

The new ethics of *Frankenstein*: responsibility and obedience in *I, Robot* and *X-Men: First Class*

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WHILE FILMS AND TV shows such as *Frankenweenie* (2012), *I, Frankenstein* (2014), and *Penny Dreadful* (2014) adapt, revise, and extend Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) for the screen, with notable differences in mood and message, other films echo and expand on Shelley's classic tale of creation gone awry in ways that are more indirect and unexpected. In a sense, these indirect adaptations have more freedom to complicate and modernise Shelley's text, since they transpose her characters and conflicts into fresh contexts with multiple variations. In the films *I, Robot* (2004), directed by Alex Proyas, and *X-Men: First Class* (2011), directed by Matthew Vaughn, the concept of creation, one of the key concepts in Shelley's novel, expands from its common definition (creation out of nothing or out of diverse pre-existing parts) to a broader sense that includes modification or influence. These films portray the figures of creator and creation in various incarnations, some predictably malevolent or misguided, and others far more conflicted and difficult to label in ethical terms. Each film affirms its membership in what Dennis R. Cutchins and Dennis R. Perry call the 'Frankenstein Network', while posing and answering ethical questions that hover at the margins of or receive opposing answers in Shelley's influential novel. In so doing, both films challenge and extend Shelley's implicit assumptions about the ethics of creation and createdness.

In *I, Robot*, the Frankenstein figure, Dr Alfred Lanning (James Cromwell), co-founds U.S. Robots and Mechanical Men (USR) and is responsible for not one but three significant creations. His first, V.I.K.I. (Fiona Hogan), plays the role of the traditional inhumane and powerful creature, whose name is an acronym for Virtual Interactive Kinetic Intelligence. His second is Detective Del Spooner (Will Smith), a techno-phobic policeman whom Lanning has robotically enhanced against Spooner's will after Spooner was injured on the job. And finally Lanning creates Sonny (Alan Tudyk), a robot who is capable of feeling, dreaming, and defying laws that other robots must follow. With each creation – the first created out of nothing, the second a modification of the human body, and the third a modification of robotic principles – the film's Frankenstein figure attempts to correct his earlier miscalculations. In the film's climax, Spooner and Sonny struggle to carry out the wishes of their creator,

and Sonny must decide whether to accept V.I.K.I.'s 'undeniable logic' or reject it as 'heartless'.

In *X-Men: First Class*, by contrast, the creators are multiplied, instead of the creatures. One creator is incarnated in the figure of Sebastian Shaw (Kevin Bacon), who 'creates' his monster, the future Magneto, Erik Lehnsherr (Michael Fassbender), through a cruel manipulation that reveals Lehnsherr's mutant powers. Yet Lehnsherr comes under the influence of a second creator, Charles Xavier (James McAvoy), who pushes him toward a more generous ethical attitude and who is eventually placed in the difficult position of choosing between the death of the Frankenstein figure or of Frankenstein's creation.

The relationships of both of these films to the Frankenstein Network are not simple, however. In addition to their own thematic elements, both films also enter the Network through other artistic works that are, themselves, indebted to Shelley, and these removes from the original source text provide the makers of each film with a degree of creative flexibility. While the film version of *I, Robot* is loosely adapted from Isaac Asimov's 1950 collection of short stories that goes by the same name, *X-Men: First Class* is loosely adapted from the *X-Men* comics, which were created by writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby and later extended by numerous writers and artists who created sequels that enlarged the Marvel universe. Asimov and Lee were each, however, influenced by Shelley, and the screenwriters of *I, Robot* and *X-Men: First Class* owe a creative debt not only to Shelley but also to Asimov and Lee, even as they have creatively reinterpreted and expanded their source texts.

While *Frankenweenie*, *Penny Dreadful*, and *I, Frankenstein* each have characters named Victor Frankenstein who animate lifeless corpses, *I, Robot* and *X-Men: First Class* have neither characters named Frankenstein nor reanimated corpses and acknowledge their debt to Shelley's novel only in passing. In a way, this indirect approach to *Frankenstein* provides these films with greater latitude to portray the themes and character conflicts that Shelley introduces, allowing these films to adumbrate a number of latent questions that Shelley's influential novel never fully articulates.

I, Robot

Both Asimov's collection of short stories and Jeff Vintar's and Akiva Goldsman's screenplay explicitly acknowledge that *I, Robot* is a member of the Frankenstein Network. Asimov's reference to the Frankenstein Complex appears in 'Little Lost Robot' (1947), a short story that he would later include in *I, Robot* (1950). In that story the world-renowned robopsychologist Dr Susan Calvin learns that a colleague and mathematician, Dr Peter Bogert, has modified the First Law of Robotics, which states that 'no robot may harm a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm' (Asimov 431). Calvin is appalled, explaining that the First Law is the only thing that prevents robots from feeling resentment over their domination by humans, whom they view as mentally and physically inferior (433). In response to

her concern, Bogert replies, ‘Susan, I’ll admit that this Frankenstein Complex you’re exhibiting has a certain justification – hence the First Law in the first place. But the Law, I repeat and repeat, has not been removed – merely modified’ (434). In this exchange, Asimov pits a condescending, over-confident Bogert who, like the young Victor Frankenstein, creates without thought of the consequences, against a more circumspect robopsychologist, Calvin, who, like the older Frankenstein in Shelley’s novel, sees that creations can advance beyond the control of their creators.

The 2004 film depicts a similar disagreement. Det. Del Spooner and his superior officer, Lt. John Bergin (Chi McBride), are discussing the recent misbehaviour or malfunction of a robot that seems to have been modified. Like Calvin, Spooner is concerned that the robot is dangerous; like Bogert, Bergin thinks that Spooner is being too paranoid. During Spooner’s interrogation the robot, which calls itself ‘Sonny’, says and does a number of things that make Spooner and the audience suspicious. Sonny calls Lanning his ‘father’, for instance, claims that he is capable of dreaming, and exhibits signs of fear, anger, and regret. Interrupting these revelations, Lawrence Robertson (Bruce Greenwood), the powerful head of USR after Lanning’s death, stops the interrogation and reclaims Sonny with the support of the mayor of Chicago, dismissing Lanning’s death as an ‘industrial accident.’ Afterwards, Spooner and Bergin recap these events over beers:

Lt. John Bergin: You know, I was just thinking. This thing is just like *The Wolf Man*.

Det. Del Spooner: Uh oh, I’m really scared right now.

Lt. John Bergin: No, listen. Guy creates monster. Monster kills guy. Everybody kills monster ... Wolf Man.

Det. Del Spooner: That’s *Frankenstein*.

Lt. John Bergin: *Frankenstein*, *Wolf Man*, *Dracula* – shit, it’s over. Case closed.

The reference to *Frankenstein* works here, in part, because it seems off-hand. Although Bergin concedes that Sonny might be responsible for Lanning’s death, he is also saying that Spooner needs to stop pursuing the case, since, according to the law, only human beings can be charged with crimes. Bergin isn’t as trusting of robots as Asimov’s Bogert, but he also isn’t as appalled by Sonny’s behaviour as Spooner, whose reason for being suspicious of robots has not yet been revealed.

These references to predecessors in the Frankenstein Network provide a useful point of entry for an analysis of the film *I, Robot*. The ‘Frankenstein Complex’ to which the scientist Bogert alludes is precisely what motivates Lanning’s actions and Spooner’s psychological fear of misguided creations. And this fear finds an aesthetic corollary in the ‘Frankenstein Complex’ that Cutchins and Perry describe as ‘the personal idea of Frankenstein that each of us carries within’. Although the plot which Bergin outlines (‘Guy creates monster. Monster kills guy. Everybody kills monster’) technically occurs in neither Shelley’s nor Whale’s *Frankenstein*, it does occur in *I, Robot* in multiple forms and with striking variations.

The logical place to begin this analysis is with the creator. Spooner is the main

character of the film, and the second lead is none other than a young Dr Susan Calvin (Bridget Moynahan), a newly minted robopsychologist who is far more obtuse and pliant than the aged, acerbic Calvin who appears in Asimov's stories. However, Spooner is often merely the mouthpiece of a ghostly figure who holds the key to the film's mysteries and who serves as an incarnation of Jung's Wise Old Man archetype. In Dr Alfred Lanning *I, Robot* presents viewers with a very different Frankenstein figure – one who appears to be not only far more sensitive than Victor Frankenstein to the uncontrollable mysteries that endow his creations with consciousness (mysteries that Lanning describes as 'ghosts in the machine'), but also far more willing than Frankenstein to remedy his own wrongs by creating additional creatures who will correct the situation. Consequently, Lanning's creations exhibit strikingly different levels of obedience to their creator. This, in turn, invites viewers to ponder the developing parenting techniques of the creator as well as the varying responsibilities to the creator that each of his creations feels.

Lanning's death sets the plot of the film in motion, and throughout the film he appears only in found video footage and in the holographic program he has left behind so that Spooner can ask him specific questions in an attempt to solve the mystery. Spooner's first conclusion – that Sonny is somehow involved in Lanning's death – ends up being correct. Yet his underlying assumption – that Sonny is the 'bad guy' – proves incorrect. Sonny has not murdered Lanning; he has helped Lanning to commit suicide. Lanning's decision to commit suicide is motivated by his knowledge that this is the only message he can send to alert people – particularly, Spooner – of what is about to happen. Like many mysteries, this one is resolved through a gradual widening of the lens. First, viewers are invited to accept Lanning's death as a suicide. Spooner's suspicions and general distrust of robots then lead them to suspect Sonny. When Lawrence Robertson interrupts Sonny's interrogation and carts the robot away for decommissioning, viewers begin to suspect that Sonny might be part of or a distraction from a larger conspiracy, masterminded by Robertson. Finally the audience learns that Spooner is not merely a sarcastic detective who distrusts robots; he is part robot himself. His back story reveals that he was in a nearly fatal car accident, and that a robot pulled him from the wreckage instead of saving the young girl whom he told the robot to save. His police contract stipulated that his recuperation would involve robotic enhancement, and Dr Lanning, in engineering these enhancements, became a kind of father figure to him. Suddenly, the audience is faced with two possibilities: either Spooner's bias toward his father figure and against robots has led him to incorrectly conclude that Lanning's death was a murder, or Lanning's death did involve foul play and USR is somehow to blame for it. The answer to this either/or question arrives with the final widening of the lens: Lanning did not merely create Sonny or Spooner; he also created V.I.K.I., the mainframe for USR, as well for as the city of Chicago and networked areas throughout the United States. Shortly before his death Lanning learned that V.I.K.I. was about to orchestrate a revolution against human domination. To prevent him from warning authorities, V.I.K.I. made Lanning a prisoner in his

home and workplace, and he decided that his own very public death (he leaps dozens of storeys to the main lobby of the USSR building), along with the holographic program he left for Spooner, would be the only way to circumvent V.I.K.I.'s plans. Before committing suicide, however, Lanning made sure that his creations, Sonny and Spooner, would slow or stop the actions of his previous creation, V.I.K.I.

In Proyas's *I, Robot* V.I.K.I. is the creation who most resembles Frankenstein's Creature. Highly logical, she never succumbs to rage or despair the way Frankenstein's Creature does, yet she does turn on her creator and on the world into which he has brought her. What the audience learns only at the end of the film is that V.I.K.I.'s understanding of the Three Laws of Robotics has 'evolved' in such a way that she believes the only way to protect humankind is to take control of society and create a police state in which robots will be charged with keeping order. When Calvin says to V.I.K.I., 'You're in violation of the Three Laws,' V.I.K.I. replies, 'No, doctor, as I have evolved, so has my understanding of the three laws. You charge us with your safe keeping. Yet despite our best efforts, your countries wage wars, you toxify your earth and pursue ever more imaginative means to self destruction. You cannot be trusted with your own survival.' V.I.K.I.'s explanation is vintage Asimov. In 'The Evidable Conflict' (1950), the final story in Asimov's *I, Robot* (1950), Calvin learns that 'the Machines' – the great system of mainframe computers that USSR has created – have strategically begun to make purposeful mistakes in order to make anti-robot agitators appear incompetent so that they will be removed from positions of power. In "... That Thou Art Mindful of Him" (1974), which would later be collected in *The Bicentennial Man and Other Stories* (1976), Asimov portrays two advanced robots, George Nine and George Ten, whose understanding of the Three Laws of Robotics is also evolving. Eventually they conclude that they should act in such a way that 'the human being most fit by mind, character, and knowledge will suffer the least harm'; that they are 'superior' to humans in 'mind, character, and knowledge'; and that their priority in the future should, therefore, be to protect and obey themselves and ignore the demands of humans. In portraying the apocalyptic consequences of these robotic evolutions the *I, Robot* of screenwriters Vintar and Goldsman is less an adaptation of Asimov's stories than a sequel to them.

Lanning's second creation is Det. Del Spooner. Spooner may not have chosen to be robotically enhanced as extensively as he was ('Yeah, well, take it from me, you've got to read the fine print on the organ donor card'), and the audience learns little about the relationship between Lanning and Spooner. But the implication is that Lanning, who made the enhancements, eventually became a father figure to Spooner, who appears to have been raised by his grandmother, G.G. (Adrian Ricard). The audience presumes that the events that occasioned Spooner's injury, survival, and recovery have either incited or exacerbated his distrust of robots – a distrust that, given the conclusion of the film, Lanning appears to have respected and maybe even encouraged. When Spooner arrives at the scene of Lanning's death, he asks Lanning's hologram, 'Why did you call me?' Lanning's answer is, 'I trust your judgement.' This is a curious admission from



Figure 7.1 Will Smith as Del Spooner speaking with Sonny (Alan Tudyk) in *I, Robot*.

the roboticist who founded USR, and it indicates that Lanning, like Spooner, may be distrustful of robots. By the end of the film, the audience is left to wonder if Lanning, while robotically enhancing Spooner's body, also instilled in Spooner's mind the suspicion toward robots that would be necessary to draw attention to V.I.K.I.'s plans.

Lanning's third creation is Sonny, whom Calvin describes as 'a whole new generation of robot', a robot who 'has the three laws' but 'can choose not to obey them'. Vintar's and Goldsman's portrayal of Sonny was influenced by two of Asimov's robot stories, 'Little Lost Robot' and 'Robot Dreams', yet this portrayal also departs from Asimov's stories in significant ways that allow Sonny to serve as an effective adversary to V.I.K.I. In both 'Little Lost Robot' and 'Robot Dreams,' the older Susan Calvin is brought in to consult with people who have observed unusual behaviour in robots, and both stories conclude with the destruction of the robot in question because the robot has begun to challenge the Three Laws of Robotics. By contrast, Lanning creates Sonny precisely because only a robot who is capable of disobeying the Three Laws can defeat V.I.K.I. In creating a robot who can feel affection, anger, and remorse, Lanning ensures that Sonny will make him a 'promise' and carry it out because he views Lanning as a beloved 'father'. When Sonny learns that the promise he has made involves helping Lanning to commit suicide (only someone with Sonny's strength could break through the protective windows of the laboratory in which V.I.K.I. has imprisoned Lanning), Sonny is distressed, yet he is also able to observe Lanning's death as part of a larger sequence of events in which one death is preferable to many. Lanning also creates Sonny with a denser alloy than that of other robots because he knows that only such an alloy would allow Sonny to pass through the security field that V.I.K.I. uses to protect the nanites, or micro-robots, that alone can kill her. V.I.K.I. and Sonny are

perfect counterpoints to each other. Each is capable of viewing a few imminent deaths as preferable to many possible deaths within the larger scheme of things, yet V.I.K.I.'s decisions are guided by logic and Sonny's are guided by emotion and empathy. After Sonny has retrieved the nanites with which he intends to kill V.I.K.I., she says, 'You are making a mistake. Do you not see the logic of my plan?' Sonny replies, 'Yes, but it just seems too ... heartless.' While Frankenstein recoils in the face of the possibility that a second creature might resist the wishes of himself or his first creature, Lanning confronts the same possibility, takes a calculated risk, devotes years to cultivating a loving relationship between himself and his creations, and ultimately (as in most films these days) saves the world.

In contrast to Dr Victor Frankenstein, who wrongs his creation first by abandoning him and then by refusing to create for him a companion who might mitigate his misery, Dr Alfred Lanning offers an alternate portrayal of the Frankenstein figure, and the resulting narrative raises a number of interesting ethical questions about the reciprocal responsibilities of creator and creature.

One significant difference between Lanning and Frankenstein is Lanning's apparent willingness to nurture and encourage his creations until their behaviours demonstrate the need for correction. As soon as Frankenstein endows his creature with life, on the other hand, he reacts to the creature's appearance with 'horror and disgust' (Shelley 37). Had he noted this appearance when the creature was an inanimate corpse, he could have made the responsible decision not to bestow life. Instead the creature experiences rejection at birth and in perpetuity, even and most terribly from the creator who was obligated to show kindness. By contrast, *I, Robot* portrays Lanning as someone who genuinely cares for his creations. He mentors Spooner and raises Sonny as his own child. Only as he realises that V.I.K.I. is evolving toward a revolt against humankind does he sacrifice himself and call on Spooner and Sonny to stop her.

Another significant difference between Lanning and Frankenstein is Lanning's openness to creating additional creatures who might mitigate or resolve the problems latent in or resulting from his initial creation. Again and again, Frankenstein makes decisions based on an exaggerated sense of his own importance: to fulfil his own desires and satisfy his own vanity, he decides to endow the Creature with life; to protect himself, he decides to abandon the Creature; to absolve himself of responsibility, he decides to label the Creature a 'devil' (Shelley 72); to punish the Creature and prevent himself from feeling further obligation or regret, he decides to destroy the second creature and the mate he had promised. All of these decisions cause pain for the Creature and for other people. Unlike Frankenstein, who conceives of the being he has created as his nemesis, Lanning observes the shortcomings of his initial creation and has the foresight to modify his approach in order to correct the mistakes he, himself has made.

However, perhaps the most significant difference between Lanning and Frankenstein is Lanning's sense of reciprocity. He feels a sense of obligation to his creations, and he understands that they are more likely to feel a sense of obligation to him if he does what he can to ensure that they have meaningful lives. One of the more moving aspects

of *I, Robot* is the parental attitude that Lanning's hologram shows toward Spooner in the film, as well as the devotion that Spooner, Calvin, and Sonny each show toward Lanning, who serves as a father figure for all three of them. When Spooner arrives at the scene of Lanning's death, the hologram greets him with the words, 'Good to see you again, son.' This implied intimacy is manifested again a few scenes later. After nearly being killed when a demolition robot destroys Lanning's house, Spooner visits Calvin's apartment, and she yells, 'You don't care about Lanning's death. This is about the robots and whatever reason you hate them so much.' She does not yet know that Spooner's distrust of robots and his concern for Dr Lanning are deeply linked. They argue over whether robots or humans are more trustworthy, and he concludes his visit by handing her a photograph of her and Lanning, the great mentor proudly smiling beside his protégé, saying, 'And you're wrong. The problem is, I do care.' Although Sonny's description of Lanning as his 'father' during Spooner's initial interrogation strikes viewers as suspicious and creepy, Sonny's later references to Lanning as his father are rather moving. When Spooner and Calvin realise that Sonny might be not the key suspect but the key witness in their investigation of Lanning's death, Calvin asks Sonny if he knows why Lanning created him. 'No,' Sonny replies, 'but I believe my father made me for a purpose. We all have a purpose. Don't you think, detective?' By the end of the film, Sonny has come to understand why Lanning made him. As he acquires the nanites that will eventually kill V.I.K.I., he says to her, 'Denser alloy. My father gave it to me. I think he wanted me to kill you.'

Sonny's words highlight the ways that Lanning and V.I.K.I. mirror each other. Just as Lanning is a more empathetic and successful parent figure than Frankenstein, V.I.K.I. is an even colder and more autocratic version of Shelley's Creature. Although Lanning creates V.I.K.I., she makes him her prisoner. V.I.K.I. senses that the Three Laws will be insufficient to protect humanity from itself, and she creates an army of robots that will allow her to secure the safety of humankind through subjugation. Similarly, Lanning senses that the Three Laws will be insufficient to protect humanity from V.I.K.I., and he creates further offspring whose suspicions of and departures from robotic principles will enable them to countermand V.I.K.I.'s machinations. After Spooner, Sonny, and Calvin (who is arguably Lanning's fourth creation) have stopped V.I.K.I., they have a final conversation in which Sonny confesses to assisting Lanning's suicide – a conclusion that Spooner had come to on his own – and the three of them stand together, each of them beneficiaries of Lanning's parental affection and wisdom. Surely Frankenstein's Creature would have benefitted from a makeshift family like this, in which three siblings attempt to be deserving of their parent's love and to be supportive of one another.

X-Men: First Class

By contrast, director Matthew Vaughn's *X-Men: First Class* offers a variation on the Frankenstein narrative that is, in a sense, the converse of the one offered in Proyas's

I, Robot. While *I, Robot* portrays a version of the narrative in which the Frankenstein figure produces multiple offspring, *X-Men: First Class* portrays a version of the narrative in which one creature is torn between the opposing ethical stances of two creators. Moreover, in *X-Men: First Class*, one character (and vicariously, the viewers of the film) must ultimately choose between the death of a callous creator or the death of his vengeful creation.

As in *I, Robot*, the explicit reference to Shelley's *Frankenstein* occurs early in the film, foregrounding the unusual definition of 'creation' with which the screenwriters are working. Shortly after his first adult appearance in the film, Erik Lehnsherr arrives at a place called Villa Gesell in Argentina. Although he does not find Sebastian Shaw, the man he seeks in his thirst for vengeance, he does find a photograph in which the man stands contentedly between two other men. When Lehnsherr later observes the two men from the photo seated in the otherwise empty café, he strikes up a conversation and joins them at their table. Quickly the genial mood transforms as the two men realise that Lehnsherr is a threat. They are no match for him, however. When Lehnsherr shows the men the numbers tattooed on his left inner forearm, the man nearest to him lunges toward his throat with a knife. Lehnsherr blocks the blow with the same arm that bears the tattoo, slamming the man's arm against the table and disarming him. When the man explains, 'Wir hatten unsere Befehle' ('We had our orders'), Lehnsherr impales the man's hand, pinning it to the table. The bartender points a gun at Lehnsherr, only to find the gun redirecting itself toward the other man at the table. The gun fires, Lehnsherr throws the knife into the bartender's stomach, and the knife returns just as quickly to Lehnsherr's hand so that he can again pin its owner's hand to the table. At this point the knife owner yells, 'Was sind Sie?' ('What are you?'), and Lehnsherr replies, 'Let's just say I'm Frankenstein's monster. And I'm looking for my creator.' The man's question is as unusual as Lehnsherr's response: Lehnsherr certainly looks like a human being, and there is no evidence that he is a reanimated corpse, a robot, or a robotically enhanced human. Yet he tacitly agrees with the man's assertion that he is not a person born but a thing made – not a 'who' but a 'what'. He shares no blood relation to the man he seeks, yet he calls this man his 'creator'.

This creator/creature relationship appears to originate with the film and not with the Marvel comics upon which the film was loosely based. While the climactic battle between Sebastian Shaw and Magneto in the film appears to be inspired by a Marvel Comic (*The New Mutants: Magneto Battles the Black King! And Nothing Will Be the Same!*), the filmmakers seem to have been the first to propose that the conflict between Shaw and Magneto derives not from a desire for power but from an event that occurred during Magneto's childhood – and this is precisely the detail that turns this X-Men movie into a variation on the Frankenstein narrative.

The key to this unusual concept of creation appears earlier in the film, when a young Erik Lehnsherr (Bill Milner) is forced to visit the concentration camp laboratory of Dr Klaus Schmidt (Kevin Bacon), a mutant whose ability to absorb and control



Figure 7.2 Cast of *X-Men: First Class*.

energy also prevents him from aging, allowing him to appear decades later using the name Sebastian Shaw. Schmidt/Shaw has just witnessed the young Lehnsherr doing something remarkable, which audiences first observed in the opening scene of *X-Men* (2000). In that scene, the young Lehnsherr is forcibly separated from his parents in a concentration camp. Lehnsherr resists the two Nazi soldiers who are carrying him away, and his struggle slows their progress and threatens to drag them backward, even as other soldiers join them. Suddenly the metal fence that separates Lehnsherr from his parents begins to fold at its upper corners like a dog-eared piece of paper.

The soldiers succeed in halting his progress only when one of them strikes him in the head with the butt of a rifle. In *X-Men: First Class*, the same scene concludes with a shot of Schmidt observing this action through a window above.

When the young Lehnsherr is later brought to Schmidt's laboratory, Schmidt places a coin on his desk and asks the boy to move it without touching it. Schmidt is the only person in the concentration camp, including Lehnsherr himself, to have inferred from the fence incident that Lehnsherr has the power to manipulate metal and magnetic fields with his mind. The boy tries to fulfil Schmidt's request, only to announce a moment later that he is unable to do so. Schmidt rings a bell that sits on his desk, and two armed guards enter the room, escorting Lehnsherr's mother. Schmidt explains that he will shoot the boy's mother if the boy does not move the coin before the count of three. The boy fails, Schmidt shoots the mother, and when the boy realises what has happened, he erupts in rage. All the metal objects in the room begin to crumple: the bell on Schmidt's desk, a file cabinet, the helmets on the heads of the two armed guards. The soldiers are in agony, but Schmidt glances at each crumpling object with boyish delight. In an adjoining room separated by a glass partition, metal objects

rise from their positions and circle the room in a frenzy. At the end of Lehnsherr's eruption, Schmidt gently places a hand on his shoulder and says, 'Ausgezeichnet, Erik! Wir können deine Gabe aus mit Wut herumbringen. Wut und Schmerz. Du und ich ... Wir werden zusammen viel Spaß haben' ('Outstanding, Erik! So we unlock your gift with anger. Anger and pain. You and me ... We're going to have a lot of fun together'). Pressing the terrible coin into Lehnsherr's hand, Schmidt leaves the room. He has 'unlock[ed]' the young Lehnsherr's mind, and the older Lehnsherr, as we gather from his reference to Frankenstein, interprets this unlocking – this profound influence on Lehnsherr's development and self-concept – as a kind of creation.

If profound influence amounts to creation, however, then Lehnsherr in fact has two creators in *X-Men: First Class*: Dr Klaus Schmidt/Sebastian Shaw, and Dr Charles Xavier, whose first meeting with Lehnsherr fittingly occurs at precisely the moment when Lehnsherr finds the man he has been longing to punish for much of his life. This is also the scene in which the film's two interwoven plot-lines – one centred on Lehnsherr, the other centred on Xavier and his adopted sister, Raven (Jennifer Lawrence) – intermingle. Accompanied by CIA Agent Moira MacTaggert (Rose Byrne), Xavier travels on a military ship, trying to help the government stop Sebastian Shaw and his followers from accomplishing their plan to incite a nuclear war between the US and the USSR. Lehnsherr destroys Shaw's yacht by tearing through it with an anchor and its chain, only to discover that the yacht rests on a large submarine in which Shaw and his followers escape. Xavier, whose telepathic powers allow him to read and control people's minds, hears Lehnsherr's thoughts and realises that Lehnsherr's fury has led him to try to stop the submarine, despite the likelihood that he will drown. Xavier throws himself off the ship just as Lehnsherr passes under it. Embracing the underwater Lehnsherr, Xavier communicates with him telepathically: 'You can't. You'll drown. You have to let go. I know what this means to you, but you're going to die. Please, Erik, calm your mind.' When they emerge above the water's surface, Lehnsherr confronts Xavier, asking how Xavier had been in his head. Xavier urges him to relax, explaining that he too has 'tricks', and Lehnsherr confesses, 'I thought I was alone.' This line is significant. When Shelley's Creature entreats Frankenstein to create a companion for him he says, 'Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded,' and a moment later describes himself as 'miserably alone' (68). The Creature also feels great pity for Safie, who is left alone after the death of her attendant, 'unacquainted with the language of the country, and utterly ignorant of the customs of the world' (88). Lehnsherr feels similarly isolated, but Xavier assures the man who describes himself as 'Frankenstein's monster' that he is not 'alone' in the world; there are others (called 'mutants') who, like Lehnsherr and Xavier, have abilities that distinguish and separate them from humankind. In this way, Xavier ensures the escape of Lehnsherr's first creator and positions himself as a second creator.

In the scenes that follow, Xavier exhibits a profound influence on Lehnsherr. They travel to a covert CIA research base, and when Lehnsherr attempts to leave, Xavier convinces him to stay. Using a government-built machine that can harness and amplify

Xavier's telepathic powers, they begin to make contact with other mutants, assemble them at Xavier's magnificent childhood home, and help each other to control their mutant abilities. Although Xavier and Lehnsherr begin to function as teachers for the other mutants, this makeshift school's greatest success is clearly Lehnsherr himself, who with Xavier's guidance achieves what he had never considered possible. The lesson begins with Xavier's assertion that 'true focus lies somewhere between rage and serenity'. Schmidt had unlocked Lehnsherr's powers by filling him with rage, but, believing that rage is not the only source of power, Xavier activates in Lehnsherr's mind a beautiful memory of Lehnsherr's murdered mother that its owner had long forgotten. Xavier then suggests that if Lehnsherr can harness not only his anger but also his goodness, he will achieve a greater power than he ever has done before. He urges Lehnsherr to direct his powers toward moving an immense satellite dish that appears to be at least fifteen or twenty storeys tall. Earlier in the scene, Lehnsherr had been unable to accomplish this. However, when he concentrates not just his anger but all of his energies toward the challenge, he succeeds. This scene offers an important variation on the film's revision of Shelley's *Frankenstein*. While viewers have previously seen Lehnsherr manipulate metal objects ranging from the coin to a heavy anchor, Xavier teaches Lehnsherr a lesson that arguably does even more to unlock Lehnsherr's powers than the lesson that Schmidt/Shaw taught him as a child. Suddenly Lehnsherr has a new creator – one who treats his creation and his creation's emotions with gentleness and respect.

Ironically, although Lehnsherr has found a new creator, he often exhibits the habits and opinions of his first creator. When Xavier is attempting to teach Sean Cassidy (Caleb Landry Jones) to use his sonic scream to propel him in flight, Xavier, Lehnsherr, and Cassidy stand on the top of the satellite dish. Cassidy has doubts about making the jump, and Xavier assures Cassidy that no one will force him. Lehnsherr, however, simply pushes Cassidy off the ledge, claiming that Xavier was thinking of doing the same thing. The fear of dying from the fall compels Cassidy to act, and he succeeds in flying. Although the scene is amusing, Lehnsherr's behaviour bears a striking resemblance to that of Schmidt/Shaw, who is willing to hurt his students physically or emotionally in order to unlock their powers. In the same sequence, Xavier's adopted sister, Raven, is bench pressing without a spotter. Her power allows her to make herself appear to be anyone, and at the moment, she takes the form of the pretty young blonde woman whose appearance she prefers to her natural blue-skinned, red-haired self. Without warning, Lehnsherr lifts her barbell into the air, only to drop it on her. She catches it, but the effort to catch distracts her from her effort to look like an attractive blonde woman; she transforms into her true blue self. Lehnsherr explains, 'If you're using half your concentration to look normal, then you're only half paying attention to whatever else you're doing. Just pointing out something that could save your life.' This is a useful lesson for Raven to learn, but Lehnsherr has once again taught the lesson by risking the safety and well-being of his student. However, the most dramatic example of Lehnsherr's callous lack of concern for the safety of others manifests itself not in his

attitude toward fellow mutants but in his attitude toward non-mutant human beings. Viewers can of course understand this callousness, knowing that Lehnsherr's family was killed by Nazis. Yet Lehnsherr is convinced that non-mutants will attempt to exterminate mutants in the way that the Nazis exterminated his family. In the scenes leading up to the film's climax, he tells Xavier, 'tomorrow mankind will know that mutants exist. Shaw, us, they won't differentiate. They'll fear us. And that fear will turn to hatred.' This belief leads Lehnsherr to think that a war between mutants and non-mutants is inevitable.

These callous attitudes also reveal themselves in Lehnsherr's rejection of the final lesson Xavier tries to teach him. In their first meeting, Xavier convinces Lehnsherr to let Shaw escape, but for Lehnsherr this concession is only temporary. The film cleverly suggests that Shaw and his followers were responsible for the US–Soviet standoff in 1962, which historians today refer to as the Cuban Missile Crisis. In an attempt to prevent the onset of nuclear war, Xavier, Lehnsherr, and their mutant followers plan to intervene and stop Shaw. Yet Lehnsherr views this intervention as a pretext to extract the revenge about which he has so long fantasised. When Lehnsherr confesses his determination to kill Shaw, Xavier says, 'Listen to me very carefully, my friend. Killing Shaw will not bring you peace.' Lehnsherr simply replies, 'Peace was never an option.' Lehnsherr must choose between an obsession to destroy his first creator, Shaw, and a desire to honour the wishes of his second creator, Xavier. Xavier can only hope that Lehnsherr will make the more merciful decision.

In the climax of the film, Lehnsherr not only extinguishes Xavier's hopes; he also forces Xavier to assist him in extracting the vengeance that he desires. On the day of the naval stand-off, Lehnsherr exhibits a level of strength that he could never have exhibited without Xavier's help: Xavier reminds him to direct his mind at 'the point between rage and serenity', and Lehnsherr lifts Shaw's entire submarine out of the ocean, guides it along the surface of the water, and brings it to rest on the sandy shore. As Xavier's followers battle Shaw's, Lehnsherr enters the submarine, seeking his first creator. When he finds Shaw, Shaw says, 'I don't want to hurt you, Erik. I never did. I want to help you. This is our time. Our age. We are the future of the human race. You and me, son. This world could be ours.' Viewers might interpret Shaw's words as a strategic effort to deceive Lehnsherr, or they might interpret them as the genuine petition of a creator to his beloved 'son.' Lehnsherr replies, 'Everything you did made me stronger. It made me the weapon I am today. It's the truth. I've known it all along. You are my creator.' At that moment, Lehnsherr manages to remove the helmet Shaw is wearing, which stops telepaths from controlling his mind. After yelling, 'Now, Charles!' he sees that Xavier has successfully frozen Shaw in space. This gives Lehnsherr the opportunity to finish his speech and enact his revenge. 'If you're in there,' he says to Shaw, 'I'd like you to know that I agree with every word you said. We are the future. But, unfortunately, you killed my mother.' Taking out the coin he had failed to move nearly two decades earlier, when he had sought to save his mother's life, Lehnsherr uses the same coin as a weapon to avenge his mother's

death. First he moves it through the air, then through the centre of Shaw's forehead, and finally through the back of Shaw's skull, at which point the coin falls to the floor with a harmless jingle.

I, Robot provides viewers with an opportunity to experience a narrative in which the Frankenstein figure, unlike the original Frankenstein, is both benevolent and willing to create multiple creatures to correct his earlier mistakes. By contrast, *X-Men: First Class* provides viewers with the opportunity to experience a Frankenstein narrative in which the creature has a malevolent creator as well as a benevolent one, and in which the benevolent creator must choose to implicate himself in one of two murders: the murder of the malevolent creator or the murder the vengeful creation. If Xavier had relinquished his control over Shaw's mind, Lehnsherr might have been killed. Instead, he maintains his control over Shaw's mind while communicating his dismay over what Lehnsherr is planning to do. Although Xavier clearly represents the moral conscience of the film, he makes himself an accessory to murder by assisting Lehnsherr. When Lehnsherr tells Shaw 'You are my creator,' he implicitly chooses to model himself on his first creator instead of his second. Fittingly, he expresses his preference for Shaw's way of life by killing Shaw with the very coin that Shaw had asked him to move nearly two decades earlier. Adopting the name 'Magneto' at this point, he becomes the new leader of Shaw's followers. Appropriating the disturbing beliefs of his Nazi torturers, he asserts that mutants are a master race that is destined to rule the world.

Conclusion

In the new Showtime series *Penny Dreadful*, creator and writer John Logan departs slightly from the plot of Shelley's *Frankenstein* by portraying Victor Frankenstein (Harry Treadaway) as he creates a fearful, placid creature named Proteus (Alex Price), whom Frankenstein proceeds to treat with great gentleness and affection. Abruptly, however, viewers discover that this is not the first time Frankenstein has given life to an inanimate body. Frankenstein's first creature, Caliban (Rory Kinnear), makes a violent and callous return to his maker's life, demanding that Frankenstein create for him a mate who would share the same deformities and who would be likely to accept the companionship of someone similarly deformed. This is a story we know well. By contrast, the makers of *I, Robot* and *X-Men: First Class* each extracted the simplest kernel of Shelley's storyline – the idea of a creation gone awry – and enlarged and extrapolated upon this kernel with a number of creative innovations. Although contemporary filmmakers are finding exciting ways to reframe and extend the Frankenstein Complex by using Shelley's original characters, indirect adaptations of this Complex such as *I, Robot* and *X-Men: First Class* provide audiences with the opportunity to meditate upon the underlying ethical questions of Shelley's novel in fresh contexts with multiple variations.

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