, Rousseau became the symbol of the central principles of Enlightenment philosophy, including universality, objectivity, rationality (Löwy and Sayre, 2001: 8).

By situating this Enlightenment subject within these Enlightenment philosophical traditions, Žižek highlights the impasse of political subjects and the paradoxes underlying debates on natural rights in 18th-century philosophy. As Reese points out, the Creature's attempt to succeed to the regime of universal rights discourse stages the "split in the fundamental category of the 'human' to be observed in this series of pivotal philosophical and political 'doubles'," including Kant's ethics, Rousseau's politics, and the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* (Reese, 2009: 8). While the Creature is recognized by Victor as the "figure of a man" (Shelley, 2012: 95), a subject that could be considered the bearer of universal rights, the Creature is decentered, marking the slippage between man and citizen.

Reese correctly notes that the Creature problematizes the man-citizen split in the meaning of the human, since he is either a "rational being without being human or potential citizen without being man" (Reese, 2009: 8). Moreover, the Creature makes a rights-based "requisition," a demand for recognition, to become a member of a community or species (Shelley, 2012: 126). However,

3. Diana Reese discusses the debate about the impact of Locke's and Rousseau's philosophies on Shelley (2009: 29-34).

Victor blocks his attempt to succeed to the rights of man, by denying him “the corollary rights of man: the protection of the necessities of his life” (Reese, 2009: 52). The Creature’s dependency on Victor, nonetheless, identifies him as a subject of the “private sphere of much political and social thought in the eighteenth century,” including women, slaves and servants (Reese, 2009: 26). In short, as Reese states, the novel is “[n]either an endorsement nor rejection of the Enlightenment,” but “reveals a critical dilemma for attributions of the human proceeding from enlightenment” (Reese, 2009: 22).

Nonetheless, Shelley was still not able to articulate the speculative identity of the enlightenment and revolutionary terror. Žižek shows this failure not in her inability to articulate the dialectical relationship of the coincidence of opposites between enlightenment and terror but in the relationship between creator and created. He states that the traditional critical argument about the parallels between creator and created in the novel, God/Victor and Adam/the monster, is fundamentally flawed. He argues that Victor cannot be associated with God and simultaneously be represented as the figure of a rebel. However, in his opinion, Shelley is convinced that Victor’s sin is his violation of the laws of nature and assuming the power of God, actions that can only result in horror and terror (Žižek, 2008a: 438). In contrast, Žižek proposes a Chestertonian solution that views God as the ultimate rebellious figure. God rebels against himself because, by “creating man, God committed the supreme crime of aiming too high – of creating a creature ‘in his own image,’ new spiritual life,” that could never live up to the ideal image of the divine (Žižek and Milbank, 2009: 50-51).

Elsewhere, however, Žižek examines the “radical identity of opposites” of universality and terror in his interrogation of Jacobin terror. He argues that Jacobin terrorism was the ultimate conclusion of “their violent reduction of the social totality to the abstract principle of equality” (Žižek, 1991a: 184). To protect democracy Jacobins maintained this abstract equality through a regime of terror. As Jodi Dean explains, Jacobinism begins with an “act of radical emptying,” because “[d]emocracy requires that the place of power remain empty” (Dean, 2006: 106). Hence, the Jacobins took it upon themselves to safeguard “the empty locus of power,” ensuring that this center of power remained empty (Žižek, 1991a: 268). As such, terror becomes the “condition for the emergence of the formal, empty place of universality” (Dean, 2006: 121). For Robespierre, as Žižek contends, this terror is the only means of enforcing the Truth. He writes, “Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is therefore an emanation of virtue. It is less a special principle than a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our country’s most pressing needs” (Žižek, 2008a: 159). Robespierre’s argument reaches its ultimate conclusion, “the paradoxical identification of the opposites”, by which “revolutionary terror ‘sublates’ the opposition between punishment and clemency – just and severe punishment of the enemies is the highest form of clemency, so that rigor and charity coincide in terror” (Žižek, 2008a: 159). Unfortunately, Žižek points out, Shelley was unable to articulate the ambiguity in her novel through “the radical identity of

opposites.” Rather, she withdraws from it, by taking a more conservative position, at least in her later years. Thus, he claims that the only way she was able to resolve these contradictions in the novel is by narrativizing them through the family myth/Oedipal drama.

3. Family myth and the monstrosity of revolution: the politics of obfuscation

Consequent upon Shelley's inability to articulate the coincidence of opposites between the Enlightenment and revolutionary terror, Žižek argues that Shelley employs the family myth to obfuscate the historical references to the French Revolution. Žižek thus examines the relationship between history and family in the novel in the context of his analysis of the ways in which Hollywood films use the family drama to obfuscate the socio-political context. He argues that “in a typical Hollywood product, everything, from the fate of the knights of the Round Table through the October Revolution up to asteroids hitting the Earth, is transposed into an Oedipal narrative” (Žižek, 2008a: 52). Hollywood and non-Hollywood film productions, that is, employ a fundamentally reactionary ideological operation, by framing important historical events and larger social struggles within the coordinates of the family plot. These films foreground the family drama, whether it is the impasse of parental authority, incestuous relationships between fathers and daughters, or the production of the romantic couple, at the expense of social reality and revolutionary or catastrophic historical references. They thus approach their historical subject matter indirectly through emplotting intense dramatic family relations.

Drawing on Freud's analysis of dreams, and the distinction he makes among manifest content, dream thought, and unconscious wish, Žižek argues that Shelley's *Frankenstein* constitutes an important text that points to a different radical strategy, by which she undermines the family myth from within. Shelley's novel does not, as Marxist critics contend, simply encode the family drama and its sexual libidinal impetus at the level of the manifest content of the dream that reflects its true latent content, the historical Real, in a distorted way. Rather, he states, “it is through this very distortion and displacement that the text's ‘unconscious wish’ (the sexualized fantasy) inscribes itself” (Žižek, 2008a: 78-79). In the gap between the manifest content of the scientist-monster narrative and the latent content, the reality of the French Revolution, Žižek discerns the text's transgressive sexual fantasy, namely incestuous desire. By playing out transgressive incestuous desire, Žižek foregrounds the ways in which Shelley rejects the idealization of the bourgeois family and accomplishes the difficult task of subverting the family myth from within, rather than substituting it for political commentary on social reality.⁴

4. Indeed, Žižek's analysis here is in line with feminist critiques of the novel which have shown that Shelley rejects the bourgeois family institution – its hierarchical structure, property relations, and ideology of domination (Ellis, 1979).

Nonetheless, Žižek maintains that Shelley still obfuscates any reference to the French Revolution in her novel. He zeroes in on the French Revolution and “its degeneration into terror and dictatorship” as a clear site of monstrosity in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Shelley, he claims, uses the master-signifier of monstrosity to encode not only the French Revolution, but also modern industrial production and scientific knowledge (Žižek, 2008a: 79). Žižek thus examines the Romantic notion of monstrosity in relation to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s distinction between imagination and fancy. He identifies four levels of artificial monstrosity in the narrative along the lines of Coleridge’s concept of fancy. These levels include the xenogeneic monster, social reality, the novel, and critical interpretations, all of which demonstrate different forms of monstrosity that violate the notion of organic harmony (Žižek, 2008a: 74-75).⁵

Interestingly enough, Žižek does not address Jacobin terror at all in his analysis of revolutionary monstrosity in the novel, even though he invokes Jacobin terror in a later chapter of the book (Žižek, 2008a: 158-173). Rather, Žižek draws on biographical and contextual references that associate Mary Shelley with revolutionary politics. He thus mentions that the Shelleys were interested in the polemics surrounding the French Revolution, and that Victor attends Ingolstadt University and creates the monster in the same city where the Illuminati planned the Revolution. Furthermore, he alludes to the symbolic association between the monster and Mary Shelley’s father, the philosopher William Godwin, who was the target of anti-Jacobin attacks.⁶

It is important to note that Žižek merely associates Mary Shelley with revolutionary politics and does not identify her with it ideologically. As critics have noted, there is a clear ambiguity in Shelley’s fidelity to radical revolutionary politics. Some critics associate her novel with the radical Jacobin tradition (Blumberg, 1993) and the progressive tendencies of the “late Enlightenment” (Day, 1996: 181-182). Other critics, however, compare her style to Burke’s counter-revolutionary rhetoric (Sterrenburg, 1979), while others note that the novel registers Shelley’s “distinct, perhaps unconscious, unhappiness with the revolutionary politics of her husband and his political predecessors” (Weissman, 1976: 171). Nevertheless, Žižek states that

[Shelley] goes much further than the usual conservative warnings about how scientific and political progress turns into nightmare, chaos, and violence, how man should retain proper humility in the face of the mystery of creation and not try to become a master of life, which should remain a divine prerogative. (Žižek, 2008a: 79)

Nevertheless, it must be noted, neither the French Revolution nor incestuous desire is completely obfuscated in the novel. Jean-Jacques Lecercle has

5. Johanna Smith (2016) offers a comprehensive overview of the critical interpretations of the novel.
6. On Godwin’s monstrosity, see Sterrenburg (1979: 143-171), and on the attack on Godwin’s *Political Justice* in various anti-Jacobin novels, see Grenby (2004: 76-77).

correctly pointed out that “although not once mentioned in *Frankenstein*, the French Revolution is nevertheless alluded to” (quoted in Montag, 2016: 470). Although a precise chronology of the narrative’s plot cannot be equivocally determined (Wolfe, 1993), major events in the story unfold during the French Revolution (1789-1799). For one, Robert Walton’s letters seem to have been written in the last two years of the eighteenth century. In his second letter to his sister, Margaret Walton-Saville (the other MWS), he alludes to Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which was published in 1798, making it possible to date his letters to the years 1798-1799.

Another date in the novel makes it unequivocally clear that the events happened during the French Revolution. On his trip to Oxford, Victor still inscribes the absent presence of the French Revolution in the passage. Shelley writes, “As we entered this city, our minds were filled with the remembrance of the events that had been transacted there more than a century and a half before. It was here that Charles I. had collected his forces. This city had remained faithful to him, after the whole nation had forsaken his cause to join the standard of parliament and liberty” (Shelley, 2012: 140). Some critics condemn Shelley here for substituting the English Revolution of 1642 for the French Revolution (Montag, 2016: 470).

Although Shelley mentions the events that had happened a century a half prior to their trip, however, she does not refer to it by name. At the same time, she makes it clear that Victor and Henry visited Oxford some time in April 1792. This does not make Shelley reactionary, as Montag suggests, because she accomplishes a double inscription of revolutionary events in one stroke. Moreover, as Fred Randel states, the trip to Oxford ends with the friends’ visit to “the tomb of the illustrious Hampden,” the point of which is to “[fault] the monster’s creator and recent British society, not for excessive radicalism but for not being radical enough” (Randel, 2003: 478). Indeed, Hampden is represented as the novel’s “ideal male revolutionary” (Randel, 2003: 479). Needless to mention, Shelley makes an explicit reference to France, by describing their trip to Le Havre and Paris (Shelley, 2012: 157).

Likewise, incestuous desire is not completely obfuscated in the novel either. Oddly enough, Žižek notes that incest was hinted at twice in the novel, through Walton’s letters to his sister (for some reason, Žižek thinks Walton is married but prefers his sister over his wife) and through the filial relationship between Victor and Elizabeth (Žižek, 2008a, 76). More importantly, he glosses over Victor’s “wildest dreams”, in which he plays out this uncanny incestuous desire. Right after he creates the Creature, the agitated Victor recalls:

I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. (Shelley, 2012: 65)

While “the incestuous stuffiness of home” is complicated by the image of Elizabeth as the mother’s double and Alphonse Frankenstein’s relinquishment of his public duties and move to the private sphere (Shelley, 2012: 51), Victor’s dream accentuates Victor’s Oedipal drama. In fact, critics propose that Victor attempts to resolve his Oedipal anxieties through recreating the lost mother or finding a substitute for her at either the Symbolic or Imaginary levels, whether or not he follows the normative Oedipal trajectory (Homans, 1986; Collings, 2016).

The fact that neither the French revolution nor incestuous desire is completely obfuscated in the novel does not mean that Žižek’s reading in principle is misguided. Shelley’s novel occludes another “unconscious wish” that Žižek does not address at all, but that is important in this context. Critics have suggested that Victor’s unconscious wish, as evident in this dream, is to move beyond his mother and eliminate women altogether (Veeder, 1986). Hence, William Veeder argues that the novel substitutes the Oedipal plot for the “negative Oedipus” narrative, in which “the son desires to murder mother in order to get to father” (Veeder, 1986: 366). By uniting with the father, the son can give birth to himself or part of himself and ensure immortality (Veeder, 1986: 373), an analysis that is congruent with Žižek’s own exemplification of the fantasy/gaze nexus in the novel (Žižek, 1991c). Veeder, however, insists on reading his “negative Oedipus” in terms of androgynous sexuality, ignoring the implications of the homoerotic subtext he uncovers in Victor’s relationship with the monster, as well as the Shelleys’ relationship with Godwin.

Furthermore, as critics note, the novel encodes a repressed homoerotic subtext in family dynamics and demonstrates the extent to which this subtext subverts patriarchal family structures, which supplant homosocial bonds and “compulsory heterosexuality” for the production of the gay couple in the novel (Daffron, 1999; McGavran, 2000). In these queer readings of Shelley’s novel, therefore, the monster embodies not only the network of homoerotic desire in the novel, but its monstrosity – its horror and abjection. All the clues and signs that Victor and the Creature leave for each other in the chase around the globe, as well as Victor’s tours in Europe, demonstrate the extent to which Victor and other men in the novel circulate around the Real of homoerotic desire. This Real can only be managed through repetition – Joan Copjec, for example, states that

The signifier’s difference from itself, its radical inability to signify itself, causes it to turn in circles around the real that is lacking in it. It is in this way—in the circumscription of the real—that its non-existence or its negation is signified within the symbolic. (quoted in Khader, 2017: 549)

Incidentally, these interpretations are in line with Žižek’s reference to the monster as the “ambiguous obstacle to the sexual consummation of marriage” and his undeveloped analysis of the monster as the acephalus subject (Žižek, 1999). It is important to note, however, that Žižek’s analysis remains grounded in his critique of the traditional heteronormative politics undergirding

Hollywood's family myth (Žižek, 2008a: 74).⁷ Perhaps within the Hollywood formula, incestuous desire is still more subversive than homoeroticism, which has been commodified and depoliticized in Hollywood and popular culture. Nonetheless, queer desire was certainly transgressive at the time the novel was written. Max Fincher, for example, writes that coming out was not an option during the Romantic period, but "being doubted [was]" (Fincher, 2007: 22). To this extent, homoerotic subtext, it can then be claimed, constitutes the deeper "unconscious wish" of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and the grounds for an immanent critique of the family myth. Homoerotic desire, to paraphrase Žižek, could be considered the way in which Shelley managed to resolve the contradictions underpinning her novel.

4. Shelley and Debates on the Left: Terrorism and Sexual Politics

Žižek's analysis of the ambiguity of Shelley's revolutionary and sexual politics in *Frankenstein* and the speculative identity of enlightenment and terror has important implications for his critique of leftist politics and their mass, or popular, commodification today.⁸ Indeed, his extended critique of Shelley's novel is developed in a book that denounces post-Marxist leftists for their alleged complicity with global capitalist domination and liberal democratic ideology, and calls instead for reclaiming the legacy of revolutionary politics. These leftists, Žižek argues, have been resigned to the "liberal blackmail" and embraced not only its premise that liberal democracy and the free market are the ultimate horizon of political action, but also its multicultural ideology and the rhetoric of identity politics, political correctness, and victimhood. He also faults the left for disavowing its terroristic heritage and for clinging to the idea of a "decaffeinated revolution, a revolution which does not smell of a revolution," or along the lines of this discussion, "1789 without 1793" (Žižek, 2008a: 158).

Žižek's analysis of the novel can be related to two major debates he has had over the last few years on the Muslim refugee crisis in Europe and trans-gender communities. Although he directly weaponizes the novel in the former debate, he does not invoke Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the latter. In the refugee debate, Žižek attacks the left's liberal subjectivization of fundamentalist Muslim terrorists and their elevation to an iconography of victimology (Žižek, 2016a: 2016), directly blaming Shelley's liberal subjectivization of the Creature as the source of such ideologically suspect rhetorical strategies. In the trans-gender debate, he criticizes the commodification of sexual politics under late capitalism, in a way that can frame other, more radical immanent critiques of

7. There could be many reasons for Žižek's reluctance to push against this heteronormative framework in his analysis of Hollywood's family myth, but this does not mean that he is "sexist and homophobic" (Coffman, 2013). For Žižek's relationship to feminism, see Khader (2017), and on his critique of social construction and gender theory, see Kapoor (2018).
8. For a critical discussion of Žižek's position in these debates, see Sharpe and Boucher (2010: 165-193).

the family especially, the queer and transgender interrogation of Shelley's novel, within an urgent anti-capitalist critique.

In *Against the Double Blackmail* (2016), Žižek examines the refugee crisis in Europe and the leftist response to the crisis within the European debate about freedom of movement, humanitarian aid and security, and the rise of extreme right-wing populist and fascist movements in Europe. He thus situates these problems within the broader context of the global capitalist system that feed on global apartheid systems as well as the failures of multicultural tolerance. He proposes that neither the liberal leftist open-door immigration policy nor the right-wing populist ban on immigration (the double ideological blackmail) offers adequate solutions to these problems. His main concern here is to warn against the potential tragic consequences of a haphazard re-settlement plan that simply advocates "open border" policies that fails to take into consideration the rising tide of anti-immigrant hostilities. Instead, Žižek offers a practical solution to the refugee crisis based on Frederic Jameson's idea of military option, a commitment to Western enlightenment values (egalitarianism, human rights, and the welfare state), and an ethical duty toward the refugees grounded in a solidary politics based on a common class struggle that cuts across all cultures.

Žižek's critics in this debate insisted on turning this exchange into Žižek's Heideggerian moment. His interlocutors found his claims about refugees and their cultural traditions to be not only reckless, irresponsible, and inconsistent with his self-professed radical egalitarian politics, but also outright racist and xenophobic, and Islamophobic. Even worse, they contended that they could hardly distinguish his claims from populist, conservative, anti-immigrant, right-wing Neofascist propaganda, that such claims prove that he has been a closeted racist Neofascist all along (Khader, 2015). Writing for *Roar Magazine*, for example, Esben Bøgh Sørensen writes, "Essentially, Žižek accepts the dominant idea – shared by institutional Europe and the extreme right – that refugees and migrants pose a problem, threat, or some kind of crisis for 'us' and 'our egalitarianism and personal freedoms'" (Sørensen, 2015). Ironically, as Žižek himself responds to Sara Ahmed, his critique of the hegemony of multiculturalism as an ideology does not mean that he uses multiculturalism as a normative description of the "reality of predominant social relations" ("Multiculturalism"). Adam Kotsko thus correctly points out, "Every time [Žižek] mentions the existence of intolerance or cultural difference, for instance, it is taken as an *endorsement* or *legitimation* rather than a description of facts that must be taken into account" (Kotsko, 2015).

The problem in the critical reception of Žižek's polemic on the refugees is not so much, as Kotsko maintains, that Žižek over-identifies with the "(inadequate) terms of the public debate." Rather, Žižek's problematization of the presuppositions inherent to both Western liberal multicultural and populist, anti-immigrant, neofascist discourses on the refugees are misrecognized to be his own position on the politically correct and postmodern taboos that he tries to violently demolish (Khader, 2015). These presuppositions, however, are

clearly distinct from his position on the taboos. The three main presuppositions that Žižek engages in this polemic and the PC taboos that are related to them include the following: First, the slippage between refugees and Islamic terrorists, by which racist discourses seem to suggest that the refugees are somehow ISIS terrorists who were transplanted into Europe directly from some ISIS's terrorism training camps (Žižek, 2016a: 17). The corresponding PC and postmodern taboo that Žižek forcefully disavows is the taboo about demonizing the ISIS terrorists – those who enforce this taboo tend to subjectivize the terrorists, with the intention of offering a “deeper understanding” of their humanity in their struggle against Western colonial interventions (Žižek, 2016a: 17-18). For Žižek, there should be no sympathy for the terrorist Other.

Second, Žižek insists on breaking the PC and postmodern taboo against Eurocentrism. In his view, the European values that ushered the Enlightenment legacy are much needed today at this historical juncture, in which the global capitalist system has decoupled itself from the democratic project and mutated into a global economy that pursues ruthless accumulation based instead on Asian values – these values are modeled after the authoritarian capitalist policies of the late Singaporean leader, Lee Kwan Yew (Žižek, 2016a: 18-19). As such, he identifies the left's embarrassing silence over oppressive cultural practices among specific Muslim communities in Europe. And finally, Žižek proposes that the taboo concerning the ban on Islamophobia – that any critique of Islam is an expression of Islamophobic sentiments, should be completely rejected. He makes it clear that such an attitude is based on nothing but paternalistic condescension towards Muslims. For him, the corollary to the slippage between refugees and terrorists is the over-sweeping homogenization of all Arab refugees into Muslims, whereby the religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity of these refugee communities is flattened out (Žižek, 2016a: 20-21).

It is in the context of his interrogation of the first taboo concerning the demonization of the ISIS terrorists that Žižek invokes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. He reiterates the basic argument about Shelley's full subjectivization of the Creature that he developed in *Violence* (2008), in which he curiously refers to the Creature in the name of his creator Victor Frankenstein. Interestingly enough, in *Violence*, Žižek situates the novel in the context of his discussion the Judeo-Christian idea of the Neighbor Thing and the Lacanian approach to the subject as a presupposition that is lacking in “rich inner life.” Since one can never be sure whether the person present is another subject and not merely a “flat biological machine lacking depth” (Žižek, 2008b: 46). Thus he argues that Shelley's novel constitutes the ur-text of a genre that subjectivizes the radical, monstrous Other, under the pretext that the true enemy is the one whose story or voice we have not heard yet. He claims that she refuses to demonize the radical Other and admit its evils. Žižek thus states that “Mary Shelley moves inside his mind and asks what it is like to be labelled, defined, oppressed, excommunicated, even physically distorted, by society. The ulti-

mate criminal is thereby allowed to present himself as the ultimate victim. The monstrous murderer reveals himself to be a deeply hurt and desperate individual, yearning for company and love (Žižek, 2016a: 17; Žižek, 2008b: 46).

Nevertheless, Žižek exposes the limits of this narrative technique, by invoking the hypothetical humanization of Hitler as that about whom we do not know much. He thus discredits Shelley's leftist narrative strategy as the ultimate expression of the "liberal attitude to freedom of speech at its most radical." Similarly, Žižek condemns the politically correct and postmodern insistence on offering a "deeper understanding" of the terrorist Other's humanity in their struggle against Western colonial interventions. Ultimately, Žižek rejects this focus on the Imaginary dimension of the Otherness of the refugees (the refugees are "people just like us"), insisting on underscoring the refugees' class positionality and political agency, however utopian it may seem (they are not merely poor, passive victims).

Žižek's insistence on inscribing the Real of the fundamental antagonism, or class struggle, is also central to his polemic on transgender communities (Žižek, 2016b: 2016). In the debate about transgender subjects, Žižek does not relate transgender subjectivity to Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but his argument about the capitalist commodification of sexual politics has radical implications for queer and transgender critiques of the novel. In this debate, Žižek recognizes the importance of the debate about transgender rights to the legal and ideological struggle today, but takes issue with the way in which transgender theory addresses the issue of gender anxiety.

Transgender critics have nonetheless appropriated the novel to outline the contours of transgender subjectivity. For example, Susan Stryker theorizes transgender subjectivity through the trope of monstrosity, identifying a "deep affinity" between herself as a transsexual woman and Shelley's Creature. She examines the effect of medical science on the formation of transgender subjectivity and explores her "monstrous identity" and embodiment in relation to the Creature's monstrosity. She also views the monster's body and the transsexual body as unnatural, "the product of medical sciences," and "technological construction" (Stryker, 1994: 238). She writes:

Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster's as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist. (Stryker, 1994: 238)

Underlying Stryker's theorization of this transgender "monstrous" subjectivity is her understanding of gender as social construction that is supposed to interrogate the ontological status of nature and reveal its fabrication. She writes:

Hearken unto me, fellow creatures. I who have dwelt in a form unmatched with my desire, I whose flesh has become an assemblage of incongruous ana-

tomical parts, I who achieve the similitude of a natural body only through an unnatural process, I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. *You are as constructed as me*; the same anarchic womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. I challenge you to risk abjection and flourish as well as have I. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself. (Stryker, 1994: 241; emphasis added)

For her, the transgender subject is socially constituted as a site of monstrosity that results from the artificial and unnatural process of stitching together different incompatible body parts. The transgender subject diffracts the artificial nature of heteronormative bodies, revealing the extent of their fabrication and socially-constructed status. The task for all subjects, transgender and otherwise, is thus to confront abjection and embrace monstrosity as an opportunity for transformation. As such, she reclaims monstrosity as an identification category, stating that “I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster” (Stryker, 1994: 254).⁹

Drawing on his Lacanian theory of sexualization or sexual difference, Žižek argues that sexual difference is an ontological deadlock and hence all gender positions circulate “around an antagonism that forever eludes it” (Žižek, 2016b). As such, sexual difference is not the manifestation of pre-existing binary sexual positions and positive identities, but rather the result of the attempt to resolve the deadlock of sexual difference. The same sexual difference is embodied in all these sexual positions and hence the deadlock of sexual difference persists, even if binary genders are eliminated. There is no exception or “third way,” as he explains in his rejoinders to his critics, because the masculine position and the feminine position are mutually exclusive – one is either “all” or “not-all” with respect to the phallic function. Hence, he readily acknowledges that gender anxiety among transgender subjects is more pronounced in the context of dominant transphobic discourses, but that this anxiety is constitutive to all gender positions. In their experiences, that is, transgender subjects bring out the perversion and the suffering that is inscribed into human sexuality as such, and in this sense, Žižek states, transgender subjects embody sex at its purest or at its most antagonistic (Žižek, 2019).

Consequently, Žižek rejects the (postmodern) proliferation of gender identities as an attempt to cover up and displace the constitutive impossible deadlock of sexual difference. Moreover, he correctly maintains, this displacement of the antagonism can be easily coopted by global capitalism today. Indeed, Žižek sets up his polemic on transgender bathrooms in the context of transnational corporations’ opportunistic exploitation of transgender rights (Žižek,

9. Stryker’s groundbreaking article made an indelible impact on transgender theory and ushered a considerable body of criticism that centers around the appropriation of the trope of monstrosity in transgender theory. For more on the impact of her article on the field, see Zigarovich (2018).

2016b). He indicts 80 business leaders who signed a letter in which they condemned a North Carolina law that legalizes gender segregation in public facilities. For him, this letter clearly demonstrates the interests of transnational corporations – it allows them to use a “big gesture of solidarity with the underprivileged” in order to cover up and distract from the “slave conditions” under which their employees in the Global South suffer. In his other piece on the topic, Žižek specifically denounces the happiness rhetoric, within which transgender experiences are framed by global corporations such as Gillette. He dismisses this rhetoric as part of the “superficial transgender ideology” (“transgender dogma”) that underlies global capitalism.¹⁰ In its cynical humanitarian politics, in short, global capitalism commodifies and fetishizes this new sexual politics of proliferation and celebration, since it successfully reproduces the capitalist logic of diversity and fluidity.

Žižek’s analysis of trans-sexual politics makes it possible to shift the attention from the fetishization of identity politics and the representation of the monstrosity of queer desire in queer and transgender critiques of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to the ways in which identity politics can be readily appropriated and commodified in late capitalism (Khader, 2013). Indeed, as John D’Emilio memorably states in his article on capitalism and gay identity, “In the most profound sense, capitalism is the problem” (D’Emilio, 1993: 474). The absent presence of capitalism as the transcendent signifier, especially for sexual minorities, constitutes the ultimate site for their doing and undoing. For D’Emilio, sexual minorities inhabit an ambivalent position within the neoliberal capitalist system, since it facilitates both their emergence as consumers/producers, allowing thus their integration into the labor market as well as their exploitation to benefit corporate interests, and the homophobic backlash against them.

D’Emilio attributes this ambivalence to the contradictory position that the nuclear family occupies in the capitalist system: Capitalism, he argues, has not only subverted the material basis of heteronormative families, allowing family members to live outside of the family structure, but has also enshrined these families for their reproductive value as the only functional model of intimate and personal relationships. He thus states, “In divesting the family of its economic independence and fostering separation of sexuality from procreation, capitalism has created conditions that allow some men and women to organize personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex” (D’Emilio, 1993: 473-474).

10. In this debate about transgender subjects, Žižek’s critics mistake his critique of superficial capitalist ideology on transgenderism for his position on the transgender movement itself. “Transgender dogma” does not refer to the transgender community and their beliefs, but to the ideology that underpins the way capitalism markets transgender experiences within a rhetoric of happiness. The irony in this debate is that Žižek’s critics and the right-wing magazine *Spectator*, which published his “Transgender Dogma,” seem to assume that Žižek is a reactionary right-wing transphobic ideologue. Žižek should rather be applauded for landing a decoy article that subverts and contradicts the right-wing assumptions of this transphobic rag.

Moreover, capitalism has provided the conditions for commodifying sexuality and erotic desire as a matter of choice outside the parameters of procreative sexual economy. As long as such erotic choices are coopted and contained as a “form of play, positive and self-enhancing,” in D’Emilio’s words (1993: 474), sexual identity can be evacuated from its excessive threats and history of struggle, only to circulate as a fetish of erotic pleasure. To this extent, sexual identity becomes then the grounds for collective organization that, nonetheless, substitutes consumption for production. Not all forms of queer transgression, that is, are necessarily subversive, until the proliferation of the semiotics of queer identity is understood in relation to the larger social inequalities (Taylor, 2009: 201). While capitalism continues to undermine the fabric of social relations, moreover, queer and transgender communities have been paradoxically blamed for the social ills and instabilities of the capitalist system.

In these debates, whether or not he directly invokes Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Žižek’s polemics are heavily invested in reorienting and reconfiguring the liberal discourse on universality. Against hegemonic Western universality, Žižek proposes the authentic universality of “the worst off” in the global capitalist system. All those communities that have been exploited, excluded and oppressed in the global capitalist system function as its symptom – in their lack of a proper place, they stand for the truth of the brutality of this system. This universality, as Žižek insists throughout his work, is not based on some common substantial content or identities among different cultures or groups. Rather, this universality is centered around “antagonistic struggle, which does not take place between particular communities, but splits from within each community, so that the ‘trans-cultural’ link between communities is that of a shared struggle” (Žižek, 2013). Perhaps Shelley’s *Frankenstein* can teach us more about this authentic universality.

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