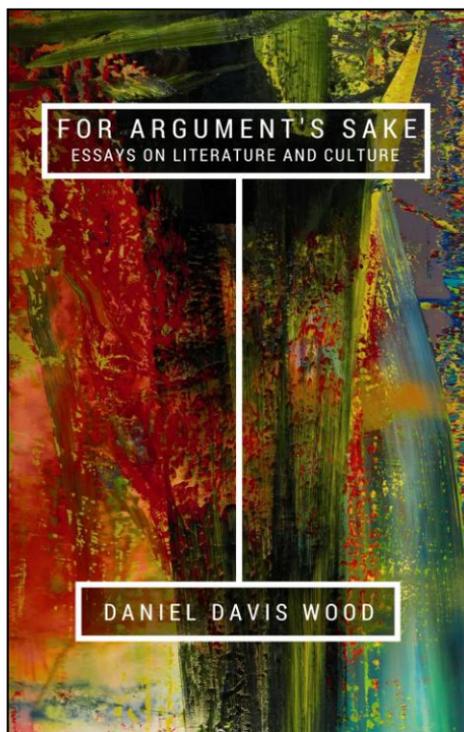


The following document is an extract from *For Argument's Sake: Essays on Literature and Culture* by Daniel Davis Wood, pages 333-335.

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# FRANKENSTEIN AND FORMAL BIAS

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DANNY BOYLE'S THEATRICAL ADAPTATION OF MARY SHELLEY'S *Frankenstein*, which ran for three months at London's Royal National Theatre in early 2011, struck me as remarkable for its outstanding performances and set design as well as for what I originally thought of as a strong fidelity to its source material. Notwithstanding the abridgement of certain scenes, the erasure of peripheral characters like Robert Walton and Henry Clerval, and the dramatisation of events in chronological sequence rather than via retrospective explanation, Mary Shelley's narrative survived largely intact. The creature escapes from Victor Frankenstein's laboratory in Geneva only to be persecuted by wider society; he observes the De Laceys from a distance and is befriended by the blind patriarch before the younger De Laceys turn against him; he returns to Geneva where he kills Frankenstein's brother and orders Frankenstein to create him a bride; and, when Frankenstein refuses him, the ensuing struggle between the scientist and his creature takes the two of them on their cataclysmic journey to the North Pole. For the most part, Boyle's adaptation of Shelley's novel appears to be an extremely faithful one.

In a sense, though, the fidelity of the translation from the page to the stage is precisely what makes the adaptation essentially and radically different. It is finally impossible to orchestrate a faithful visual adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, since Shelley's *Frankenstein* invests so much importance in the essentially abstract and non-visual nature of literature as an artform. In both Boyle's and Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the narrative is propelled by the creature's efforts to persuade others to see beyond his monstrous appearance and to engage with him on exclusively rational terms; and the climax in particular is propelled by Victor Frankenstein's overpowering inability to look beyond the creature's monstrosity even after acknowledging his capacity for rational thought. As the narrative works towards its conclusion, then, we as readers are increasingly urged to either side with Frankenstein or stand apart from him. Do we too despise the creature for his monstrosity in spite of his rational capa-

bilities, or do we feel some sort of pity for the creature by crediting him as a rational being crippled by his own monstrosity? Shelley's novel, however, is biased towards the creature simply by virtue of being a novel. The words on the page, unmediated by physical expression, convey the rational outpourings of the creature with the utmost lucidity, while at the same time denying readers a visualisation of the physical monstrosity that prevents Frankenstein from engaging with the creature on rational terms. For that reason, any visual adaptation of *Frankenstein* invariably loses the novel's formal bias and instead assumes a bias against Frankenstein's creature; and I think that's why, as I reflected on Danny Boyle's adaptation, I found myself much less sympathetic towards the creature — much more distracted and put off by his visceral monstrosity — than I was after reading Shelley's words. As faithful to its source material as Boyle's adaptation may otherwise be, that simple switch from one artform to another generated a production that was in fact only superficially faithful and very different in its substance.

### Works Cited

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