

Why Orwell's 1984 could be about now

By Jean Seaton

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Reading 1984, George Orwell's claustrophobic fable of totalitarianism, is still a shock. First comes the start of recognition: we recognise what he describes. Doublethink (holding two contradictory thoughts at the same time), Newspeak, the Thought Police, the Ministry of Love that deals in pain, despair and annihilates any dissident, the Ministry of Peace that wages war, the novel-writing machines that pump out pornography to buy off the masses: Orwell opened our eyes to how regimes worked. *Today it is social media that collects every gesture, purchase, comment we make online.* But now we can read 1984 differently: with anxious apprehension, using it to measure where we, our nations and the world have got to on the road map to a hell Orwell described. Prophetic? Possibly. But stirring, moving, creative, undeniable and helpful? Yes. A book published on 8 June 1949, written out of the battered landscape of total war, in a nation hungry, tired and grey, feels more relevant than ever before, because Orwell's 1984 also arms us.

The book, with its disorientating first sentence, "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen", defines the peculiar characteristics of modern tyranny. Winston Smith, the protagonist, works as a censor in the Ministry of Truth in a constant updating of history to suit present circumstances and shifting alliances. He and his fellow

workers are controlled as a mass collective by the all-seeing and all-knowing presence of Big Brother. In 1984 television screens watch you, and everyone spies on everyone else. Today it is social media that collects every gesture, purchase, comment we make online, and feeds an omniscient presence in our lives that can predict our every preference. Modelled on consumer choices, where the user is the commodity that is being marketed, the harvesting of those preferences for political campaigns is now distorting democracy.

Orwell understood that oppressive regimes always need enemies. In 1984 he showed how these can be created arbitrarily by whipping up popular feeling through propaganda. But in his description of the 'Two Minutes Hate' he also foresaw the way in which online mobs work. Obligated to watch the violent film, (as everyone is), Winston Smith observes "The horrible thing about the Two Minutes Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but that it was impossible to avoid joining in...A hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness, a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces in with a sledgehammer, seemed to flow through the whole group of people like an electric current". Now political, religious and commercial organisations all trade in whipping up feelings. Orwell uncannily identified the willing collusion in hate that such movements can elicit: and of course Winston observes it in himself. So, by implication might we, in ourselves.

Then there is Orwell's iconic dictator Big Brother: absurd and horrifying in equal measure. Orwell's writing is rooted in the struggles between the giant '-isms' that disfigured the 20th Century. He fought against Fascism

as a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War (believing pacifism was a luxury paid for by other people) but realised the hollow promise of Communism, when the anti-Stalinist group he was fighting for was hunted down by the pro-Stalin faction. He witnessed first-hand the self-deception of true believers. Today there is another set of ‘-isms’, such as nationalism and populism who operate through the mobilisation of that most dangerous of feelings, resentment. And everywhere you look in the contemporary world, ‘strong’ men are in positions of power. They share the need to crush opposition, a fanatical terror of dissent and self-promotion. Big Brothers are no longer a joke but strut the world. *Two plus two equals five.*

But the greatest horror in Orwell’s dystopia is the systematic stripping of meaning out of language. The regime aims to eradicate words and the ideas and feelings they embody. Its real enemy is reality. Tyrannies attempt to make understanding the real world impossible: seeking to replace it with phantoms and lies. Winston Smith’s first audacious act of dissent had been to hide from the all-seeing camera and write a diary – to compose his own account of himself and his inner world. He knows that the acts of writing and describing mark him out for the death penalty if he is discovered. When he is finally broken by torture he agrees that “two plus two equals five.” He had discovered that they could indeed “get inside you”, and “Something was killed in your breast; burnt out, cauterised out”.

The terror in 1984 is the annihilation of the self and the destruction of the capacity to recognise the real world. There is no fashionable or casual relativism in Orwell’s work: he understands how hard it is to get things

right. However, this story pins down the terror of a world where people have fewer and fewer words to use and whose thinking is distorted by ideologies.

All over the world where tyrannies rule 1984 is banned, but of course it is pirated. And sales have surged too in countries known as stable democracies. In India and the UK, in China and Poland people are turning to 1984. In the US, sales surged as people searched for a way of getting to grips with the reality of the Trump administration.

You cannot separate Orwell's work from the man. He is increasingly viewed as a kind of a saint, but how he would laugh at the statues of him that are sprouting up. His views towards feminists (though not women), vegetarians and other groups would hardly pass the test now. But he was a man who lived by his beliefs. He made himself genuinely poor; he fought for what he thought was right; he was unfailingly generous and kind to other writers, and yet he taught himself to try and see the world as it was not how he would like it to be. He was never compliant, and forensically unearthed for our gaze the worst of himself. His aloof integrity is unique.

It is not only that we live in a world transformed by Orwell's insights in that it shapes how we see oppression. But 1984 is also handbook for difficult times. Knowledge is a kind of strength and we are all being tested.

Why Frankenstein is the story that defines our fears

The story Frankenstein has done more than any other story to define the anxieties of modern life. But it's what it tells us about compassion that we need now more than ever.

By Rebecca Laurence

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"It's alive! It's alive!! It's alive!!! - Frankenstein (James Whale, 1931)

One night during the strangely cool and wet summer of 1816, a group of friends gathered in the Villa Diodati on the shores of Lake Geneva. "We will each write a ghost story," Lord Byron announced to the others, who included Byron's doctor John Polidori, Percy Shelley and the 18-year-old Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. *Frankenstein is simultaneously the first science-fiction novel, a Gothic horror, a tragic romance and a parable all sewn into one towering body.* "I busied myself to think of a story," Mary wrote. "One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror." Her tale became a novel, published two years later as 'Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus', the story of a young natural philosophy student, who, burning with crazed ambition, brings a body to life but rejects his horrifying 'creature' in fear and disgust.

Frankenstein is simultaneously the first science-fiction novel, a Gothic horror, a tragic romance and a parable all sewn into one towering body. Its two central tragedies – one of overreaching and the dangers of ‘playing God’, the other of parental abandonment and societal rejection – are as relevant today as ever.

Are there any characters more powerfully cemented in the popular imagination? The two archetypes Mary brought to life, the ‘creature’ and the overambitious or ‘mad scientist’, lurched and ranted their way off the page and on to stage and screen, electrifying theatre and film goes as two of the linchpins, not just of the horror genre, but of cinema itself.

Frankenstein spawned interpretations and parodies that reach from the very origins of the moving image in **Through Hollywood’s Universal Pictures** and Britain’s Hammer series, to **The Rocky Horror Picture Show** – and it foreshadowed others, such as **2001: A Space Odyssey**. There are Italian and Japanese Frankensteins and a Blaxploitation film, **Blackenstein**; Mel Brooks, Kenneth Branagh and Tim Burton all have their own takes. The characters or themes appear in or have inspired comic books, video games, spin-off novels, TV series and songs by artists as diverse as **Ice Cube**, **Metallica** and **T’Pau**: “It was a flight on the wings of a young girl’s dreams/ That flew too far away/ And we could make the monster live again...”

As a parable, the novel has been used as an argument both for and against slavery and revolution, vivisection and the Empire, and as a

dialogue between history and progress, religion and atheism. The prefix 'Franken-' thrives in the modern lexicon as a byword for any anxiety about science, scientists and the human body, and has been used to shape worries about the atomic bomb, GM crops, strange foods, stem cell research and both to characterise and assuage fears about AI. In the two centuries since she wrote it, Mary's tale, in the words of Bobby Pickett's comedy song, Monster Mash, has truly been "a graveyard smash" that "caught on in a flash".

'Mysterious fears of our nature'

"All them scientists – they're all alike. They say they're working for us but what they really want is to rule the world!" – Young Frankenstein (Mel Brooks, 1974).

Why was Mary's vision of 'science gone wrong' so ripe a vessel to carry our fears? She certainly captured the zeitgeist: the early 19th Century teetered on the brink of the modern age, and although the term 'science' existed, a 'scientist' didn't. Great change brings fear, as Fiona Sampson, author of a new biography of Mary Shelley tells BBC Culture: "With modernity – with the sense that humans are what there is, comes a sense of anxiety about what humans can do and particularly an anxiety about science and technology." Frankenstein fused these contemporary concerns about the possibilities of science with fiction for the very first time – with electrifying results. Far from an outrageous fantasy, the novel imagined what *could* happen if people – and in particular overreaching or unhinged scientists – went too far.

Several points of popular 19th Century intellectual discourse appear in the novel. We know from Mary's writings that in that Villa Diodati tableau of 1816, Shelley and Byron discussed the 'principle of life'. Contemporary debates raged on the nature of humanity and whether it was possible to raise the dead. In the book's 1831 preface, Mary Shelley noted 'galvanism' as an influence, referring to Luigi Galvani's experiments using electric currents to make frogs' legs twitch. Galvani's nephew Giovanni Aldini would go further in 1803, using a newly-dead murderer as his subject. Many of the doctors and thinkers at the heart of these debates – such as the chemist Sir Humphry Davy – were connected to Mary's father, the pre-eminent intellectual William Godwin, who himself had developed principles warning of the dangers and moral implications of 'overreaching'.

Despite these nuggets of contemporary thought, though, there's little in the way of tangible theory, method, or scientific paraphernalia in Frankenstein. The climactic moment of creation is described simply: "With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet." The 'science' of the book is rooted in its time and yet timeless. It is so vague, therefore, as to provide an immediate linguistic and visual reference point for moments of great change and fear.

Monster mash-up

But surely the reason we turn to Frankenstein when expressing an anxiety about science is down to the impression the ‘monster’ and ‘mad scientist’ have had on our collective brains. How did this happen? Just as the science is vague in the book, so is the description of the creature as he comes to life. The moment is distilled into a single, bloodcurdling image:

“It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.”

With his ‘yellow skin’, ‘watery eyes’, ‘shrivelled complexion’ and ‘straight black lips’ the creature is far from the beautiful ideal Frankenstein intended. This spare but resonant prose proved irresistible to theatre and later film-makers and their audiences, as Christopher Frayling notes in his book, *Frankenstein: The First Two Hundred Years*. The shocking novel became a scandalous play – and of course, a huge hit, first in Britain and then abroad. These early plays, Frayling argues, “set the tone for future dramatisations”. They condensed the story into basic archetypes, adding many of the most memorable elements audiences would recognise today, including the comical lab assistant, the line “It lives!” and a bad-brained monster who doesn’t speak.

It’s a double-edged sword that the monstrous success of Hollywood’s vision (James Whale’s 1931 film for Universal starring Boris Karloff as the

creature) in many ways secured the story's longevity but obscured Mary's version of it. "Frankenstein [the film] created the definitive movie image of the mad scientist, and in the process launched a thousand imitations," Frayling writes. "It fused a domesticated form of Expressionism, overacting, an irreverent adaptation of an acknowledged classic, European actors and visualisers – and the American carnival tradition – to create an American genre. It began to look as though Hollywood had actually invented Frankenstein."

Making a myth

And so, a movie legend was born. Although Hollywood may have cherry-picked from Mary Shelley to cement its version of the story, it's clear she also borrowed from historical myths to create her own. The subtitle of Frankenstein, 'The Modern Prometheus', namechecks the figure of ancient Greek and Latin mythology who variously steals fire from the gods and gives it to man (or makes a man out of clay) and represents the dangers of overreaching. But the other great myth of the novel is of God and Adam, and a quote from Paradise Lost appears in the epigraph to Frankenstein: "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me man?". And it is above all the creature's tragedy – and his humanity – that in his cinematic transformation into a mute but terrifying monster, has been forgotten.

Mary gave him a voice and a literary education in order to express his thoughts and desires (he is one of three narrators in the book). Like The Tempest's Caliban, to whom Shakespeare gives a poetic and poignant

speech, the creature's lament is haunting: "Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous."

As an allegory of our responsibility to children, outsiders, or those who don't conform to conventional ideals of beauty, there isn't a stronger one

If we think of the creature as a badly made and unattractive human, his tragedy deepens. His first, catastrophic rejection is by his creator (man, God), which Christopher Frayling calls "that post-partum moment", and is often identified as a parental abandonment. If you consider that Mary Shelley had lost her mother Mary Wollstonecraft at her own birth, had just buried her baby girl and was looking after her pregnant step-sister as she was writing the book – which took exactly nine months to complete – the relevance of birth (and death) makes even more sense. The baby/creature is alienated further as society recoils from him; he is made *good*, but it is the rejection that creates his murderous revenge. As an allegory of our responsibility to children, outsiders, or those who don't conform to conventional ideals of beauty, there isn't a stronger one.

The way that we sometimes identify with Frankenstein, as we've all taken risks, we've all had hubristic moments, and partly with the creature; they are both aspects of ourselves – all our selves" Fiona Sampson tells BBC

Culture, “they both speak to us about being human. And that’s incredibly powerful.”

Some modern interpretations, such as Nick Dear’s 2011 play (directed by Danny Boyle for the National Theatre), have highlighted the question of who is the monster and who is the victim, with the lead actors Jonny Lee Miller and Benedict Cumberbatch alternating roles each night. And in this shapeshifting context, it’s fitting that the creature is widely mistaken as ‘Frankenstein’, rather than his creator.

So could a new, cinematic version of Frankenstein be on the cards? One which brings together the creature’s humanity, the mirroring of man and monster and contemporary anxieties? Just like the Romantics, we edge towards a new modern age, but this time, of AI, which brings its own raft of fears and moral quandaries. A clutch of recent films and TV shows have channelled Frankenstein, exploring what it means to be human in the context of robotics and AI – Blade Runner, Ex Machina, AI, Her, Humans and Westworld among them. But there is one film director (rumoured to have been developing the story for a while) who might be able to recapture the creature’s lament as a parable for our time.

Collecting a Bafta for a different sci-fi monster fable, *The Shape of Water*, this year, Guillermo del Toro thanked Mary Shelley, because “she picked up the plight of Caliban and she gave weight to the burden of Prometheus, and she gave voice to the voiceless and presence to the invisible, and she showed me that sometimes to talk about monsters, we need to fabricate monsters of our own, and parables do that for us”.

When the then-Mary Godwin thought up her chilling parable that summer of 1816, she couldn't have imagined how far it would go to shape culture and society, science and fear, well into the 21st Century. "And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper," she wrote in the preface to the 1831 edition. The creator and creature, parent and child, the writer and her story – they went forth, and did they prosper? Two hundred years since its publication, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is no longer just a tale of "thrilling horror" but its own myth, sent out into the world.