The Medium
Is the Monster
Introduction

The question that animates this book might at first sound like the start of a joke: what do modern technology, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and Canada have to do with one another? The short answer is “Marshall McLuhan,” and much of what follows will be devoted to explaining this punchline. I want to venture a twofold argument: first, that Shelley’s *Frankenstein* effectively “reinvented” the meaning of the word “technology” for modern English; and, second, that Marshall McLuhan’s media theory and its receptions, especially in Canadian popular culture, together constitute a tradition in adaptations of *Frankenstein* that has globalized this Frankensteinian sense of the word. So my two main tasks here are to provide a concrete account of the historical origins and transformation of the definitively modern word “technology” and, by closely reading *Frankenstein* and its Canadian adaptations, many of which also adapt McLuhan, to model new directions for adaptation studies.

I aim to show how *Frankenstein*, technology, McLuhan, and Canadian popular culture relate to one another, in historical and cultural contexts, and to explore the implications of this interrelation. I start with an historical account of the modern meaning of “technology,” a word that organizes not only whole scholarly fields but also the political economies of whole nation-states—yet a word whose meaning is often ambiguous in scholarly literature and ambivalent in popular culture. Technology, a term that initially used to denote the study of any art or technique, has come, in modernity, to describe machines, industrial systems, and media. Contrary to extant definitions (such as that in the *OED*), which locate the word’s redefinition in the late nineteenth century, this book shows that its modern “reinvention” emerged in the early nineteenth century—specifically, in the wake of *Frankenstein*’s publication. *The Medium Is the Monster* analyzes *Frankenstein* as a founding intertext for technology in its own time and in adaptations that popularized the story by simplifying it as a
cautionary tale of technology run amok (Baldick 1987, 7). My argument then turns from *Frankenstein* in its period to its postcolonial adaptations in Canadian popular culture, anchored in McLuhan’s work. If *Frankenstein* helps us to understand the modern transformation of the discourse of technology, then Canadian adaptations of *Frankenstein* help us to understand the globalized transfer of this discourse, a transfer effected largely by McLuhan’s media theory, together with its myriad adaptations.

The impetus for this investigation derives from two areas of interest: first, a preoccupation with the rich variety of *Frankenstein’s* receptions and adaptations, which abound in Canada and repay postcolonial study in this national context; and second, an interest in—and a dissatisfaction with—the ways the word *technology* is used in popular culture and scholarly literature. In popular culture and everyday speech, references to technology regularly strike a sometimes subtle, sometimes strident chord of ambivalence. In scholarly literature on technology, and in popular literature too, the word enjoys great elasticity of meaning, as an abstraction, sometimes a convenient one—sometimes even an unexamined one. It is alternately presumed to be self-evident, defined commonsensically, conceptualized idiosyncratically or speciously, or theorized critically. The effects of the word’s ambivalence and multiple meanings have profound and sometimes pernicious effects and implications. Prominent in humanities and social science scholarship, prevalent in everyday language, and privileged in political policy, the word *technology* adapts readily to the service of imaginative culture, incisive critique, or ideological mystification. Discussing one of technology’s most intimately related counterpart keywords, *media*, John Guillory states that his aim is “to describe the philosophical preconditions of media discourse” (2010, 321). If we substitute “technology” for “media” (a rhetorical switch that recurs throughout McLuhan’s work, incidentally), Guillory’s statement could aptly summarize the aim of the first chapters here.

A representative instance of the word’s use in popular culture illustrates the ambivalence and ambiguities of technology and suggests how to connect the conceptual dots among technology, *Frankenstein*, and Canada. The 2 February 2009 episode of Viacom’s cable news-comedy program *The Daily Show* (Stewart et al. 2009) featured a segment called “Future Shock”: a report on military robotics. *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart introduces the segment like this: “Technology: technology’s allowed us to do
everything from land on the moon, to fake landing on the moon. Now technology may be about to solve one of our most vexing problems of all.” Over footage of assembly lines and vacuum cleaners, the segment’s correspondent, Samantha Bee, says: “Robots. They’ve already revolutionized the way we clean our homes and spot-weld. Now they’re about to help us cross the last frontier of human unpleasantness: killing.” Bee’s segment reports on a government military contract awarded to iRobot, the corporation that makes the “Roomba” robot vacuum. The segment stages a satirical drama of technological imperative versus technological risk, juxtaposing interview footage with the iRobot CEO against an interview with Noel Sharkey, a robotics professor at Sheffield, whom Bee names among those who “actually see a downside to having robots do our killing.” The segment’s production parodies the conventions of the cable-news “technology report,” with quick cuts, footage of high-tech gadgetry, and strobe-like interstitials flashing the segment’s “Future Shock” title. At one point in the interview, the iRobot CEO describes a cyberpunk future straight out of William Gibson’s 1984 novel Neuromancer: “Wouldn’t it be cool to be able to have, look, a memory chip that you could put in the back of your neck. You could augment yourself with some robot technology—all of a sudden you understood calculus.” This speech shifts to voice-over as the video cuts to a special-effects sequence that farcically visualizes it: a wide shot of Bee cuts to a close-up of a prop-dummy head (a wig-draped chicken carcass) being drilled and stuffed with wires. A wide shot turns the figure around as Bee, now sporting horn-rimmed glasses and an arm-load of textbooks, exclaims, “I totally get it!” Correspondent Jason Jones, costumed as a “jock,” walks past, slapping the books out of her hand and shouting “Nerd!” As Jones exits screen left, she frowns and points a finger at him. Bee’s finger—visually referencing a joke about The Terminator from earlier in the segment—then morphs, via computer graphic effects, into a machine gun and opens fire.

The Daily Show sketch uses a mix of clichés, news genre conventions, and satirical commentary and imagery to dramatize a symptomatic convergence of subjects: the modern discourse of “technology”; the iconic figure of Frankenstein; and the contribution of Canadian labour to globalized popular culture. Stewart’s introductory invocation of the term technology suggests its sensational “headline” value and presumes the transparency of its meaning, in his illustrative references to space exploration and...
digital simulation. As the episode unfolds, it then dramatizes, in all its ambivalence, the Utopian techno-fetishism of cyborg empowerment and the dystopian techno-phobia of murderous robots run amok. The iRobot CEO represents the former position, in statements premised in technological instrumentalism: the “most widely accepted view of technology,” as Andrew Feenberg notes, “based on the commonsense idea that technologies are ‘tools’ standing ready to serve the purposes of their users” (2002, 5). Professor Sharkey represents the latter position, with statements suggesting the wary reservations of technological determinism: the view that technology acts independently of human agency to determine social conditions. This contrast in views on technology is dramatized according to Frankenstein’s “skeleton story” of technology in revolt (Baldick 1987, 7). This dramatization entails alluding to prior adaptations of Frankenstein, which is a widely recognized source for the Terminator films parodied here (Picart 2003, 9), for the discourse of robotics (Hitchcock 2007, 136), and even for science fiction as such (Aldiss 1986, 26). Lastly, the episode demonstrates the crucial—but characteristically inconspicuous—contribution of Canadian labour to globalized popular culture: the episode features Canadian actors Bee and Jones, and its “Future Shock” title reproduces the title of Alvin Toffler’s 1970 book, a book that owed its success largely to the prior success of McLuhan. One of the effects of the episode’s coordination of these subjects is to simultaneously reproduce and satirize the view of technological substantivism, which goes further than determinism to suggest that technology has become autonomous, or even that—in the triumphal words of Henry Frankenstein in the iconic James Whale film (1931)—“It’s alive!”

That 2009 Daily Show episode illustrates the connections among technology discourse, Frankenstein, and Canadian popular culture that this book maps out. How such an episode makes these connections, in its adaptation of multiple intertextual sources and references, is a question of theory and method that chapters 1 and 2 take up in depth. Many such popular cultural images of technology could be offered, and later chapters will look at some key examples in detail. Likewise, in the scholarly and popular bodies of literature on technology, we see similar presumptions of the word’s meaning and similar ambiguity and ambivalence in its usage, as well as similar connotations of its uncanny autonomy. I want to suggest that it has been one of the distinctive contributions of Canadian
adaptations of *Frankenstein* to disseminate and popularize these presumptions, connotations, and ambiguities—which, taken together, I call the *modern discourse of globalized technology*.

To put the matter plainly, I hold that we cannot talk about technology without conjuring *Frankenstein*, and that Canadian adaptations of *Frankenstein* have popularized, even globalized, this modern, fundamentally Frankensteinian discourse of technology. Adaptations of *Frankenstein* have long proliferated, and continue to proliferate, across media and around the world. What this study hopes to contribute to the literature on *Frankenstein* adaptation is a historicized analysis of *Frankenstein*’s founding traces in the modern discourse of technology and attention to the interstitial and liminal fields of cultural production—between extensive and ephemeral modes, between scholarly and popular registers—at which much contemporary *Frankenstein* adaptation takes place. As we’ll see, in the contexts of technology discourse and Canada’s postcolonial popular culture, Shelley’s hideous progeny has engendered a diffuse and decidedly strange brood of mutations, replicants, and other intertextual adaptations of its story, both extensive and ephemeral. As globally significant articulations of technology discourse, Canadian *Frankenstein*s reveal a strange interface of postcolonial literary adaptation and techno-Romantic popular culture. Canadian adaptations of *Frankenstein* organize popular ideas of technology and structure images of the global technological crises in which Canada is embroiled—from copyright to climate change.

To argue and illustrate this claim, *The Medium Is the Monster* unfolds as follows. Before examining *Frankenstein* or its adaptations in detail, the first chapter elaborates on two key discursive and social contexts for my argument—technology discourse and Canadian culture—and, in the process, contextualizes how subsequent chapters triangulate these terms with *Frankenstein* and its numerous popular cultural progeny.

Chapter 2 further develops this study’s premises and method by elaborating on my approach to the theory and practice of adaptation studies—the analysis of how different media, genres, and other cultural forms are used to tell and retell a story like *Frankenstein*. My approach to adaptation studies challenges some key premises of the field in order to build its capacity to analyze the many forms adaptation can take, from the extensive (like feature film versions of Shelley’s novel) to the allusive or ephemeral (like pop songs that sample audio from *Frankenstein* films, or even just develop
instrumentation traditions that evoke *Frankenstein*). A critical term I adopt to theorize such a range of adaptations is the “Frankenpheme”: an image or idea derived from *Frankenstein*, represented in another text or form (Morton 2002, 47). This chapter surveys a spectrum of sound and image adaptations—focusing on Afro-Futurist music and Canadian rap—for a few reasons: to model an approach to adaptation studies that is sufficiently expansive and materialist to account for the vast cultural diffusion of a text like *Frankenstein*, to detail textual and contextual criteria for reading texts as “Frankensteinian,” and thus to suggest how Canadian *Frankenstein* adaptations both circulate globally and inform the discourse of technology.

Chapter 3 focuses on Mary Shelley’s novel, documenting the modernization of the meaning of *technology* as a discursive effect of the novel and its early stage adaptations. I retrace the word’s “reinvention” (from describing the study of any art or technique to describing industrial machines and systems) and argue that Shelley’s characterization of the monster through five tropes—shock, revolution, utility, inhumanity, and contagion—in turn characterizes the “reinvented” meaning of technology with affective anxiety and a negative moral valence and contributes to its fetishization (that is, the treatment of technology as if it were a living thing). Transatlantic *Frankenstein* adaptations and technology references in the period then represent technology in terms of industrial monstrosity, and the period’s theatrical *Frankenstein* productions dramatize technology’s uncanny liveness in their spectacular use of special effects. The chapter tracks the discursive origins of a word now valorized as a policy imperative and naturalized as virtually biological.

In chapter 4, I turn from Shelley’s time to the postwar period, McLuhan, and his media theory. This chapter details the intertextual and historical contexts of McLuhan’s work and closely reads how McLuhan represents technology as a Frankenpheme in his best-known texts. The reading illuminates the underappreciated Romanticism in McLuhan’s media theory, and its focus on some of his most popular statements highlights the global influence of his work in shaping and popularizing the modern discourse of globalized technology, a discourse that I summarize as the *McLuhanesque Frankenpheme of technology*. A crucial globalizing dimension of McLuhan’s popularization of a Frankensteinian sense of technology is his press presence and counterculture influence in the 1960s. This chapter documents the receptions of McLuhan by the journalistic establishment and the
performative, mediatized scenes of the counterculture, which mobilized McLuhan’s ideas for social change, but, in the process, also furnished the corporate news media with sensational images of “tuned in” radicalism that amplified McLuhan’s idea of technology as a Frankensteinian menace and caricatured McLuhan as a kind of mad scientist of media.

In chapter 5, the work of US expatriate novelist William Gibson links the counterculture of the 1960s to the technoculture of the 1980s. Gibson has openly acknowledged McLuhan’s counterculturally informed influence on his 1984 novel *Neuromancer* (see Foster 1999 and Rapatzikou 2004). A close reading of *Neuromancer*’s borrowings from both McLuhan and *Frankenstein* invites a comparison of Gibson’s work to David Cronenberg’s contemporaneous “cult” film *Videodrome* (1983). In these texts—both globally renowned touchstones for digital culture—I identify a shared pattern of intertextual adaptation, narrative strategy, and new media theorization. Gibson and Cronenberg combine and juxtapose references to Shelley’s novel and McLuhan’s theory—not only in *Neuromancer* and *Videodrome* but also throughout their oeuvres—and so consolidate and reproduce McLuhan’s Frankenpheme of technology.

Chapter 6 tracks this distinctive pattern of pairing *Frankenstein* and McLuhan references through Canadian science fiction, with readings of illustrative works by writers like Larissa Lai (2009), Nalo Hopkinson (1998), Margaret Atwood (2003), and Peter Watts (2006). How these writers’ texts adapt both *Frankenstein* and McLuhan echoes the adaptation pattern established by Gibson and Cronenberg and shows the propagation of McLuhan’s Frankenpheme of technology across Canadian science fiction.

In chapter 7, I shift from print adaptations of the McLuhanesque Frankenpheme of technology to its amplifications in electronic dance music (EDM) culture, where the work of several key producers and DJs both evokes the technological sublime of ghosts in the machine and enacts what music critic Simon Reynolds calls “techno-Romanticism” (1999): the subcultural synchronization of hedonism and high technology. Two notable acts in this respect are the house music producer Deadmau5 (a.k.a. Joel Zimmerman) and the Paladin Project (a.k.a. Len Jaroli), a spectacular DJ persona who played “dark and hard” dance music at Canadian raves and clubs. These performers reveal the subcultural circulation of McLuhanesque *Frankenstein* adaptations, as does Matthew MacFadzean’s 2001 fringe play *richardthesecond*, whose dance culture milieu points to the
further amplification of McLuhan’s Frankenpheme of technology in Canadian pop culture.

Chapter 8 analyzes how the Frankensteinian discourse of technology has informed and structured popular cultural representations of the Alberta tar sands industry. It is the world’s biggest resource extraction project, and, as such, it presents a vast industrial spectacle of “the technological sublime”: the experience of “awe and wonder, often tinged with an element of terror, which people have had when confronted with particular natural sites, architectural forms, and technological achievements” (Nye 1994, xvi). Accordingly, a variety of cultural representations of Big Oil and the tar sands do not just evoke the industry’s technological spectacle, but do so in ways that amplify its Frankensteinian aspects too.

Finally, the conclusion moves beyond Canadian texts and contexts to survey an international selection of scholarly receptions of McLuhan as an important means of globally distributing McLuhan’s Frankenpheme of technology. Langdon Winner’s *Autonomous Technology* (1977) and Avital Ronell’s *Telephone Book* (1991) both explicitly link McLuhan and *Frankenstein*. I then consider the reception of McLuhan in Europe—acknowledging the difficulties of translation—with reference to Jean Baudrillard (1983) and Friedrich Kittler ([1986] 1999). The study then closes by reflecting on the implications of Canadian adaptations of *Frankenstein* for reconceiving Canada’s “technological nationalism” (Charland 1986) as technocratic transnationalism in order to better describe the increasingly corporate and globally focused priorities of Canada’s governance and cultural production. This proposed notion of technocratic transnationalism helps to highlight some notable commonalities among Canadian *Frankenstein* adaptations: besides their consistent pairing of Shelley and McLuhan, they also share preoccupations with media, corporate business, and globalization. Finally, I point to some further directions for studying *Frankenstein* adaptations, and for reconceiving adaptation studies more expansively, which richly rewards paying close attention to more varied forms of adaptation in cultural production.