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## Frankenstein (1931) Directed by James Whale

### Cast

Colin Clive as Henry Frankenstein  
Mae Clarke as Elizabeth  
John Boles as Victor Moritz  
Boris Karloff as The Monster  
Edward Van Sloan as Dr. Waldman  
Frederick Kerr as Baron Frankenstein  
Dwight Frye as Fritz  
Lionel Belmore as Herr Vogel  
Marilyn Harris as Maria  
Michael Mark as Ludwig

### Credits

Directed by James Whale  
Produced by Carl Laemmle, Jr.  
Written by Francis Edward Farragoh  
Garrett Fort  
(Uncredited) Robert Florey  
Based on a play by Peggy Webling  
Adaptation by John L. Balderston  
Cinematography Arthur Edeson  
Makeup by Jack Pierce

Distributed by Universal Pictures  
Release Date November 21, 1931  
Budget \$262,007  
Box Office \$12,000,000

*Frankenstein* is a 1931 horror monster film from Universal Pictures directed by James Whale and adapted from the play by Peggy Webling, which in turn is loosely based on the [novel of the same name](#) by [Mary Shelley](#). The film stars Colin Clive, Mae Clarke, John Boles and Boris Karloff and features Dwight Frye and Edward Van Sloan. The Webling play was adapted by John L. Balderston and the screenplay written by Francis Edward Farragoh and Garrett Fort with uncredited contributions from Robert Florey and John Russell. The make-up artist was Jack Pierce. A hit with both audiences and critics, the film was followed by multiple sequels and has become an iconic horror film.

Perhaps the longest-lasting and most memorable image of Frankenstein and his Monster was created in 1931, when Universal Pictures released what is now often praised as the definitive horror film: *Frankenstein*. The image of Boris Karloff in the flat-head monster mask with bolts in his neck and in undersized clothes has become part of popular culture; even little children are familiar with it and by today Boris Karloff's iconic impersonation of the Monster has become synonymous with the word "Frankenstein".

But before filming began on 24 August 1931 a long period of pre-production preceded. At the end of the 1920s Universal Pictures, which was founded in 1912 by Carl Laemmle Sr, a Jewish German immigrant, was still a small studio. Nevertheless Universal had achieved a reputation as the sole creator of the horror film genre. Low-budget productions like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Dracula* had established it as the leading studio of the genre and had made actors like Lon Chaney and Bela Lugosi famous. In 1930 French-born director Robert Florey was hired by Universal to develop a new horror film as a follow-up to the highly successful *Dracula*. The studio had acquired the rights to Peggy Webling's theatre adaptation *Frankenstein: An Adventure in the Macabre*, which had become a huge success in London in the late 1920s. Bela Lugosi, star of Universal's *Dracula*, was cast as the Monster, but later turned down the role because he did not want to play a character that did not utter a single word. (Another source, the Hollywood Filmograph magazine, stated in January 1932 that Lugosi did not want the role because he thought that "physically he was not strong enough to give the strength and power to the characterization"). First test screenings with Lugosi did not satisfy producer Carl Laemmle Jr and director James Whale was hired to replace Florey. Whale, an acclaimed director, chose 44-year old Boris Karloff as the Monster and together with make-up specialist Jack Pierce they created the most influential horror image of all times.

*Frankenstein* finally opened on 4 November 1931 at the Mayfair Theatre in New York's Time Square and caused an immediate sensation. It was voted one of the films of the year by the New York Times and earned Universal Pictures \$ 12 million - the production had cost only \$ 262 000. This made it an even bigger success than *Dracula* one year earlier.

Its controversial content, in particular scenes depicting violence and dialogue which was deemed to be blasphemy (e.g. Frankenstein's line "Now I know what it's like to be God!"), made sure that Frankenstein would run into trouble with censorship boards all over the world. Although on first release the US federal censor didn't demand any cuts, several US states only showed edited versions of *Frankenstein*. In Kansas City the State Board of Censors demanded

32 cuts and in Rhode Island newspapers refused to run advertisements for the movie. In Britain censors cut out the scene where Frankenstein discovers Fritz's hanged body, a scene of the Monster threatening Elizabeth and the murder of Dr. Waldmann. But when *Frankenstein* was re-released in the USA in 1937 Universal were forced to cut several scenes, including one where the Monster kills the little girl Maria - undoubtedly one of the film's key scenes. Movie fans had to wait until 1985 to see a restored version of the film including all previously trimmed scenes. All current versions released on DVD and VHS contain this uncut version, although some TV broadcasts may still be based on older, censored prints.



The creation of Boris Karloff's mask, which has become the ultimate image of the Frankenstein Monster, is mainly the work of Universal's chief makeup artist Jack Pierce. Whale, who was also an artist, had drawn sketches of Karloff, which were closely followed by Pierce. Sketches provided by other make-up artists depicted the Monster as an alien, a wild man or a robot, but Pierce and Whale wanted him to have a "pitiful humanity" <sup>(4)</sup>. In 1939 Pierce revealed how he designed the mask:

"I did not depend on imagination. In 1931, before I did a bit of designing, I spent three months of research in anatomy, surgery, medicine, criminal history, criminology, ancient and modern burial customs, and electrodynamics. My anatomical studies taught me that there are six ways a surgeon can cut the skull in order to take out or put in a brain. I figured that Frankenstein, who was a scientist but no practising surgeon, would take the simplest surgical way. He would cut the top of the skull off straight across like a potlid, hinge it, pop the brain in , and then clamp it on tight. That is the reason I decided to make the Monster's head square and flat like a shoe box and dig that big scar across his forehead with the metal clamps holding it together." <sup>(5)</sup>

Jack Pierce built an artificial square-shaped skull, like that of "a man whose brain had been taken from the head of another man" <sup>(6)</sup>. He fixed wire clamps over Karloff's lips, painted his face blue-green, which photographed a corpse-like gray, and glued two electrodes to Karloff's neck. The wax on his eyelids was Karloff's idea. "We found the eyes were too bright, seemed too understanding, where dumb bewilderment was so essential. So I waxed my eyes to make them heavy, half-seeing", Karloff explained <sup>(7)</sup>. He wore an undersized suit in order to make his limbs look longer and heavy boots weighing 13 pounds each in order to produce his lurching walk. The procedure of applying the make-up was a horrible experience for Karloff: "I spent three-and-a-half hours in the make-up chair getting ready for the day's work. The make-up itself was quite painful, particularly the putty on my eyes. There were days when I thought I would never be able to hold out until the end of the day."



Stylistically, James Whale's *Frankenstein* shows many influences of German expressionism, particularly of films like *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* and *Metropolis*. Frankenstein's tower and his laboratory often look as if they were taken directly out of a nightmare. Walls and stairs are huge and irregular; the hunchback Fritz and the Monster cast eerie shadows on the walls. A distinctly dark, morbid tone is also established right with the opening shots of a funeral and graveyard, where Frankenstein and Fritz steal bodies for their experiments. The highlight of the set design is surely the laboratory. It is stacked with strange machines, electric devices and bubbling test tubes. The Monster lying on a platform is lifted to the top of the lab where it is exposed to lightning. The platform then descends and the first sign of life of the creature is his moving right hand. Frankenstein's hysterical cry, "It's alive!" is obviously a reference to Brinsley Peake's 1823 play *Presumption*,: There Frankenstein animates his monster and shouts, "It lives!".



This film also established the concept that the Monster is brought to life by means of electricity and lightning. This idea may be taken from Mary Shelley's introduction to *Frankenstein*, where she mentions galvanic experiments, and from chapter two of the novel (1818 edition), which contains the following short discourse on electricity and galvanism:

"When I was about fifteen years old we had retired to our house near Belrive, when we witnessed a most violent and terrible thunderstorm. [...] Before this I was not unacquainted with the more obvious laws of electricity. On this occasion a man of great research in natural philosophy was with us, and, excited by this catastrophe, he entered on the explanation of a theory

which he had formed on the subject of electricity and galvanism, which was at once new and astonishing to me. All that he said threw greatly into the shade Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus, and Paracelsus, the lords of my imagination;" (Shelley 1818)

In this and most succeeding Frankenstein films the creature is exposed to lightning or some other electrical source in order to give it life. Mary Shelley, however, never goes into detail on how Victor Frankenstein manages to inject life into his creature.

