4. The Medium Is the Monster
McLuhan’s “Frankenpheme” of Technology

*Frankenstein* and key adaptations of it may have redefined and modernized the discourse of technology in the early nineteenth century, but it was the fast-changing mediascape of the twentieth century—and more specifically the work of McLuhan in and on this mediascape—that put the modern discourse of technology on the map and into common circulation.

McLuhan may not seem a likely subject for studying either literary adaptation or the popular legacies of Romanticism; what this chapter will discuss is how McLuhan defines and theorizes technology, with reference to *Frankenstein*. It will also discuss McLuhan’s distinctive research methodology, with reference to Edgar Allan Poe and with attention to how McLuhan’s stated method contradicts and conflicts with his work’s tone. The chapter then outlines the Frankensteinian historical narrative that his work constructs, his epochal model of technological change, and subsequently reviews some representative reviews and receptions of McLuhan in the popular press and the counterculture of the period of his greatest fame, the late 1960s. McLuhan’s receptions by journalists and counterculture scenesters, taken together, served greatly to popularize his ideas, to figure McLuhan himself as a kind of mad scientist of media, and thus to amplify what I will term his “Frankenpheme of technology.”

“Every technology necessitates a new war”

To argue, as the present chapter does, that McLuhan’s work takes up and develops technology as a Frankenpheme is in the first place to situate his
work in the context of the profound social turmoil visited on the globe by the Second World War. This global conflict was technologized to an extent that the fascist Futurists, turned on by the industrial and systematized stratagems of World War I, could scarcely have imagined in their wettest machine dreams.

If you run a Google n-gram search for the frequency of the occurrence of the word “technology,” in every century since 1500, the advent of print, the line will hug the horizontal time axis, flat except for little speed bumps in the late seventeenth century and the turn of the twentieth. But it starts to rise up, gradually, in the 1920s, climbing into a ten-degree angle that it holds until the mid-1950s, when it swings up towards thirty degrees. Then, in the late 1960s and 1970s, the line shoots steeply upward, leveling briefly between 1985 and 1990 before arcing in a shallow parabola over Y2K. Acknowledging that a Google n-gram is not exactly the most rigorously isolated data set (how do we quantify “lots of books,” exactly?), its statistical thumbnail sketch is still a suggestive index of broad changes in language use. Kelly suggests that technology entered colloquial English use in 1939 (2011, 6), and while he gives no particular explanation for suggesting that year, the date ominously implies that the onset of World War II might have had something to do with it. Perhaps, then, the chilling historical insight of Kittler ([1986] 1999)—that the major innovations in media have regularly arisen first as military research projects and wartime field tests—also holds true for corresponding transformations in everyday language and public discourse.

For most of the war, McLuhan was teaching at Saint Louis University in Missouri; but in 1939, having just married, he and his wife went to Cambridge where he finished his master’s degree and began his doctorate as the war in Europe began. In 1940 they returned to the United States, and McLuhan completed his doctoral studies at a distance, with Cambridge’s blessing and understanding. Soon after McLuhan earned his PhD, in 1943, his attention was already turning from canonical literary subjects to contemporary popular ones, reading the latter by the lights of the former to try to make sense of the emerging postwar mediascape—and of his students. In the wake of such unprecedented and eminently technological atrocities as Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the war registers powerfully in McLuhan’s writing. Not coincidentally, along with the imagery of modern weaponry, the word technology itself “began to
appear with noticeable frequency in McLuhan’s writings” after World War II (Gordon 1997, 132)—when it began to appear with increasing frequency in everyday English in general.

The nuclear bomb became one of McLuhan’s favourite analogies for the drastic, global effects of media. Nuclear power and especially nuclear weaponry have established a distinctive—and deserved—Frankensteinian discourse (Morton 2002, 56), as the apotheosis of a human-made technology whose threat to humankind makes Victor Frankenstein’s projection of “a race of devils” seem a welcome alternative. Accordingly, the rhetoric of nuclear weaponry that recurs in McLuhan’s writing—sometimes in deadly earnest, sometimes in gallows humour—harbours its own peculiar set of Frankensteinian connotations and associations. A private letter from 1946 shows McLuhan’s debt to his Cambridge mentor, F. R. Leavis, and to the artist Wyndham Lewis, as well as the private hostility to technological change that he publicly disavowed: in this letter, McLuhan says the critical methods of Leavis and the creative methods of Lewis “can serve to educate a huge public . . . to resist that swift obliteration of the person which is going on” (quoted in Gordon 1997, 133). In its image of “swift obliteration,” this remark about media effects (to which McLuhan alludes as “what is going on”) conjures “the Bomb”; in its defence of individualism against technology, it shows a Romantic ideology consistent with other Romantic contexts of McLuhan’s work.

The scholars with whom McLuhan studied, the writers he read, and postwar geopolitics all informed his research and the priority it gave to technology. “I am a set of partially developed and isolated fragments,” McLuhan wrote in his diary on 11 February 1937, then straddling a junior position at the University of Wisconsin and doctoral studies at Cambridge. McLuhan’s ultimate focus on media was based in wide-ranging graduate work that encompassed the Renaissance and modernism, as well as Romanticism, to an extent not widely acknowledged. Conventional accounts attribute McLuhan’s definition of technology to the more immediate influences of Leavis and Lewis. But McLuhan also knew well the work of Shelley’s contemporary Peacock (Gordon 44), who as we saw in the last chapter used technology as a Frankenpheme; and McLuhan cites Thomas Carlyle—whose critical writing was powerfully influenced by *Frankenstein* (Baldick 1987, 103)—as a source for his own definition of technology (McLuhan 1970, 302). While McLuhan’s references to Shelley
and Carlyle are not as numerous as those to, say, Joyce or T. S. Eliot, they are integral to his theory of technology.

The Mechanical Bride (of Frankenstein)

Both the bomb analogy and extensive borrowings from Romantic literature appear in McLuhan’s first book, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951), a “mosaic” of essays on postwar US advertising and popular culture, in which McLuhan proceeds by reprinting and analyzing a series of contemporary advertisements. In framing his essays and their arguments as a mosaic of assembled fragments, McLuhan makes an observation about his analytic method that the present study turns on McLuhan’s own writing. “Among the multifarious forms and images sustained by any society,” McLuhan writes, “it is reasonable to expect to find some sort of melodic curve. There will be many variations, but they will tend to be variations on certain recognizable themes” (1951, 96). The “theme” that McLuhan identifies in the postwar popular mediascape is a recurring “cluster image” of “sex, technology, and death.” McLuhan doesn’t define technology in *Bride*—he takes it for granted to signify industrial machinery and to act as the fulcrum of his “cluster image” theme. The variations on this theme that are discussed in the book include sexualized images of automobiles and weaponry, mechanized images of bodies and sexuality, dystopian images of media technology, and fetishized images of industrial enterprise and free-market ideology. Contemporary with but independent of analogous European projects—Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies*, Richard Hoggart’s *Uses of Literacy*, the Frankfurt School’s culture industry thesis—McLuhan surveys the postwar corporate mediascape and its ascendant hegemony of instrumental rationality in order to expose its latent effect: the dehumanizing transformation of North America’s individual citizens into mass consumers, in symptomatically gender-coded terms. McLuhan conceived the book as a critique of “the feminization of the North American male” (Gordon 1997, 117) and “the decimation of sex by . . . mechanization” (McLuhan, quoted in Gordon 1997, 153).

McLuhan is concerned, throughout *Bride*, with the difference between surface readings and latent meanings of mass media, especially advertising. He identifies a series of popular figures that typify the postwar consumerist zeitgeist: the sleuth, the scientist, and the gangster—the last of which McLuhan calls the “tragic hero” best suited to “commercial
society dedicated to the smash and grab and one-man fury of enterprise” (1951, 145). Significantly, the prototype for all these symptomatic figures of industrial culture is none other than the Byronic hero, following whose example “all rebellion against the spirit of hawking and huckstering takes in large measure the Byronic form” (109). More recent work on the legacies of Romanticism tacitly bolsters McLuhan’s argument about Byron. Atara Stein (2004) tracks the Byronic hero through popular culture—and discusses the intertextual intimacy found in this context between the Byronic figure and the Frankenstein monster. McLuhan himself contextualizes this argument, with reference to early industrialization, Regency society, and the culture of Byron and his contemporaries, making connections between popular media and figures of subterranean or latent influence on it.

McLuhan’s connections between submerged cultural history and in-your-face contemporary media lead him to suggest that the themes he finds in the mediascape are not obvious—are even unconscious, despite their prevalence: “Important for present purposes is the fact that the complexities of such popular images as that of the sleuth are subterranean. So with the current image of the ‘businessman’ or the ‘scientist.’ The indiscriminate cluster of items included in these images becomes in turn a means of ‘popular thinking’ about society and politics” (1951, 110).

McLuhan’s work harbours a “subterranean,” thematic “cluster image” of its own, an image that becomes integral to his writing about media. If The Mechanical Bride essays an extensive analysis of the “cluster image” of “sex, technology, and death,” the middle term here, “technology,” becomes a cluster image unto itself, in which the recognizable tropes with which Shelley characterized her creature converge with explicit intertextual references, and thus render the word technology itself a Frankenpheme—a condensed, connotative term to conjure the spectre of Frankenstein. The book places the term technology in a web of references that clarify its Frankenpheme aspect. The title of McLuhan’s book alludes to Marcel Duchamp’s artwork The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (1915–23), in which the “stripping” of the “bride” is depicted as a kind of Cubist disassembly into her (or its) machine parts. However, in keeping with McLuhan’s interest in the interface of high and popular culture, the title also evokes the bride of Frankenstein, the manufactured female body destroyed in Shelley’s novel but later brought to cinematic life in Bride of Frankenstein (1935), and in the robot Maria of Metropolis (1927). These evocations in the title are made
concrete with McLuhan’s explicit reference in the title essay: “Frankenstein fantasies depend on the horror of a synthetic robot running amok in revenge for its lack of a ‘soul.’ Is this not merely a symbolic way of expressing the actual fact that many people have become so mechanized that they feel a dim resentment at being deprived of full human status?” (1951, 100).

The statement puts McLuhan’s thesis in sensational and pop-cultural terms, and the essay in which it appears includes related “cluster images” that recur throughout McLuhan’s work. McLuhan ends this essay by underscoring both his title’s Frankensteinian figure and his book’s central image; he states that the “trance-like” effects of popular art—the mass-produced “Frankenstein fantasies”—are to perpetuate “the widely occurring cluster image of sex, technology, and death which constitutes the mystery of the mechanical bride” (1951, 101). In addition, this title essay in McLuhan’s first book refers not only to *Frankenstein*, but also to a legion of likewise Gothic and grotesque figures: cybernetic “thinking machines,” ghouls, and vampires (100–1), as well as the striking image of machines “coming to resemble organisms not only in the way they obtained power by digestion of fuel but in their capacity to evolve ever new types of themselves with the help of the machine tenders” (99). In this paraphrase of a premise from Samuel Butler’s utopian fiction *Erewhon* (1872), McLuhan first iterates a claim that he puts more vividly in *Understanding Media*: that “man becomes, as it were, the sex organs of the machine world” (McLuhan [1964] 2003, 68). This image of an inverted, dystopian human-machine relationship—an image both Cronenberghian and *Matrix*-like—would become one of his “most widely repeated aphorisms” (Harvey 2006, 341), and its defamiliarizing suggestion “that the origins, transformation, propagation and continual reproduction of the human subject is an inherently technological process” (335) has proven a compelling point around which attention to McLuhan has been perennially renewed in relation to technology studies, critical theory, and popular culture.

**Understanding Media (Means Fearing Technology)**

McLuhan opens *Understanding Media* with a working definition of technology—as an “extension of man”—and a Frankensteinian illustration of it: “Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach
the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness” ([1964] 2003, 5). In this book, the word “technology” occurs almost as often as “media”: in Understanding Media, the former word occurs 227 times; the latter, 277. Moreover, technology becomes interchangeable, even synonymous with media in McLuhan’s theory. For example, he writes: “The personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (19). In one sentence, both medium and technology are treated as “extensions of man.” We also see their interchangeability in a private letter from the same year Understanding Media appeared, in which McLuhan wrote: “I have discovered a better way of saying the medium is the message. It is this: each technology creates a new environment” (quoted in Gordon 1997, 175). He thought this wording better addresses how media strive for “immediacy,” how they become taken for granted, invisible, and natural in their social implementation—and thus how they effect their most profound transformations on subjectivity and society, time and space.

McLuhan attributes his idea of technology as extension to contemporaries like Lewis Mumford, Leavis, and Lewis (Gordon 1997, 120). But McLuhan also credits Romantic sources: the phrase “extensions of man” is Ralph Waldo Emerson’s (Gordon 1997, 196), and McLuhan cites Carlyle’s 1833 Sartor Resartus as a source for his idea of technology as extension, as environment, and as weapon:

Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus followed in the tracks of the eighteenth-century Swedenborg zeitgeist theory of Age Garb (or garbage); i.e., all human institutions from language to tweezers are extensions of, and weapons of, the human body.

New technologies = new environments. (1970, 302)

This weaponized sense of technology speaks to McLuhan’s hostility to technological change, which he shared with his mentor F. R. Leavis, but which he tried to keep private. In public, McLuhan assumed a neutral, critical stance towards technology: “Value judgments have long been allowed to create a moral fog around technological change such as renders understanding impossible” ([1962] 1969, 255). For McLuhan, the “only person able to encounter technology with impunity” is “the serious artist . . . an expert aware of the changes in sense perception” ([1964] 2003, 31).
McLuhan’s models for this romanticized role of the artist as outsider and visionary included Joyce, Yeats, and Eliot—but also William Blake, Percy Shelley, and, above all, Poe ([1964] 2003, 430). McLuhan adopted two formal principles from Poe’s work for his own criticism, and both are significant for his discourse of technology as Frankenpheme. First, McLuhan emulated Poe’s *a posteriori* narrative strategy:

The method of invention, as Edgar Poe demonstrated in his “Philosophy of Composition,” is simply to begin with the solution of the problem or with the effect intended. Then one backtracks, step by step, to the point from which one must begin in order to reach the solution or effect. Such is the method of the detective story, of the symbolist poem, and of modern science. ([1962] 1969, 59).

Interestingly, Poe in his essay credits his own method of working back from effects to Mary Shelley’s father, William Godwin, and his novel *Caleb Williams*, a prototype of the modern “whodunit” mystery that Poe himself pioneered ([1846] 1987, 480). Shelley herself, though absent from Poe’s account, similarly recounts composing *Frankenstein* as a process of working back from effects, an effort to “develop at greater length” her original conception of “a short tale” arising from “the grim terrors of my waking dream” (Shelley [1831] 2000, 24). So it is on the basis of Poe’s writing practice, influenced in turn by the Shelley circle, that McLuhan then develops his own distinctive research method and expository style, focusing on the effect of a technology in order to “reconstruct” its cause (1951, 106). This method leads to his main idea: that technologies produce and naturalize specific environments.

From his first book forward, McLuhan developed a neutral analytic method based on Poe’s 1841 short story “A Descent into the Maelstrom”: “Poe’s sailor saved himself by studying the action of the whirlpool and by cooperating with it. The present book likewise makes few attempts to attack the very considerable currents and pressures set up around us today by the mechanical agencies of the press, radio, movies, and advertising” (1951, v). McLuhan “identif[ied] throughout his adult life” with Poe’s sailor (Gordon 1997, 13), but adopting such “rational detachment” for his own critical method proved both controversial and contradictory: controversial, in that his refrain from value judgments led to the widespread misreading of him as an “anti-book” techno-fetishist; and contradictory,
in that his own writing abounds with “moral indignation”—its tone veering between ambivalence and horror. McLuhan’s “personal dislike” of technological change is also apparent in his choice of literary touchstone: McLuhan doesn’t model his “rational detachment” on an Austen heroine sizing up a match, or a Benthamite legislator of the greater good, but on an unreliable narrator, whose miscalculating ambition leads him to the brink of annihilation, barely surviving his hostile environment to tell the tale. A narrator, that is, like Victor Frankenstein.

As Poe’s sailor shares character traits and plot points with Victor Frankenstein, so the prominence of Poe in McLuhan’s work mediates Frankenstein’s long shadow, adding layers of intertextual resonance to its line of influence in McLuhan’s work. Poe’s fiction itself shows the impact of Frankenstein in its period, with his stories of necromancy (“The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar”); galvanic reanimation (“Some Words with a Mummy”); nautical hubris (“Maelstrom”); doppelgängers (“William Wilson”); and even cyborgs (“The Man Who Was Used Up”). For these and related reasons of Poe’s significant intertextual borrowings, “closer scrutiny of Poe’s knowledge and use of Frankenstein seems warranted,” as Don Smith notes (1992, 38). Like the uniquely Frankensteinian imagery of “the Bomb” and McLuhan’s more direct Romantic borrowings, the second-order adaptations of Poe’s fiction filter into McLuhan’s theory, along with the disinterested approach to criticism that it models and that McLuhan’s work only partly succeeds in reproducing.

A close reading of McLuhan’s usage of technology as Frankenpheme suggests the extent of his Romantic (and gender-coded) understanding of modernity, and his deep but disavowed hostility to technological change. The tone of McLuhan’s statements on technology conflicts with his stated neutrality. McLuhan amplifies the tropes of utility, supplement, contagion, shock, and revolution with which Frankenstein modernized the meaning of technology, and his use of the word as a Frankenpheme both undergirds his deterministic premise concerning technology and undermines his declared suspension of judgment. For McLuhan, new technologies produce pain, confusion, and despair (McLuhan and Fiore [1967] 2001, 8), to which individuals and societies respond by going into a kind of shock or “auto-amputation”: “With the arrival of electric technology, man extended, or set outside himself, a live model of the central nervous system itself . . . a development that suggests a desperate and suicidal autoamputation”
McLuhan consistently describes technology in terms of invasion ([1964] 2003, 30), disease ([1962] 1969, 17), disaster ([1962] 1969, 302), and conflict on a global scale. “Every new technology,” he states grimly in *War and Peace in the Global Village*, “necessitates a new war” (McLuhan and Fiore 1968, 98). All five technological tropes that we find in *Frankenstein* thus inform and shape McLuhan’s model of global technological change, a model figured in Frankensteinian imagery that clearly conveys his hostility to such change. We find perhaps the most dramatic expression of McLuhan’s Frankenpheme of technology—and a rare but telling public confession of his hostility to its effects—in a 1969 interview with *Playboy*. Pressed by the interviewer to clarify his personal opinion about “new technology” as a “revolutionizing agent,” McLuhan replied frankly:

I view such upheavals with total personal dislike and dissatisfaction. I do see the prospect of a rich and creative retribalized society . . . but I have nothing but distaste for the process of change. . . . I derive no joy from observing the traumatic effects of media on man, although I do obtain satisfaction from grasping their modes of operation. . . . It’s vital to adopt a posture of arrogant superiority; instead of scurrying into a corner and wailing about what media are doing to us, one should charge straight ahead and kick them in the electrodes. They respond beautifully to such treatment and soon become servants rather than masters. . . . The world we are living in is not one I would have created on my own drawing board, but it’s the one in which I must live. (1969, 158)

McLuhan figures technology as a rebellious, *male* artificial intelligence, whose inherently rebellious tendency should be violently pre-empted; technology is a menace that needs to be subordinated—*mastered*—to be useful. This figure vividly condenses and dramatizes the tropes of utility, shock, revolution, and supplementarity with which Shelley characterizes the monster. And in his closing reference to “the world we are living in,” McLuhan positions this monstrous figure of technology in a new relation to globalization and modernity, as an age whose “labor pain of rebirth” is producing a world unlike the one he “would have created” (158).

In the interview, McLuhan goes on to say he “would never attempt to change my world” and “must move through this pain-wracked transitional era as a scientist would move through a world of disease” (1969, 158). His totalizing rhetoric of *era* and *world* recur throughout his work to construct
an overarching historical drama of social transformation; in *Understanding Media*, for example, he echoes Carlyle to announce the new age as an “Age of Anxiety,” augured by progress in “the technological simulation of consciousness” ([1964] 2003, 5). In the epochal-scale drama of world history articulated in McLuhan’s theory, the monstrous figure of technology plays the lead role—and takes the “global village” for its stage.

This historical drama represents its own distinctive adaptation of *Frankenstein’s* mythmaking “skeleton story.” It plays out across McLuhan’s writing in a way that is readily amplified by his critical receptions. In McLuhan’s world-historical drama, the fragmented subject of print culture is galvanized, by electric technology, to be “reborn” as a unified but monstrous subject, at once “primitive” and globalized, “corporate” yet incoherent. To take one journalistic example, the *New Yorker’s* review of *Understanding Media* gives a typical period gloss of McLuhan’s historical drama in language that makes legible its “technological reduction” of *Frankenstein*: “Though the shock of the sudden passage from mechanical to electrical technology has momentarily narcotized our nerves, integral man is in the process of formation” (Rosenberg 1965, 133). To take a scholarly example, John Fekete’s 1977 critique of “McLuhanacy” sees in McLuhan’s “structuration of the historical field . . . a mythic pattern of Fall and salvation,” in which “integration displaces fragmentation”; moreover, Fekete describes the politics of McLuhan’s historical construct as conservative—even “anti-Promethean” ([1977] 2005, 33).

Together with the Frankenpheme of technology as a central keyword in his media theory, McLuhan’s own rogue academic persona and his “mosaic” of interdisciplinary pursuits exposed him to caricature by the press as a “mad scientist” of media. In a book McLuhan cowrote with Wilfred Watson, *From Cliché to Archetype* (1970), an account of how critical figures become ideological ground (and vice versa), the authors take a moment to reflect on what they call “the philosophical tale,’ a genre designed for the popularizing of ideas”—but one whose exemplars, “from *Gulliver’s Travels* to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* . . . tend to melt quickly” (103). It is an ironic claim, in its denigration of Shelley’s work (a denigration typical enough for its time), given McLuhan’s own extensive redeployment of *Frankenstein* in his vocabulary and imagery of technology. And its irony becomes poignant, given the way in which McLuhan’s own work—especially its populist incarnations in the *Playboy* interview and
The Medium Is the Massage—was received in the moment of his international celebrity, during the late 1960s, as a vehicle for the popularizing of ideas, and perceived thereafter to melt quickly. It is to that moment, the scene of McLuhan’s receptions by baffled critics and countercultural techno-romantics, that we now tune in.

The “Mad Scientist” of Media: McLuhan and the Counterculture

The counterculture and popular culture of the late 1960s gave McLuhan and his work the moment of their peak popularity and established for them a cultural space that continues to be productive, as the next chapters will detail. The countercultural and popular receptions of McLuhan in the 1960s amplified and countered each other and helped to globally disseminate his Frankensteinian idea of technology, in both the content and form of these receptions. A counterculture that styled itself a “global underground” adopted McLuhan’s ideas for oppositional forms of cultural praxis like the underground press and psychedelic scene making; however, the countercultural adoption of McLuhan provided dominant cultural producers, like corporate journalists, with sensational images of mediatized radicalism that helped to construct a caricature of McLuhan as a “mad scientist” of media. The period of McLuhan’s popular ascendancy both disseminated his discourse of technology as a kind of Frankenstein monster, and dramatized its proponent as a kind of Victor Frankenstein.

McLuhan’s Frankensteinian figuring of technology in his own writing, as seen in the previous chapter; his unconventional method of presenting research; and his diversified public intellectual engagements: all these can be identified as key ingredients in the popular press’s construction of a caricature of McLuhan as a “mad scientist” of media. First, McLuhan’s unusual approach to presenting research involved what he called a “mosaic” method: a nonlinear form of writing that presents a series of claims and arguments in no particular order. McLuhan’s prefatory remarks in his major works invite the reader to skip and dip, to browse and peruse, according to the drift of the reader’s interest, rather than to read sequentially from first page to last. McLuhan’s popular works, like The Medium Is the Massage ([1967] 2001), are even more nonlinear; they are cut-up collages and juxtapositions of prose, quotations, and found images. By this “mosaic” method, McLuhan sought to bring “cool,” immersive and participatory values of new media to the traditionally “hot” print medium—that
is, to more fully involve the reader in meaning making (Cavell 2002, 126); but for our purposes here, his intent is not as significant as how critics and scholars interpreted his method and how they resorted to tropes that styled this method as that of a latter-day Victor Frankenstein. Critics described him as “irrational” (Crosby and Bond 1968, 51), as a case of “intellectual megalomania” (68), someone who uses “shockmanship” (190) and a “hodge-podge methodology” (51) not to write but rather to “paste-up” (118) “a mosaic of exhibits . . . assembled from widely separated fields” (74), in which everything becomes “grist for his mad, mod mill” (173); such critics could then dismiss his dubious research results as “science fiction” (174)—or even demonize them as “horrible mutations” (83).

To be sure, such criticisms often took issue not only with McLuhan’s experimental and unscholarly writing style, but also with his cult of personality as a maverick academic, a “theoretical guru” (Fekete [1977] 2005, 71) for the 1960s counterculture that grew more or less in step with McLuhan’s own fame: a counterculture galvanized by opposition to the American war in Vietnam and by radical student movements on both sides of the Atlantic. As this counterculture grew, networked, and diversified, it began to position itself as a “global underground” (Rycroft 1998, 230), partly through media strategies and cultural practices that openly acknowledged McLuhan’s influence and argued his importance.

The counterculture was heavily influenced by McLuhan in its radical and avant-garde cultural practices across a range of media and venues: from textual, art, and music production, to performance scenes, to family and community dwellings. McLuhan “was adopted by the counterculture. . . . To them, McLuhan’s slogans, like ‘the medium is the message,’ ‘hit us with telegraphic immediacy and the opacity of their clever, clever wordplay’” (Rycroft [2011] 2016, 111, quoting Ferguson 1991, 73). According to counterculture archivist Alastair Gordon, McLuhan’s 

*Understanding Media* became “one of the canonical texts of the period. Its unorthodox views on space, community, and communications had resonance with a generation that had come of age watching television” (2008, 167). A multimedia collective called The Company of Us (USCO) linked McLuhan’s “electronic tribalism” to mysticism and psychedelia in immersive art installations designed to induce sensory overload, like *Tie-Dyed Cave* (1966): a small room with its walls wholly covered in fabrics tie-dyed with fractal patterns. In 1966, various counterculture events were “organized on

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McLuhanesque principles” (Cavell 2002, 230). These included happenings in New York, a “three-day sensorium” in San Francisco (Crosby and Bond 1968, 103), and a Vancouver festival that included a performance by the psychedelic rock band Jefferson Airplane (Cavell 2002, 230). As Cavell reminds us, urban Canada in this period was a “countercultural locus par excellence” (and not only because it represented a haven for draft dodgers), with places such as Halifax and Vancouver garnering international attention for artistic programs and events developed within the context of McLuhan’s media theories” (103). At New York’s Electric Circus, light and projection shows accompanied live music by acts like the Velvet Underground; one visitor described its audiovisual chaos as “a place where Marshall McLuhan meets Sigmund Freud” (quoted in Gordon 2008, 57). Another club, Cerebrum, was more aggressively experimental: “participants sucked on mint-flavored ice balls and gathered in circles as guides squirted cream over their intertwined fingers. A weather balloon was filled with helium and released into the air. People gathered beneath the silken fabric of a parachute and waved their arms up and down. . . . Time called it a ‘McLuhan geisha house’” (Gordon 2008, 57). And “for the Yippies”—an anarchistic group of avant-garde pranksters-as-protesters—“understanding media after McLuhan was a crucial weapon—they relied on distortion of all forms of media” to advance “an alternative way of life” that would “fuse an instinctive comprehension of the workings of mass communication with direct action” (Rycroft [2011] 2016, 133).

As in the counterculture’s performance practices, so in its textual and media work was McLuhan a legible presence. “McLuhan’s books and periodicals were advertised in most underground publications,” writes Simon Rycroft, and his ideas “informed the editorial policy of some underground papers not least because of scattered references to him throughout” ([2011] 2016, 115). In New York, a video cooperative called Global Village “explicitly used McLuhan’s theories in an attempt to undermine the power of the mass media” (155). Many counterculture media producers read McLuhan as an advocate of art as politics, and of the radical democratization of media, and consequently misread his “global village” not as the “whirlwind of violence” he thought it, but as a techno-Utopian “call for retribalization,” a premise “to reinvent the human community” (Gordon 2008, 145). McLuhan’s work informed the tactics whereby the underground press represented the counterculture as a “global underground” (Rycroft 1998, 230).
McLuhan was also sometimes a counterculture participant. His own periodicals, like *Counterblast*, strongly suggest “some form of an aesthetic dialogue between the underground press and McLuhan” (Rycroft [2011] 2016, 132). His work was included in an avant-garde anthology, *Astronauts of Inner-Space*, which also included contributions by Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs (Cavell 2002, 103). McLuhan’s book *The Medium Is the Massage*, in its medium-challenging visual experimentation—its textual nonlinearity and bold photomontage (127)—both reflects and courts the counterculture; its notion that photocopying lets the individual become her or his own publisher (McLuhan and Fiore [1967] 2001, 123) was taken to heart by the underground press (Rycroft 1993, 55, 194). Whatever his personal reservations about the counterculture, McLuhan showed serious interest in and engagement with it, which likely did not help his already dubious standing among academic colleagues.

But in engaging with the counterculture, McLuhan was engaging with his students—after all, his interest in *their* interests was what had brought him to popular culture in the first place, and now students were a big part of the counterculture. A 1964 “McLuhan Festival” held at UBC included work by USCO, as part of a labyrinthine, multimedia and multisensory environment that, as Tom Wolfe told it, guided participants “to understand the ‘tactile communication’ McLuhan was talking about” (quoted in Genosko 2005, 168). Students and scholars alike recognized McLuhan’s countercultural connections. McLuhan’s students at the University of Toronto were labelled “McLuhanatics” (Bessai 1999). A 1967 *Newsweek* story on McLuhan quoted a student who “likens reading McLuhan to taking LSD. ‘It can turn you on,’ she says. ‘LSD doesn’t mean anything until you consume it—likewise McLuhan’” (quoted in Crosby and Bond 1968, 166). McLuhan responded to this claim in his interview with *Playboy*: “I’m flattered to hear my work described as hallucinogenic, but I suspect that some of my academic critics find me a bad trip” (1969, 66). Umberto Eco criticized as “obvious” McLuhan’s main idea that “every new technology imposes changes in the social body” ([1986] 2005, 129) but praised his “visionary rhetoric” as “stimulating, high-spirited, and crazy. There is some good in McLuhan,” writes Eco, “as there is in banana smokers and hippies” (130).

McLuhan’s world-historical figure of “electronic man,” his “mosaic” style, his relationship to the counterculture, and his engagements with other audiences outside academia (especially the advertising industry)
earned him a portfolio of both subcultural capital and political capital unique among academics; but the countercultural context of his public intellectual life also supplied mainstream journalism with sensational images of technologized radicalism that helped to cement the popular discourse of technology as a Frankenstein monster and the image of McLuhan as a mad scientist out to anatomize and reanimate the media—to “seek the cure in the disease,” as the *New Yorker* put it (quoted in Crosby and Bond 1968, 119). Another *New Yorker* article criticized McLuhan for leaving his subject “in the end (despite the aphoristic crackle) more dead than alive” (quoted in Crosby and Bond 1968, 201). The introduction to McLuhan’s *Playboy* interview lists some vividly figured press vilifications and demonizations of McLuhan: as a “guru of the boob tube,” a “metaphysical wizard possessed by a spatial sense of madness,” and as a “high priest of popthink who conducts a Black Mass for dilettantes before the altar of historical determinism” (1969, 53). Invoking a monster character long associated, like the vampire, with *Frankenstein*, a 1967 article on McLuhan in *Senior Scholastic* rhetorically asks, in its headline, “Will TV put a zombie in your future?” (quoted in Crosby and Bond 1968). And Toffler’s bestselling 1970 book *Future Shock* harbours an important debt to McLuhan that the book works hard to disavow. Toffler (without a hint of self-reflexive irony) dismisses McLuhan as a “Super-Simplifier” (1970, 361), and yet the dismissal seems disingenuous, even unthankful, since Toffler’s hugely popular book owes a clear debt to McLuhan, citing his work repeatedly in building its own rather simplistic argument about technology as a “great, growling engine of change” (25) in need simply of “taming” (428).

McLuhan focused much of his work on television, and the period’s journalism and popular culture correspondingly associated TV with his theories to parse them: “No other medium . . . captured so well the technophilia and technophobia of the period, as well as McLuhan’s agonistic response to media generally”; the feedback between McLuhan and the counterculture (the former furnishing theory that the latter put into practice that the former then theorized further) thus exacerbated how television was perceived to “encapsulate the most liberating and most threatening aspects of the electronic revolution” (Cavell 2002, 191). In the process, both McLuhan and counterculture became icons or symptoms of this “revolution”; both were sensationalized as images of “tuned in” radicalism that in turn amplified McLuhan’s own Frankensteinian sense of technology
(and fostered the erroneous idea that McLuhan was himself a radical). We still hear a suggestive period example of this discourse in The Stooges’ proto-punk single “Search and Destroy,” in which Iggy Pop snarls: “Look out honey, ’cause I’m using technology” (1973). Pop invokes the discourse of technology in the context of a warning, and the fast-tempo drumming and distorted guitars amplify the ominous import of this lyric. The listener in the know, furthermore, understands Iggy’s warning as a coded reference to the excessive recreational and often performative drug use for which he became notorious, and which itself enacts a Frankensteinian “techno-Romanticism” (Reynolds 1999) that we will take up in chapter 7.

Having developed a discourse of technology that dramatized its Frankensteinian pretext and globalized its scope, McLuhan and his media theory have been popularized globally in a multimedia range of adaptations that, in turn, further amplify that discourse to such an extent that, today, we cannot use the word technology without conjuring the spectres of both *Frankenstein* and McLuhan. It is to a selection of particularly significant adaptations that the next chapter turns, as the period’s McLuhan-infused counterculture welcomed to its Toronto scene a Virginian draft dodger with literary ambitions, who saw the literary potential and dystopian implications of McLuhan’s claim that new media turn “the real world into science fiction” ([1964] 2003, 54–55): an expatriate by the name of William Gibson.