2. Refocusing Adaptation Studies

Modern Myth and “Frankenpheme”: Adapting Frankenstein

Shelley’s novel has long furnished a grotesque, sensational figure for the routine representations of technology in general, or a given technology in particular, as some kind of risk or danger. As Jay Clayton notes, *Frankenstein* is an “obligatory reference in any attempt to challenge the technological pride of the modern era” (2003, 128). This kind of allusive signification constitutes one of the text’s major functions as a “Frankenpheme” (Morton 2002, 47), and, thus, as a reason for thinking about how to refocus adaptation studies. Tenner’s aforementioned use of *Frankenstein* exemplifies this kind of “obligatory reference.” Moreover, in describing the novel as “prophetic,” and in using it to frame his own Frankensteinian stories about technology’s “revenge effects,” Tenner’s series of stories, with their freight of commentary, recalls the narrative structure of *Frankenstein* as a sequence of stories recounted and commented on by Walton, the ship captain. Tenner’s book thus adopts the image of the monster, as an allegorical figure of technological risk, and (intentionally or otherwise) some of the narrative elements from Shelley’s novel. Does this mean we might position Tenner’s book itself as an adaptation of *Frankenstein*? In this section, I want to explore this kind of question with reference to the literature on adaptations of *Frankenstein*, and with reference to the theory of adaptation studies.
Almost as soon as it was published in 1818, *Frankenstein* began fueling an extraordinarily rich and varied tradition of adaptations, across a spectrum of media, genres, and intertextual, intercultural networks; this tradition now almost constitutes a cultural industry unto itself. *Frankenstein* resonates throughout Western culture as a unique “modern myth”—a definitively modern text that has paradoxically assumed the power of myth (Baldick 1987). Ironically, it is perhaps not Shelley’s novel itself so much as its multimedia adaptations that have secured this peculiar privilege for the story. As William St. Clair recounts, the book was out of print through much of the nineteenth century and was best known through its stage—and, more recently, its screen—adaptations (2004, 367). The text itself has been doubly marginalized: not only eclipsed by its adaptations and the vicissitudes of copyright, but exiled from the English literary canon and relegated to “pulp” status until the 1970s and 1980s, when feminist, Marxist, and other theoretical and political trends in English literary studies revisited it and precipitated a great deal of research and criticism that has promoted it to canonical status (Hitchcock 2007, 281). *Frankenstein* is now one of the most widely taught English novels in secondary and post-secondary English curriculum. (I had to read a comic-book adaptation in Grade 8, and the novel’s 1831 edition in an undergraduate seminar.)

Major contributions to the study of *Frankenstein* adaptations—literary, theatrical, and otherwise—emerged as part of the novel’s overall academic rehabilitation in the latter quarter of the twentieth century and have striven, ambitiously, to survey the scope and diversity of *Frankenstein*’s receptions, reworkings, and recontextualizations. Among the first studies of *Frankenstein* adaptation was Levine and Knoepflmacher’s anthology *The Endurance of Frankenstein* (1979), which argued the novel’s value on the basis of its impact on and reworkings in popular culture. In 1973, science fiction writer Brian Aldiss argued that *Frankenstein* is the foundational ur-text of modern science fiction: it resituated Gothic fiction in a modern setting, it transformed fantasy into extrapolation, and it told an iconic, allegorical story of hubris clobbered by nemesis ([1973] 1986, 26). Aldiss’s cogent argument achieved as close to a consensus on the origins of science fiction as is likely to be found among scholars of the form (see Freedman 2002). Developing Aldiss’s interpretation, George Slusser theorized science fiction as a narrative literature of “the Frankenstein barrier”: the foreclosure of future possibilities by present contingencies, played out in
plots “where the present, lurking all along, rises up to avenge the sins of our uncreated future” (1992, 71).

Other studies have turned from page to stage, documenting the prolific performance traditions of \textit{Frankenstein} adaptation. Steven Forry’s \textit{Hideous Progenies} (1990) historicizes and reprints several nineteenth-century dramatic adaptations; Caroline Picart’s \textit{The Cinematic Rebirths of Frankenstein} (2002) details the twentieth century’s Universal and Hammer franchises and other film versions. The proliferation of new media forms since the latter twentieth century has prompted some studies to conduct broader surveys that sample the diversified mediascape, as in Susan Tyler Hitchcock’s \textit{Frankenstein: A Cultural History} (2007) and Timothy Morton’s \textit{Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein: A Sourcebook} (2002).

The present study builds in particular on Morton’s idea of “Frankenphemes” and Christopher Baldick’s theory of \textit{Frankenstein’s} modern myth, as well as Pedro Javier Pardo García’s (2005) argument for expanding the scope and vocabulary of \textit{Frankenstein} adaptation studies—on which more below. The value of Morton’s idea comes into clearer focus if we consider Baldick’s first. Baldick’s \textit{In Frankenstein’s Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing} theorizes \textit{Frankenstein} as a modern myth and thus as a paradox: a text that is at once modern, and a critique of modernity, and a “household name” imbued with mythic symbolism (1987, 1). Baldick argues that \textit{Frankenstein} has achieved this modern mythic status via reductive reproductions of its basic “skeleton story,” comprised of two pivotal plot points: first, the good doctor makes a living creature out of bits of corpses; and second, this creature turns on him and runs amok (3). Baldick then shows how this skeleton story gets fleshed out through two main lines of popular interpretation: a psychological interpretation in which the creature represents the “return of the repressed”; and a “technological reduction” of the story as “an uncanny prophecy of dangerous scientific inventions” (7). Moreover, while these reductive popularizations constitute practices of creative adaptation, they also represent strategies of interpretive control and closure, as illustrated by the fixing of the creature’s image in Boris Karloff’s iconic film portrayal (5). The technological interpretation of \textit{Frankenstein} is most salient to my purpose here, because \textit{Frankenstein} helps us interpret the modern meaning of technology. It also seems the far more predominant of the two interpretations, among the text’s receptions and adaptations.
Baldick’s argument is resolutely and productively materialist; he argues that the *Frankenstein* myth manifests in the material accumulation of all the “adaptations, allusions, accretions, analogues, parodies, and plain mis-readings which follow upon Mary Shelley’s novel” (1987, 4). The inclusion of allusions is significant here. Baldick’s analysis of *Frankenstein’s* legible impact on nineteenth-century writing and rhetoric is preoccupied with what Linda Hutcheon calls “palimpsestic intertextuality”: the layering and modulation of textual referents and their sometimes recognized, sometimes latent links with one another that produce, in audiences, “intertextual expectations about medium and genre, as well as about specific work” (2006, 22). But while Hutcheon reserves these “multilaminated” receptions for extensive, acknowledged adaptations (21), Baldick excavates some of this specific work’s more ephemeral references and esoteric reworkings. He attends, for instance, to the first documented use of *Frankenstein* as an “object of political allusion,” which occurred in British parliamentary debates over abolition (60). As Baldick argues, the “kind of connection” found in tracking such a widely popular text as Mary Shelley’s is not always “one between a given writer and a literary ‘source’” but more often a Foucauldian genealogy of “subterranean and invisible diffusion in the cultures which adopt them” (9).

The “subterranean” circulation of *Frankenstein’s* central characters and “skeleton story” in adaptations as extensive as film series and as ephemeral as allusions thus finds an apt encapsulation in Morton’s concept of the “Frankenpheme”:

“Frankenphemes” is the name I have chosen to give to those elements of culture that are derived from *Frankenstein*, but that are less than a work of art in completion or scale. Some kernel of an idea derived from Shelley’s novel has been repeated in another medium. . . . They demonstrate the extent to which the novel has permeated the ways in which we see the world. (2002, 47–48)

Morton’s examples of “Frankenphemes” include TV commercials, movie scenes, and allusive portmanteaus like “Frankenfoods,” which emerged to frame debates over genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in agribusiness (2002, 48). The coinage, then, encapsulates the intertextual and appropriative practices of condensation and encoding that further the popular dispersal of *Frankenstein’s* modern myth in allusions, quotations,
piecemeal or fragmentary adaptations, and other miscellaneous ephemera that abound in popular culture. The present study undertakes to explore several such popular cultural Frankenphemes, together with the discursive and cultural practices that produce and reproduce them in specific contexts.

Frankenphemes may not qualify as extensive, acknowledged adaptations, but they can be intensive, sometimes profoundly so. Explicating them as such means both developing and departing from Baldick’s and Morton’s interpretive practices. What distinguishes the present study from Baldick’s and Morton’s might be described as a matter of putting the proverbial horse before the cart, in light of textual evidence from *Frankenstein* in its period. My reading extends Baldick’s argument into a chiasmus: if *Frankenstein* is so widely interpreted as “the first and most enduring symbol of modern technology” (Tropp, quoted in Baldick 1987, 7), it is because the novel conditioned the interpretation and usage of technology that began to emerge in Shelley’s own time. In addition, this study follows Baldick’s work in paying attention to the nuances and implications of allusive and other nonextensive adaptations, but breaks with it in treating them, through the lens of adaptation studies, as adaptations.

Positioning this work in adaptation studies (to which the next section turns) prompts a preliminary reflection on the interdisciplinary formation of adaptation studies and this formation’s peculiar relationship to studying *Frankenstein*.

Morton acknowledges the basis of his coinage in the vocabulary of linguistics, the technical vocabulary of phonemes, graphemes, and so on. He adds the suffix -eme, which denotes a specific structural unit, to the first part of a name that signifies at once the text’s title, the name of its protagonist, and the creature—according to the long-standing identification of the nameless creature with the name of its creator. The coinage pointedly echoes Richard Dawkins’s 1976 coinage of the *meme*, “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation”—an idea that catches on, basically ([1976] 1989, 192). Dawkins’s meme idea has caught on itself, as the common name for the ideas and texts that are said to “go viral” in digital culture. Introducing her theory of adaptation, Hutcheon discusses the aptness of Dawkins’s suggestion of “a cultural parallel to Darwin’s biological theory” (2006, 31) for the study of intertextual reproduction with difference, and emphasizes culture’s crucial distinction from biology: that mutation is the exception (albeit a critical one) in the process of genetic
replication; however, in cultural transmission, it is much more the rule (32). As Morton’s example of “Frankenfood” shows, the notion of Frankenphemes brings this interdisciplinary, linguistic borrowing full circle: if the life sciences have supplied elements of the vocabulary of evolution to the discourse of cultural adaptation (“I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like ‘gene’” [Dawkins 1976, 192]), then the discourse of Frankenstein adaptations has returned attention to life sciences that are now exploited to manipulate biological evolution itself. Thus Emily Ryall observes of “the language of genetic technology” that, “as Frankenstein himself is often depicted in popular conceptions of the fictional story as an eccentric and renegade scientist, the scientists who carry out genetic experimentation today are represented similarly” (2008, 369). Ryall’s observation is also noteworthy here for its tightly paired references to the text’s “popular conceptions”—its “technological reduction”—and the news media’s “similar representations” of scientists—that is, as Frankenphemes.

These formally and thematically connected details of terminology and discourse in reconfiguring and redistributing Frankenstein—and in analyzing these reconfigurations and redistributions—thus make the case of Frankenstein adaptations both a challenge and an opportunity for the theory and methodology of adaptation studies more generally. Adaptations that are reduced to “skeleton stories,” condensed in allusions, and encoded as memes occupy a shifting analytic shore, between the field of adaptation as it has been conventionally theorized and the ocean of open-ended intertextuality and heteroglossia.

**Attuning Adaptation Studies to Nonnarrative and Nonextensive Cultural Forms**

Adaptation studies is a field where literary, media, and cultural studies intersect, and it first emerged to investigate the negotiations and appropriations of literature by film. But like the mediascape itself, adaptation studies have diversified: to address more media and genres; to document specific oeuvres and traditions; to move from one-way to multilateral models of adaptation (between canonical and popular forms, old media and new); to account for social and political contexts; and to take stock of its own theory and practice.

Some of the most productive recent work in adaptation studies has focused on specific authors, like Shakespeare. *Adaptations of Shakespeare,*
for instance, is a critical anthology of dramatic adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays, and yet despite its strict focus on theatrical productions, editors Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier offer one of the most expansive working theories of adaptation, as “almost any act of alteration performed upon specific cultural works” (2000, 4). Taking stock of the overall character of adaptation practice in the context of Frankenstein’s proliferating multimedia progeny, Pedro Javier Pardo García suggests the term “cultural intertextuality” to better capture the breadth of citational, generic, discursive, and dialogic practices of interpretation, selection, and recombination that go into adaptation, especially postmodern adaptations like Kenneth Branagh’s 1994 movie: “it is not just that the film perfectly exemplifies the concept,” García writes, “but also that its representation of the creature turns it into a walking metaphor of cultural intertextuality” (2005, 240). The figurative suitability of the text and its main character for commenting on textual production and adaptation—their “perfect correspondence of matter and form” (240)—is something of a commonplace in Frankenstein criticism, as García acknowledges. It is a commonplace well worth rehearsing here, in order to inform my similarly expansive refocusing of adaptation studies methodology, a refocusing undertaken in response to a major theoretical statement on the field, which sets rather more restrictive parameters for adaptation that invite some critical discussion.

In A Theory of Adaptation, Linda Hutcheon surveys the field and argues for “a more restricted . . . definition of adaptation” (2006, 9) than that of Fischlin and Fortier, which she cites as indicative of the field’s overall tendency. Concerned that such a theory is too vast for critical practice, Hutcheon defines adaptation as both a product—an acknowledged, extensive, and specific transcoding of a given text, usually a narrative text—and as a process, a navigation—whether knowing or unknowing—of different modes of textual and intertextual engagement with modes categorized as telling (e.g., print), showing (e.g., film), or interactivity (e.g., video games). Of the adaptor, this navigational process requires creative interpretation; for the audience, it entails “palimpsestic intertextual” engagement (22).

By problematizing the multidirectionality of source and derivation, and by covering a wide range of forms and media, Hutcheon’s theory breaks with the field’s tradition. Her idea of interactivity crystallizes around video games and theme parks, for instance. But the theory also reinforces tradition, mainly in its orientation to story as the field’s
“common denominator” (2006, 10) and its corresponding delimitation of adaptation’s definition as acknowledged, specific, and extensive.

Confining adaptation to story-based forms and texts seems unnecessarily restrictive in and of itself, as it forecloses considerations of adaptation in nonnarrative forms: lyrical forms like poetry, critical forms like scholarship, forms that occupy a range of genres and media. In a manner that I hope is both analogous and adequate to that whereby technology discourse encompasses sound and image as well as textuality, I want to theorize adaptation and its study more expansively than restrictively. Adaptation study affords interpretive tools for critiquing varied, divergent, and intersecting orders of discourse and media forms, as the above discussion of Tenner’s (1996) nonfiction prose has suggested. The point is material to our purposes here in so approaching McLuhan’s work, among that of other Canadian artists and thinkers. McLuhan actually makes a great initial case study for adaptation practices in critical (or otherwise not “creative”) bodies of work. McLuhan himself and McLuhan scholars alike have recognized the strong artistic strain in his writing. As Richard Cavell says, “If McLuhan’s critical reputation declined severely during the 1970s . . . what I can only call his artistic reputation has continued to grow” (2002, xvi). McLuhan’s self-consciously unorthodox writing style, with its “probes” and its “mosaic” structures, may account for his dramatically divergent receptions, but it also lends itself to the protocols of close reading and theoretical contextualization that literary studies normally reserve for more straightforwardly “creative” texts. Conversely, studies of adaptation in cultural production also help to illuminate the critical practice in creative texts, including nonnarrative, lyrical, condensed, or otherwise short forms, and different media, like popular music. The emphasis on extensiveness that reinforces this theory’s prioritization of story explicitly excludes a wealth of other cultural modes and forms—like theory or music—that warrant consideration as adaptations. For instance, Hutcheon specifically excludes “musical sampling” from her theory, on the basis that it “would not qualify as extended engagement” (2006, 9). Since the book undertakes a theoretical synthesis of the field of adaptation in cultural production, such parameters seem somewhat arbitrary: why can’t a broadly scoped theory of adaptation address adaptations that are less extensive, more like memes?

As the analysis unfolds, interactivity—a mode of engagement that ostensibly signals a more inclusive approach to the field—ironically
becomes a more exclusive category, by coming to refer predominantly to video games. Even the broader digital milieu goes underexamined for its interactive and adaptive practices. Admittedly, the “2.0” interactivity of social web media was only emerging at the book’s time of publication, but other forms of interaction and adaptation available then for analysis do not receive it. The web also gives good cause to be included in a theory of adaptation for what had become, even by the turn of the century, one of its major cultural forms: the “Internet meme.” This book treats the “Frankenepheme of technology” as a kind of cultural meme, and it considers a few selected Internet memes in its later chapters, but a theorization of the Internet meme as such is beyond its scope (although theorizing the meme is something I’ve taken up elsewhere; see McCutcheon 2016, 178).

Hutcheon’s stipulations for extensiveness and interactivity also reproduce adaptation studies’ implicit privileging of the visual, over and against the audible. Hutcheon does discuss several music examples throughout the book and details one specific case of musical scoring, but most of these examples are taken from Hutcheon’s formidable repertoire of opera expertise. In addition to opera and musical theatre examples, song covers get some consideration (2006, 90–93), but songs and other musical productions that adapt other forms remain unaddressed and omitted—even those that might qualify as extensive, acknowledged, and narrative-based: albums like The Alan Parsons Project’s Poe-inspired Tales of Mystery and Imagination (1976) and Janelle Monáe’s Afro-Futurist concept albums (2010, 2013), or inverse cases, like Joshua Dysart and Cliff Chiang’s Neil Young’s Greendale (2010), a graphic novel based on the eponymous 2003 album by Neil Young and Crazy Horse.

Like Internet memes, popular music adaptations open up all kinds of implications for Hutcheon’s emphases on extensiveness and interactivity. If extensiveness is about creative interpretation of a whole narrative, is not the Eurythmics’ single “Sexcrime (1984)” (1984) a condensed, lyrical retelling of Orwell’s whole novel? If extensiveness is about duration, what about the repetitive reception labour put into consuming and appropriating this, or any pop song, which, as Leonard Cohen (quoted in Kennedy 2006) puts it, one can “place into the air and have it last twenty years”? Such different reception modes problematize interactivity, as well. In A Theory of Adaptation, Hutcheon repeatedly makes the double gesture of acknowledging that all modes of engagement are interactive to an extent, while insistently
distinguishing the interactivity of computer games and theme parks for their physical involvement: “enacting or participating replaces telling” (2006, 138). The recurring double gesture in its very insistence suggests something unresolved about this argument—perhaps the claims of games and parks on physical, participatory interactivity are ultimately not exclusive after all. To return to the counterexample: what kind of interactivity is represented by listening to “Sexcrime” at a dance club? Or while out for a jog? These points are not about theoretical hairsplitting, or about diluting the analytic power of adaptation theory; rather, these points are offered as notes towards thinking through the limits of a productive theory, and building deliberately on its own more incidental use of sonic vocabulary, in the interests of improving its theoretical comprehensiveness, consistency, and applicability.

Popular music resounds with adaptation practices, in ways that warrant refocusing a theory of adaptation to account for nonnarrative, nonvisual, and nonextensive adaptations, and to rethink what such parameters mean—to rethink, that is, what can count and be studied as adaptation. I want to explore the matter of popular music in detail here, partly because the book considers music later on (see chapter 7), but mainly for two more important reasons: first, the sonic and acoustic register is critical for understanding of McLuhan’s theory; and second, the vocabulary of sound processes and music recording supplies a peculiarly useful terminology for analyzing adaptations, especially less extensive, more citational, and differently interactive adaptations. *Modulation* and *variation* (as in a variation on a theme) are terms that aptly capture the sense of repetition with difference that Hutcheon sees as crucial to adaptations; as with several of the terms suggested here, Hutcheon uses the term *variation* in her own arguments (2006, 35, 86). *Sampling* and *remixing*, borrowed from the parlance of DJ-based music-making, can be borrowed to describe brief, ephemeral, and more meme-like adaptations, and formal rearrangements and recontextualizations, respectively. *Amplification* is a useful way to describe how a meme like a Frankenpheme can “catch on” and reproduce both its forms and its cultural functions (Hutcheon also uses this term in this way [2006, 3]). *Feedback*, *gain*, and *loss*—borrowed more from communications than from music discourse—suggest different kinds of effects that adaptations can achieve, on audiences and on source texts alike.
As I’ve discussed elsewhere, popular music is an important cultural vehicle for adaptations, including those of *Frankenstein* (McCutcheon 2007). This and other prior investigations of adaptation in popular electronic dance music inform the use of the above terminology for adaptation studies—not just for popular music adaptations, either—and also suggest an interpretive framework in orders of adaptation. For example, I suggest that if *Star Wars* can be considered a “primary” *Frankenstein* adaptation (as the 2005 prequel [Lucas 2005] spelled out in its *Franken*cliché backstory—in case you hadn’t already picked up on all the Frankenphemes of clones, cyborgs, and planet-destroying weapons), then a dance record that samples *Star Wars* can be considered a “secondary” adaptation—that is, an adaptation of an adaptation (McCutcheon 2007, 260). Depending on how well documented or poorly decayed is the line of attribution among specific texts (and mindful of adaptation’s “subterranean” circuits), we can posit further orders of remove and remix: tertiary, quaternary orders, or more. Call it *six degrees of adaptation*? But the point is not necessarily to fix, taxonomize, or hierarchize particular lineages of adaptation as some kind of effort to combat what William Gibson has called “attribution decay” (so common especially in our copy-paste digital culture of reposts and “viral” memes), but rather, more broadly, to document and theorize patterns and trajectories of intertextual appropriation and amplification. How these patterns materialize and relate to each other will be illustrated in a sample case detailed below and over the course of this book.

Neither developing a more expansive critical vocabulary for adaptation studies based in digital and music practices, nor tracking the “subterranean” diffusions of adaptation, means diluting or emptying the principle of adaptation. The notion of orders or degrees of adaptation, together with acknowledgements of attribution and its vicissitudes, represents a way to uphold and extend Hutcheon’s stipulation that adaptations be defined in relation to specific texts, in order for analysis to stay grounded in concrete historical and material contexts (2006, 21). Another means to keep the analysis grounded in concrete textual details and material contexts is to itemize some of the common, even cliché images, tropes, and plot points that mark specific texts as Frankensteinian, or specific textual elements or fragments as “Frankenphemes.” Common figures or characters among these adaptations would include “mad scientists” of all kinds; grotesquely assembled, “patchwork,” or corporate subjects; and mechanical
or otherwise manufactured monsters—artificial intelligences, genetically engineered organisms, rebellious robots, cyborgs, clones, and other such technological doppelgängers. Common plot elements would be those that reproduce or vary the reduced “skeleton story” of the novel: stories of technological backfire; robots in revolt; resurrections gone awry; uncontrollable experiments; human-made catastrophes of technology, biology, or ecology; and the awakening to self-awareness of machines—an event that some thinkers, such as Ray Kurzweil (2005), expect as a real-world eventuality, which they call “the technological singularity.” Common images and tropes would include scenes of profane or at least ill-advised creation, of technological backfire, or artificially induced apocalypse; motifs of Faustian bargains for forbidden knowledge, of a creature overwhelming its creator; recursive reflections on the text’s own composition or facticity—especially acknowledgements of composition as collage, “mongrel,” or otherwise synthesizing or appropriative; and images or evocations of the technological sublime (Nye 1994), that is, representations of technological prowess that test or defy the limits of representation. In some cases the adoption of certain narrative or genre conventions may be worth considering: epistolary, Gothic, or science fiction modes; unreliable narration; or regressive framing devices, stories embedded within stories. References or allusions to *Frankenstein* or other adaptations are also significant textual elements of adaptation, even where used sparingly or in passing.

To be read together with these formal, textual criteria are a number of contextual criteria, aspects of the cultural and economic conditions of production that inform or augment a given text’s adaptation strategies. Criteria like these include the following: production modes marked by ambivalence over technology, especially new media and automation; globally oriented or distributed scenes or conditions of production; forms that privilege special effects above other production values; and postmodernist approaches that use and call attention to pastiche, or otherwise comment on their own production processes, especially with self-reflexive reference to media, technology, or globalization.

Moreover, bringing critical terms from music and communications disciplines to adaptation studies can orient the present study more firmly to the overarching cultural studies principle of *articulation*, a methodological principle of analyzing the “relationships of relationships” between popular culture and power structures, of probing “the ways in which everyday life
is articulated by and with the specific forms and formations, the material deployments and effects, of popular discursive practices" (Grossberg 1997, 229). The term *articulation* also harbours a crucial double meaning for a study of *Frankenstein*: a meaning drawn from the technical language of anatomy, for which it describes the jointed connection of bones in a body.

A Sample of Refocused Adaptation: *Frankenstein’s Organ Transplant*

To put these terms to work, and to suggest the interpretive possibilities of nonextensive “Frankenpheme” adaptation, let’s consider a specific pattern of this kind of adaptation at work in postmodern Afro-Futurist music. This pattern, in brief, consists of combining Frankensteinian imagery with organ instrumentation in Afro-Futurist music making. As theorized by Kodwo Eshun (1998) and John Corbett (1994), among others, Afro-Futurism is a black diasporic music tradition of appropriating science fiction forms, and principles of technological experiment, in black diasporic cultural production: for example, we find science fiction tropes and experimental appropriations of technology in black Atlantic music from Sun Ra’s jazz to George Clinton’s P-Funk, from Lee Perry’s Black Ark studio to turntablism and techno. But Afro-Futurism is also a theory—a critique of racist ontology, especially in the music industry (Corbett 1994), and a challenge to essentialist ideas of black identity, an avant-garde cultural practice of liberation, countermemory, and transfiguration (Gilroy 1993). For Corbett, the jazz band leader Sun Ra, the dub-reggae pioneer Lee “Scratch” Perry, and George Clinton of Parliament and Funkadelic fame are three exemplary Afro-Futurist artists who establish and embody the Afro-Futurist tradition in productions and performative personae that articulate a distinctively Frankensteinian “space madness”: these artists’ music articulates a science fiction aesthetic while their personae represent a marginal and self-consciously monstrous relationship to the mainstream music industry. This “space madness” tradition has been revamped recently by Janelle Monáe, in albums like *The ArchAndroid* (2010) and *The Electric Lady* (2013) that reimagine the African American experience in the imagery of androids and artificial intelligence together with auction blocks and segregation.

In this context, a distinctive practice of combining *Frankenstein* reference and organ instrumentation in black diasporic music making emerges: we hear it in Byron Lee and the Dragonaires’ 1964 ska tune “Frankenstein
Ska”; in Parliament’s album *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein* (1976); in Michael Jackson’s 1984 single “Thriller”; in Rockwell’s single “Somebody’s Watching Me” (1984); in Handsome Boy Modeling School’s “Once Again” (1999); and in the extended “Power” mix of Canadian rap artist Maestro Fresh-Wes’s single “Let Your Backbone Slide” (1989). So in six music productions by Afro-Futurist artists from four different decades and three different nations, we hear specific combinations of Frankensteinian imagery and organ instrumentation. This diasporic pattern of musical combinations prompts two questions that warrant preliminary consideration as a means to contextualize the subsequent, more detailed discussion of the aforementioned Afro-Futurist music texts that follows: first, how has the organ become such a formulaic and familiar trope of musical metonymy for *Frankenstein*? And second, what might be the cultural functions of this metonymy for Afro-Futurist music?

To address the first question: Forry’s *Hideous Progenies* (1990) looks at performance adaptations of *Frankenstein* since Richard Brinsley Peake’s 1823 play *Presumption*. In the process, he identifies a number of popular adaptation strategies established by that play, and later made ubiquitous by its successors: for example, the recasting of Shelley’s articulate and well-read creature as a mute, raging monster. Relevant for our purposes are two adaptation strategies in particular: the identification of Frankenstein’s monster both with its creator and with the related Gothic icon of the vampire, and the trope of the monster’s reaction to music.

The identification of the monster with its maker results from the long-standing application of the latter’s name to the former, and so references to the monster itself as “Frankenstein” persist in popular culture to this day. For instance, take this rap from Kool Keith, in his “Dr. Octagon” alter ego: “I’m strictly monster, with turtlenecks like Frankenstein” (1997). Developing the story’s doppelgänger theme in a different but related direction, stage and screen adaptations of *Frankenstein* have also consistently identified the unnatural monster with its supernatural counterpart, the vampire; this identification also derives from the famous primal scene of the novel’s inception at the Villa Diodati in 1816, when Shelley started her story while John Polidori composed “The Vampyre” (Forry 1990, 90). In early adaptations, the identification of man-made monster and vampire took place in paired presentations of *Frankenstein* and vampire plays, and in literary works that referred to multiple monsters, in a way that
Hollywood has made formulaic and routine in “monster mash” films from *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943) to *Van Helsing* (2004). In early film adaptations, this identification assumed a more industrial than intertextual character: in Universal’s *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* franchises of the 1930s and 1940s, actors Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi became virtually interchangeable by performing similar monster and mad doctor characters among different films. For the iconic 1931 *Frankenstein* film, Lugosi had been considered first for the monster’s role that Boris Karloff would make famous. Lugosi, who performed the figure of Dracula (in the 1931 film *Dracula*) as influentially as Karloff played the monster, appeared in *Frankenstein* sequels as Dr. Frankenstein’s assistant, Ygor, and in *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943) he played the Frankenstein monster. Similarly, Christopher Lee played the roles of Frankenstein’s monster and Dracula for the Hammer horror films produced in the UK in the 1950s and 1960s.

To refer to this process of “iconic identification” and “conflation” between Frankenstein and Dracula, especially as dramatized in the careers of Karloff and Lugosi, I’d like to suggest the portmanteau *iconflation*. I want to suggest this term because the processes of icon production, identification, and conflation that it links have significance not just for understanding the popular cultural history of *Frankenstein* but for understanding the function of organ music in this history. Iconflation becomes a significant component of the musical metonymy in question here.

The iconflation of Karloff’s creature and Lugosi’s vampire is reproduced in Universal’s franchise of Edgar Allan Poe adaptations, where it gets connected to the trope of the monster’s reaction to music. Interestingly, the Universal *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* film soundtracks do not feature any organ music to develop its metonymic association with horror generally and *Frankenstein* specifically. *Bride of Frankenstein* includes a gospel-style organ arrangement in the scene where the monster meets the blind hermit, but it augments the hermit’s ability to soothe the monster’s proverbially savage breast with his own violin playing. While this scene of the sublimation of the creature’s rage by music was established by the earliest adaptations (Forry 1990, 22), it is the opposite of what I’m investigating: the use of organ music to amplify horror in general, and Frankensteinian monstrosity more specifically. As it happens, it’s in other period films that the metonymic association of organ music and Gothic horror emerges. In Universal’s screen versions of Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Black Cat* (1934) and
The Medium Is the Monster

50

The Raven (1935), Karloff and Lugosi, respectively, play mad doctors who also play Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D Minor on the organ. Paramount’s 1931 film Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde also sits its mad doctor at the organ to play this number. The diegetic use of Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in films like these has contributed greatly to the popular cultural association of organ music with Gothic and horror narratives. There’s an earlier source for this association: Universal’s 1925 silent film The Phantom of the Opera. The scene in Phantom where the heroine unmasks Erik as he plays the organ was a sensation with audiences, and the film’s popularity suggested to Universal and other studios the potential market for Gothic and horror films, like The Black Cat (1934), The Walking Dead (1936), and Return of the Vampire (1943). Of course, it is ironic that this silent film contributes so significantly to the metonymic link between organ music and Gothic horror.

Between these interwar film uses of organ music, especially Bach’s Toccata and Fugue, and the postwar Afro-Futurist uses of organ music in records that refer to Frankenstein, we find a proliferation of both horrific and humorous Frankenstein figures throughout American popular culture. Some possible sources for the metonymic link of organ music and horror must be noted simply to be ruled out: Bobby Pickett’s 1962 “Monster Mash” features piano, not organ; and the theme song of the 1964 Addams Family television show features not organ, but harpsichord for its distinctive melody. (Its competitor The Munsters featured a surf-rock theme.) But later covers of the “Monster Mash” sometimes substitute organ for piano, and organ music occasionally featured in the soundtracks and commercials of the Addams Family and Munsters franchises. Warner Brothers, Hanna-Barbera, and other cartoon producers, as well as their Saturday morning advertisers like the General Mills line of monster-theme breakfast cereals, also entrench and exploit this implicit association between organ music and Frankensteinian monstrosity, which has become routine across the media of American pop culture. For one popular postwar film example: The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975) includes a scene where Riff-Raff teases the creature Rocky by chasing him around with a lit candelabrum. Quoting a similar scene from the 1931 Frankenstein film, this scene in Rocky Horror accompanies its action with organ music, suggesting Rocky’s fear and Riff-Raff’s menace. For an Afro-Futurist film example: the opening and closing credits of the 1973 film Blackenstein prominently feature organ arrangements.
This brings me to the second question, about the cultural function of this music metonymy for Afro-Futurism, and the aforementioned Afro-Futurist music productions that iconflate Frankenstein references together with organ instrumentation.

First, the pianist Thelonious Monk created a series of remarkable jazz-compositions built around his singularly angular phrasing, highlighted by unusual intervals, dissonance, and displaced notes. Amongst fellow jazz artists, Monk’s musical language was sometimes known as “zombie-music.” Pianist Mary Lou Williams explains: “Why ‘zombie music’? Because the screwy chords reminded us of music from Frankenstein or any horror film” (quoted in McNally 2011, 262). As David McNally observes in his study of zombie and vampire images as responses to global capital, Monk’s “screwy chords’ express the rhythms of a world out of joint, a space of reification in which people are reduced to things”: “We hear not only the jarring sounds of things coming to life; more than this, we hear the rhythms of zombie-movement, the ferocious sounds of the dance of the living dead” (2011, 263). Echoing the critique of racialization, exploitation, and reification contained in the Afro-Futurist music of Ra, Perry, and Clinton and the black diaspora theory of W. E. B. Dubois and Paul Gilroy, McNally acknowledges the widespread recognition “that the entire African-American experience is bathed in living death, in the ‘double consciousness’ of being both person and thing. And Monk’s music captures this in the monstrously beautiful cadences of the banging, smashing, crashing chords of an emerging African-American protest-music.” As McNally and music critics like Eshun have discussed, the avant-gardism, alienation effects, and oppositional character of Monk’s music—like that of Ra, Perry, and Clinton—have refracted and extended throughout contemporary black diasporic music, “in genres as diverse as hip-hop and Afrobeat” (McNally 2011, 263–64). For just one example, Kool Keith’s “Wild and Crazy” (1997) uses a “zombie-music” piano chord as the downbeat, in a song that names Frankenstein (“Frankenstein’s still standing here”), a song whose chorus overlays the dissonant downbeat with Psycho-soundtrack high-pitched strings, as the singer croons, “The moon is out / Tonight it’s time for experiments.” Like Sun Ra before him and rap artists after, Monk adapted and repurposed a selection of popular cultural materials, especially Hollywood film materials, to construct a musical language that would
speak to a diasporic African American experience framed and haunted by the legacy of racialized, institutionalized slavery.

Byron Lee and the Dragonaires’ “Frankenstein Ska,” released in 1964, uses the organ to establish the “crooked beat” that is the signature of ska; in ska’s successor genre, reggae, the rhythm guitar assumes responsibility for keeping the crooked beat. In “Frankenstein Ska,” the rhythmic organ arrangement evokes the clumsy, clunking step of Boris Karloff’s hulking, heavy-booted creature. And in this arrangement, we also hear both echoes of Monk’s dissonant “zombie music” and a foreshadowing of what the UK band Madness, in the vocal introduction to their ska-revival cover of Prince Buster’s 1964 song “One Step Beyond” (1979), would call “the heavy heavy monster sound.” (Interestingly, with reference to Afro-Futurism’s playful, postmodern approach to black identity, it is worth noting that Lee is a Chinese diasporic artist who played an influential role in popularizing ska as a distinctively Jamaican, black diasporic sound.)

In The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein (1976), George Clinton and Parliament unfold a musically and referentially rich concept album, a space opera, imagining America’s black population as “the children of production” in possession of ancient secret wisdom; whether intentionally or incidentally, the album resonates powerfully with other period productions like Sun Ra’s 1974 cult film Space Is the Place. The album opens with a spoken-word “Prelude,” in which a campy-spooky organ arrangement strikes up to lead in and accompany a monologue by George Clinton’s “Dr. Funkenstein” persona, who describes “the concept of specially-designed Afronauts, capable of funkatizing galaxies,” a concept awaiting to be materialized by someone who can “release them to multiply in the image of the chosen one: Dr. Funkenstein” (1976). Parliament’s Clones album in turn has given rise to further amplifications—tertiary adaptations?—by furnishing samples for electronic dance music, from Armand Van Helden’s tribal house anthem “Witch Doktor” (1994) to Deadmau5’s 2006 house track “Dr. Funkenstein.”

Another production that has given rise to a host of further amplifications and articulations—from samples in other songs to costumed and choreographed public dance performances—is Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” (1984), which makes emphatic use of organs, dramatic stabs of which give the song its unmistakable hook. And a resonantly Toccata and Fugue–like organ arrangement arises late in the song, to accompany its climactic
monologue, a campy litany of monster movie references, delivered by Vincent Prince. (In this connection, it’s worth noting Price’s *Dr. Phibes* films from the early 1970s; in them, Price plays Phibes, a mad scientist character who seeks to avenge his wife’s death—and who also plays organ music.) In Price’s “Thriller” monologue, “creatures” that “crawl in search of blood” and “grisly ghouls from every tomb” mix with similar figures to make a mash-up of living-dead monster images, and, together with the organ arrangement, they clearly conjure the spectres of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, the Hollywood film adaptations of which have made them (alongside George Romero’s *Living Dead* franchise) the very stuff of “Thriller’s” homage, and which, reciprocally, have furnished much of the image repertoire for the many subsequent homages to “Thriller” in recorded and performance media.

Jackson also played a pivotal role in producing another 1984 single, Rockwell’s “Somebody’s Watching Me,” on which Jackson provides backup vocals for the chorus. “Somebody’s Watching Me” features, throughout the track, organ instrumentation very reminiscent of Bach’s Toccata and Fugue, and more explicit links to *Frankenstein* arise in this song’s video, which includes a portrait of Mary Shelley and close-up flashes of a grotesque face strongly resembling that of Karloff’s iconic portrayal of the creature.

As campy, commercially successful, and still-popular singles, “Thriller” and “Somebody” contribute crucially to the musical metonymy being tracked here. Both “Thriller” and “Somebody” exploit organ music to amplify their Gothic modes; the Afro-Futurist element here lies more in musical arrangement than in lyrical content, as each track juxtaposes the modishly futuristic synthesizers and drum machines of early 1980s pop against the classical- and gospel-derived sounds of organ instrumentation.

The gospel context may suggest why the organ recurs in Afro-Futurist music adaptations of *Frankenstein* more than in other music adaptations. In *Frankenstein*-themed songs by rock artists, and more specifically white rock artists—for example, the Edgar Winter Group, Black Sabbath, the New York Dolls, White Zombie—electric guitar and synthesizer sounds rather than organs amplify the *Frankenstein* theme. In this intercultural context, the use of organs by Afro-Futurist artists appears ambivalent. On the one hand, the use of organs instead of guitars to signify *Frankenstein* themes in black diasporic music might be read to assert cultural difference as musical difference. On the other hand, if the use of organ
instrumentation and sampling by Afro-Futurist artists signifies on the organ’s place in sacred music by connecting it to the profane theme of Frankensteinian presumption, then it may be read as a critique of essentialist ideas of black diasporic identity, or as a variant representation of African American double consciousness. The black diasporic cultural practice of what Julian Jonker calls “black secret technology”—that is, “taking white technology apart and not putting it back together properly” (2002, para. 32)—involves, as the work of Monk and Perry especially dramatizes, transgressing modes of conventional music making—and, in Perry’s case, music recording—as expressions of emancipation from not just slavery proper but also its haunting, revenant legacy. Such transgressions have both defined black American music and installed this music as among the most popular and successful around the world: from the lore of Faustian bargaining that shrouds accounts of Robert Johnson’s development of the guitar blues; to Ray Charles’s adaptation of gospel structures and rhythms to nascent rock and roll; to Monk’s dissonant “zombie-music” be-bop; to the birth of hip hop in its now-legendary do-it-yourself culture of turntable innovations, boom-box pause-play tape mixes, graffiti art, and breakdancing.

Which brings us to the combination of Frankenstein reference and organ instrumentation—or in this case sampling—in rap music. “Let Your Backbone Slide” is a 1989 single by Maestro Fresh-Wes; it’s one of the most successful Canadian rap songs. Two specific details of this track, in lyric and instrumentation, are noteworthy here, in order to appreciate the adaptive practice of Maestro’s sampling and synecdoche in full effect. The instrumental arrangement of “Backbone” is organized around an organ riff sampled from the 1968 funk track “The Champ” by the Mohawks, a track widely sampled in rap for this riff and for its breakbeat rhythm. In this distinctive pairing of Frankenstein reference and organ arrangement, “Let Your Backbone Slide” reproduces the pattern tracked above from the Dragonaires to Michael Jackson.

The lyrical references to Frankenstein in “Let Your Backbone Slide” are extensive, albeit elliptical. In the last verse of the extended mix of the song, Maestro raps: “It’s gettin’ out of hand / I’ve created a monster.” This Frankenheim figure Maestro’s self-proclaimed success—a common conceit in rap, and a pointedly bold claim for a debut single—as a Frankensteinian effect of unintended consequences.
The lyric sampled here is sufficiently legible as a common enough Frankenpheme in everyday speech. However, it resonates with other lyrical details. There is the recurring imagery of the “spine”: in the refrain’s reference to “backbone,” the first verse’s mention of “vertebrae,” and the song’s justly celebrated rhyme about the “sacro-iliac,” or tailbone. But lines in the first verse further flaunt this “rap scholar’s” learned repertoire, most notably his likening of rap to “a slab of clay that’s shapeless” until “I mould it in my hands” (1989). Taken together with the lyrical details noted above, this verse’s self-reflexive rhyme about rap as creative practice alludes with artful economy to the same ancient myths adapted and referenced in Shelley’s own novel: the medieval Jewish legend of the golem; the biblical accounts of creation in Genesis and John’s gospel; the classical myths of Prometheus and Pygmalion.

“Backbone” thus assembles and reanimates a set of deeply embedded and “subterranean”—but identifiable—cultural elements and discourses; the track constitutes a second-order adaptation, in its rehearsal of a clichéd, vernacular Frankenpheme and its sampling of the Mohawks’ organ hook. It is significant that the Frankenpheme lyric only occurs on the 12” vinyl “power mix” and video, not on the shorter “radio edit” version—the lyric thus self-reflexively remarks on its own excess: “It’s gettin’ out of hand.” And the track’s sampling practice is itself integral to understanding this specific text’s representative articulation of the ready-made, bricolage aesthetic of “early hip hop,” for which, as music critic Simon Reynolds puts it, “sampling was like Frankenstein’s monster, funk-limbs crudely bolted together” (1998, 45). In turn, as a nationally bestselling and internationally popular single, “Backbone” gained further currency for this Frankensteinian Afro-Futurist motif in the vocabulary and imagery of subsequent rap. In “Dr. Frankenstein” (1998), Ice Cube adopts the modern myth’s moniker to describe himself as the creator of a genre, gangsta rap, that has run amok since he invented it. In the video for 50 Cent’s “In da Club” (Atwell 2003), the establishing shots depict a top-secret R&D lab in a desolate desert locale: the “Shady/Aftermath Artist Development Center,” where we first see 50 Cent prone on a laboratory table, being assembled as a kind of android, while Dr. Dre and Eminem supervise, dressed in white coats. In a style much closer to the Maestro’s, and in a further reproduction of the distinctive Afro-Futurist pattern of coupling of Frankenstein allusion and organ arrangement, Handsome Boy Modeling School’s rap track “Once
Again (Here to Kick for You)” (1999) is structured around a pitched-down sample from Three Dog Night’s “Old Fashioned Love Song,” which adds a funereal organ sound prominently to the mix. And like other tracks sampled above, “Once Again” features a verse that likens the rapper’s own work to the mad scientist’s: “One time as I sew it up like Doctor Frankenstein.”

As with the Michael Jackson and Rockwell tracks, so “Backbone” may not at first seem as definitely “Afro-Futurist” as the more self-consciously avant-garde work of Clinton, Perry, or Monk. The Afro-Futurist aesthetic emerges here as much in the song’s musical arrangements as it does in its lyrics, with their play on Pygmalion and Dr. Frankenstein figures. Maestro’s track articulates something of the technology discourse that we find in other Canadian adaptations of Frankenstein, in its relatively fast tempo and its corresponding lyrical agility. For mainstream rap of the late 1980s, Maestro’s lyrics are unusually rapid-fire, more comparable to the style of Public Enemy’s Chuck D than to that of the Beastie Boys or NWA, and its tempo is, for rap, very fast (114 beats per minute), accompanied by an intensive collage of sampling and turntablism effects. The lyrical density of “Backbone” invites headphone concentration, while its detonative breakbeat, a modulation of James Brown’s “Funky Drummer,” invites dance-floor abandon. In the context of pop music in 1989, the percussive arrangement of “Backbone” resonates as much with UK acid house as its acrobatic rhyming resonates with US east-coast rap. In this divided transnational perspective, then, “Let Your Backbone Slide” is maybe as quintessentially Canadian as pop music gets—it is a technological and transnational acoustic space oddity: Canadian hip house.

The track gains additional interest in its Canadian production context. Maestro signifies on citizenship in his persona’s self-description as “un-American” (evoking national difference as well as the American allergy to “communism” that perennially positions Canada as some purportedly “socialist” threat). Maestro’s self-promotional boasting about success as a jet-setting rap star contrasts ironically with his other self-descriptions as hubristic artist and mad scientist; moreover, all these self-descriptions join a shape-shifting host of alter egos presented in the track—tactician, Colossus, Tarzan, conductor, builder, playwright—as well as Wesley Williams’s rapper pseudonym as “the Maestro.” The MC’s boastful proliferation of personae signals the track’s skilful adoption of this staple convention of the rap genre. What’s more, in this black Canadian cultural production,
Maestro’s multiple roles signify ironically on official Canadian multiculturalism: the track’s voice is a virtual mosaic all to himself. It is not just “the beat,” in the words of the track’s introductory vocal sample, that “will be played in many parts,” but the performing persona itself, a satirical figure of the Canadian multicultural “mosaic” that is rendered ironic by the volume of Frankenphemes in the Maestro’s mix.

As demonstrated by Afro-Futurist music generally and the aforementioned tracks specifically, especially Maestro’s “Backbone,” black diasporic music has amplified the metonymic associations—the “iconflations”—of zombie and vampire, organ instrumentation and horror intertextuality, such that the sound of organ instrumentation is itself almost sufficient to evoke the “modern myth” of Frankenstein in popular culture. We should also note here the multiple meanings of the word “organ”; although this may go without saying in any discussion of Frankenstein, in popular music, and especially in Afro-Futurist music, the sound of the organ has thus become the sound of the body built of—which is to say, reduced to—organs, an inter-medial “iconflation” of sacred musicality and profane monstrosity, the monstrosity of bodily self-alienation, synecdoche as commodification and exploitation. The organ is the most uncannily named wind instrument, the windpipe that sings in an inhuman voice, but only when compelled to by human machinations.

Popular music can thus be seen to harbour an extraordinary wealth of adaptation practices—allusions, amplifications, articulations—that amply repay close critical attention. The case of Frankenstein’s iconflations in Afro-Futurist music demonstrates, in particular, the great repertoire of knowledge—cultural, historical, technological, and otherwise—that is so characteristically concentrated and then coded in black Atlantic music-making practices and networks. Eshun (1998) extensively documents the profoundly philosophical and sometimes explicitly theoretical work of black Atlantic music, and Angela McRobbie echoes work like his by plainly pointing out “just how much thinking there is in black music.” As she says, it “can hardly contain the investment of artistry, politics, history, and literary voice, so that as an aesthetic it is, by definition, spilling out and overflowing, excessive, a first destination for social commentary, dialogue, and rap that leaves those of us still caught in the prison of language far behind” (1999, 43–44). In the process, works like those discussed here contribute to processes of iconflation and other condensed or elliptical
forms of adaptation and intertextuality that, taken together, serve to keep certain texts—certain images and ideas, not only stories—in constant rotation through the popular imagination, even as they remix their elements to the point of either total defamiliarization or virtual naturalization, or both. The perception and reception of an adaptation as such—whether narrative or lyrical, extensive or ephemeral—is a beauty very much in the ear of the beholder.