FRANKENSTEIN

PENETRATING THE SECRETS OF NATURE

October 31, 1997–August 15, 1998

National Library of Medicine
National Institutes of Health
8600 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, Maryland

Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*

Corbis-Bettmann

On a dark and stormy night nearly two hundred years ago, nineteen-year-old Mary Shelley accepted a challenge to compose a ghost story—a story so horrific the world would never be the same again.

First published anonymously in 1818 as *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, Shelley's story is a richly Gothic tale of a scientist obsessed with creating life. The scientist, Victor Frankenstein, succeeds. But while he does so, the creature he creates eventually goes on a murderous rampage, threatening his maker's life and a leaving a dark path of destruction in his wake.

Frontispiece from the third edition of *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, published in 1831

The Department of Special Collections, University of Pennsylvania Libraries

Today, as scientists push across previously unimagined frontiers, Frankenstein is still a compelling and cautionary tale. The

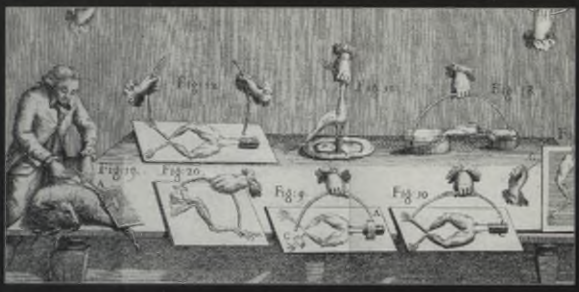


Illustration of Italian physician Luigi Galvani's experiments, in which he applied electricity to frog legs; from his book *De Viribus Electricitatis in Motu Muscalari (1792)*

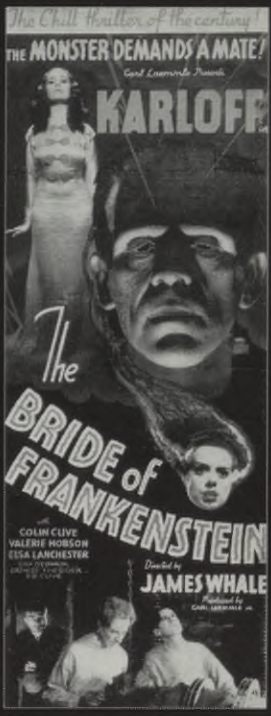
story remains like a warning beacon, throwing its harsh, unsettling beam upon human efforts to penetrate the secrets of nature.

The Birth of Frankenstein

Hollywood did not give birth to *Frankenstein*; Mary Shelley did. More than a century before actor Boris Karloff, helped by make-up artists, made the monster in his image, came Shelley and her creation.

The author of *Frankenstein* came from the rarefied reaches of the British artistic and intellectual elite. While Mary Shelley drew her inspiration from a dream, she drew her story's premises about the nature of life from the work of some of Europe's premier scientists and thinkers at the time.

Tantalized by the elusive boundary between life



Poster for the 1935 film *The Bride of Frankenstein*

The Granger Collection, New York

and death, scientists such as Luigi Galvani and Erasmus Darwin probed it through experiments with lower organisms, human anatomical studies, attempts to resuscitate drowning victims, and experiments using electricity to restore life to the recently dead.

Electrical Frankie, ca. 1960s

Toy Scouts, Inc.

The Celluloid Monster

Mary Shelley's story began getting reshaped almost from the moment it appeared. The 1931 Universal Studios production of *Frankenstein*, starring Boris Karloff as the monster, capped more than a century of variant retellings of the original story.

Compared to Shelley's sensitive, articulate creature, Universal's was crude and unformed. But the sheer power of Hollywood image-making gave him an impact as great or greater than Shelley's, and made him into an icon of popular culture.

Today, the image of Frankenstein the monster is immediately recognizable in consumer products, cartoons, newsaper headlines, and other media.

Promise and Peril

In the late twentieth century, as the pace of scientific progress has increased, so has our concern about society's ability to retain control of the dazzling new technologies that are reshaping our understanding of what it means to be human. Organ transplants, xenografting,

Newsweek, March 10, 1997

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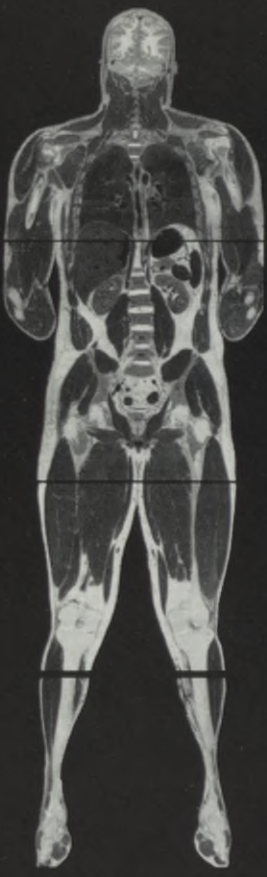

Image available over the Internet from The Visible Human Project, the world's first computerized library of human anatomy at www.nlm.nih.gov

genetic engineering, and cloning have all provoked references to "Frankenstein."

In the face of such developments, how can society balance the benefits of new medical discoveries against ethical or spiritual questions they pose? Or the human urge to know and understand against problems arising from that knowledge?

Although there are no easy answers to these questions, the process of resolving them has profited from an openness of public debate that Victor Frankenstein, alone in his laboratory, could scarcely have imagined.

Similarly, unlike Mary Shelley's day when access to medical and scientific knowledge was limited to the educated elite, today we have unparalleled access to such information through databases such as Medline or the World Wide Web.

But as science more deeply penetrates the secrets of nature, issues like cloning will arise again and again. Each time they do, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* will sound its note of warning.

THURSDAY AT THE MOVIES

The National Library of Medicine is pleased to host a free "Thursday at the Movies" film series featuring five classic films about Frankenstein in conjunction with the exhibition *Frankenstein: Penetrating the Secrets of Nature*. The screenings will take place at the Lister Hill Center Auditorium at noon and then again at 7:00 pm. The evening show will feature introductory remarks from film professionals, scholars, and scientists. For more information call (301) 435-3270 or e-mail: frankenstein@nlm.nih.gov

November 6, 1997
FRANKENSTEIN (1931) 70 minutes
Speaker: Stephen Hunter, film critic at The Washington Post

November 13, 1997
THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN (1935) 118 minutes
Speaker: Sue Norton, filmmaker and president of SBN Entertainment

November 20, 1997
CURSE OF FRANKENSTEIN (1957) 83 minutes
Speaker: Joseph Bierman, psychiatrist and member of the Forum for the Psychoanalytic Study of Film

December 4, 1997
YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN (1974) 105 minutes
Speaker: Betty Bennett, leading scholar on Mary Shelley and former dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at The American University

December 11, 1997
MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN (1994) 123 minutes
Speaker: Patricia Gallagher, information specialist at the New York Academy of Medicine

Jack Pierce (left) and his assistant turn Boris Karloff into the Frankenstein monster

Film Stills Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York