5. Monstrous Adaptations

McLuhanesque *Frankensteins* in *Neuromancer* and *Videodrome*

William Gibson credits Canada’s counterculture scene in the 1960s as a formative milieu for his science fiction generally, and he credits McLuhan specifically as a source for his own celebrated vision of “cyberspace” (quoted in Rapatzikou 2004, 228). Gibson’s 1984 novel *Neuromancer* and David Cronenberg’s 1983 film *Videodrome*, two widely popular “cult” texts from the early 1980s, typify and establish a pattern of adaptation in Canadian popular culture that amplifies and dramatizes McLuhan’s Frankensteinian discourse of technology. *Neuromancer* narrates a picaresque story of cyberspace, cyborgs, and incipient artificial intelligence, set in a dystopian, free-market future that has become an “unsupervised playground for technology” (Gibson 1984, 11). *Videodrome*, a film about corporate media research and development that goes monstrously, murderously wrong, bases its plot on *Frankenstein*, and, what is more, the film includes a character who is an open parody of McLuhan. Both of these texts adapt *Frankenstein* in several key respects; both, in the process, refer significantly to McLuhan. Consequently, both texts articulate and have further popularized the discourse of technology as a McLuhanesque “Frankenpheme.” These texts’ adaptation practices have been amplified in turn by adaptations of these texts in their own right; they have also supplied popular culture with a wealth of samples and terms, the most familiar of which may be “cyberspace” itself. In addition, Gibson and Cronenberg have repeated, with variations, this practice of McLuhanesque
Frankenstein adaptation in their other works, notably Gibson’s 1996 novel Idoru and virtually every Cronenberg movie before Videodrome (as well as a few since). Furthermore, other works by other Canadian popular cultural producers have propagated this pattern of McLuhanesque Frankenstein adaptation, in print literature and other media and performance practices (which the next three chapters will turn to).

“Real motive problem, with an AI”: The Formation of Frankensteinian Plots

Neuromancer, Gibson’s debut novel and the first in a series known as the Sprawl trilogy, appeared in 1984 to immediate acclaim. Neuromancer won the genre’s major awards, the Hugo and the Nebula; it has been credited with envisioning—and naming—a graphically rich Internet, “cyberspace,” at a time when the rudimentary Internet was strictly DOS and text-based; and—after helping to introduce and popularize a science fiction (SF) subgenre known as “cyberpunk”—it has since become more or less the canonical novel of contemporary science fiction as such (Brouillette 2002). It is widely taught in SF courses, it has stayed in print since its first publication, perennially drawing new readerships, and it has been widely translated, into other languages and into other media, as a graphic novel and as a computer game—though not film, as yet.

Neuromancer is basically a high-tech heist caper: the novel adopts something of the style and tone of hard-boiled detective fiction and film noir to project an all-too-plausible free-market future of totalized corporate dominion, a future society polarized between a fabulously wealthy elite and various underclasses of freelancers, subcontractors, hustlers, and criminals, in which any recognizable middle class and nation-state governance are conspicuously absent. The most prominent police presence in this setting is the “Turing Registry,” a global law enforcement agency that exercises legal “flexibility,” under the international treaties that govern it, to suppress research on artificial intelligence and quarantine its results (1984, 162). A computer hacker named Case and a surgically weaponized mercenary named Molly are hired by an ex-military officer, Armitage, to break into the compound of a corporate dynasty in order to steal an artificial intelligence (AI). The AI is masterminding its own theft as an escape, and at the novel’s end the AI unites with its heretofore concealed
sibling AI and then fuses with the virtual world, known alternately as “the matrix” or “cyberspace” (51).

The novel’s plot focuses on the self-discovery and liberation of one such AI; this storyline in itself cements Neuromancer’s Frankensteinian framework. The discourse of artificial intelligence is definitively Frankensteinian: it presents a contemporary image of nonhuman sentience, agency, and autonomy, and today it is increasingly posited less as a fiction or hypothesis than as a looming likelihood, if not an already emergent phenomenon (Gunkel 2012). Since World War II and Alan Turing’s famous test, in which an interviewer’s inability to identify the interviewee as human or machine signals the advent of AI, images of AI have tended to take shape in the context of computing and to assume a Frankensteinian aspect as a technological threat of sometimes apocalyptic global magnitude. From Hal to Her—from the spacecraft computer in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) to Spike Jonze’s 2013 film about a sentient mobile operating system—and from the apocalyptic brinksmanship of the ICBM launch computer in WarGames (1983) to the postapocalyptic, machine-ruled worlds of The Terminator (1984) and The Matrix (1999): such images of ascendant and dominant AI echo not only the earlier Frankensteinian images of manufactured, nonhuman subjects like those in Karel Čapek’s 1920 stage play R.U.R., which invented and popularized the word “robot” (Hitchcock 2007, 135), but that of Frankenstein’s creature itself, which remains popular culture’s founding figure of human-made sentience and agency. In Neuromancer, the fact that the AI has turned on its creators, that it plots to escape its confinement, and that it is a divided creature seeking the merger of its separated selves, Wintermute and Neuromancer: these three major plot points reflect the analogous plot points in Frankenstein’s “skeleton story” of a manufactured creature, which turns on its creator and desires a mate like itself.

The AI in question is a double entity, its own doppelgänger, a composite of two AIs made by the same creator. The name Wintermute, itself a composite of noun and adjective, is evocative of key details from Frankenstein: the noun winter conjures both the Arctic setting that frames the story of Frankenstein (and, incidentally, the season with which Canada is popularly identified); the word mute (which can be read in this name, somewhat ambiguously, as either adjective or noun) suggests both the pointedly low profile that the AI maintains throughout the plot and the inarticulate
characterization of Frankenstein’s monster that was made famous in its stage and screen adaptations. The other AI’s name, Neuromancer, is a pun on “necromancer,” the title of that eminently Faustian and Frankensteinian figure: the magician who practices communication with or summoning of the dead. The climax of the plot takes place as the speaking aloud of a certain code word, “a true name” (1984, 262), which triggers the synthesizing fusion of Wintermute and Neuromancer into “something else,” something undefined yet described as nothing less than all of cyberspace itself, “the sum total of the works, the whole show” (268–69). Significantly, the “true name” is never divulged to the reader, and this withholding of that name, together with the coy refusal of the merged AI to name itself, echoes the equally significant namelessness of Frankenstein’s monster. The merger of the AI with cyberspace itself dramatizes “the singularity”: a theoretical tipping point at which technology becomes self-aware and begins to exert its own agency over the pace and scale of further technological change (Kurzweil 2005).

While the AI drives the plot, most of the main characters are also high-tech cyborgs of one kind or another. The heist team’s muscle, Molly, has undergone surgery to implant retractable razors in her fingers. The team’s leader, Armitage, turns out to be a personality that the scheming AI has scripted and grafted onto the salvaged body of a soldier named Corto: “Wintermute had built something called Armitage into a catatonic fortress named Corto” (1984, 193). Towards the end of the novel, the factitious personality that is Armitage begins to crack, endangering the heist. Most minor characters are also spectacular cyborgs: one’s eyes are described as “vatgrown sea-green Nikon transplants” (21); another has “a dozen spikes of microsoft protruding from the socket behind his ear” (57).

A prominent supporting role is played by other AIs, especially a “ROM personality construct,” a crude simulation of AI based on the recording and recoding of a dead man’s personality: “It was disturbing to think of the Flatline as a construct, a hardwired ROM cassette replicating a dead man’s skills, obsessions, knee-jerk responses” (76–77). The “Dixie Flatline” construct, as a recording of a deceased person capable of live interaction, bears a strong similarity to the character of Brian O’Blivion in Videodrome, as will be discussed below. In an ironic dialogue with the main character, Case, the heist team’s hacker, the “Flatline”—which is a rudimentary AI, incapable of autonomy or persistent memory—reminds Case of the
profoundly nonhuman and inscrutable otherness of AI thinking: “Real motive problem, with an AI. Not human, see? . . . And you can’t get a handle on it” (131). The construct then warns Case that the opacity of an AI’s “motive” is what makes its capacity to achieve agency and autonomy a Frankensteinian menace: “The minute, I mean the nanosecond, that one starts figuring out ways to make itself smarter, Turing’ll wipe it. . . . Every AI ever built has an electro-magnetic shotgun wired to its forehead” (132). The apocalyptic threat in the deep background here is that of Victor Frankenstein’s imagined “race of devils.” Hence the Turing police of Gibson’s imagined world: a police force exclusively for surveilling and suppressing AI research and development, authorized to suppress or terminate any such work that threatens to achieve autonomy or to get loose into the world’s digital network.

Which is exactly what ultimately happens in *Neuromancer*. In ambiguous relation to Slusser’s notion of the “Frankenstein barrier” as science fiction’s narrative mainstay—that barrier being the foreclosure on future possibilities by present contingencies—*Neuromancer* holds out an open end in which the AI at large may or may not signify the radical technological change of a “singularity” kind: “How are things different?” Case asks the escaped AI. “You running the world now?” The AI answers, “Things aren’t different. Things are just things” (1984, 270). And yet immediately after this assertion, the AI reports having made contact with another AI from a distant planet. While such a startling suggestion could mean profound social change, it never comes up again in Gibson’s novels, and thus remains an arch and understated instance of the Frankenstein barrier narrative strategy.

*Videodrome*, in contrast, represents a narrative that much more graphically and less ambiguously enforces the Frankenstein barrier, even though in most other respects the film is profoundly ambiguous, and justly celebrated by critics for this depth of ambiguity, which greatly augments its effectiveness as a horror film. *Videodrome* adapts *Frankenstein* in terms of premise, plot, characterization, and several significant cinematic strategies, in the process unfolding a bizarre, quintessentially postmodernist story that concerns technological backfire, McLuhan’s ideas, and media imperialism.

In the film, the Hollywood star James Woods plays Max Renn, a TV station owner who is drawn to a mysterious TV program that specializes
in sadomasochism and torture porn; this program is called Videodrome. Renn starts hallucinating after watching it and looks for answers from Brian O’Blivion, who claims to be the inventor of the Videodrome “signal.” But O’Blivion remains enigmatic: he makes cryptic pronouncements about media, in clear parodic echo of McLuhan: “television is reality, and reality is less than television.” Furthermore, O’Blivion only ever appears on a TV screen: it turns out that O’Blivion has died prior to the plot’s start, leaving ambiguous and uncanny the nature of his dialogues with Renn and others. Then Renn meets Barry Convex, CEO of the Spectacular Optical corporation, “an enthusiastic global citizen that makes eye-glasses for the third world and missile guidance systems for NATO”—as well as Videodrome. As Renn’s grasp on reality slips increasingly into surreal, grotesque hallucination, he becomes a murderous pawn in a struggle between O’Blivion’s techno-utopian “Cathode Ray Mission,” which serves free TV access to the homeless, and Spectacular Optical, which plans to broadcast the Videodrome program as part of a corporate plot to transmit the Videodrome signal across North America. Ultimately turning on Convex and those who would “program” him to do their will—by slotting videotapes into his abdomen and by empowering him to turn his own hand into a “flesh gun”—Renn finally flees to an abandoned ship where he destroys himself in a self-immolating apotheosis of “the new flesh.” Or does he? The screen goes black before we hear the “flesh gun” shot fired.

Videodrome represents a version of the Frankenstein skeleton story that is set in the contexts of contemporary media and media theory. O’Blivion is a transparently McLuhanesque “mad scientist,” and—in keeping with the film’s Frankensteinian imagery of doubling and doppelgängers—he shares the “creator” role with Convex. O’Blivion claims responsibility for creating the Videodrome signal, but it is Convex who claims credit for its production and who proceeds to “program” Renn to assassinate O’Blivion’s daughter, heir to his legacy and the Cathode Ray Mission. But—in perfect creaturely form—Renn rebels, maiming Convex’s henchman and murdering Convex before seeking refuge and possibly suicide in a corner of the ship that is, significantly, on fire.

The plot within the plot—the Spectacular Optical corporation’s strategic plan to widely deploy the Videodrome signal—remains strangely vague: to judge by what Convex and his henchman, the broadcast tech expert Harlan, tell Renn, the corporation’s vaguely media-imperialist plan
is either to incapacitate the North American populace into hallucinatory stupor or to incite it to violent mobilization. Either way, Spectacular Optical’s plan amounts to a mass zombification of the North American television audience, and as such it exemplifies the tradition of “technological reductions” of the *Frankenstein* story.

In an early scene in the film, Renn watches O’Blivion first explain Videodrome in McLuhanesque terms and then address Renn personally, as the medium grows grotesquely monstrous: the television set from which O’Blivion speaks to Renn starts inflating and deflating as though breathing, and the screen protrudes towards Renn as he watches. This scene is a “new media” version of the scene in *Frankenstein* where the creature reads of its origins in the papers left in Frankenstein’s coat pocket. That scene shows the importance of media as a theme in Shelley’s own text, which dramatized an Enlightenment belief in the power of narrative, and textual representation generally, to produce interpersonal understanding and thus social change. This is one way to read Walton’s ultimate encounter with the creature and his ensuing decision to call off the fatal Arctic expedition to return home. But in *Videodrome*, film and video invert that power: these new media become tools for corporate social control—consumerist colonization and domination—through affective intensity, addictive serialization, and domestic distribution, techniques that mobilize consumerism and fragment audiences into isolated viewers.

Another Frankensteinian plot element is the interpretive ambiguity and unreliability of its events and its end, effected by a cinematic equivalent of Shelley’s nesting of narratives within one another: in the film, the focalizing point of view is always that of Renn, who, as William Beard notes, “is present in every scene of the movie”; Beard quotes Cronenberg’s description of *Videodrome* as a “first-person film,” in which “we get no information that Max himself doesn’t get” (1983, 50). This constant focalization through Renn’s point of view echoes the similar but easily overlooked focalization of *Frankenstein*, which is wholly focalized through the point of view of the ship captain Walton, whose letters to his sister frame the narratives then told successively by Victor Frankenstein and the creature. Just as Walton’s focalizing perspective leaves unanswered the extent of his participation, interference, or accuracy in recounting his own story and those he hears, so does *Videodrome*’s focalization leave unresolvedly ambiguous which events in the film actually happen and which Renn hallucinates.
One effect of this focalization is an apprehension of the postmodern sublime: the uncertainty about what one sees and how far one can trust what one sees. Not just Renn but the very film audience itself is left in doubt over what is real, left to ponder the extent to which reality is a matter of perception and imagination. The abysmal ambiguity of Cronenberg’s resituating of *Frankenstein* hinges on popular culture’s perennial anxieties of new media technologies, peculiarly Canadian concerns regarding media imperialism, and, not least, McLuhan’s media theory.

**Spectres of McLuhan: Learning to Live in a “Strange New World”**

Both Gibson and Cronenberg borrow significantly from *Frankenstein* and McLuhan’s media theory, and, just as significantly, they pair these sources in order to figure technology as monstrous and globalized.

One of the most striking and celebrated features of *Neuromancer* is its durably influential envisioning of “cyberspace” as “a consensual hallucination . . . a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system” (1984, 51); this vision has since been heralded as a fictional anticipation of the World Wide Web, if not the Internet as such. Yet as Gibson recalls, his conception of cyberspace developed less in a pre-Internet context than in a post-McLuhan context.

McLuhan’s influence is clear in the novel itself and in commentary by and about Gibson. In a 1999 article, Derek Foster identified some conceptual “linkages between the fictional musings of Gibson and the nonfictional reflections of . . . McLuhan” (66). As of that writing, Foster says that he “know[s] of no acknowledgment by Gibson that he has even read McLuhan” (70)—but in a subsequent interview with Tatiani Rapatzikou, Gibson confirms this creative debt, citing McLuhan’s influence, especially over his idea of cyberspace, which he describes as a “McLuhanesque post-Orwellian television universe” (quoted in Rapatzikou 2004, 228). For Gibson, cyberspace is not an image of a utopian “open web,” it is a McLuhanesque “global village” of digital disruption and dystopia, of surveillance, securitization, sabotage, and subversion, all organized by corporations, not states, as the major controlling powers. The controversy that erupted in 2013 over the widespread practice of online spying on citizens by many state intelligence agencies, and over the cooperation and complicity of major technology firms and services in this practice,
has given new clout to McLuhan’s and Gibson’s dystopian projections of digitally networked and globalized society.

On close reading, the novel readily demonstrates the influence of McLuhan’s media ecology that Gibson has acknowledged. In one scene in the novel, Case objects to the AI “reading” his mind, to which the AI replies by alluding to the theory of typographic literacy that McLuhan elaborates in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*: “Minds aren’t read. See, you’ve still got the paradigms print gave you, and you’re barely print-literate” (1984, 170). McLuhan’s model of technological revolutions also informs this scene, and, perhaps more clearly, a scene set in Istanbul, where a niche industry of “letter-writers” who work on “old voiceprinters” suggest to the itinerant protagonist Case that “the written word still enjoyed a certain prestige here. It was a sluggish country” (88).

And McLuhan’s dystopian model of the “global village” looms behind Gibson’s fictional conglomeries of mobile capital, media simulacra, and ecological ruin. *Neuromancer*’s opening scene describes “the glare of the television sky” over “drifting shoals of white styrofoam” (6). For the protagonist, Case, electronic cyberspace and pharmaceutical stimulants often function as interchangeable fixes (16), dangerous supplements alike. Like Cronenberg’s *Videodrome*, *Neuromancer* figures its Frankensteinian protagonists as model schizoid consumer-subjects, navigating the economically uneven and ecologically unstable ground of transnational capital’s “global village.” The novel’s action globe-trotts from a Japanese black market to the eastern seaboard of the United States, from Istanbul to an elite tourist retreat in orbit around Earth. The action thus also navigates between a representative constellation of financial centres and the technologized wastelands at their peripheries, and between the physical and virtual worlds as well. Conspicuously, and perhaps presciently, *Neuromancer* downplays or even omits the names and functions of the nation-states that ostensibly host the novel’s main urban settings—Japan, Turkey, the United States. In *Neuromancer*, the ruling powers in his projected world-system are transnational corporations, not nations.

In this context, *Neuromancer* becomes legible as a fictional staging of the volatile global village, in its extrapolation of McLuhan’s projections of televised, computerized, and “corporate” global connectivity. Moreover, in the process of projecting a hypermediatized and fully privatized global village, Gibson adapts to the mode of fiction the kind of theorizing and
extrapolating that McLuhan did in a nonfiction mode, and he consequently furnishes a fictional reworking of McLuhan’s own main thesis: that technologies, as extensions—or supplements—of human abilities, produce distinct social environments and subjectivities ([1967] 2001, 26)—or, in short, that the medium is the message. That Gibson’s novel has become the canonical text of science fiction since the neoliberal turn around 1980 means it has not only fictionalized but also further amplified and popularized McLuhan’s ideas among a global audience of science fiction readers, critics, and scholars.

Gibson’s reworking of McLuhan’s theory of media ecology is evident in a couple of significant lines from the opening chapter, which introduces the novel’s dystopian setting not in a scene of the neo-feudal corporate financescape that governs it, but in a scene set in the underground counterpart of that financescape: a Japanese demimonde called Night City. The first salient line is that which opens the novel itself, a line that immediately evokes the specter of McLuhan by association with the medium he most famously and extensively theorized. “The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel” (1984, 3).Shortly after this memorable opening line, Night City is described by Case as “a deliberately unsupervised playground for technology itself” (11). As described above, the hideous progeny of this totally technologized milieu is a ubiquitously cybernetic populace, a carnivalesque crowd of spectacular cyborgs whose members each, in different ways, blur the nominal and unstable boundary between organism and mechanism, between ethnoscape and technoscape. Like the AI and Armitage, most characters in Neuromancer are posthuman: factitious, sometimes self-made hybrids of organic life and technology run amok. These characters animate the image of the setting as a “playground for technology,” an image to be discussed in detail in the next section.

 Likewise, with its juxtaposition of vivid grotesquerie and knowing reference to Toronto’s nationally pivotal media and finance sectors, Videodrome dramatizes McLuhan’s claim that new media are turning “the real world into science fiction” ([1964] 2003, 54–55). The film depicts new media—which, at the time of the film’s cinematic release in 1983, meant videotape and computers—as technologies of globalization that serve the imperialist aspirations of multinational corporations. Moreover, these technologies are depicted as grotesque and horrific: monstrous in and of themselves,
and in their effects on their users. As William Beard puts it, “the ‘organicization’ of technology—the ‘breathing’ cassettes and TV sets—acts to transfer technology into the intimate and personal realm of the body” (2006, 133–34). Videodrome horrifically dramatizes two of McLuhan’s main ideas by figuring their monstrous hybridization: the medium is the message, as becomes evident in the film’s literalization of O’Blivion’s claim that “reality is less than television”; and, moreover, the content of new media is not merely old media, as McLuhan often claimed ([1964] 2003, 19)—the content is, more vitally, the user her- or himself, as we learn in different characters’ recurring claims to herald “the new flesh.” And as will be discussed below, similarly Frankensteinian figures of other new media, like computers and “virtual reality,” preoccupy other Cronenberg films, notably Scanners and eXistenZ.

As Beard and other critics recognize, Videodrome is not only an exemplar of postmodernist filmmaking, it is also knowledgeable enough about contemporary theory, especially McLuhan’s media theory, to satirize such theory in the film itself: “The brutally hilarious strategy of Videodrome is to take media theorists like Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard completely at their word, to overliteralize their claims for the ubiquitous mediazation of the world” (Shaviro, quoted in Beard 2006, 127). The pivotal figure of this satire on both media business and media theory is the character of Professor Brian O’Blivion himself. O’Blivion is a very edgy parody of McLuhan, perhaps scripted a bit too close to the bone: not only does O’Blivion echo McLuhan’s ideas and public persona as a media “prophet,” but, like the historical McLuhan, the fictional O’Blivion also suffers a brain tumour. Unlike McLuhan’s, O’Blivion’s tumour kills him, and O’Blivion hypothesizes its pathology as a side effect of exposure to the Videodrome signal itself. Given that the Videodrome signal is an outcome of O’Blivion’s media research, the implication is a satirical comment on the lethal practicality of ostensibly abstract theory.

As mentioned in the preceding discussion of the film’s plot and Frankensteinian intertextuality, O’Blivion is a character who only appears in the film according to a double mediation: that is, he only appears on television screens within the frame of the film; the actor playing him (Jack Creley) never occupies a set or location with the other actors. We first meet O’Blivion at a third remove of mediation, when, in a scene that takes place on a TV talk show, he is introduced as “media prophet Professor
Brian O’Blivion” and appears as a television set gets wheeled onto the set of the talk show. Prompted by the host, O’Blivion makes cryptic, theoretical statements and offers this explanation of why he’s on the set only as a set: “the television screen has become the retina of the mind’s eye. That’s why I refuse to appear on television, except on television.” Parked centre stage on the set, between the interviewer and the protagonists, O’Blivion looks uncannily from one speaker to another as though he is present on the set.

O’Blivion’s every appearance in Videodrome doubles the form of the film itself, mediatizing its cinematic frame by inserting a second, video frame within it; the film often exploits this formal doubling for mise en abyme effects that heighten its disorienting efforts. In what is maybe the film’s most famous scene, which marks the film’s decisive departure from realism into surrealism, Renn watches a taped recording of O’Blivion that begins to address Renn directly, as the TV set starts heaving and making breathing, hissing sounds, veins rippling across its wood-paneled surfaces. And later, Renn meets O’Blivion’s daughter-turned-curator Bianca (played by Sonja Smits), who explains her father’s uncanny afterlife as an archive of videotapes:

Bianca: This is him. This is all that’s left.
Max: What are you talking about?
Bianca: Brian O’Blivion died quietly on an operating table eleven months ago.
Max: The brain problem?
Bianca: The Videodrome problem. You have it, too.
Max: But he was on that panel show with me.
Bianca: On tape. He made thousands of them, sometimes three or four a day. I keep him alive as best I can. He had so much to offer. My father helped to create Videodrome. He saw it as the next phase in the evolution of man as a technological animal. When he realized what his partners were going to use it for, he tried to take it away from them and they killed him, quietly. At the end he was convinced that public life on television was more real than private life in the flesh. He wasn’t afraid to let his body die. (1983)

This explanatory plot twist scrambles what sense the audience has made of the diegetic narrative time up to this point, and it renders O’Blivion’s seeming conversations with Renn comprehensible only as uncanny addresses
from some monstrously remediated afterlife. O’Blivion embodies an uncanny doubling: Is he alive or dead? Good guy or bad guy? Present or absent? Corporeal or cathode? Inspired or insane? Public or private? Real or imagined? Himself or someone else? Both or neither? Only a few of these questions receive any answer in the scene that presents the “real” O’Blivion, embodied as the tape library, and these answers are at best speculative and provisional; the other questions contribute to the radical ambiguity of the whole film. Moreover, O’Blivion’s role as an explanatory “father-figure” (Beard 2006, 143) is doubled; he shares this role with Convex, whose corporate profiteering contrasts O’Blivion’s public-interest projects. In a few ways, then, O’Blivion acts as a referential doppelgänger, complementing Convex while citing not only McLuhan but also Glenn Gould, the Canadian pianist who gave up live performance to work exclusively in recordings.

O’Blivion’s totally mediatized appearance throughout the film, as an uncanny “talking head” on a TV screen, both parodies McLuhan’s ideas about television and gives a cyberpunk twist to the Frankensteinian film trope of the brain in a vat. One of McLuhan’s more sensational ideas, refracted throughout popular culture and especially in discourses of “virtual reality,” is the notion of subjectivity as a transferable kind of “software” that can be downloaded from a body and uploaded to a device: as I have discussed elsewhere (McCutcheon 2012), this notion has been widely fictionalized, dramatized, and theorized, for instance in the 1980s TV series *Max Headroom*, the 2000s TV series *Battlestar Galactica*, Cory Doctorow’s 2003 novel *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, and in the discourses of “virtual reality,” for example Derrick de Kerckhove’s *The Skin of Culture* (1995) and Christopher Dewdney’s book *Last Flesh* (1998). In 1971, McLuhan alludes to both television and incipient computing in his statement that “what is very little understood about the electronic age is that it angelizes man, disembodies him. Turns him into software” (quoted in Benedetti and DeHart 1996, 79). McLuhan later elaborated on this idea of disembodied remediation in a 1978 article: “When you are ‘on the telephone’ or ‘on the air,’ you do not have a physical body. In these media, the sender is sent and is instantaneously present everywhere. The disembodied user extends to all those who are recipients of electric information” (quoted in Benedetti and DeHart 1996, 80). Hence, in *Neuromancer*, Case’s technological transcendence of corporeal existence in his flights through the
datascapes of cyberspace and his grudging returns to mere “meat” existence, in “the prison of his own flesh” (1984, 6). Hence, also, Videodrome’s Brian O’Blivion, who only appears onscreen within a second, embedded screen. Both characters’ full withdrawal into media systems dramatize the distinctively McLuhanesque double movement of both a transnational spacing—the remediated “extension of our own bodies and senses”—and a technological doubling—the “lease [of] our central nervous systems to various corporations” (McLuhan [1964] 2003, 99–100).

As Cavell has argued (2002, xiii), McLuhan directed his major research questions to contexts of space, of surroundings, of environment; hence, for instance, his retroactive positioning as a founder of the field of “media ecology.” Through his thoroughly technologized existence, strictly “on television,” O’Blivion occupies a simultaneously indeterminate space—from where (and/or when) is he broadcasting?—and a closely confined space—the cathode-ray small screen. The revelatory scene that exposes O’Blivion’s fate as a video library is set in a high-ceilinged room, through which the camera pans across shelves full of tapes, suggesting both the professor’s encyclopedic knowledge and the extent of his media obsession. O’Blivion’s indeterminate redistribution problematizes the spatial dimension of electronic remediation as a globalized space: O’Blivion inhabits the “strange new world” in which “television is reality and reality is less than television,” a world evocative of McLuhan’s “global village,” an idea that figures in Videodrome as prominently as it does in Neuromancer.

While Neuromancer dramatizes the global village in a jet-setting plot that rockets the characters through the financescapes of late capital, Videodrome condenses the global village into the complementary characters of O’Blivion and Convex as figures of contrasting and conflicting globalization, the one dedicated charitably (albeit eccentrically) to the public interest, the other dedicated to profit and his shareholders. Cronenberg’s ironic portrayal of corporate “social responsibility” in Convex’s invocation of “global citizenship,” in Spectacular Optical’s corporate deployments of mass media, and in the implied unevenness of global development—portrayed here as a soft North America in conflict with the “rest of the world” turned “tough” and “savage”—all appear years ahead of the critical theories of globalization that gained currency over a decade later. O’Blivion warns Renn that he will “have to learn to live in a very
strange new world,” signifying the disoriented North America plotted by Spectacular Optical and modelled by McLuhan’s global village.

Cronenberg’s McLuhanesque commentary on globalization also emerges in the form and production of the film, in its extended satire on Canadian media culture and Canadian film in the global entertainment market. O’Blivion, as a parody of McLuhan, is a standout example of this satire. So are Renn and the station he works for. Introduced as a kind of opportunistic sleaze merchant, Renn satirizes the shift from cinema to home video taking place in the pornography industry at that time. The station where Renn works—“Civic TV”—is a thinly veiled parody of City TV, which (before its takeover by CTV) was a Toronto independent station whose varied programming included softcore porn on late-night weekend slots. Late in the film, Renn shoots a coworker named “Moses” (a cipher for City TV’s founder Moses Znaimer).

The movie’s satire on the Canadian media establishment also encompasses its globalizing trends. Renn enacts the kind of subjectivity that McLuhan posits as symptomatic of the “global village”: a kind of “programmable” subjectivity: “There’s nothing at all difficult about putting computers in the position where they will be able to conduct carefully orchestrated programing of the sensory life of whole populations. I know it sounds rather science-fictional” (McLuhan 1969, 72). Renn’s visceral programing and reprogramming via the repeated insertions of videotapes into his abdomen—at once suggestively sexual and suggestively cybernetic (recall that, at the time of the film’s release, magnetic tape was a standard storage medium for computer programs)—dramatizes and literalizes McLuhan’s claim that media programming could, in turn, program “whole populations”: “We could program five hours less of TV in Italy to promote the reading of newspapers during an election” (1969, 72). If O’Blivion has uncannily, ambiguously colonized the medium, Renn, conversely, is violently colonized by the medium, and so becomes, himself, a weaponized technology, as the repeated insertions of videotape over the course of the film give way to repeated withdrawals of a pistol that is mechanically and organically fused to Renn’s hand: a “flesh gun.” Inasmuch as the actor playing Renn, James Woods, is, in 1983, a relatively big Hollywood star, the actor’s performance in this film—which was financed by Canadian federal arts funding—lends a critical Canadian irony to Renn’s fate as the test subject for a transnational media empire.
Its Hollywood stars and Toronto set stage the global tensions faced by Canada’s film industry, between cultivating “Canadian content” and drawing foreign investment to “Hollywood north,” and the Spectacular Optical corporation, whose slogan is “keeping an eye on the world,” parodies the globalized business culture whose rhetoric of corporate “citizenship” contrasts its “enthusiastic” and amoral trade in a catalogue of symptomatic consumer and state technological goods: eyeglasses, weapons, and TV signal, which here also turns out to be a weapon.

Unsupervised Playgrounds: McLuhanesque Frankenphemes of Technology

The adaptations of Frankenstein and McLuhan in Neuromancer and Videodrome converge in articulations and images of technology that vividly illuminate its popular cultural construction and dissemination as a McLuhanesque Frankenpheme. Both texts depict settings that are replete with and even defined by media technologies; both texts’ plots pivot around figures and problems of autonomous technology; both texts’ main characters are stylized, grotesquely imagined cyborgs. Both texts explicitly use the word “technology,” too, and while these references are relatively few, they augment the texts’ more intensive and sustained representations of technology in general—and media technologies specifically—as simultaneously McLuhanesque and Frankensteinian.

Neuromancer includes five uses of the full word technology, five uses of the abbreviation “tech,” and two uses of “techno-” as a prefix. The “Panther Moderns” that help the heist crew steal the rudimentary, ROM-only AI “construct” are described as “nihilistic technofetishists” (1984, 59); the Japanese city of Chiba, where the novel opens, is described not only as an “unsupervised playground for technology” (11)—an image we’ll return to—but also as “a magnet for the Sprawl’s techno-criminal subcultures” (6). The slang abbreviation “tech” occurs five times. The Finn, an entrepreneur who provides privacy services—a pricey, scarce commodity in Gibson’s near future of ubiquitous surveillance—is introduced as “our tech here” (50). A subsequent scene includes “a trio of young office techs” (77). As a descriptor of certain characters, “tech” abbreviates not “technology” but “technician”; however, like the prefix “techno-,” which works adjectivally to describe certain social groups, the abbreviation “tech” allows an ambiguity that develops the novel’s cyberpunk setting and plot: the ambiguity
between tool and user, which makes fantastical cyborgs of most of the characters in the novel. Like Case’s physical, hard-wired connection to the console whereby he enters cyberspace, like Molly’s mercenary surgical augmentations, the abbreviation “tech” and the prefix “techno-” contribute to the construction of a fictional world in which late capital has radically blurred if not erased the traditional ontological boundary between human and machine.

The word technology itself contributes likewise to *Neuromancer*’s thoroughly cybernetic fictional world. What is distinctive about the novel’s use of the word technology is that it consistently situates technology as a novelty itself, as the cutting edge, as the prized object of unregulated or downright underground research and development. “If the technology had been available the Big Scientists would all have had sockets stuffed with microsofts” (59): here, Gibson adapts what would subsequently become one of the most globally powerful software brands (Microsoft) to describe a kind of data storage medium that interfaces with the user’s own body, via “sockets” described elsewhere as surgical implants in the cranium (today we might imagine this as something like USB ports set into the base of a person’s skull—but this analogy is, no doubt, already en route to obsolescence). In the conspicuously uncertain history of the novel’s premise lurks one backstory about a world war that involved nuclear weapons and other kinds of weapons; as one character recalls, the war had “wasted a fair bit of patriotic young flesh in order to test some new technology” (35). Reminiscent of McLuhan’s claim about technology prompting war (McLuhan and Fiore 1968, 98), this passage shares with the “microsofts” passage a sense of technology as what is new, what is next, what is under development. Something of this sense of technology as the object and laboratory of capitalist futures also emerges in the “playground” image, and in a scene where Case pays a second visit to the Finn and feels as if the jungle of junk equipment and devices that camouflages the Finn’s place of business “had grown somehow,” forming “a crystalline essence of discarded technology, flowering secretly in the Sprawl’s waste places” (72).

The image of “discarded technology, flowering secretly” evokes not only technology’s novelty in Gibson’s prose but also, moreover, its uncanny, almost organic autonomy. This passing description thus foreshadows the emergence of artificial intelligence as a major actor in—and object of—the plot; it also amplifies the sense of technology’s almost self-aware agency in
The opening description of Chiba’s “Night City” black market as “a deliberately unsupervised playground for technology itself” (1984, 6). Like the scene of the breathing, beckoning TV set in Videodrome, this image of the “unsupervised playground” effectively encapsulates Neuromancer’s overall representation of technology as a McLuhanesque Frankenpheme. The simile situates technology as a kind of child by invoking the image of the “playground,” and the adjective “unsupervised” suggests the absence of regulation that is typical of neoliberal ideology, laced with a hint of danger, as if the unmonitored status of this free-market playground could mean harm for who or what plays there, or as if who or what plays there could grow to bring harm to the wider world. The adjective “itself” following technology furthers the fetishistic sense of technology here as autonomous agent, as a character—arguably, indeed, as the true main character of Neuromancer.

Videodrome—a genre-bending film, at once “body horror” and cyberpunk—similarly articulates and visualizes technology as a McLuhanesque Frankenpheme. The words “media” and “technology” each occur only once in the film script, both with reference to O’Blivion, who is introduced first, in the TV interview scene, as a “media prophet.” Later, in the aforementioned scene in O’Blivion’s video library, his daughter Bianca explains to Renn: “My father helped to create Videodrome. He saw it as part of the evolution of man as a technological animal.” Bianca’s reference to “evolution” evokes the epochal narrative that runs through McLuhan’s theory of the “ages” of different media, such as those of “typographical man” and “electronic man.”

If the script’s articulation of technology is sparing, though, the film’s visualization of it is pervasive, spectacular, and exceedingly grotesque. The main plot is driven wholly by the development and backfire of a new technology, the characters’ interactions with one another are dramatically technologized, and the film’s visual elements—its mise en scène, its settings, its props—are a sustained study in the aesthetics of mediatization and the technological grotesque. The film’s first lines of dialogue come from a TV station call and an automated voicemail system, respectively; its last frames display a televised image of Renn, pointing the flesh gun at his own head. Cathode-ray television sets figure frequently in many scenes; Renn meets both O’Blivion and Convex first as televised images; Renn and his fellow
protagonist Nicki Brand, played by Blondie’s Debbie Harry, both start out as “real” characters who eventually become entirely creatures of video.

The film’s most vivid articulation and amplification of technology as McLuhanesque Frankenpheme is perhaps the scene in which Renn interacts surreally, intimately, and then immersively with the TV set in his living room, as the set shifts from playing back an O’Blivion tape, to showing O’Blivion address Renn personally, to becoming animate, as it starts to move and heave, veins rippling across its surface and the screen protruding towards Renn, while O’Blivion’s image and voice give way to those of Brand. This iconic scene condenses, in an exemplary way, the discourse of technology (figured here, significantly, as a consumer media technology) as a Frankensteinian monster that takes on a life of its own and threatens that of the user. This threat intensifies in the similarly surreal scene later in the film, where the TV screen extrudes an appendage in the shape of a hand pointing a pistol (fig. 3).

The monstrosity is figured as globalized, in the indeterminate source of the televised content—that of O’Blivion’s uncanny interactivity and that of the Videodrome signal and program, whose production is purported to take place in either Malaysia or Pittsburgh—and in the globalizing, totalizing language of O’Blivion’s speech, as he prognosticates that “the

Figure 3 The medium is the monster: scene from Videodrome (1983). Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLC.
battle for the mind of North America will be fought in the video arena,” theorizes that “television is reality,” and warns of the “strange new world” that *Videodrome* augurs.

**Pattern Recognition**

This distinctive synthesis of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and McLuhan’s media theory in representations of technology recurs throughout the oeuvres of both Gibson and Cronenberg: their works not only formulate but repeat, with variations, the McLuhanesque Frankenpheme of technology.

Cronenberg’s early body of work, from *Stereo* (1969) to *The Fly* (1986), comprises a tradition of *Frankenstein* adaptation unto itself, which Cronenberg has further extended, though more sporadically, with more recent films like *eXistenZ* (1999). Bart Testa (1995) and Jonathan Crane (2000) have argued that Cronenberg’s early films belong as much to science fiction as to the horror genre, because of their distinctly Frankensteinian fusion of both generic conventions. Noting how consistently the early films “revivify” a “mad scientist” father figure, Crane argues that Cronenberg “reaches back as far as the genre will allow, and returns Dr. Frankenstein to the present. All Cronenberg’s variations on the father are interested in restoring life to the dead” (2000, 55). Variations on this character type recur in *Shivers* (1976), *Rabid* (1977), *The Brood* (1979), *Scanners* (1981), *Videodrome*, *The Dead Zone* (1983), and *The Fly* (1986). In *Videodrome*’s version of the *Frankenstein* story, Crane recognizes the link between *Frankenstein* and technology that Cronenberg dramatizes in the context of media theory: “The vast television audience will be reconstructed in the face of real, direct communication effects. Frankenstein, as a pivotal player in new technologies, will now succeed Rupert Murdoch and Ted Turner” (2000, 56).

For Testa, Cronenberg’s early films all adapt a common Frankensteinian plot structure of “the monster-protagonist-internal narrator searching for Explanation (finally to find his/her origins) and the same figure suffering and spreading a rising spectacular monstrosity.” The “Explanation” in these films is another commonality they share: “The origin of the monster-protagonist is the technological manufacture of the body,” based in dubious if not downright diabolical scientific research (1995, 47–48). *Videodrome* is an exemplar of such Frankensteinian plotting, in its first-person point-of-view and in its insertion of other media forms, chiefly video footage, to unfold the backstory (45). Moreover, the
Cronenbergian “technological manufacture of the body” resonates with Canada’s technological nationalism, especially with McLuhan’s contributions to it:

When, in *Understanding Media*, McLuhan claims the media are extensions of the human body he appears provocatively gnomic to some, but he recasts a metaphor classic in Canadian imagery of national settlement in the northern portion of the continent as extending the body—a manufactured body reaching out in railroads, telegraphs, televisions. (50)

Echoing Kroker (1984), Testa concludes that “behind the Canadian Cronenberg is . . . a discourse on technology springing from the Canadian ethos” (51).

In Cronenberg’s early films (many of which, like *Videodrome*, were federally funded under the tax shelter provisions of the Canadian Film Development Corporation, now Telefilm Canada, as a nation-building cultural policy), the nested narrative frames, monstrous protagonists, and irresponsible father-doctors, as well as grotesque and Gothic effects, all show that *Frankenstein* is a potent source text; *Videodrome* accompanies these *Frankenstein* sources with a sustained and relatively explicit homage to McLuhan and Canada’s distinctive media culture.

Together with *Videodrome* and the considerably later film *eXistenZ* (1999), the 1981 film *Scanners* exemplifies Cronenberg’s penchant for setting his *Frankenstein* adaptations in media contexts. Just as *Videodrome* explores the manufactured monstrosity of cable TV and video recording, so does *eXistenZ* explore that of virtual reality and gaming, and *Scanners* that of networked computing and pharmaceuticals. *Scanners* follows the protagonist Cameron Vale on his journey of monstrous self-discovery: he learns that he is a “scanner”—he has telepathic powers; that he is embroiled in a struggle between telepaths being cultivated by the private security firm ConSec and a rogue faction of power-hungry telepaths; that his powers result from drugs a ConSec researcher gave to his mother when she was pregnant with him; and, finally, that he and the rogue telepaths’ leader, Revok, are brothers—both are sons of that researcher. In the course of this plot of monstrous awakening, which entails many feints and fights between the warring telepaths, Vale also learns that he can “scan” not only human minds but media systems. In the film’s most striking scene, Vale uses a pay
telephone to access and read the ConSec computer database that includes top-secret records about the pharmaceutical program that has produced the scanners. For a 1981 film, this scene is remarkably contemporary as a fantastic dramatization of modern technology, the use of telephones to access computer networks. When one of Vale’s enemies—Keller, ConSec’s chief of security—realizes what he’s doing, Keller cuts the connection not only to block access but also to hurt him; but this act backfires and Keller dies instead. Keller’s notion that terminating a technological link will harm the body using it dramatizes the McLuhanesque premise of technology as prosthesis; similarly, Keller’s fate as a victim of technological backfire dramatizes just one of the many McLuhanesque Frankenphemes of media technology that pervade this extraordinary early Cronenberg film.

Unlike Videodrome, Scanners in its soundtrack makes much more use of synthesizer instrumentation, not orchestral instrumentation, which amplifies its aesthetic of technologized grotesquerie. Like Videodrome, Scanners grounds its setting in a globalized business context of corporate research and development, particularly R&D on weaponizing both technological prostheses (such as drugs) and media systems (such as computer networks): the ConSec database inventories its arsenal of human bodies turned into corporate property and weaponry, and in the plot becomes weaponized itself in the skirmishes between ConSec and its rivals. And, again like Videodrome, Scanners attributes the origins of its protagonists’ technological monstrosity to a mad-scientist kind of father figure: like Brian O’Blivion, Scanners’ Dr. Paul Ruth develops a technology that profoundly affects and even shapes bodies and subjects, and becomes exploited by private interests in order to weaponize bodies and subjects—on a global scale. However, in Videodrome, it is the corporation (Spectacular Optical) that plots to exploit its monstrous technology on a global scale, while in Scanners it is the rogue individual, Revok, who seeks to turn scanners into a Frankensteinian race for bedeviling the globe. So Videodrome’s casting of the corporation as antagonist represents a significant difference from the earlier film.

Critically contextualized as not just horror but also science fiction, Cronenberg’s early oeuvre constitutes a Canadian contribution to a broader cinematic trend, mainly Hollywood-driven, in which the Frankenstein story has become the dominant narrative framework for blockbuster science fiction films today, as illustrated by Westworld (1973), Star Wars
(1977), Blade Runner (1982), The Terminator (1983), Robocop (1987), Gattaca (1997), The Matrix (1999), Cronenberg’s own eXistenZ, AI (2001), The Island (2005), Moon (2009), Splice (2009), and Transcendence (2014)—to name just a few in a very long list. These films have exploited Frankenstein references for cultural commentaries on a variety of social themes, including work, cybernetics, ecology, consumerism, war, and militarization, as well as corporate and state power.

Meanwhile, Cronenberg’s recent films have been more varied in their plots and subject matter: A History of Violence (2005) and Eastern Promises (2007) explore organized crime, for instance. Some recent films have carried on his Frankenstein plotting, though, notably eXistenZ (1999), which was the first film after Videodrome that Cronenberg not only directed but also wrote. And Cronenberg himself is fond of talking about his filmmaking process with nods to Frankenstein. He has “described getting all the pieces in place for the kind of films he wants to make as ‘stitching a Frankenstein quilt’” (Onstad 2013, para. 9); and he repeats the analogy in a more recent interview: “I rather like that independent films are put together like Frankenstein: You get pieces from all over the world, and you stitch them together and hope it ends up being a living organism” (quoted in Vlessing 2014, para. 8). The analogy is fitting for a director who established his reputation in a series of provocative genre films that transplanted the Frankenstein story to corporate North America.

Like Cronenberg’s, Gibson’s body of work demonstrates a recurring preoccupation with Frankenstein plots and imagery. Concerns with artificial intelligence and technology’s unintended consequences that are first elaborated in Neuromancer then recur through the rest of the Sprawl trilogy and the subsequent Bridge trilogy, a set of novels set in a nearer, more recognizably extrapolated future, organized loosely around San Francisco and its Golden Gate Bridge. Gibson’s complementary concern with the constructed character of human subjectivity itself also recurs across his oeuvre, from the volatile assemblage named Armitage who leads but then abandons the heist in Neuromancer, to Virtual Light’s subplot about Videodrome and the impact of mass media on subject formation, to the Bigend trilogy’s Milgrim, a translator and addict whom one critic likens to “Frankenstein’s monster, an experiment of sorts” (Henthorne 2011, 127) for being manipulated and exploited by the spy named Brown in Spook Country (2007).
After *Neuromancer*, the first two novels of Gibson’s Bridge trilogy feature the clearest and most extensive elaborations of his McLuhanesque Frankenpheme of technology. The trilogy’s first novel, *Virtual Light*, includes recurring references to *Videodrome* in a subplot about a lapsed member of an American cult that worships television; in the cult’s theology, *Videodrome*—together with Cronenberg’s whole oeuvre—is condemned as heretical and Satanic. “There’s movies that are clearly of the Devil, Berry. Or anyway that’s what Reverend Fallon says. Says all of Cronenberg’s are” (Gibson 1993, 295–96). As Dominick Grace argues, in exploring several structural and thematic similarities between Cronenberg’s films and Gibson’s fiction: “Cronenberg’s ambivalent and interrogative view of technology . . . is consistent with the kind of ambivalent interrogation of technological change that emerges in much of Gibson’s work and is central to the plot of this novel” (2003, para. 12). In *Virtual Light*, Gibson’s McLuhan-influenced extrapolations of the social ubiquity and subject-forming power of mass media, especially TV and networked computers, echo Cronenberg’s earlier dramatizations of this ubiquity and power in *Videodrome* and (via the allusion to “all of Cronenberg’s” films) his earlier film *Scanners* (1980) and anticipate his return to these themes in 1999’s *eXistenZ*, which carries forward *Videodrome*’s premises of media-made subjectivity and the unreliability of “reality” to the new media industry of networked, virtual gaming.

In the Bridge trilogy’s second book, *Idoru*, the title refers to the Japanese adaptation of “idol” and thus to the character Rei Toei, an entirely holographic pop star, whom a human rock star, Rez, intends to marry. This courtship and engagement of a human and an artificial intelligence organize the main plot of *Idoru*; that is, the novel tells the story of a mechanical bride. *Idoru* develops and deepens the fictional near-future mediascape introduced in *Virtual Light* and uses the word technology and its cognates with conspicuous intensity: “technology” itself occurs eight times, and “tech,” as prefix or suffix, occurs an additional thirty-seven times in the novel.

In a late chapter in *Idoru*, Rei Toei and her creator, Michio Kuwayama, explain to the investigator Colin Laney how the *idoru*’s “union” with Rez furthers the strategy and plan of Famous Aspect, the corporation that has created her. To Laney’s question of what the seemingly impossible marriage is “all about,” Kuwayama says that “it is about futurity” and then articulates what Gibson represents as an implicitly non-Western, Japanese perspective on futurity—and technology:
“Do you know that our word for ‘nature’ is of quite recent coinage? It is scarcely a hundred years old. We have never developed a sinister view of technology, Mr. Laney. It is an aspect of the natural, of oneness. Through our efforts, oneness perfects itself.” Kuwayama smiled. “And popular culture,” he said, “is the testbed of our futurity.” (1996, 314)

This passage in *Idoru* is as suggestive in illustrating Gibson’s development of a McLuhanesque Frankenpheme of technology as is the “unsupervised playground” image in *Neuromancer*. The use of collective, first-person pronouns, as in “our word,” implies that Gibson’s Kuwayama here speaks not just for Famous Aspect but for the Japanese; despite the arguable Orientalism operating in Gibson’s character development here, through Kuwayama’s statement, Gibson imparts an insight about the Western world’s view of technology: namely, that in contrast to the purported Japanese view of technology, the Western world’s view of technology is sinister. Passages like these, taken together with the plotlines of several Gibson novels, illustrate how his body of work, like Cronenberg’s, constitutes an extended figuration and dramatization of how and why the modern globalized discourse of technology, influenced by the coupled forces of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and McLuhan’s media theory, has assumed its “sinister” character.

**Pattern Modulation**

Aside from the recurrence of the McLuhanesque Frankenpheme of technology throughout Gibson’s and Cronenberg’s oeuvres, *Neuromancer* and *Videodrome* have remained popular enough in their own right to propagate McLuhan’s Frankensteinian discourse of technology. Perennially discovered by new audiences, these texts have graduated from “cult” status to popular cultural canonicity. Both are still in print and commercially available to purchase, over thirty years after their initial release. And both have been sampled and cited in other cultural productions—as, for instance, in Gibson’s own citation of *Videodrome* in *Virtual Light*.

To illustrate the abiding popularity of these texts in just one niche field of popular cultural production, electronic dance music (which chapter 7 will address) yields a rich vein of quotations and adaptations. *Videodrome* has been widely sampled by music producers like Skinny Puppy (“Draining Faces” 1987), Front 242 (“Masterhit” 1987), and Messiah; in the process, these tracks become secondary *Frankenstein* adaptations. Messiah’s
“You’re Going Insane” (1992) opens with Convex’s words of reassurance to Renn as he dons the VR-like vision-recording helmet: “You might catch yourself sliding in and out of an hallucinatory state after this is all over. If you do, just relax and enjoy it, it’ll soon go away.” Videodrome samples are common in 1990s rave tracks (e.g., Messiah’s 1991 “Prince of Darkness,” Luna C’s 1993 “Mind of a Lunatic”). The line “ease yourself back into consciousness,” from the film’s opening scene, has been a favourite sample among electronic dance music producers, as heard in Bomb the Bass’s “Switching Channels” (1991), Cybordelics’s “Adventures of Dama” (1993), Dope on Plastic’s “Wave Dub” (1994), and Ed Brown’s “Industrial (P.B.K. remix)” (2009), to name a few.

Neuromancer has been similarly cited in electronic dance music. Several producers, including Paul Drake, Christian Smith, Yuri Melnikov (among others), have taken “Neuromancer” as their professional alias, as credited on Drake’s 1992 “Pennywise” and “Nookie” tracks, on Smith’s 1993 “Journey into Cyberspace,” and on Melnikov’s 2008 EP, 666. UK producer DJ Massive (Alan Clark) released a five-track Neuromancer EP in 1992. In 1995, the German producer Wippenberg released “Neuro Dancer”; Siva released the experimental “Aegean Neuromancer” in 2006; Germany’s Phantasma Disques label put out the Neuromancer Complex EP in 2012; and in 2014, the US synth-goth band William Control released an album titled The Neuromancer. In addition, the name “Dixie Flatline” has been assumed by a Japanese electronic music producer.

Arguably, Neuromancer and Videodrome recommend themselves particularly to the field of electronic dance music in part because of its analogous investments and experiments in new media for making music. In the early rave culture of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Videodrome’s radical interpretive indeterminacy provided a bank of thematically fitting vocal samples for the rave scene’s “techno-Romantic” aesthetic of cyber-narcotic excess-as-transcendence (see Reynolds 1999); and Neuromancer offered a vision of digital culture and “virtuality” that rave embraced and romanticized, in the scene’s cultural function as one subcultural milieu of the broader popularization of computer networking that began to accelerate in the early 1990s, a popularization also seen in the advent of the World Wide Web and the explosion of interest in “virtual reality” interfaces and devices. In addition, Neuromancer features Afro-Futurist music significantly in its setting and plot. The Zion space station’s Rastas play a constant
stream of dub—“a sensuous mosaic cooked from vast libraries of digitalized pop” (1984, 104)—and this conspicuously technological, structurally spacey music ultimately helps Case find his way to freedom from virtual imprisonment by the Neuromancer AI at the novel’s climax (244).

*Neuromancer*’s own references to electronic music, its citations by other electronic music producers, and its aforementioned adaptations in other media show just the tip of a virtual iceberg of influence that it has wielded over popular culture. The novel’s impact on subsequent print science fiction has been widely recognized (Brouillette 2002) and will be revisited below. The novel’s pivotal portmanteau, “cyberspace,” has achieved an incalculable, quotidian currency in discourses and technologies of cultural globalization and networked computing (Bukatman 1992, 199; Downes 2005, 3; Manovich 2001, 250–51; Mosco and Foster 2001, 220, 233). Specifically, Gibson has been widely celebrated as “the individual who . . . coined the term and conceptualized the idea of cyberspace” (Annesley 2001, 224). *Neuromancer* has come to enjoy a peculiar distinction (shared with only a select few other literary works, by the likes of H. G. Wells and Jules Verne) as a fiction celebrated for anticipating a specific technological innovation—the graphic Internet now known as the World Wide Web—and even, according to some of his more radical readers, for having played an active role in making its fiction a reality. This position, which perennially resurfaces in the popular press (Sullivan 2009, para. 5; Rich 2014, para. 3), is perhaps best articulated by Gibson’s friend and fellow SF author Jack Womack, who asks, “What if the act of writing it down, in fact, *brought it about*?” (Womack 2000, 269). Womack articulates (with the help of a Frankensteinian trope, no less) a speculation shared by many commentators on “cyberspace”:

> When *Neuromancer* appeared it was picked up and devoured by hundreds, then thousands, of men and women who worked in or around the garages and cubicles where what is still called new media were, fitfully, being birthed. . . . [Gibson] has often said that he intended “cyberspace” to be nothing more than a metaphor. No matter. Once a creation goes out in the world its creator, like any parent, loses the control once so easily exertable over the offspring; another variety of emergent behavior, you could say. . . . So rather than the theoretical Matrix, we now, thanks to all those beautiful William Gibson readers out there in the dark, have the actual Web. (2000, 269)
Given the intervening decades and the massive growth of globalized, networked computing they have witnessed, the question of whether or to what extent Gibson’s work actively fostered the nascent Internet remains open—a favourite subject of widespread speculation about one of contemporary literature’s canonical speculative fictions. As journalist Nathaniel Rich says, “Thirty years after the novel’s publication, it’s difficult to tell whether Gibson foresaw the future or whether the future, designed by technologists who idolized Gibson’s novels, self-consciously imitated his novel” (2014, 10).

This question of a fictional influence on historical technological change thus prompts a similar question of media theory’s influence on media practice: Gibson’s acknowledgement of McLuhan’s influence on *Neuromancer* augments the corresponding claims that McLuhan, too, had anticipated if not predicted the Internet. Those now familiar claims began to emerge in force alongside the explosive popularization of the Internet that the early World Wide Web catalyzed in the mid-1990s, exemplified by three illustrative samples of the mid-1990s McLuhan revival that accompanied the popularization of the Internet.

First, McLuhan was named “patron saint” in the colophon (the list of contributors’ credits) of early issues of *Wired* magazine, which was launched in 1993. Something of the thinking behind this canonization was spelled out in Gary Wolf’s 1996 column in the magazine, which suggests both the sense of technological revolution that accompanied the Internet’s popularization in the 1990s and the anticipatory role of McLuhan’s theory in framing contemporary understandings of it: “In recent years, the explosion of new media—particularly the Web—has caused new anxieties. Or to put a more McLuhanesque spin on it, the advent of new digital media has brought the conditions of the old technologies into sharper relief, and made us suddenly conscious of our media environment. In the confusion of the digital revolution, McLuhan is relevant again” (1996, para. 3).

Second, Paul Benedetti and Nancy DeHart’s 1996 retrospective collection *On McLuhan: Forward Through the Rearview Mirror* (the layout of which evokes Quentin Fiore’s media-collage designs for McLuhan’s popular books) combines statements by colleagues and protégés with those by McLuhan himself. The editors stress McLuhan’s “remarkable prescience” and attribute “McLuhan’s revival” to “a new wave of technological innovation . . . a wave signified by the Internet and virtual reality”
In the early 1990s, “people started rereading McLuhan and discovered that a quarter of a century before words such as on-line, wired, and the Web became part of our vocabulary, they existed in McLuhan’s lexicon” (34).

And third, a 1999 episode of CBC’s Life and Times biography program on McLuhan introduces him as having “predicted the Internet before there was a name for it” and, throughout, emphasizes his revival amidst the burgeoning Internet culture and tech sector. Framed by a frenetic, media collage backdrop (also reminiscent of Fiore’s design principles), in which Internet screen shots and techno music figure prominently, interviewees like Lewis Lapham assert that “much of what he said would happen or guessed would happen has happened”; and, against a screen shot of the online edition of Wired showing McLuhan’s name, a Wired editor claims that “Wired is actually reporting the very things that he anticipated.” Both Gibson and McLuhan, then, exerted a powerful cultural and conceptual influence over the historical development of the Internet: “McLuhan’s works, side by side with those of Gibson, have been avidly read by early researchers in MIT’s Media Lab, for these researchers also conceive of a VR composed, like the tribal and collective ‘global village,’ of ‘tactile, haptic, proprioceptive and acoustic spaces and involvements’” (Theall 1992, para. 3).

Like Cronenberg’s film and Gibson’s novel, the 1990s “revival” of McLuhan further amplifies the Frankensteinian inflection of his rhetoric of technology, and of his broader ideas of media, by retrieving, recontextualizing, and recirculating not only McLuhan’s work but his public persona, most suggestively perhaps, in his enlistment as a contributor in the pages of Wired. In both Videodrome and the mid-1990s “revival” discourse of McLuhan, the man himself figures hauntologically, as a technologized return of the repressed (or more precisely, in his case, the unfashionable); as a “prescient” revenant haunting the broadcasts and modem handshakes and reanimating new media theory; as an old ghost in the new machine. And as significant as the variously purported and disputed “prescience” of both McLuhan and Gibson in anticipating new media technologies are their shared wariness and dread of these technologies and the social environments they create, as evinced in their writings’ common conjuration of Frankenstein in the very discourse and imagery of technology. The next two chapters detail the further appropriations
and transformations of McLuhan’s Frankenpheme of technology in Canadian popular culture since Gibson’s and Cronenberg’s influential works, focusing in the next chapter on print science fiction, and turning in chapter 7 to electronic dance music.