7. Is It Live or Is It Deadmau5?

Pattern Amplification in Canadian Electronic Dance Music

If David Cronenberg’s 1983 film *Videodrome* and William Gibson’s 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, both globally popular texts, establish a pattern of McLuhanesque Frankensteins that refracts throughout Canadian popular culture, then electronic dance music (EDM) culture is a lower-profile but profoundly rich and resonant subcultural scene for reproducing, recirculating, and further amplifying this pattern. Some of this scene’s adaptations of *Frankenstein* and articulations of technology discourse occur textually and linguistically, but often they emerge in audio and visual representations that dramatically exhibit and further circulate the McLuhanesque Frankenpheme of technology. This chapter sketches some background for contextualizing EDM culture both globally and in Canada and considers in detail two exemplary Canadian EDM acts: the Paladin Project (a.k.a. Len Jaroli), an underground DJ act; and the more recently established but already globally successful Canadian EDM producer Deadmau5 (a.k.a. Joel Zimmerman). These examples illustrate and dramatize dance culture’s Frankensteinian contexts and put McLuhan’s theories into dance-floor practice. The chapter then turns to a theatrical production steeped in EDM culture—Matthew MacFadzean’s fringe play *richardthesecond*—to consider how EDM culture engages with other sites of cultural production and scene making to further disseminate McLuhan’s Frankensteinian discourse of technology.
“Experimenting on their own nervous systems”: EDM Culture’s “Techno-Romanticism”

A backgrounder on EDM might be helpful to begin with. Today’s dance culture is both diversified and robust, building on more than half a century of dance scenes that have pivoted on DJ culture and the playback of recorded music: from postwar US record hops and Jamaican sound system clashes to the rapid rise and exaggerated “death” of disco, which actually lived on in the electronic sounds of Chicago house, Detroit techno, and New York garage. These sounds stayed very marginal subcultures in North America through the 1980s and 1990s, while becoming massively popular in Europe, especially the UK, where rave culture spawned huge dance parties, some amassing tens of thousands of partygoers for a night or a weekend. By the mid-1990s, UK rave culture had become a target of quite draconian neoliberal regulation and suppression, such as the Criminal Justice Act of 1994, which outlawed a gathering of ten or more listeners to music “characterized by repetitive beats.” UK raves put together black American dance music, traveller culture nomadism, and nascent new media technologies like cellphones and the Internet.

North American rave culture emerged in the wake of UK rave but modelled itself more openly on the mediatized scene making of 1960s counterculture: just as 1960s counterculture adopted McLuhan’s then-current ideas for its psychedelic scene making, so did 1990s rave culture adopt McLuhan’s then-revived ideas for its cyberdelic scene making. Like UK raves in the mid-1990s, towards the turn of the millennium North American raves were subjected to extraordinarily suppressive policy and policing as they gained greater popularity; they became, in effect, a domestic front in the US “war on drugs.” The globalized dance music industry fell into an economic slump in the mid-2000s, but, since around 2010, dance music has become much more firmly established in the pop soundscape, as heard by the prevalence of electronic dance songs in commercial, “hit format” FM radio. If the purported death of disco was belied by the rise of raves, the decline of raves amidst bad press, moral panics, and legislative zeal has in turn been reversed by EDM. Simon Reynolds argues that some of the success of EDM might be attributed to a “rebranding coup” that evokes cultural legitimacy, where raves formerly signalled transgressive excess: “What were once called ‘raves’ are now termed ‘festivals’; EDM is what we used to know by the name of techno. Even the drugs have been
rebranded: ‘molly,’ the big new chemical craze, is just ecstasy in powder form (and reputedly purer and stronger) as opposed to pills” (2012, para. 1). And Deadmau5, a.k.a. Joel Zimmerman, a producer from a working-class Niagara Falls background, tours dance floors around the world, wearing a cartoonish, vaguely trademark-infringing mouse-head helmet as the face of disco’s latest resurrection.

The Frankensteinian language of death and resurrection in dance culture articulates three of this culture’s constitutive contexts: the oscillating popularity of dance sounds in the global music market, as outlined above; the culture’s “techno-Romantic” representations of excess as experiment; and its uses and fetishizations of technology in reconfigurations of “liveness” in music media and performance practices.

The long-running historical predisposition of western modernity to treat bodily affective music with suspicion or outright hostility (McClary 1994) has made social dance scenes reliable and routine targets for various kinds of public controversy and moral panic. In disco and its electronic successors, the racializing anxieties once visited on rock and roll became compounded by heteronormative anxieties: early house music was reviled by the music press as not just a fad but as an unexpected return of disco, and moreover a kind of disco that amplified a stark, alien minimalism of drum loops, bass lines, and other machine sounds and thus exaggerated the foundational *queerness* of disco. As rave culture codified and popularized (even while sometimes strenuously disavowing) the interface between electronic dance music and MDMA or “Ecstasy,” the moral panics that reductively caricatured rave culture as drug culture (from the UK’s 1994 Criminal Justice Act to the turn-of-the-millennium “war on raves” in North America) traded on myths and misconceptions about MDMA—for example, as depersonalizing hallucinogen not self-affirming empathogen—that positioned MDMA as a “synthetic” or “designer” drug. Philip Jenkins notes that the rhetoric of “designer” drugs is Promethean, portraying scientists as irresponsibly venturing into realms of knowledge not meant for human beings. . . . The Frankenstein image is so frequently cited in discussions of synthetic drugs because, as in the original tale, a quest for human improvement results instead in the creation of what are identified as terrifying figures. . . . Through chemical technologies, drug users abandon full humanity in a quest for a superior state. (1999, 8)
This “quest” activity has long structured raving, clubbing, and other social dance leisure activities and is organized not according to chemical technologies alone but in concert with cultural technologies, chiefly music. This activity is what Reynolds calls “techno-Romanticism”: the pursuit of the palace of wisdom on a path of excess “expressed in the discourse of science and technology,” as in Iggy Pop’s reflection on fronting for the Stooges by taking so many drugs that, as he puts it, “I sublimated the person” and “became a human electronic tool” (quoted in Reynolds 1999, 200). Iggy Pop’s language and performance practice exemplify the way in which subcultural scene makers use “the discourse of science and technology” to represent practices of music making—and drug taking: “In rave,” Reynolds writes, “kids play the roles of both Frankenstein and the monster, experimenting on their own nervous systems” (1999, 204).

Techno-Romanticism also aptly describes the aesthetics of EDM’s musical foundation in Afro-Futurism, the tradition of black Atlantic music-and scene-making in which producers and performers like George Clinton and Kool Keith adopt “mad scientist” personae and in which marginalized and racialized dancers breakdance or jack their bodies with stylized robotic moves, in empowering practices of “technological identification” whereby “the fearful paradox of the technological age, that machines created as artificial slaves will somehow enslave and even mechanize human beings, is ritually enacted at the discotheque” (Hughes 1994, 151). About rave more specifically, Reynolds adopts a more negative view in describing raving as a zombie-like “living death” (1997, 102), arguing that the dance-drug interface is “an engine for programming sensations . . . connotative of enthrallment, of loss of control” (109).

These Frankensteinian figures of dance music’s “techno-Romanticism” reverberate with representations of EDM music making, performance, and consumption in terms of “liveness” and death: representations of EDM as a monstrous synthesis of sampled fragments (Reynolds 1998, 45); as autonomous technology, where “the sequencer and sampler take over” (Chapman 2002, 17); as “soulless” artifice versus authentic presence—recording versus “liveness.” The conventional performance of EDM by DJs revolves around a paradox of live playback: the improvised, responsive, site-specific selection and sequencing of tracks. EDM culture illustrates Philip Auslander’s argument that “the ‘live’ has always been defined as that which can be recorded” (1999, 86)—and, moreover, that “liveness” marks
“a site of anxiety, an anxiety that infects all who have an interest in maintaining the distinction between the live and the mediatized” (87). Following theorists like Benjamin and Derrida, scholars of media and culture have observed the reconfigurations of aura and authenticity not only between unmediated presence and mediation but also between different kinds of media (for instance, Bolter et al. 2006). Sarah Thornton documents these reconfigurations in dance culture, from early twentieth-century musicians organizing against jukeboxes and DJs to DJs themselves, by century’s end, dreading the “death of vinyl” (1996, 64) amidst the rise of CDs and digital sound. “Since the mid-eighties,” Thornton writes, “‘live’ qualities have been increasingly attributed to recorded events,” while “music performances have become more reliant on recording” (85).

EDM’s estranging reconfiguration of “liveness” converges commodity fetishism and the technological sublime: media live and die and achieve uncanny, monstrous effects, confusing the biological and the technological. From techno-Romantic representations of EDM consumption in terms of experiment and automatons to techno-fetishizing representations of EDM production in terms of automatic yet autonomous technology, dance culture is fraught with the discourse of technology as Frankensteinian monstrosity. These historical and discursive contexts thus suggest how the McLuhanesque Frankenpheme of technology courses through the technologically immersed and experimental culture of EDM, as becomes more concretely illuminated in the work of particular EDM cultural producers: the Paladin Project and Deadmau5.

The Paladin Project: “You are a big rechargeable battery”

Many DJs and producers before Deadmau5 have used costume and technical spectacle in their acts and their performing personae: perhaps none more so than a fixture in Canada’s dance underground, the Paladin Project, a.k.a. Len Jaroli. From 1996 until 2015, Jaroli donned (and incessantly modified, tweaked, and revamped) an elaborate cyborg costume with which he DJ’d as “the Paladin Project” at raves and other dance events across North America.

Paladin’s costumes both exaggerated and satirized the militarized hyper-masculinity that has long dominated DJ culture. Over the twenty years of Paladin’s performance career, Jaroli constantly modified his costume and its attendant array of technical gear. The first Paladin performance I attended
was at the “E Space” venue in Toronto’s West End, for a Hallowe’en party in 1997. Paladin’s set included samples of the “Imperial March” anthem from Star Wars, and his costume consisted of bright, day-glow orange camouflage fatigues, repurposed sports equipment, and a gas mask. At the end of the 1990s, the costume assumed a storm-trooper or riot-police look, complete with helmet. Jaroli also adapted the show to specific occasions; for instance, at a Hallowe’en party at a Richmond Street club in 1999, Paladin replaced his helmet with a fanged, bug-eyed alien mask. By the time Jaroli retired the Paladin Project, in 2015, it had reached its “6.3” iteration, which exaggerated the storm-trooper militarism of the suit, sound, and show and featured a helmet that displayed an Expressionistic skeletal mask (figs. 4 and 5).

Figure 4  The Paladin Project in performance, circa 2011. Paladin’s version 6 iterations featured a grotesque monster mask as well as the machine-military costume and props. Photo courtesy of Ben Ripley Photography. Copyright © 2011 by Ben Ripley.

Paladin’s performance persona adapted the name, cultivated anonymity, and vigilante image from CBS’s 1957 TV series Have Gun Will Travel (Alan Filewod, pers. comm, 11 June 2003)—but gave it a science fiction spin. Paladin’s costume combines a kind of “Robocop” imagery of body armour, gadgetry, and weaponry, with masks ranging from gas mask, to face-plated helmet, to grotesque, grimacing monster. Paladin’s costume
also incorporates media: mounted cameras, lasers, and screens; built-in monitors and microphone; and even an FM transmitter. Evoking both Marx’s vampire image of capital and The Matrix’s image of bodies as batteries, the Paladin “darkandhard.ca” website that was up in 2006–7 stated: “As far as PALADIN is concerned . . . you are a big rechargeable battery that actually enjoys having the life force pounded out of you. The harder you dance the harder PALADIN plays.”

Figure 5 The Paladin Project in performance, circa 2011. Photo courtesy of C. Jaroli. Copyright © 2011 by C. Jaroli.

Like many cultural practitioners, Paladin embraced social media in the later 2000s, discontinuing his independent “darkandhard.ca” website in favour of the newer affordances of Facebook and Soundcloud, where “P4L4DiN” and “thepaladinproject” accounts, respectively, remain operative as of this writing and archive a great deal of photos and mixes from
various performances over the years. The “darkandhard” site, though, also included a “Technical Data” web page that detailed the tech specs that went into the Paladin Project, which was at that time in its “5.1” version (Paladin 2006b). The description is worth quoting at some length, given the meticulous attention to creative and highly technologized detail that Jaroli put into developing and delivering his DJ act:

After over 7 years of development, The PALADIN Project has now released the latest version of the world’s first Prototype Artificial Lifeform and Data Integration Network: The PALADIN 5.1 Advanced Prototype. Music programming is best described as dark and hard, and utilizes a combination of vinyl / original tracks and a MC-303. . . . The PALADIN 5.1 system also includes a custom made wireless F.L.I.R. (forward looking infra red) camera system. Utilizing advanced technology similar to that used by military and government agencies. Totally wireless . . . with a range beyond 100 meters, this custom made one of a kind camera system emits no (negligible) visible light—yet the 58 high power infra red LED’s provide true night vision images on projector screens as well as giving a never before seen view of the dance floor from the PALADIN system itself. In addition to wireless video output, the PALADIN 5.1 system is also equipped with a stereo FM transmitter and signal booster. The capability of the PALADIN system to broadcast on any standard FM frequency adds yet another layer to the complete experience. The standard configuration currently allows participants to hear discreet voice communication from PALADIN. With an on board voice processor and noise cancelling microphone; PALADIN can walk and talk to any individual with a receiver . . . or feed the signal to the main system. At larger events, this capability can be configured to independently provide music to anyone with a FM radio—within the operational range of the on-board 4ft antenna—or—at a proximity close enough to PALADIN to hear the onboard 10 watt amplified speaker system. To complement the audio, is an on-board visual system unlike any other. The primary component is an arm mounted—5mW—bright green—DPSS laser system. This compact laser is capable of projecting a beam over 4000 meters away, and is visible without the augmentation of a fog machine. On the chest is a 1.3” LCD screen as well as a 10 band graphic spectrum analyzer for real time visual interpretation of sound at any volume. . . . Completing the equipment list is a CSA® approved helmet with a custom mesh
front that blocks all light including camera flashes at close range as well as concealing a Sony® VDR700 custom headphone monitor. . . .

The PALADIN 5.1 prototype demonstrates what is possible when advanced technology and unrestrained creativity are combined into one complete package. (2006b)

These technical details suggest that Paladin's shows came to consist of more than music mixes played by a DJ in costume. In particular, the systems that fostered interactivity—like short-range broadcasting, audio input and output feeds, and patches for them into the sound system used for DJing—played creatively with the “interactivity” for which many digital media and processes have been widely lauded (from games, to message boards, to social networks). The technological sophistication of Paladin's act suggests not only creativity but considerable cost; but the act proved successful enough in the dance underground that from the mid-1990s to the mid-aughts, DJing was Jaroli's only employment and source of income (Paladin 2006a, para. 8). Paladin's performance act, like much of rave culture more generally, extended the earlier 1960s counterculture's McLuhan-influenced practices of intensely stimulating and professedly interactive multimedia experimentalism (Rycroft 1998).

The creative cybernetic details that made Paladin both a unique dance music performer and an eminently McLuhanesque multimedia monster also made him a favourite act in the North American electronic dance scene. As evinced in the above passage, and in numerous statements and samples during performances, Paladin dramatized the technological sublime. Paladin's technological sublime is a figure of the “fetishism of mechanical power,” with music sets that not only drove intense audience engagement on the dance floor but also sometimes represented abstract musical narratives of power, paranoia, and panic. In a 2006 interview, Jaroli theorized that

PALADIN's sole purpose is to generate as much energy as possible for its consumption—using the energy to increase its own output. If you don't like PALADIN . . . leave . . . because if you aren't a power source then you're taking up space. . . . If you get into a PALADIN set—you don't just “dance.” You become one of a thousand screaming dancers with clenched fists and stomping feet . . . an incredibly powerful—and unique experience. (Paladin 2006a, para. 10)
In this interview, Jaroli also expressed his preference for surprising new audiences over playing to established followings: “A big show in a city that has never seen PALADIN is what I love above all” (para. 25). This preference suggests that surprise and novelty were key performance values in Paladin’s audiovisual construction of technological spectacle; surprise and novelty are analogous to and associated with the elements of shock and revolution that are integral to the discourse of technology, as chapters 1 and 3 showed.

Paladin also dramatized novelty, surprise, and the trope of “revolutionary technology” in his performance by continually changing, modifying, and “upgrading” the costume and multimedia show. Moreover, the changes in Paladin’s costume, from the day-glow fatigues, football gear, and gas mask of the mid-1990s to the cybernetic storm-trooper armour and death’s-head helmet of the 2010s not only demonstrated Jaroli’s technical creativity with new media technologies, they also spoke sometimes to changes in the political economy of Toronto’s dance scene over the years. The turn of the millennium saw a spotlight put on Toronto’s rave scene, as city officials banned raves from public municipal sites, provincial legislators proposed bills to suppress dance events, the Toronto police began a systematic crackdown on—and shakedown of—Toronto rave organizers and partygoers, and the press and media consequently shone a national spotlight on raves in Toronto and across the country. Amidst the crackdown, in early 2000, the chief of the Toronto police proposed to dramatically change the force’s uniform to adopt a more paramilitary image; the proposal drew public criticism for perceptions the new uniform looked too fascist, even neo-Nazi (Blackwell 2000, A5). Around the same time, Paladin debuted the “5.0” iteration of his project: this was the first iteration that introduced the storm-trooper look, departing drastically from the previous fatigues-and-gas mask ensemble with a black, armoured suit, helmet, backpack, and body-mounted laser. In the context of the cops’ crackdown and their chief’s somewhat ridiculous sartorial proposal, Paladin’s futuristic riot-cop look seemed hardly coincidental and caused a sensation on the dance floor. On ending a set, Paladin would often exit the DJ booth to stalk slowly around the dance floor, turning a moment of audience appreciation into a parody of police surveillance. After the summer of 2000, the dramatically increased visibility of actual, paid-duty police officers at dance parties (a requirement imposed by the force in an
attempt to make raves prohibitively expensive via the cost of hiring more paid-duty officers) lent Paladin’s costume and dance floor patrol a pointed, carnivalesque irony, calling the crowd’s attention to the escalating militarization of leisure space and to the studied performativity of the officers’ own dress, presence, and actions amidst the dancers and partygoers.

Paladin’s dramatization of the McLuhanesque Frankenpheme of technology in performance also emerged in the music around which his performance practice revolved (and which can still be heard in several of his DJ sets that have been archived online). Paladin consistently described the music style he played as “dark and hard”: house and techno characterized by 140 beats-per-minute tempos, driving 4/4 kick drums often given echo effects to make them stomp harder, distorted Roland 303 bass lines, minor-key strings sections and synthesizer riffs, and a range of Gothic and dystopian sound effects like horror film samples, sirens, and gunfire. Early Paladin sets sometimes included 45 rpm hardcore tracks played at 33 rpm, and a favourite mantra of the performer is this: “Faster isn’t harder. Harder is harder.” A track often heard in Paladin sets of the later 1990s was Brainbug’s “Nightmare” (1996), and samples from the Nightmare on Elm Street films recur frequently in later mixes (Paladin 2014). Paladin’s 4.5 mix from 1999 opens with an extremely slowed-down playback of the lyrics from the Foremost Poets’ 1998 track “Moon-Raker,” in which a man’s voice (in Paladin’s mix slowed to a muddy growl) tells the audience to “remain calm” and not leave the dance floor while the DJ tests the sound system for “an unidentified frequency” that “has become a threat . . . used by a secret society in conjunction with Lucifer to lure and prey on innocent partygoers, with hypnotism, synco-prism, tricknology, lies, scandal, and pornography” (1998). This sample has been repurposed extensively in EDM to the point of becoming cliché; Paladin’s use defamiliarizes the sample by pitching it way down so the voice becomes a cadaverous croak. The pun on “technology”—“tricknology”—becomes a self-reflexive comment on Paladin’s own performance practice and an explicit invocation of the discourse of technology whose monstrousness his whole performance is devoted to dramatizing. The track that follows this ominous opening amplifies the Frankenpheme of “tricknology” by starting with a low-frequency synth note that sounds intermittently, evoking an alarm klaxon, as a low voice starts to punctuate the bar changes by repeating only the word “annihilating,” before a spare, echoing kick drum drops to establish the tempo and
gradually becomes syncopated with an additional drum track that sounds like simulated machine gun fire. A subsequent track in the mix samples a similarly down-pitched voice that asks the listener, in a guttural growl, the popular dance-floor question that here sounds like a rudimentary Turing test: “Can you feel it?” (1999).

Paladin’s music selections and sequencing, taken together with his spectacular stage show, conjure a techno-Romantic, dystopian soundscape of beat-regimented hedonism, industrial and postindustrial sounds of automation and militarization, and pervasive Gothic atmospherics. The “hard” in Paladin’s brand signals, in a gender-coded way, his music’s and his show’s “hardcore” credentials: the music is audibly abrasive, even hostile, an acquired taste, even for fans of other EDM styles like house and trance; it is a definitively “underground,” non- or anticommercial sound. And yet at the same time, this music also sounds like the culmination of industrial capital in automation verging on artificial intelligence, bolstered by intensifying militarism and securitization. Paladin’s music is resolutely, critically “underground,” and yet at the same time it also sounds like a virtual soundtrack for neoliberalism. The Paladin Project’s coherent and detailed creative presentation of both a militarized cyborg figure and a dystopian soundscape made his act a unique dance-scene act and a profoundly McLuhanesque media monster: a DJ’s dramatization of the “rise of the machine” and its monstrous takeover. In the process, the Paladin Project prefigured the more recent and more globally recognized music and performance of another Canadian EDM artist, Deadmau5, a.k.a. Joel Zimmerman.

Deadmau5: “An unhealthy obsession with technology”

While, largely because of the more hardcore style of his music, Paladin stayed very much in EDM’s underground niche, Deadmau5 has achieved global popularity for more accessible productions, with slower tempos (around 128 bpm), more major-chord melodies and harmonies, and sung lyrics. But like Paladin—and like French house producers Daft Punk, who also combine costume and spectacle to play on human-machine ambiguities (2005)—Deadmau5 plays, in his performance, production, and promotion, on EDM’s structuring tensions between liveness and death. Zimmerman says the “Deadmau5” pseudonym derives from his once having found a dead rodent in his computer. That which is named “dead” plays “live” (like the Grateful Dead); the name also connotes “mouse” as
computer peripheral, the device that translates the digits into the digital, a McLuhanesque “extension” of the hand. The mouse is a synecdoche for the hand; here, the dead mouse is a synecdoche for the dead hand, a complex evocation at once of the problem of “liveness” in electronic music, of the disembodied yet autonomous hand known as “‘Thing”’ from The Addams Family, and of “Dead Hand,” the nickname of the Soviet military computer system programmed to launch nuclear missiles across the northern hemisphere in a war scenario where human command had been wiped out (Thompson 2009).

Deadmau5’s costume is a helmet shaped like a cartoon mouse head; the mouse icon has become recognizably Deadmau5’s own brand while also clearly evoking, in a potentially trademark-infringing way, the image of Mickey Mouse (fig. 6)—clearly enough that in September 2014, Disney launched a trademark action against Deadmau5, who counter-sued Disney for unlicensed use of his music; ultimately, the two parties called the whole...
thing off (O’Reilly). The Deadmau5 helmet and Zimmerman’s visible tattoos of video game icons evoke the formal basis of his music in the assembly of samples, including some appropriated ones.

Deadmau5 produces house music of the “electro” and “progressive” subgenres—popular dance music styles that are staples at nightclubs, especially the major clubs of Ibiza, London, and Miami that are central scenes and tastemakers for the global EDM economy. Although it is a more accessible and less alienating sound than Paladin’s, Deadmau5’s music, like Paladin’s, features Gothic motifs and textures, including explicit references to horror figures like Frankenstein. The 2010 track “Cthulhu Sleeps” evokes the monster of Lovecraft’s story. (Deadmau5’s Twitter account sometimes states his location as “Rlyeh”: the undersea city that houses Cthulhu in H. P. Lovecraft’s 1928 story “The Call of Cthulhu.”) “Cthulhu Sleeps” uses a sampled vocal “whoop” that we also hear in Armand Van Helden’s “Witch Doktor,” which itself also samples Parliament’s The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein (1976)—a record also sampled by Deadmau5 in a different track, the eponymous “Dr. Funkenstein,” in which the only lyric is the utterance of this name, in a sonorous bass voice. Deadmau5’s “Dr. Funkenstein” has since been widely remixed; for Hallowe’en 2009, Deadmau5 released the Dr. Funkenstein Remixes EP (2009a), featuring the original track together with nine remixes by other EDM producers, in a range of EDM styles.

Gothic and horror references abound in other Deadmau5 tracks. “Complications” (2008) includes the metronome pulse of an electrocardiogram, which flatlines during sequences when the kick drum cuts out, and then stops when the kick drum resumes, as though the drum beat replaces the heartbeat; the arrangement signals an oscillation from life to death, and back to life—or its digital simulation. The 2009 track “Ghosts ‘n’ Stuff” propelled Deadmau5 to chart-topping fame; its lyrics open with a disorienting image of shared disembodiment: “It’s been so long I’ve been out of my body with you” (2009b). The song’s hook is a heavy organ riff (which in itself evokes Frankenstein, according to the tradition of organ instrumentation discussed in chapter 2). The companion track “Moar Ghosts ‘n’ Stuff” (2009c) opens with the funeral march by Chopin and modulates this into the organ hook of “Ghosts.”

The 2012 track “The Veldt” extends these thematics of death and technics in its adaptation of the eponymous Ray Bradbury story, and its unsettling juxtaposition of major-chord melody, bucolic samples of
bird- and insect song, and subtly gruesome, dystopian lyrics: “Happy life with the machines . . . Happy technology / Outside the lions run / Feeding on remains” (2012b). In an interview with CBC, Zimmerman (2012a) described “The Veldt” as an homage to the Bradbury story “in which an unhealthy obsession with technology ends up having murderous consequences.” He said that part of his intent with the song was to renew interest in that story. In a way both suggestive and symptomatic of the discourse of technology as Frankenpheme, the interviewer then asked Zimmerman:

Interviewer: Do you have an unhealthy obsession with technology?
Zimmerman: Yeah, absolutely. It’s incredibly unhealthy.
Interviewer: Tell me how it’s unhealthy.
Zimmerman: Well, because I have absolutely no social skills whatsoever. I cannot unplug. It’s not like I’m addicted to it, like a drug . . . well, maybe I am. (2012a)

As if to deliberately overstate the point, Zimmerman subsequently answered his cellphone while still on the air.

Deadmau5’s performance aesthetic and his productions alike thus dramatize and thematize the Frankensteinian problematic of life, death, and undeath. And in June 2012, Zimmerman reanimated the debate in popular music over “liveness” versus playback: in a Rolling Stone interview (Eells 2012), he claimed that EDM performers—including himself—“just hit play”—that is, preprogram whole sets—instead of improvising a mix of tracks. In follow-up music press coverage and social media, Zimmerman tried to clarify that he was referring specifically to EDM producers who are expected to perform at concerts and are held—absurdly, he holds—to expectations to perform music “live” the way singer-songwriters would: that is, to play music, not to play it back: “we all hit play,” he said (Deadmau5 2012c). But Deadmau5’s claim that he could show up at a gig, press the spacebar, and then just fist-pump for the whole show touched a nerve with DJs as well as producers (thus showing some slippage and identification between these two roles, which have long overlapped in the EDM economy). On Twitter, Canadian expat DJ Sydney Blu continued the debate, writing: “Some idiot accused me of prerecording my set last night. That’s the funniest thing ever because I am one of the few djs that still beat match” (@SYDNEYBLU, 23 December 2012, 11:13 am).

In this way, Deadmau5 is extending not just recent traditions in Canadian EDM, but a broader legacy of McLuhan-informed Canadian music
making, like that demonstrated by Glenn Gould. But while Gould famously forsook the live concert for the recording studio, Zimmerman, conversely, brings the recording studio to the concert. In the perennial crisis of “liveness” in music, Zimmerman’s “just hit play” comments transposed the terms of this crisis more deeply into the already mediatized context of EDM and inflamed deep-seated and long-standing anxieties over technology as labour’s monstrous supplement, which perennially recur in music as new instruments, production processes, and performance practices alternately assist or supplant human labour (Porcello 1991). For those who don’t know or don’t like EDM, Deadmau5’s remark feeds these anxieties and plays into stereotypes of DJs as doing work other than music making, and of EDM as something other than music. What does Deadmau5’s admission leave the performing body to do? To parody liveness, to act as conductor? As Bolter et al. (2006) argue, “aura” is now just a design parameter for digital media. Opting out of the aura of liveness, it seems, has hurt neither Zimmerman’s touring schedule nor his music sales.

Deadmau5’s performance practice includes a further detail that furnishes an apt coda to this discussion: when he performs while wearing the version of the mouse-head helmet that lights up with LEDs, he cannot actually see out of the helmet with his own eyes. Instead, he wears video goggles. As he explained in his CBC radio interview:

Zimmerman: I got a camera coming out of this thing so I can see my hands—
Interviewer: So wait a sec—there’s a camera in the mouse head?
Zimmerman: Yeah, there’s video goggles in the mouse head, so I’m looking through video goggles and there’s a camera down here by my neck.
Interviewer: You’re watching a video of what is in front of you.
Zimmerman: Yeah, it’s really weird. And there’s a two millisecond lag on it and it drives me crazy. (2012a)

Identifying hypermediatization with intoxication, and technology with addiction, and making and playing music in ways that amplify the Frankensteinian figuration of technology, Zimmerman as Deadmau5 thus represents a recent, globally popular contribution to the tradition of McLuhanesque Frankenstein adaptations in Canada’s EDM scene. As Canadian representatives of a globalized EDM culture characterized by “techno-Romanticism” and immersive mediatization, the Paladin Project
and Deadmau5 problematize anxieties over liveness and labour in their productions and performance practices that amplify McLuhan’s Frankensteinian discourse of technology.

Despite EDM culture’s organization around subcultural capital and insulating “gatekeeping” practices and discourses, it is a fundamentally social cultural scene; and while its heavy investments in digital media complicate and problematize “liveness,” by the same token they thus show that EDM culture is a profoundly performance-oriented scene. These social and performative dimensions of EDM scene-making have facilitated its cross-pollination with other sites and forms of cultural production in Canada; in the process, EDM culture’s performance practices, reference points, and techno-Romantic aesthetics—with their emphasis on the McLuhanesque Frankenpheme of technology—have spread to and been adapted by other sub- and popular cultural scenes and processes. One salutary example of this cross-pollination is the fringe play richardthesecond (2001), by Toronto-based actor and playwright Matthew MacFadzean.

“The new celebrity is gonna be genetic pioneers”

MacFadzean’s richardthesecond, first performed at the 2001 Summer-Works festival in Toronto, is an intensely intertextual production: an acknowledged adaptation of Shakespeare and an implicit adaptation of Mary Shelley’s “skeleton story,” with numerous nods to Videodrome and Toronto’s rave scene, among a dizzying array of other popular cultural points of reference. The play distills its manic mix of subcultural, pop-cultural, and canonical sources into an eminently McLuhanesque meditation on new media technologies and their monstrous implications.

richardthesecond is a one-actor play, and as the plot unfolds this dramaturgy assumes a rich irony. The protagonist, “Richie Excellent,” introduces himself as a cocky young hipster-raver; he tells the audience of his ambition to make a difference in the world, amidst a tangle of segues and non-sequiturs about Star Wars, Electric Circus, and other pop culture touchstones. Between his live monologue and video footage, which includes speeches by a “mad scientist” character named Gene, we gradually learn that Richie has been cloned as part of a research project led by Gene. In the first pages of the script, Gene’s references to Darwin and eugenics frame the project that Richie ultimately describes very much according to the familiar Frankenphemes that have historically articulated public
concerns with experiments in cloning (Morton 2002, Turney 1998): later in
the script, video footage shows “protesters holding placards reading ‘Stop
Cloning Now’” (MacFadzean 2001, 18). Gene’s introductory references to
Darwin and natural selection also bear self-reflexively on MacFadzean’s
play as an adaptation in its own right (albeit of the cultural not biological
kind). By the end of the play, which concludes Richie’s search for identity
and ethics among the simulacra of postmodernity, neither the audience
nor Richie himself knows if he is the original Richie, or the second.

The play’s similarities to Videodrome abound, from its opening on a
TV screen showing noise not signal, to the O’Blivionesque (which is to
say McLuhanesque) restriction of Gene’s role to a posthumous, televised
presence and his characterization as a mad scientist preoccupied with
human adaptation, to Richie’s references to TV as a kind of surrogate
parent figure: “I sorta . . . stumbled onto destiny. Birthed by must-see
tee-vee” (MacFadzean 2001, 10). Like O’Blivion, Gene only ever appears on
a video screen, as a recording, and he provides the explanation of the pro-
tagonist’s monstrous origins. As in Videodrome, this explanatory sequence
occurs late in the plot, a revelation of Richie’s true, “second” nature as
a clone. Something of O’Blivion’s apocalyptic tone—which itself echoes
McLuhan’s tendency to generalize his claims about media into nothing
less than epochal terms—resonates in a late montage sequence wherein
a TV announcer welcomes the audience to “the Next Age of Man” (16).
Like O’Blivion, a great deal of Richie’s identity is bound up in a videotape
library, in this case, a complete collection of every episode of the TV show
Electric Circus (which was Toronto’s answer to US dance shows like Solid
Gold and Soul Train): “I watch Electric Circus to know I’m alive,” Richie
asserts, echoing O’Blivion’s claim in Videodrome that “television is reality.”

Like Atwood’s Snowman, Richie is a collage of a character, a pastiche
of pop-culture and media references, one of which is Cronenberg’s film
Dead Ringers (which Richie cites to describe Gene). As Richie’s role in the
cloning experiment becomes clear, he also becomes his own doppelgänger:
unsure whether he’s the first or second Richie, he adds that additional
“me’s” will be built “at age 2, 20, 40, 60, 80” (20). “I’m tellin ya,” he boasts,
“the new celebrity is gonna be genetic pioneers, and if that’s the case
I’m like grade seven Canadian history” (21). Apprehending the Franken-
steinian character of his fate in terms of media—and the mediatization not
simply of performance but of subjectivity itself—Richie expects that he will
eventually become downloadable (21), describes himself as a “high-speed connection,” as a “telegram” (23), and, more abstractly and ambiguously, as simply “shared” (27).

Recognizing that the play’s compulsive referentiality risks dating it, the script’s stage directions call for “pop culture updates” as “necessary” (2), thus rendering a constellation of script details subject to both obsolescence and interchangeability—and therefore amplifying the Frankensteinian resonance of the play’s intense intertextuality. This intertextuality encompasses echoes of and allusions to other previous Frankenstein adaptations: not only Videodrome but also Max Headroom (in early footage of Gene, edited to loop, repeat, and stutter) and 2001: A Space Odyssey (in subsequent footage of the iconic rebellious computer, Hal) (21). The play also alludes to Frankenstein itself, in that Richie’s concluding reflection—and confusion—is set against the mediatized backdrop of repeating video footage of an “arctic vista” (20, 25, 30), and the play’s end mirrors its beginning in footage of TV “snow” (30).

Electronic dance music accompanies the play’s action; productions have for the most part used not prerecorded music but “live” mixing performance by an offstage DJ. The script sometimes suggests what kind of music is to be played, with repeated references to “tech” in its stage directions: “like some massive tech-anthem” (2); “muscle car techno” (12). These references to “techno”—the music genre—mark the performances of techno music in the production and textually complement the script’s other references to technology, which culminate in the denouement’s stage directions for a climactic montage of footage including “rapid firing off of images on screen symbols, slogans, inventions, technologies, ending with a shot of Darth Vader with his mask taken off” (29).

Techno music accompanies the action and dialogue, references to technology and prior Frankenstein adaptations augment the script, and MacFadzean’s commentary on the play suggests how it furthers a McLuhanesque and Frankensteinian discourse of technology. Describing his play as a “techno-opera,” the playwright told Now magazine that “what I like most about Shakespeare is that each play mirrors an era, and Richard II seems to be ours” (quoted in Kaplan 2001, 53). Detailed production notes identify Richard II’s protagonist as a “dreamer” who is fascinated by the strange fruits of technology and capitalist excess, while wilfully oblivious to “impending environmental shutdown” (MacFadzean 2002).
richardthesecond thus adapts major canonical literary works, pop culture references and media samples, and the subcultural milieu of EDM to stage a story of technological backfire organized around a scientific field whose long-standing controversy has been framed emphatically in Frankensteinian terms. As a fringe play, the production has occupied a liminal niche where subculture, pop culture, and canonical or “high” culture converge—and where they enable cultural hybridization and experimentation with form and media. Together with the music production and performance practices of Paladin and Deadmau5, theatrical works like richardthesecond dramatize the Frankensteinian and McLuhanesque contours of new media technology and media discourse in Canada. These multimedia productions and performances, occupying intersecting milieus of localized subculture and globalized popular culture, also illustrate how the discourse of technology functions legibly in sound- and image-making practices as well as textual and language articulations. And they demonstrate that Canadian popular culture represents a pivotal site both for theorizing adaptation in cultural production and for popularizing McLuhan’s sense of technology as something modern, manufactured, and monstrous.