Frankenstein's Monster as Mythical Mattering: Rethinking the Creator-Creation Technology Relationship

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Abstract. The mythical tale of Frankenstein portrays a certain pursuit of knowledge as being the monster. By drawing parallels between Frankenstein's tale and aspects of both Martin Heidegger's and Marshall McLuhan's work, this paper foregrounds what ontologically needs to "matter" for us to "love" our technological creations. Creator-creation modes of being are problematized in relation to the pursuit of knowledge, suggesting an organic view of being is needed. What this view highlights is an important knowledge-identity dichotomy; one which plays an irrevocable role in our understanding of the people-technology relationship.

Keywords: Knowledge · Myth · Sociomateriality · Technology
Identity

1 Introduction

This year's conference theme, "living with monsters", coincides with the 200-year anniversary of the mythical tale of Frankenstein. Since its publication, the tale has been metaphorically used to discuss various aspects of modern social life, such as the potential repercussions we face for how we treat our artificial (technological) creations [1]. As the conference calls for papers that encourage "rethinking" about our so-called technological "monsters", this paper heeds the call by problematizing a key aspect of scholarly practice.

Scholars arguably play a privileged role in commenting on, as well as influencing and educating others about, our increasingly ubiquitous technological world. However, as part of this pursuit, scholars can also be seen as embodying the same monster that is depicted in the fictitious tale of Frankenstein. The monster portrayed in the tale is not, as Latour [2] suggests, the act of creature abandonment, but rather an individual's pursuit of knowledge. Stated by Frankenstein to Captain Walton [3]:

> Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow (p. 42).

It seems fitting to explore what Frankenstein meant by such a statement, especially given that debates have emerged in the sociomateriality literature for how matter comes

to "matter" [4]; and suggestions have also been made urging scholars to build an ontological foundation for strengthening the sociomaterial stance [5]. To build such a foundation, some have turned to the philosophies of Martin Heidegger [6] and Marshall McLuhan [7]. Fittingly, aspects of what "mattered" [8] in Heidegger's *Being and Time* [9] and McLuhan's *The Extensions of Man* [10], offer striking parallels to Frankenstein's cautionary tale; a tale that directly discusses problems of *being* that we encounter in relation to the natural world, other people, and the material entities we create.

For example, Heidegger's "Dasein" shows that the meaning we derive from our being-in-the-world comes from the encounters we have with others and things that are not-of-the-self. This is how Frankenstein's creature comes to identify as being foreign, as he is rejected by the world he finds himself in. Similarly, McLuhan saw our technological evolution as the iterative imitation of the human body – that we ourselves are already a version of Frankenstein. For example, McLuhan viewed the wheel as an extension of the foot, whilst artificial intelligence (AI) could be viewed as an extension of human thought or cognition.

By exploring the role of myth in relation to Frankenstein and aspects of Heidegger's and McLuhan's work, this short paper aims to foreground a knowledge-identity dichotomy; one that stands at the ontological helm of our empirical technological focus. What this paper suggests is that to "love" our technologies requires us to understand what Heidegger meant by the "authentic self".

2   Technology as Myth

The role that myth plays in our lives is well-established. Since Ancient Greece, for example, creative artistic works have functioned as societal disguises; of cloaking messages as stories in order to explore the nature of existence and reveal aspects of ourselves to ourselves [11]. According to Campbell and Moyers [12], mythical stories depict the same central message; one that sees the hero, or the protagonist, experience a type of metaphysical awakening.

In the referenced philosophies of Heidegger and McLuhan, they too acknowledged the powerful role of art and myth in this regard. Heidegger saw artistic works as the conveyor of truth and as the goal of philosophy – that art conveys the *meaning* of being to us, which in essence delivers a form of technological insight. Otherwise known as "enframing", this insight sees technology as revealing something about us that is non-technical in nature. The message of seemingly "monstrous" technology would, in Heidegger's view, be seen not as something to do with the technologies themselves, but something that resides in the essence of man – of our failure to see a truth revealed via our technological enframing, in which what we *do* with technology reveals the nature of our being to us.

Similarly, McLuhan believed that we live our lives "mythically", in which our technological progressions symbolically reveal our own nature to us. He also saw art as an avenue for us to convey meaning to ourselves in an electronic age of information overload. Part of McLuhan's analysis of seeing technology as the mythical message for our being human was his turn towards the work of Carl Jung; referencing Jung's concept of "shadow". In this vein, the idea of a monster would be viewed from the

perspective of technologies reflecting our unconscious – of us manifesting into being that which we need to be made consciously aware of [13].

What Heidegger and McLuhan both allude to is that our technologies become something that require our conscious attention and questioning for the role they play in our lives. The creation of an artificial construct, and the subsequent role that construct plays in the creator's life, is the essence of the Frankenstein tale.

3   The Tale of Frankenstein

As the tale goes, the scientist Victor Frankenstein harvests body parts from a graveyard, stitches pieces together, and creates a pseudo man. When Frankenstein "zaps" his creature to life, he is however horrified at the sight of his own creation – fleeing in terror and remorse. Left alone, the creature begins to contemplate its existence and attempts to fit-in with society, but is rejected and condemned. The creature then commits acts of murder, against those held near and dear by Frankenstein, in a plight of revenge against his creator. Frankenstein then sees himself as having no other option but to dedicate the rest of his life in the pursuit of destroying his creation; atoning for the destruction caused. This relationship that creator and creation come to have is hinged on their respective pursuits of knowledge.

Such pursuit, however, begins with Captain Walton – the explorer who Frankenstein recounts his tale to. At the time he meets Frankenstein, Walton is on an expedition seeking to navigate to unknown lands; to obtain knowledge not yet possessed by any man on earth, even stating that the cost of a crew member's life was worth paying if it meant acquiring the knowledge he sought. Walton's character is seen as a version of Frankenstein on the cusp of making the same mistake, or he can choose to change his course after hearing Frankenstein's cautionary tale.

In his recount of such a tale, Frankenstein reveals what he originally desired in wanting to create his creature, which was to obtain, "The secrets to heaven and earth" (p.33) to learn the metaphysical and physical wonders of the world. In turn, Frankenstein's creature seeks knowledge about what makes us human – specifically wanting to know why it was he was made, but also why he was abandoned by his creator and then condemned by society.

In this vein, the creature can be seen as seeking knowledge of his identity and reason for existence, whereas Walton seeks novelty in knowledge, and Frankenstein seeks mastery of it. Arguably, this thirst for knowledge, as portrayed by these three characters, lies at the center of what has become known in our own social context as "The Frankenstein Problem" [14]. By discussing this problem, the monster of knowledge becomes evident when we falsely believe we exist as separate selves.

4   The Frankenstein Problem and Revelations of Being

The Frankenstein problem explores the conundrum we face when we view our existence from one of two perspectives regarding the creator-creation relationship, as portrayed in the tale. From a religious standpoint, existence is seen as a ceramic model,

in which God is the craftsman who, similar to Frankenstein, has used certain material and moulded us into being. This view sees the world as an artefact that we have been "thrown into", yet much like Frankenstein's creature, we do not understand why.

In the second, scientific view, existence is seen as a mechanical construct. We have stumbled upon the laws of nature and, just as Frankenstein did, have substituted ourselves for being in the position of God-on-earth; creators of artificial life as expressed via our technology. However, a God complex ensues. We can explain and imitate the "machine" of life, but we still cannot explain ourselves as the metaphorical ghost trapped inside [15].

What the religious and scientific views foreground are a sense of alienation and foreignness; that we are either the victims of life, much like the creature, or we seek to control our own fate, much like Frankenstein. Yet if we take Frankenstein as an example, he saw himself as standing apart, separate from the natural world, desiring power and control over its secrets. In turn, however, Frankenstein becomes the victim of having his creature lord that same power and control over his being, with the creature at one point saying to Frankenstein, "You are my creator, but I am your master; obey!" (p. 205).

In McLuhan's view, our western technological pursuits have the same outcome, in which the technologies we mould and create in turn end up shaping and controlling our actions. McLuhan also noted that death-oriented myths, of which Frankenstein is an example, are often associated with this technological know-how; that they try to warn us against our desire to imitate life as a form of mechanical automation, rather than recognising life's organic origins. This warning stems from our desire to divide and control, which in turn promotes the illusion of separateness between man and nature, and man and machine.

In Heidegger's view, this desire for separateness, as embodied by our technology, derives from a false sense of self, based on an existential conundrum. For Heidegger, human beings are the only creature whose existence is an issue for it, which stems from the knowledge of our inevitable death. Yet for the most part we live our lives in denial, born out of fear of this inevitability, immersing ourselves in worldly activities.

The religious and scientific views associated with the Frankenstein problem can be seen as embodying the same fear, disguised by immortality. Arguably, religion seeks to displace the fear of death by promising immortality in heaven, so long as we behave in certain ways on earth; whereas science seeks to delay death, even eradicate it entirely, as suggested by our technological advancements where we substitute organic matter with artificial means.

Yet as we know from Frankenstein's tale, the desire to capture life, defy death, or see one's identity as being separate to everything else, leads us towards a pathway of destruction. In hindsight, Frankenstein tells Walton that his scientific desire was a type of "madness", especially when he realized that what he actually lived for, and what he cared most about, were the people he loved – the same people killed as a result of his knowledge pursuit and subsequent creation.

The same lack of contemplation is also true of Frankenstein's creature in his attempt to be accepted by society. McLuhan saw our individual quest for identity similar to the creature's – as violent and tribal, seeing any attempt to fit-in with the status quo as both binding and blinding us from questioning our own consciousness.

The journey and the conflict that is told between Frankenstein and his creature alludes us to two observations. Firstly, that they each needed to experience their respective journeys in order to reflect, and then subsequently regret, their actions in hindsight; and secondly, the knowledge they each sought to gain was not the knowledge they needed to obtain.

In other words, the message of Frankenstein, along with Heidegger and McLuhan's ideas, foregrounds a third, organic model of existence; one that transcends and liberates the self from the false dualism of self and other (creator and creation), being and non-being (life and death). Although a similar claim has been made by the ontological inseparability argument [6], which is the view that we cannot divorce people from technology, the organic model illuminates the "authentic self" which outlines why this inseparability is the case.

5   Foregrounding the Organic Model

In Heidegger's view, one finds one's authentic self by first living in, and then overcoming, a world of experienced "facticity". It is the idea of being-in a world of imposed parameters, a social world always-already given to, and made for us by others ('the one'), offering 'inauthentic' experiences, and then precisely to overcome them. In other words, Heidegger suggested that all schemas of the world are inherently hermeneutic, meaning that such truth can only be realized *by* one's self first living through the inauthentic experience, and in accepting death, that we do not stand over or against the world, merely reflecting on it, but rather are part of the natural world which expresses itself in finite cycles of life and death, living our lives in our own-most ways. Similarly, McLuhan saw learning as something that takes place after-the-fact, in which we as individuals have to experience, but then also have to abandon, that which we perceived to be "reality".

When Frankenstein's loved ones die at the hand of his creation, he must come to realize that their deaths were the result of his unquestioned pursuit of technological knowledge. In atoning for their deaths, Frankenstein renounces himself and his own separate desires. Similarly, the creature comes to the same realization, but only after Frankenstein dies. The creature realizes he too will one day face the same fate as his creator, and therefore acknowledges his need to find happiness in the knowledge of death.

Furthermore, the creature reflects in hindsight and realizes that the happiest he felt was when he was first in nature and did not think, at the time, to question his reason for being. It was only by being-in a social context with others that the creature came to believe that he did not "belong". If we refer back to Frankenstein's warning to Walton, the same message is portrayed – that man's existence is already the highest and ultimate form of being, as it exists in-line with the natural world. This realization is part of the authentic self-claim. The conundrum, however, is that one must first live through the inauthentic experience in order to find their authentic self.

In the tale, Frankenstein and his creature have already sealed their own fate upon such realization, but it is Walton who learns from their mistakes; abandoning his own quest, yet disliking the feeling that resulted – that he had to sacrifice his individualism for reasons that were greater than his own knowledge pursuit.

In this light, interpreting the tale of Frankenstein as one that warns against the abandonment of our own technological creations would be missing the point. Although there is merit in suggesting we should love our creations rather than abandon them [2], our ability to do so requires us to first realize what the actual abandonment message is in the tale - that we must abandon our belief in the separate self.

To put this another way, our created technologies only become "monstrous" in the first place when we falsely believe we exist separately from nature or from one another [16]. To love our technologies means only having technology that aligns us with the world, not technology where we attempt, like Frankenstein, to impose our will over nature, or the world more broadly, as a result of seeing ourselves as being separate from it, or expecting to find answers to life via our individualistic knowledge pursuits. The technology we need would allow us to be with our loved ones, not technology that destroys, or is pursued at the cost of people's lives or wellbeing, or at the cost of destroying nature.

6   Conclusion

What this paper has done is use the role of myth to suggest a need for technological reflection at an ontological level. As suggested by the tale of Frankenstein, and supported by the works of both Heidegger and McLuhan, this can only be achieved through individual contemplation and introspection. What this requires is re-evaluation for how we as individuals perceive the creator-creation relationship; of needing to overcome the dichotomous view of self and other, being and non-being. It is not our technologies that we need to love, but rather, it is the authentic self we each need to find.

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