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Mary Shelley's Visions Live again through Diane Arbus's Photographs

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Mary Shelley and Diane Arbus are two prominent artists who lived at different times, in different countries and social contexts, and expressed themselves in two different fields: literature and photography. Nowadays the value of their art is unquestioned, but their popularity is also due to the powerful presence of monstrous, disquieting but also fascinating and intriguing images we find both in Shelley's *Frankenstein* and in Arbus's photographs. This research tries to detect some of the reasons that urged the two artists to develop and stress the visual element in their works. In a sort of risky parallel between two distinct arts, the so called "monster theory" is applied to the analysis of their production. The monstrous body, be it a giant, a demon or a "freak", is the symbolic interpretation of fears, desires, cultural unease that pervade society in every age. In particular, it is also the expression of specific intellectual, political, sexual doubts and fears that women artists and women in general encounter and try to overcome in their lives and careers. Evident similarities between the two life experiences also confirm that every creative woman exerts an influence on the subsequent women artists, and this process constantly opens new research fields for us.

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In the early morning of November 7th 1972, a huge crowd was queuing in front of the Museum of Modern Arts in New York: people were eager to see the retrospective exhibition of the photographer Diane Arbus, who was already an icon of contemporary photography. More than 250.000 visitors watched her pictures in less than three months; among the many photos of marginalised people, such as dwarfs, giants, transgender people, nudists, circus performers, and any kind of "freaks", one photograph in particular compelled the watchers to stop longer in front of it, arousing contradictory reactions: it was the photo of the *Jewish Giant at Home, with his Parents, in the Bronx*, (N.Y., 1970). Eddie Carmel, the giant suffering from a disproportionate growth since his adolescence, was a gentle and naïve boy, and also a would-be poet and a would-be actor, who only succeeded in taking part in circus sideshows and being cast in the role of the monster in some TV shows; he also played a sort of son of Frankenstein's creature in a horror film called *The Head That Would Not Die*. In the film, he was the protagonist of violent, horrifying scenes where he chopped a man's arm and tossed a girl in the air: the link between awkwardness and wickedness was immediately established for him, together with the connection with the story of *Frankenstein*, in a sort of automatic, instinctive reaction, related to disquieting images buried deep in our memories, almost in our collective unconscious. The novel possesses an undisputed literary value, but one of the sources of its worldwide popularity lies in the powerful, awesome, impressive scenes where the creature is the protagonist: those images are unforgettable.

The strength of images, whether literary or photographic, their persistence and influence on our minds, is the basis on which a risky parallel between two artists, Mary Shelley and Diane Arbus may be established. They lived in different times, nations, cultural environments, and used different artistic mediums: Mary Shelley was an English writer of the Romantic Age, Diane Arbus was an American photographer of the Twentieth Century.

When photography began to develop, between the 1840s and 1850s, that is during the last years of Mary Shelley's life, it was not yet endowed with artistic dignity: in 1859, Charles Baudelaire still claimed that photography was only a mechanical process that should be regarded as a "servant of the arts" (Baudelaire 1859, n.p.). His ideas proved wrong and in a very short time photography gained the dignity of art. Nowadays, Diane Arbus is widely recognized as one of the most important, influential and controversial art photographers of the twentieth century.

This research can be considered a sort of intellectual bet, an attempt to find out why two young women far away from each other in many respects, both extremely intelligent, cultivated, sensitive and gentle, gifted with extraordinary artistic capacities, were induced to present monstrous images in their works. Although this enquiry may seem improper, it is somehow legitimized and supported by the arguments developed by Rita Felski in her essay, *The Limits of Critique* (Felski 2015). She recognizes the fundamental importance of literary criticism based on intellectual rigor, but she reminds us that literature, just like any other form of art, is not an isolated sphere, but a world connected to other meaningful artistic worlds. Works of art are not separate entities: they are felt extraordinary, special, but at the same time they are social, immanent. The consequence is that standard criticism has intrinsic limits that should be overcome adopting a more pragmatic approach, gazing at art from several different angles, recapturing its social implications. Exactly with this premise, a short parallel analysis of the two artists' lives may be useful in order to detect some significant similarities.

We know that the extremely cultivated family where Mary Shelley was brought up was the heart of a brilliant intellectual circle. There she met Percy Bysshe Shelley with

whom she eloped to France when she was seventeen and he was twenty-two. Percy encouraged her to find her own artistic expression: as he was already known as a poet, he quickly assumed the role of mentor-teacher to his young student. Her first novel, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* was published anonymously in 1818, but featured an unsigned preface written by Percy.

Diane Arbus's family was so rich to allow her to receive the best possible education and she had the opportunity to know some of the most refined intellectuals of her time. When she was fourteen, she met nineteen-year-old Allan Arbus, who was a talented fashion designer for the Russeks department store in New York, owned by Diane's grandfather. They got married as soon as Diane came of age. Allan was a war photographer during World War II, and when he came back to America, the Arbuses decided to become fashion photographers and to work as a team. They started working for the Russeks, but soon they received assignments from many other famous fashion magazines like *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*. Allan taught Diane photography and she used to repeat that her husband had been her "first teacher" (Bosworth 2005, 73), and that she owed every knowledge about the photographic technique to his genius, but she quickly developed her original talent. Diane and Allan worked in complete cooperation and complemented each other, but many times their photos were published under the single name of Allan Arbus, because he was the most famous of the two. It took time both for Mary Shelley and Diane Arbus to have their authorship completely recognized: Mary's name as the author of *Frankenstein* appears only in the 1823 edition, one year after her husband's death; Diane's pictures began to be noticed when she distanced herself from Allan and from the world of fashion photography, too ephemeral and frivolous for her. The two women were conscious of their potentialities, but they had to struggle to create their own artistic dimension, to express their own voice. In the preface to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, when she writes about the time spent before beginning the composition of her first novel, we read:

> He [Percy] was for ever inciting me to obtain literary reputation [...] he desired that I should write [...] that he might himself judge how far I possessed the promise of better things hereafter. Still, I did nothing. Travelling, and the cares of a family, occupied my time; and study, in the way of reading, or improving my ideas in communication with his far more cultivated mind was all of literary employment that engaged my attention. (Shelley 2013)

After more than one century, Diane Arbus echoed Mary Shelley's words, in an interview for *Newsweek*: she was asked why she had started artistic photography only when she was thirty-eight. Her answer was exquisitely sarcastic, but many interpreted it literally:

> Because a woman spends the first block of her life looking for a husband and learning to be a wife and a mother, just trying to get those roles down pat; you don't have time to play another role. (Bosworth 2005, 81-82)

In their lives, they both encountered numerous practical difficulties and deep psychological sufferings. They knew how sorrows can influence the development of our minds, and this may be one of the reasons why they were able to look at other people's lives with deep attention, sensitivity, empathy: a compassionate vision is always present even in their most frightful images.

In the scene of the monster's birth, when Victor Frankenstein completes his creation, he says: "I beheld the accomplishment of my toils" (Shelley 2010, 45); especially

the monster's eyes terrorize him: "I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open [...] his watery eyes" (45). After Victor's nightmare, when the monster comes back and bends over him, he remembers: "I beheld the monster – the miserable monster whom I had created [...] His eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me" (46). The actions of seeing and being seen produce the first frightful, indissoluble and contradictory bond between the two. The link between creator and creature, based on reciprocal sight, has been distorted forever. Victor is no more able to get to sleep. In a sort of delirium, he starts walking along the streets of Ingolstadt with "sleepless and aching eyes" (46), fearing to see the miserable being. His monstrous image has entered Victor's mind like a persecution: "he was forever before my eyes" (49).

Looking at his eyes, Clerval is immediately aware of his friend's devastated soul: "he saw a wildness in my eyes" (Shelley 2010, 49), and, for the first time, Victor makes a gesture that will be repeated on other occasions in the novel: he covers his eyes: " 'Don't ask me' I cried, putting my hands before my eyes, for I thought I saw the dreaded spectre glide into the room" (49). Sight and unconscious are mingled, external and internal visions overlap.

In his wanderings, the creature soon realizes that his horrible appearance frightens everybody. Nobody wants to watch him because he is ugly, while he needs to be seen, recognized, loved. When he meets Frankenstein again, he knows that the only way to be accepted and listened to by his father-creator is to shield his repulsive aspect from his sight; at first, Victor tries to flee from the monster's presence, then he reports the following words and gestures:

> 'Thus I relieve thee, my creator' he [the monster] said, and placed his hated hands before my eyes [...] 'thus I take from thee the sight which you abhor'. (Shelley 2010, 87)

Now the monster can tell about the first moments of his existence and he is paradoxically able to remember the feeble and hesitant development of his senses: sight seems to be the first to evolve and to be predominant.

The creature establishes an uncertain relationship with the surrounding world, and nature appears beautiful to him, but the first time he looks at himself, reflected in a transparent pool, in a sort of inverted myth of Narcissus, he is terrified:

> At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. (Shelley 2010, 99)

This fundamental scene suggests that identity is a process not so much of knowing as of seeing: the creature is an *unicum* in nature, a presence different from any other in the world, a unique vision, and his unfamiliar physiognomy is generally interpreted by the characters in the novel as threatening and evil. From then on, he knows that he will have to use a careful and refined communication based on words and not on appearance in order to be accepted by humans, as he explains:

> I had first become master of their [humans'] language [...] to make them overlook the deformity of my figure; for with this also the contrast perpetually presented to my eyes had made me acquainted. (Shelley 2010, 99)

When he tries to come in touch with human beings, his experiences are always disastrous. He observes:

> a fatal prejudice clouds their [people's] eyes, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend, they behold only a detestable monster. (Shelley 2010, 116)

While the creature is drawing our attention to the possibility of misreading his countenance, judging a mere appearance rather than the hidden reality, Mary Shelley is posing the basis of a fundamental epistemological question. By now, the creature can only assert: "The human senses are insurmountable barriers to our union" (128), underlining a general truth which proves tragic for his destiny.

The desolate observation reminds us of a famous sentence by Diane Arbus, when she refers to the marginalized people she photographed and to their condemnation to sorrow and despair:

> Most people know or fear that sometimes in their life they're going to have to face some monumental, traumatic experience [...] Freaks are born with a situation that is traumatic. [...] They've already passed their test in life. They're aristocrats. (Lubow 2017, 243)

Surely, most visitors of the exhibition *New Documents*, held in New York in 1967, did not regard the outcasts of Arbus's photos as "aristocrats" or nobles in any way. Disgust, shock, or at least bewilderment were the prevailing reactions, not very different from some responses of the public after reading *Frankenstein*. In her famous essay *On Photography*, Susan Sontag wrote:

> Arbus's work does not invite the viewers to identify with [...] the miserable-looking people she photographed [...] it does not arouse any compassionate feelings. (Sontag 1979, 32-33)

She also claimed that her photos were not sincere, but cold and voyeuristic, with the implicit intent to show that "America is the grave of the Occident" (Sontag 1979, 48). Among the critics, Susan Sontag inflicted the heaviest and most enduring blow. After the first violent impact produced by her images, a few years were necessary to go deeper into Arbus's art, to reach a second vision of her photos, to understand her humanistic approach.

Arbus and Shelley felt the need to understand the others and themselves among the others, the world and their own position in the world. Their monsters are the conscious and unconscious expressions of what they understood and felt. Jeffrey Cohen' s studies about the so called "monster theory" (Cohen 1996) prove to be a fundamental help in this enquiry. The critic clearly explains that a monstrous body is a construction and projection of culture because it incorporates fears, desires, anxieties, and fantasies of a given society and also of the artists that express it; the monster appears in times of crisis as an epitome of the clash between two opposing ideas, beliefs, hopes that inhabit society; it controls the borders of what is possible and what is not allowed in any field, be it intellectual, geographic, sexual, or political.

Keeping in mind the above basic concepts, Arbus's pictures can disclose innumerable potentialities and meanings. One of her first successful photos was: *Child with a Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park* (N.Y., 1962). At first sight, Colin Wood, the protagonist of the photo, seems a disabled boy, but when we look carefully at him, we see that he is only a nice, skinny boy who contorts into an angry grimace while he is

clutching a toy hand grenade in his right hand. He seems furious and, at the same time, begging for comprehension. As an adult, he remembers that in those years he was a troubled, aggressive boy living in a wealthy family, feeling isolated and hopeless because his mother and father were going through a divorce, and he recalls that "Arbus felt a special empathy with that kid" (Schultz 2011, 92). The photographer understood him instinctively and shot the right picture. She was also able to expose the contradictions of an affluent society in a moment of crisis: beneath the surface of optimism, America was no longer capable of ensuring serenity and confidence in the future. The disfigured boy, upset by his parents' conflicts, reveals the decline of the traditional family values still covered by a veil of hypocrisy; his toy weapon suggests the tragedy of the US involvement in the Vietnam War, despite the generally positive accounts. He really embodies the etymology of the term *monstrum:* "that which reveals", as the photo detects a new uneasiness and announces the clash of future pacifist movements and youth protests. Everything seems to concentrate in the desperate expression of the boy who violently asks to be seen and accepted.

The scene reminds us of Frankenstein's monster when he tries to impose his presence to terrified people who run away, especially when he calls for inclusion within the refined Frankenstein and De Lacey families. The latter have a French republican origin, and are cultivated and liberal, but they fiercely refuse to welcome the creature into their home, showing "horror and consternation on beholding" (Shelley 2010, 117) him. The reaction threatens the very definition of "fraternity" as it is expressed in the ideals of the French Revolution. According to some critics, the depiction of a terrifying man-made monster could be Mary Shelley's response to the arrogant confidence of Enlightenment utopianism and to the Terror that destroyed the republican revolutionary project. According to others, the monster could also be the metaphorical representation of the atrocious uneasiness that the traditional bourgeois family can generate (Hendrich Hirsch 1996, 170-205). Mary Shelley's philosophical approach and her painful family experiences allow us to accept both interpretations. It is also a commonplace of literary criticism to note that Frankenstein's monster is his own romantic double, the alien Other he constructs and upon which he projects all he cannot accept in himself; indeed, Frankenstein calls the monster "my own vampire, my own spirit set loose from the grave" (Shelley 2010, 64). We cannot forget that the theme of the double is developed as well in the similarities between Frankenstein and Walton and in the links between other characters.

The disturbing metaphorical figure of the double that challenges the process of self-definition is highly present in a large part of Arbus's works. In the photo of the *Identical Twins*, taken in Roselle, New Jersey, in 1967, Colleen and Cathleen Wade were photographed during a Christmas party. The little girl on the right smiles angelically and her eyes are bright. The sister on the left has sad eyes and her mouth is pursed. She appears to be a hidden personality of the first girl, a disquieting *doppelgänger*; through this portrait, Arbus delves deeply into the mysteries of human identity, and, at the same time she hints at personal repressed feelings and incommunicable opinions about her contemporary age. All these implications were not understood or accepted by the twins' parents who disliked the print when Arbus sent it to them; they completely disregarded the haunted stillness and strangeness that makes the picture one of the most iconic images of the twentieth century.

Her exploration of the theme of the double became deeper and deeper: in her production we find innumerable portraits of twins, of disquieting Siamese twins fused in different parts of their bodies, and also of transgender people and hermaphrodites. If

the monster is a figure disruptive of traditional categories of rank and distinction, all these forms of existence, where two different signs of gender coexist in a problematic connection, undermine the power balance based on gender and social relations. Arbus was fascinated with the disorder, confusion and suspension that these images could create in the viewers. Generally, the subjects look straight into the camera and face the watchers with indifference and defiance. Their condition possesses a deep affinity with the unnatural body of Shelley's monster who feels excluded from human community; he is perceived as less than fully human, and consequently he feeds an anger which is generally violent, but sometimes repressed and silent.

Social discomfort and marginalization are again evident in the photo *Jewish Giant at Home, with his Parents in the Bronx* (N.Y., 1970) which is one of her most memorable photos; the gigantic man is at home, between his parents: nobody is looking at the camera, but there is a meaningful exchange of looks between them. The giant seems a careful and remorseful child; he is looking at his mother, who is looking back at him and she still seems surprised by the son she has generated; his father is not looking at him, but fixes his eyes on his son's belly: he refuses to watch him, to identify with him, to be his father. The scene reminds us of the similar refusal of paternity of Frankenstein, and it also suggests another topic which is present for the first time in a novel thanks to Mary Shelley, and has been analysed by feminist criticism: the deep, strong anxieties about the processes of pregnancy, giving birth and mothering. In this picture, Diane Arbus wanted to hint at the same feminine fears and anxieties: Arbus's biographer Patricia Bosworth writes about Diane's satisfaction when, after eight years of attempts to capture the image she wanted, she finally got it:

> At one point, she excitedly phoned Joseph Mitchell at *The New Yorker*, "You know how every mother has nightmares when she's pregnant that her baby will be born a monster? I think I got that in the mother's face as she glares up at Eddie, thinking, 'Oh My God, no! (Bosworth 2005, 194)

The photographer perfectly illustrated a tragic example of family dynamics through the exchange of looks between the Carmels, but generally, as we have observed, Arbus caught the looks of her subjects while they were looking straight into the camera, and, as a result, the viewer feels observed, scrutinized, judged by those looks that seem emotionless. Those enigmatic looks come from people who have already seen everything, felt and suffered everything in a world apart; they have gone beyond any misery and now they are hopelessly isolated, they are fearless. They could repeat the words of Frankenstein's creature: "Beware, for I am fearless, and therefore powerful" (Shelley 2010, 151). Those looks reach a deep, obscure dimension, and they place the watcher in a conflicting position. The borderline subjects appear repulsive but meanwhile they speak to our fears, secrets, repressed desires. We have a similar reaction when we read *Frankenstein*: we identify with the creator and also with the creature, we understand and reject both Victor and the monster, in a sort of double bind which mirrors Mary Shelley's emotional response to her sufferings and to her philosophical doubts.

Developing the theme of the human perception of reality, the writer shows that the action of seeing often corresponds to the action of living, and life seems to pass through the eyes. In the last chapter, for instance, Walton understands Frankenstein's anguish in telling his story when he observes his eyes: "His fine and lovely eyes were now lighted up with indignation, now subdued to downcast sorrow and quenched in infinite wretchedness" (Shelley 2010, 187). In the letter to his sister, where he describes Frankenstein's delirium, he writes: "a feverish fire still glimmers in his eyes" (192).

When Victor tries to quell the mutiny and encourage the sailors to carry on with the dangerous expedition, Walton admires his friend's attitude: "his eyes sparkled [...] with momentary vigour" (192); he remembers how his powerful speech was pronounced: "with an eye so full of lofty design and heroism" (193); when Victor Frankenstein dies, Walton writes: "his eyes closed forever" (196). After a short time, the creature reaches the ship and Walton sees him for the first time. He is immediately repulsed by him, like all the other characters, and has to admit: "Never did I behold a vision so horrible as his face [...] I shut my eyes involuntarily" (197), thus eliminating the visual image of the monster. But Walton is the only character who has listened to the narration of the monster's creation from Frankenstein himself, and he is now able not to reject him on the basis of a first impression. On the contrary, he is attracted to him: "I called on him to stay" (197); he wishes to listen to the tale from the point of view of the creature who has arrived when Frankenstein is already dead, and can only bid farewell to his creator returning the eye contact that he received when he was born, thus completing the circle of the story: "Farewell! I leave you, and in you the last of human-kind whom these eyes will ever behold. Farewell, Frankenstein!" (201). Walton wavers between sympathy and hostility for the monster, just like the reader. Again, he poses the problem of the interpretation of reality, but, together with the writer, he does not give an answer: at the end of the novel, he loses "sight" of the creature "in darkness and distance" (202). Only another character does not reject the creature's presence: Father De Lacey, who is blind; he begins to listen to the monster's story with a sympathetic attitude, without seeing him, until he is violently taken away by his terrified son. Also the old man is allowed to perceive only one part of reality, but he has to follow a procedure opposite to the one of the other characters, who see but don't listen: the same issue is posed from another perspective.

The presence of the old, weak and blind man is rather disquieting, and suggests a connection with a peculiar subject treated by Diane Arbus in the last period of her life when she decided to take photos of blind people. In her endless research of truth, of the essence of reality, and of photographic experimentation, she tried to use her camera going somehow beyond the visual element, beyond any surface, showing images of people who cannot see images, who cannot look back at the camera and establish a relationship with the viewer, who don't know what their expressions are, and for this reason are absolutely sincere and also absolutely free from the subjection to other people's eyes. She pushed her artistic medium to the limit, almost denying it. The results of her experiments were greatly appreciated by some critics, but considered too shocking and disturbing by others. In any case, Arbus decided to go even further: in the summer of 1969, she travelled to New Jersey as often as she could to photograph the mentally disabled women living in the institution of Vineland. The project engaged her for the rest of her short life. She produced an extraordinary series of pictures of retarded women: some of them wear masks and handmade costumes celebrating Halloween. Those masks represent another failure of the viewer to know their faces, to identify them, to catch some small insight into their real appearance; masks allow the women to violate any natural and social boundaries. In other photos, they move in a procession, holding hands and looking in various directions; some of them show an empty smile, an uncertain gait, and a sort of happy inattention. Some look into the camera, but don't return any inviting or challenging gaze. They seem little evanescent monsters emerging from dreams or nightmares. In another photo, the blurred figure of a lonely woman is walking towards an unknown destination, at twilight. The pictures were published

posthumously in the collection *Intitled* in 1971 and are now regarded as the highest artistic achievement in the photographer's career.

At first, Diane was very satisfied with the pictures, and she wrote: "Finally, what I've been searching for!" (Schultz 2011, 11). She said that she adored them and that she would like to write about them: they seemed almost inadequate to her and she decided to transfer their essence into short, flashing sentences in her notebooks. Then those images began to haunt her, and she repeated that she hated them because she could not control them; she was close to achieve the aching core of her research and she sank into a deep depression; she felt that photography had no more meaning for her. For Arbus, photography was a means to capture the secret of reality beyond the surface, and she used to say: "A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you, the less you know" (Bosworth 2005, xi). The looks of her tormented, handicapped subjects had always been able to communicate a hidden truth, both to the artist and the viewer. Now, that mentally retarded woman walking alone at sunset, in a sort of American "waste land", does not give back any certainty, any response, but only a blank look. Diane's daughter, Doon Arbus, understood the value of her mother's last pictures and defined them: "the most transcendent, romantic, revelatory work" (Schultz 2011, 214), but she also added: "each image [is] a metaphor, a riddle without words or answers" (214). When the photographer was no more able to find "an answer" in her art, she took her own life.

The silent, enigmatic female character of the last photo reminds us of the figure of the Cumaean Sybil whose cave is visited by the narrator in the introduction to *The Last Man* by Mary Shelley. There, the Sybil used to stay and provide her ambiguous prophecies. The protagonist of the novel, the last human being on earth, ends his existence sailing towards the unknown: his solitary navigation is, again, a vision, now observed by the eye of the Supreme Being, who seems indifferent to the fate of the ultimate survivor:

> while the sun is high, and the moon waxes or wanes, angels, the spirits of the dead, and the ever-open eye of the Supreme, will behold the tiny bark, freighted with Verney--the last man. (Shelley 2006, 615)

The absence of any empathetic look is the conclusion of a novel which is considered a grimly pessimistic depiction of the fatal ending of human history.[1] The last man, Lionel Verney, is actually the last woman, Mary Shelley herself, who felt desperately lonely after her husband's and her friends' deaths. She began to conceive suicidal thoughts which she maintained for a long time. This is what she wrote in her journal in October 1824: "I never, in all my woes, understood the feelings that led to suicide till now" (Marshall 2011, 556). Similar considerations can be read in the following years, and on 21st of October 1838, referring to her sense of solitude and sorrow, Mary still wrote:

> Books do much; but the living intercourse is the vital heat. Debarred from that, how have I pined and died! (556)

[1] We should enlarge this one-sided interpretation underlining the importance of the fictional frame, as Elisabetta Marino brilliantly points out in *Mary Shelley e l'Italia. Il viaggio, il Risorgimento, la questione femminile* (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2012), 159-170; the prophesy of the Sybil, if rightly interpreted, might not be the prediction of a future cosmic failure, but it could be a call to continue to observe reality, study and write about it, in order to reach truth, equality and peace.

She was then forty-one and she would die thirteen years later. Over the years, she recognized the precariousness of the ideology to which she had committed her life, but fundamentally she never abandoned her deep faith in the redeeming and regenerating function of art. To express her hidden, contrasting feelings, she relied on the upsetting images of her first novel, and, for the rest of her life she believed that the artistic creation could impose order on the chaos of human nature, as she wrote in the Preface to *Frankenstein*:

> Invention [...] does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; [...] it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself. (Shelley 2010, 8)

Diane Arbus charged herself with the tremendous and continuous task of giving form to the "dark, shapeless substances", the awkwardness of life, through her pictures, following a strict self-discipline, as she said in an interview:

> I work from awkwardness [...] By that I mean if I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself... it's important to take bad pictures. It's the bad ones that have to do with what you've never done before. (Bosworth 2005, 248)

In Arbus's opinion, photography has the task of showing what is hidden, refused, excluded from the general opinion. In order to detect an uncomfortable reality, to reach the repressed, it is necessary to train "the mind's eye", as she used to repeat, quoting the title of the famous essay by the photographer Henry Cartier-Bresson. The mind's eye is very similar to Mary Shelley's imagination, when, between sleep and wakefulness, she found the inspiration for her first novel:

> My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. I saw – with shut eyes, but acute mental vision – I saw the pale student [...] I saw the hideous phantasm. (Shelley 2010, 9)

Oneiric experiences represented important moments in the lives of the two women: for Mary Shelley, a dream marked the beginning of her artistic career, for Diane Arbus, it marked the end. Just a few days before her suicide, we read in her journal:

> I dreamed I was on a gorgeous ocean liner [...] There was smoke in the air and people were drinking and gambling. I knew the ship was on fire and we were sinking slowly; they knew it too but they were very gay and dancing and singing and a little delirious. There was no hope [...] I could photograph anything I wanted. (Bosworth 2005, 312)

The world had become a place where people were superficial, unaware of the dramatic nature of life; she could go on taking pictures, but nobody would support her and understand her art.

In her battle against superficiality and hypocrisy, being for too long in close contact with external sufferings and her own inner pain, she was exhausted: art was no longer a means to objectify her psychological distress; photography consumed her definitely.

When the two artists were young, they had to face several family, social and cultural expectations; when they became famous, detractors began to dig into their private lives for various reasons. They continued to be conscious of their own artistic value but had

to struggle against their tendency to low self-esteem. Mary Shelley wrote about her insecurities in her journals, and in this letter to her friend Maria Gisborne:

> You speak of woman's intellect [...] I know that, however clever I may be, there is in me a vacillation, a weakness, a want of eagle-winged resolution that appertains to my intellect as well as to my moral character. (Marshall 2011, 2: 267)

During an interview, Diane Arbus underlined the value of her photos; she appeared rather shy and uneasy but also stubborn when she said:

> Although I can't defend this position, I think I maybe do it because [...] there are things that nobody would see unless I photographed them. (Lubow 2017, 612)

They also feared that their art would be misunderstood. Mary Shelley soon realized it when, in 1823, she saw the first stage adaptation of *Frankenstein* by H.M. Milner who radically simplified the semiotic significance of the creature.

Diane Arbus became obsessed by the idea of being misinterpreted and remembered only as "the photographer of freaks".

Years of serious literary and photographic criticism have revealed the artistic stature of the two authors. These two artists were overwhelmed by painful experiences, but they were endowed with extraordinary intelligence and artistic capacities; they were shy and reserved, but they were determined. In their constant search for truth, they placed themselves along a path which had started with the French Revolution. They wrote and showed what shouldn't be said and seen. Mary exerted a subterranean influence on many following female creators of art, in an obscure or overt way; she transferred her legacy to other women artists who received it, even if not completely aware; among them, we find Diane Arbus.

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