

Frankenstein's Army (2013)

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In this latest cinematic twist on the Frankenstein myth, set near the close of World War Two, Dr Frankenstein is a mad scientist turning the bodies of fallen Nazi soldiers into half-human, half-mechanised creatures. A group of Russian soldiers hunting for the source of a distress signal discover the doctor and his monsters and their resulting encounter is the subject of this found-footage film. Using the found-footage format adds an element of realism to this film to help the audience accept director Richard Raaphorst's outlandish vision of Frankenstein's monsters as reanimated hybrid soldiers. It also helps to cement the divide between real and imagined medical practices and as such acts to solidify the notion of the medical sphere as destructive on multiple levels, as a threat to the individual, as a catalyst for bloodshed and as a harbinger of destruction for the human physicality, as the film goes on to reveal.

Just like Mary Shelley's original creation, these monsters are formed from disparate parts of human corpses and reanimated by electricity. Unlike the original Frankenstein's "monster", these reanimates are produced solely for the purpose of warfare. As such they are without conscience or cognition and built using contemporary Nazi weapons incorporated into their bodies. Monsters with propellers or mines for heads and knives and other assorted weaponry for hands are brought to life in forms which are distorted and dehumanised, particularly through the disfigurement of the face and hands. Thus the horrors of warfare are communicated through the literal disintegration of the body and these creatures become a metaphor for the destruction of war via the practice of unbridled medical experimentation. This is further emphasised in the freakish creatures which fleetingly appear on screen, for example, the female head sewn onto the body of a teddy bear cuddly toy.

During the film, as expected, much is made of the weaponized monsters and their attacks on both the Russian soldiers entering their lair and on the local villagers, whom they have wiped out. However, an equal if less sensationalised portion of the beginning of the film is preoccupied with the group of Russian soldiers following the distress beacon and the acts of violence they perpetrate: cutting off a man's finger during an interrogation, beating up a female refugee, ransacking a village out of shot. These acts are presented in a matter of

fact manner, interspersed with set up scenes showing the soldiers pretending to help an injured enemy combatant and giving chocolate to an old lady. The propaganda footage is cleverly woven between the scenes of violence, to bring an element of unease to the initial part of the film. As it continues, the unopposed violence is intermingled with encounters with dead bodies with metallic parts and the early appearances of the monsters. With each passing scene the humans come into more and more contact with the fusion monsters until the two appear to be inseparable, quite literally. Thus the human soldiers are depicted as monsters too, albeit in a slightly less gory manner than their Clive Barker-esque fusion counterparts. Here the message is clear: war creates monsters; whether they are of the literal kind produced by Dr Frankenstein or the ones deemed so due to their actions. Included in this category would be Dr Frankenstein himself and the Russian troops.

Near the end of the film, Frankenstein wants to demonstrate how the war could be stopped, by placing half of a Russian soldier's brain into a Nazi soldier's body and vice versa so that they each could understand the other's viewpoint. With this move he abandons the literal weaponization of his monsters with military technology and instead employs a metaphorical weaponization by combining the brains of two soldiers. Rather than solving the problem of the war, this doubled soldier goes on to kill just like Frankenstein's other monsters. Tellingly, it is this monster which kills the cameraman shooting the footage and therefore brings the film to an end.

Within *Frankenstein's Army* the boundaries governing the medical sphere are removed and medicine becomes a weapon in its own right complete with its own industrial setting. Rather than being a tool for curing ills, here the medical profession is shown as being destructive. Dr Frankenstein is the principal focus of the industrialization of death, with his factory laboratory where he animates creatures using tools commonly seen in forges and foundries and with his attire which shifts between the industrial gloves and leather apron of a blacksmith and the white coat of a doctor. He even has dozens of rotting human bodies hanging from the ceiling in his workshop like unfinished projects. Interestingly, this imagery is seen again in the Hollywood film *I, Frankenstein* of the following year, where scavenged human bodies are being hoarded in order to create a demon army and are hung in an enormous, high-tech factory production line.

The destructive capabilities of the medical profession in the form of Dr Frankenstein are foreshadowed in an earlier scene with a female refugee. A group of survivors in the village approach the Russian soldiers for help and hide out with them for a time. The soldiers discover one of them is a woman and attempt to rape her, but she bargains for her safety by virtue of the fact that she is a nurse and can help their comrade who has been injured by one of the monsters. The soldier in question is wearing a metal helmet which has been pierced by monster weaponry and the nurse attempts to remove the helmet, only to pull the soldier's brain out by mistake. This act of unwitting violence to the human body is repaid with a beating for the nurse. Conversely, Dr Frankenstein's violence, initially to the animals he was experimenting on, is rewarded with a commission from the Nazis to create an undead army. His continued violence, this time to the human form, is rewarded with an offer from the Russians to come and create an army of monsters on their behalf. At this point it is revealed that the whole purpose of the Russian soldiers' mission was, without their knowledge, to recruit Dr Frankenstein. So the medical mutation of the body is endorsed instead of being punished and the horrors of war are extended through the use of medical

practices without boundaries. The doctor is finally killed at the close of the film, bringing an end to the prospect of an army of the weaponized dead, that is, until Hollywood revisited the Frankenstein myth in 2014 with their version of an army of monsters based on Shelly's original concept.

Overall this horror film constructs a narrative which weaves the industrialization of death with the weaponization of the body as a warning of both ungoverned warfare and unbridled medical experimentation. Whilst the dialogue is unremarkable and the characters do little to recommend themselves to the audience, this offering from production company Dark Skies and director Richard Raaphorst successfully recreates and builds upon the very elements of body horror which caused controversy in 1818 when Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was published.