

English 2333: An Abbreviated *Frankenstein* Filmography

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[Before this class meeting, students watch the Edison *Frankenstein* for homework and answer three questions, and we begin class by reviewing these questions: 1) What version of the Creature does this film present: the Creature as monster, the creature as human, or something in between? 2) What aspects of Shelley's story (characterization, plot detail, setting, imagery) have the filmmakers kept? What has been deleted? To what effect? 3) What role does music play in this film?]



***Frankenstein* (usually called *The 1910 Edison Frankenstein*)**

Director J. Searle Dawley. Starring Charles Ogle. Edison, 1910. Silent film. Approximately 13 minutes.

This is the earliest known film version of *Frankenstein*. Regrettably, the only surviving copy was held by a private collector who refused to let film students and scholars study or even view it. Now the film fortunately has passed into the public domain and is available via Google video.



Frankenstein

Director James Whale. Starring Boris Karloff, Colin Clive, and Mae Clarke. Produced by Carl Laemmle, Jr. Adaptation by Robert Florey and John L. Balderston. Screenplay by Garrett Fort, Robert Florey, and Francis Edward Faragoh. Based on the play by Peggy Webling. Universal, 1931. 71 minutes.

This version makes substantive changes to both plot and character, renaming our protagonist, for one example, “Dr. Henry Frankenstein,” and calling his friend “Victor.” This film gives us many of the stock elements of the twentieth-century *Frankenstein* myth: the mad scientist in a castle on a mountaintop who cries “It’s alive! It’s alive!” when his reanimation is successful, the scientist’s hunchbacked assistant, and the robot-like, inarticulate creature with bolts in his neck.

Scene 4: Creation scene (“In 15 minutes the storm will be at its height”)

- How does this creation scene compare (or differ) from Shelley’s creation scene?
- How would you characterize Frankenstein at this moment? What is his mood?
- Be on the lookout for the creature’s hands.

Scene 6: Creation scene continued: (23:00-25:17)

- Frankenstein has been joined by his friend, his fiancé, and his teacher—all are concerned for his well-being. They fear he is going off the deep end. They arrive just as F is working on the reanimation, and he has them sit and observe.
- Pay particular attention to the mechanics of the creation: what gets the most attention?
- Where does the reanimation occur? Why is this significant?
- Again, watch for the hands.

Scene 7: The Day after the Reanimation: (30:47-34:22)

- This is the moment that gives us the “Frankenstein monster” that has solidified in Western culture. Notice the creature’s appearance, his movements—how would you characterize them?
- How does Frankenstein speak to the creature?
- What is the creature’s reaction to sunlight? Why?
- Not surprisingly by now, I want you to watch the creature’s hands—how does he use them? Do we have any close-ups? Why and to what effect?
- Notice the creature’s primal fear of fire—why is this significant?
- What language, what ability to speak or communicate does the creature have?



Weird Science

Director John Hughes. Starring Anthony Michael Hall, Ian Mitchell-Smith, and Kelly LeBrock. Universal, 1985. 94 minutes.

In this comic appropriation of the Frankenstein story, John Hughes creates a story of two geeky, high-school boys who decide that since they can't get dates, they'll create a woman. (They are inspired to do so, by the way, by watching the 1931 James Whale *Frankenstein* on television late one night). This film uses many of the elements of Shelley's story, but updates them for the late 20th century. The lightning, the "body parts," and the creator's "laboratory" are all part of this story, as is the creature who develops a mind of her own and begins to interact in the creators' lives in ways they never really anticipated.

Scene 3:

- Notice the elements of Shelley's story that Hughes has kept.
- Notice what film the boys are watching.
- What "materials" do the boys use?



Young Frankenstein

Director Mel Brooks. Starring Gene Wilder, Peter Boyle, Madeline Kahn, Cloris Leachman, and Marty Feldman. Fox, 1974. 102 minutes.

A comic parody of both Shelley's novel and the 1931 James Whale version of *Frankenstein*. Rather than a late 18th-century scientist named Victor Frankenstein, Mel Brooks tells the story using Victor's grandson, Frederick Frankenstein, a respected medical doctor and teacher, who decides to recreate his grandfather's experiments, with ridiculously funny results. (As a side note, the creature in this film is played by Peter Boyle, who also played Raymond's dad on *Everybody Loves Raymond*).

Scene 2: Frankenstein classroom

- Here we get to see how Mel Brooks is appropriating both Shelley's story and James Whale's film version. How does he parody both?

Creation Scene:

- Notice the actor playing the creature.
- Clearly this scene is a parody of the Whale version; what specific elements do we get? How and what is using?



Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

Director Kenneth Branagh. Starring Kenneth Branagh and Robert DeNiro. Tri Star Pictures, 1994. Approximately 123 minutes.

Director Kenneth Branagh set out to make an adaptation of Shelley's novel that was closer to the story as Shelley wrote it, and not as influenced by the version of *Frankenstein* as depicted by James Whale in 1931. He does, however, make substantial alterations to Shelley's plotline, particularly after Elizabeth's murder.

[Over the course of discussing the novel, we have watched the opening scenes of this film—Victor arriving at Walton's ship—the creation scene, and the creature's scenes at the DeLacey's. I put the final scenes of this version, Victor's reanimation of Elizabeth, on our course webpage as streaming video and have students write a response to Branagh's alteration of Shelley's plot.]