8. Monster Mines and Pipelines
Frankenphemes of Tar Sands Technology in Canadian Popular Culture

The company is welding together old pipelines and new ones, reversing the flow on some and pumping up the volume on others, building their very own Frankenstein pipeline down to the Gulf coast. (LaFontaine 2012)

Weather forecasters are predicting that Hurricane Sandy could merge with another weather system as it moves, bringing a “Frankenstorm” to parts of Eastern Canada and the U.S. in time for Halloween. (CBC 2012)

Friday marks the fourth day of an intense firestorm in Canada’s boreal forest that has engulfed large parts of Fort McMurray, Alberta—a frontier town that serves as the base for the province’s oil sands region. . . . “The beast is still up. It’s surrounding the city,” said fire chief Darby Allen. . . . Fire is a natural part of the boreal ecosystem, but what’s happening in Fort McMurray isn’t natural. . . . We’ve reached an era where all weather events bear at least a slight human fingerprint, which, as Elizabeth Kolbert points out in the New Yorker, means “we’ve all contributed to the latest inferno.” (Holthaus 2016)

Cultural representations of the Alberta tar sands industry demonstrate the pivotal role that Canadian adaptations of Frankenstein have played in
constructing and popularizing a globalized discourse of technology. This chapter contextualizes the popular cultural tradition of Canadian adaptations of *Frankenstein* in relation to Canada’s resource extraction-based industries, and hence to globalization. Moreover, in finding an abundance of cultural representations of oil in Canada alone, this chapter answers and tempers Imre Szeman’s (2011) claim that “our fiction of energy surplus appears to be so completely shielded from view as to be hardly named in our literary fictions at all.” He sees energy infrastructure and especially oil as a “dearth . . . in contemporary fiction,” pointing to works like Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!* (1927) as exceptions to this rule. Szeman focuses on “literary fictions” and gives only a nod to science fiction, a genre that is central to cultural images of oil. For Szeman, *Avatar* (2009) illustrates science fiction’s fantastic, clean energy futures, a curious misreading of the film that seems to miss its tar sands allegory, as I will discuss.

Today, the Alberta tar sands industry, located northeast of McLuhan’s hometown Edmonton, represents a significant and symptomatic site of technology as a *Frankenstein* trope: it is the world’s biggest industrial project and capital’s most hubristic gamble with climate change catastrophe (Berman 2013). In 2016, the region where this industry is located suffered a catastrophic, long-running wildfire dubbed “the Beast” by firefighters and described by Naomi Klein (evoking the Frankensteinian rhetoric of galvanism) as the result of “El Niño supercharged with climate change” (2016). An extraction business of enormous scale and unprecedented destructiveness (Patchett 2012), the tar sands literalize David McNally’s observation that “the idea that something monstrous is at work in the operations of global capitalism is never far from the surface today” (2011, 9). Accordingly, technologically reductive articulations of *Frankenstein* have emerged to represent the tar sands—and the climate change that the oil business is now known to accelerate. Cultural representations of the Alberta tar sands demonstrate the pivotal role that Canadian adaptations of *Frankenstein* have played in constructing and circulating the globalized discourse of technology.

Here we should first recall that allusion, adaptation, and other modes of cultural appropriation can as readily serve strategies of interpretive closure (Baldick 1987, 5) as those of openness and ambiguity. *Frankenstein* references often function as sensational rhetoric designed to thwart serious, reasoned discussion. The figure of Frankenstein stalks contemporary
journalism and commentary on oil and the tar sands, among critics and supporters. A 2009 US advertising campaign by the environmental advocacy group Forest Ethics warned about “the dirtiest oil on earth” and described “the Tar Sands” as “a Frankenstein of local and global environmental hazards” (quoted in Craven 2009). In 2012, the National Wildlife Federation described Enbridge’s proposed pipeline expansion in a flurry of Frankenstein images: “If Keystone XL is the ‘zombie pipeline’ that won’t die, it’s pretty clear the Enbridge expansion is the ‘Frankenstein’ of tar sands. The patchwork, 2,600 mile pipeline is right out of a mad scientist’s dream” (LaFontaine 2012). Conversely, the oil lobby Energy Tomorrow also invoked Frankenstein to refute criticisms of diluted bitumen, or “dilbit,” the tar sands’ product: “Dilbit isn’t some Frankenstein-like product and lots of care goes into shipping it” (Green 2012). References like these are more rhetorical moves than aesthetic ones, although the availability of Frankenstein to both sides of this debate refracts a bit of the ambivalence of the story and its near-ubiquitous invocation with reference to public questions concerning technology.

Across different media and genres, Canadian cultural texts exhibit a range of reductive and ambiguous uses for Frankenstein’s story of technological backfire to represent oil business, energy crisis, and climate crisis. Take McLuhan, for instance: his work does not address energy as extensively as media, but references to energy industries furnish contextual bookends for the first and last chapters of Understanding Media (1964). That study devotes a chapter to the car, figured according to the same Frankenstein allusion that titled his first book: that chapter is called “Motorcar: The Mechanical Bride” ([1964] 2003, 291). For McLuhan, the car is a cyborg technology, described in terms as Frankensteinian as those with which he describes new media generally: “It was the electric spark that enabled the gasoline engine to take over from the steam engine. The crossing of electricity, the biological form, with the mechanical form was never to release a greater force” (296). As an “extension of man”—that is, as a medium—the car “turns the rider into a superman” (297); the car is not only a medium but also a weapon, a “misguided missile” (300) whose destructive power is its drastic environmental impact and social transformation: “cars have become the real population of our cities, with a resulting loss of human scale” (293).
In 1973 (at the onset of the first postwar energy crisis), Christopher Dewdney’s first book, *A Paleozoic Geology of London, Ontario*, includes a prose poem called “Sol du Soleil” (“Soil of the sun”), consisting of two paragraphs: the first defamiliarizes the point of view of a car driver; the second figures the fossil fuel industry in monstrous, geological terms. The second paragraph speculates how the “continued use of fossil fuels” will “slowly replace the present composition of the atmosphere with the chemical composition of the atmosphere some 200 million years ago. . . . This atmosphere will become capable of generating the life-forms essential to this ancient form” (1973, 5).

The poem posits fossil fuel use as ironic technological backlash: the human use of fuels made from the fossils of ancient life forms is changing the climate to make the earth once again hospitable to those life forms. In this concise speculation on energy futures, the unintended end and radical externality of oil is the return of the compressed. The ironic sense of cyclical time in the context of fossil fuels expressed in Dewdney’s poem has been more recently expressed in an Internet meme that started circulating around 2013; the meme image varies (some versions show stock “meme” characters like Philosoraptor), and the source is unknown (because of the anonymous and viral character of memes), but the text reads: “If oil is made from decomposed dinosaurs, and plastic is made from oil, are plastic dinosaurs made from real dinosaurs?” (Kim 2013). The question has since been taken up online, in discussion forums and web comics, to assess if there’s any scientific truth to it, although the main interest in the meme is its implied questioning of consumerism in an oil-based economy and its accompanying hint—which recurs elsewhere in popular cultural representations of oil—that this economy symbolically depends as much on archaic, fossilized ideas and ideologies as it materially depends on fossil fuels.

Another suggestive period text that represents the oil business and extraction technology in Frankensteinian terms is Richard Rohmer’s early-1970s trilogy of novels that imagine a Canada threatened with US annexation for its Arctic oil and gas reserves. The first of these, *Ultimatum* ([1973] 2003), also includes a subplot concerning First Nations protests over territorial and resource rights—and a controversial pipeline, no less, giving it an uncanny timeliness and even prescience concerning today’s “Frankenstein pipelines” and growing interest in Arctic fuel sources.
Rohmer’s novel takes the energy crisis quite seriously: the story envisions a near-future oil boomtown in Resolute Bay. Interestingly, much of the plot action takes place over the phone, as the US president and the Canadian prime minister engage in extensive and exhausting negotiations to resolve the crisis and stave off a US invasion of Canada. This may seem odd for a techno-thriller (and, well, less than thrilling) but it belongs to a distinctly Canadian and McLuhanesque tradition of integrating media, their effects, and their environments into not only the setting but also the action of a story (as discussed in chapter 5, concerning Cronenberg’s films). In an early scene in *Ultimatum*, as the US president arrives in Resolute Bay to tour its undersea drilling operation, the narrator supplies some backstory that is also foreshadowing: “It was right about here that the first big gas discovery was made in January ’70. It came up under such enormous pressure that it blew. . . . No one had the know-how or the technology then to cope with high-pressure finds like that” (118). Ironically, then, the operation that the president inspects subsequently ruptures and blows. Although the Arctic’s fossil fuels have turned Resolute Bay into a boomtown, the “know-how and technology” for extracting and distributing them remain sketchy at best, subject to backfire as well as sabotage, all while the threat of neoimperial war hangs on the phone wire between the state leaders’ offices.

The period’s popular music also addressed the energy crisis. Neil Young’s 1974 song “Vampire Blues” invokes the vampire (a figure with close historical ties to *Frankenstein*, as discussed in chapter 2) to depict the oil business: “I’m a vampire, babe / Suckin’ blood from the Earth . . . Sell you twenty barrels’ worth.”

More recently, Young has become a prominent, outspoken critic of the tar sands; his Honour the Treaties concert tour of 2014 was a legal fundraiser for the Fort Chipewyan reserve, the First Nations community that has been most gravely afflicted by tar sands pollution. Young’s tour and his controversial statements polarized and galvanized Canadians.

Turning to more contemporary work, the Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky has drawn public and critical attention to the tar sands. His photographs of “manufactured landscapes” play with scale and perspective, for instance by using elevated or aerial vantage points to suggest the enormity of infrastructural technologies, their social effects, and their drastic consequences and externalities. Images of industrial enormity, of “the rise of the machine” have, since Marx, included a tradition
of Frankensteinian references (Baldick 1987), and Burtynsky has played on and extended this tradition in his revealing photographic work. An exemplary photo is *Alberta Oil Sands #6* (fig. 7).

On the horizon, we see only “darkness and distance” (Shelley [1818] 2012, 221). In the middle distance, an oil sands refinery sprawls, like Archibald Lampman’s nightmarish “city at the end of things.” From the middle distance to the foreground stretch two flat, rectangular areas that disrupt the industrial realism of the composition; they are fields of unnatural yellow and rust hues, like lakes of fire in hell. These areas—which are sulphur collection beds—convey Burtynsky’s signature ability to turn documentary into defamiliarization, confronting us with a shocking kind of realism that verges on the surreal, in a way that might prompt us to wonder whether the images have been digitally enhanced. *OIL*, a book produced to accompany an exhibit of Burtynsky’s photographs, itself features explicitly Frankensteinian language, in curator Paul Roth’s description of Burtynsky’s work, in which, he argues, we see “no industrial Golem, no homicidal Frankenstein. Rather, we see the ordering force of man, and the chilling, corrosive, penultimate threat that lies at the black heart of our rationalism” (Burtynsky et al. 2011, 169). Roth’s reference to *Frankenstein*, intended to disavow its relevance, still conjures its association with technology, and it is suggestively worded as well: that “we see” no Frankenstein may not so much deny the monstrous horror of Burtynsky’s images as instead implicate us, the viewers, in the environmental horror show documented in Burtynsky’s photographs. That is, we may understand *ourselves* as Frankenstein’s or, at least, as accomplices to Big Oil’s Frankensteinian work—like Walton aboard the icebound ship, who first hears the stricken scientist’s story but ultimately assumes an active role in it.

Returning to popular music, the Albertan singer-songwriter Corb Lund approaches the petroculture of his home state from a libertarian perspective. The grim, apocalyptic song “Gettin’ Down on the Mountain,” from Lund’s 2012 album *Cabin Fever*, begins with an odd arrangement of juxtaposed acoustic plucking and growling electric bass, over which Lund opens the lyrics with this ominous refrain: “When the oil stops, everything stops.” What follows is like a lyrical three-minute version of Cormac McCarthy’s desolate, postapocalyptic novel *The Road* (2006): images of gridlock, supply shortages, and starvation, punctuated by pointed, pedagogical questions to the listener about survival skills. “Can you break the
Figure 7  “Darkness and distance”: Edward Burtynsky, Alberta Oil Sands #6 (2011). Burtynsky’s signature aerial vantage point and wide scope crucially document extraction technologies otherwise hidden from public view. Photo copyright © Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto.
horse, can you dig the well?” (Lund 2012). In the chorus, the song’s persona shares his own plan: “Don’t wanna be around when the shit goes down / I’m going to ground on the mountain” (2012). The song is a musical version of the “peak oil” thesis whose proponents are characterized by the bunkered, embattled survivalism conveyed here in passages like “Brother can you pass the ammo?” The song emphasizes its premise in the precariousness of the oil-based economy; both the first and the last verses start with the same line: “When the oil stops, everything stops.” The lyrics’ present-tense and interrogative wording make the imagined scene less an extrapolation than a foregone conclusion: the future present. In the backfire of this single technology—the unanticipated unsustainability of fossil fuel dependence—Lund reads the ripping of “the social fabric”: peak oil is a man-made monster in its overinvested valuation, as everything that keeps men from acting like monsters to one another.

In the tone with which it represents the oil business, this song contrasts sharply with “The Roughest Neck Around,” from Lund’s 2002 album Five Dollar Bill. “Roughest Neck” is an upbeat ode to the oil patch worker. The “roughest neck” is larger than life, a superhuman Everyman characterized by hard work, technical expertise, and devotion to family and society; “he brings power to the people.” And yet he is figured in grotesque, almost monstrous terms. “He’s got a “real long reach,” with “the power in his hands to pull the dragons from the ground.” He is the oil industry’s globalized product as much as its producer: “He’s been all around the world,” and he’s got both “power in his heart” and “dragons in his chest” (2002). Musically, too, the swinging roadhouse blues of “Roughest Neck” contrast with the halting, plodding rhythm of “Gettin’ Down.” These two songs about oil production contrast each other in tone, but not in overall ethos; both appeal, albeit in different ways, to more right-wing discourses of individual responsibility and self-making. Thus, their Frankensteinian images complement each other: the former figures the oil worker as monstrous superman, the latter posits peak oil as a global threat, and the shadow of Frankensteinian technological backfire looms over both.

Several recent plays by Alberta theatre companies—plays like Good Fences (2012) and Extraction (2013)—have turned to the tar sands for dramatic subject matter (Nestruck 2012). One allusive and suggestive production is Catalyst Theatre’s Frankenstein (Christenson 2006), which premiered in 2006 at the Keyano Theatre in Fort McMurray—the northern
Alberta town adjacent to the tar sands operation. Catalyst Theatre’s *Frankenstein* is an extensive, acknowledged adaptation on Hutcheon’s (2006) model, and it uses many of the key points of Shelley’s original plot: the Frankenstein family servant Justine is tried for the murder of the boy William; Frankenstein destroys the “bride” he promises the creature, who then murders his betrothed; in the middle of the story, the creature confronts Frankenstein on a glacier and tells its “origin story”; Frankenstein is accused of murdering his friend Henry Clerval. Catalyst’s stage version also makes significant changes: Justine is young Victor’s science tutor and mentor; Walton’s frame narrative is replaced by a loose chorus of narrators who introduce, interrupt, and look on the main action; Frankenstein completes and animates the “bride” before destroying it; and the play ends with Frankenstein incarcerated in an institution for the mentally ill, where the creature visits him in the final scene.

The script dialogue and narration are largely structured by rhyming, song-like lines, and the costumes and props are highly stylized according to a stark Expressionist aesthetic: all the costumes and props are paper, paper-surfaced, or papier-mâché and mostly all white, with only a very few accents of colour, which tend instead to be produced by lighting effects and makeup. The rhyming script and musical numbers, together with the striking, monochromatic visual effects, lend the play a surreal period atmosphere. The abundance of paper, its use to create an Expressionist visual vocabulary reminiscent of silent film, and its presence in a stage play all make for a self-reflexive commentary on dramatic form and established media like writing and live performance, at a time when reminders for audiences to turn off mobile devices have become as routine as the inevitable disruptions said devices cause. In its script and its staging, Catalyst’s *Frankenstein* mounts a self-consciously theatrical, pointedly low-tech production.

The script’s opening is particularly noteworthy for relating the play to its site of production in Fort McMurray and thus to the tar sands with which the town is popularly identified. The introduction sets the scene for the story it unfolds against a backdrop of “strange signs” seen in “strange times” that could be either Shelley’s period or the present:

Nick: These are strange days we live in.
Strange days to be alive!
Who knows where we’re heading?
Or how long we may survive?
Nancy: For five hundred days a poisonous haze
   Has spread across the sky.
Tim: Perhaps it's a sign of the sickening times:
Tracy: Grim and foreboding—sent from on high.
Sarah: Something’s gone terribly wrong in this world,
   Something beyond repair . . .
Tim: Another strange, malignant plague
   Annihilates ten thousand men.
Sarah: Another record-breaking storm
   Claims a hundred thousand more. (Christenson 2006, 1)

The suggestion of “strange days” precedes a litany of unusual—and globalized—phenomena and crises. The “poisonous haze” alludes to the “Year without a Summer,” 1816, which saw temperatures fall across Europe as a result of an Indonesian volcanic eruption; this was the unseasonable summer that Shelley spent with her circle of friends in Switzerland, when they made their famous agreement to write ghost stories, Shelley’s being *Frankenstein*. But “poisonous haze” also alludes to the pollution produced by the tar sands operations, visible in the vicinities of Fort McMurray and Edmonton, and a subject of perennial news coverage and scientific study (like Parajulee and Wania 2014). Similarly, the “plague” could refer either to the significant cholera outbreaks of Shelley’s time (which inspired her 1826 novel *The Last Man*), or to any number of global disease outbreaks today, such as the 2014 Ebola scare. But among these “signs,” the “record-breaking storm” seems decidedly more about the present than about the past. The term “record-breaking” is a construction of modern usage, and the image of a monster storm—a “Frankenstorm,” as Hurricane Sandy got called (CBC News 2012) or “the Beast” of the Fort McMurray fire—is an emphatically contemporary image, and one increasingly understood in close relation to the climate change caused by widespread fossil fuel use.

The relevance of Catalyst’s *Frankenstein* to the tar sands, especially in its relation to Fort McMurray and its apocalyptic script, has not been lost on those involved in staging the play. Dov Mickelson, an actor who plays several roles in the play (including Frankenstein’s father and younger brother), has said of the play that

certainly it has present day implications. We first performed this show in Fort McMurray (in –40 February!) and what is going on
there with the oil sands and the environment had an eerie resonance. It made me wonder if it was the same for the author 200 years earlier and the onslaught of the industrial revolution as a backdrop to what was going on. (quoted in Cross 2010)

The play’s apocalyptic sense of foreboding and looming catastrophe gets put in a significantly—and symptomatically—global context, in the above-quoted opening lines: “Something’s gone terribly wrong in this world” (2006). From these first lines forward, the play consistently connects the local to the global, the personal tragedy of Frankenstein to the broader catastrophes of the world, often through the invocation of a collective “we”; in this way, Frankenstein’s “first irreversible blunder” is universalized, the cause of a global “terrible mess” (65) that encompasses “us” in its querying of responsibility and complicity: “How did we come to this point? . . . The time will come to face our fears . . . We close our eyes, we cover our ears, / We know the end is drawing near” (65–66). If there were ever a global, technological, and ecological crisis in which “we” are implicated as a collective, it is certainly that of the capitalist world-system’s structural dependence on oil.

The last but not least example to be analyzed in detail here is the 2009 blockbuster film Avatar, directed by Canadian expatriate James Cameron, whose most successful films—for instance, The Terminator (1984), Aliens (1986), and Titanic (1997)—have all been dramas of Frankensteinian technological backfire. One of the most successful Hollywood movies to date, Avatar is also a powerful representation of the tar sands, and this representation has been mobilized for activism, against the “Avatar sands” (Sierra Club et al, 2010), by NGOs, Indigenous groups, and Cameron himself (Mirrlees 2013, 7). Among the many appropriations and critiques of Avatar, an overlooked narrative aspect is that its plot is a Frankensteinian story of technological backfire. The uncanny “native alien” body that the disabled soldier Sully learns to occupy is a lab-grown body. As a host for Sully’s projected consciousness, the avatar enacts a doubled role, making Sully his own doppelgänger. The avatar body is also gigantic and blue—as were most nineteenth-century stage performances of Frankenstein’s monster. The scene in which Sully first “wakes up” in his avatar body echoes the typical “creation scene” in Frankenstein films, as the creature awakens to cause a ruckus in the lab and breaks its restraints. Avatar’s plot becomes one of technological backfire, as the transformed Sully rebels against his
masters, abandoning his mission to join the oppressed Na’vi in resisting the military-industrial colonists. The success of the Na’vi’s resistance forces the decolonization of the planet Pandora. While this is a Hollywood happy ending, it is also a dramatization of the SF “Frankenstein barrier”: here, the Na’vi cut off Earth’s staple fuel source; this contingency effectively forecloses on the planet’s future.

What especially enabled the adoption of Avatar for activism against the “Avatar sands” are the early establishing shots that show the colonists’ mining operation on Pandora. The resemblance of these shots to the tar sands is openly acknowledged by Avatar’s art director, Alberta-born Todd Cherniawsky, who is quoted in the documentary The Tipping Point (Thompson and Radford 2011): “What was going on in Alberta,” he says, “was hugely informative in building and designing this environment.” The first view of the Pandora mine appears through the landing spacecraft’s windshield as the copilot says “the mine is in sight”—a subtle script emphasis on making visible an extraction industry characterized as “uniquely occluded” (Pendakis and Wilson 2012, 5). The next shot (fig. 8) shows the fuller vista of the mine in the middle distance and the refinery in the background; this shot strongly resembles Burtynsky’s distinctive aerial-angle, panoramic photographs of the Alberta tar sands operations.

The camera then pans and cuts to a shot that details the operation: loaded dump trucks and soldiers traversing a narrow access road, behind which a massive bucket-wheel excavator sends up dust as it chews into the earth (fig. 9).

Significantly, in this close shot the bucket-wheel appears so gigantic that it exceeds the frame, as does the gigantic dump truck in a subsequent shot where the protagonist stops as the truck drives past, revealing a number of arrows that have been shot into its tires. The script for this scene invokes the discourse of technology explicitly: “The neolithic weapons are jarring amid all the advanced technology” (Cameron 2009, 8). The bucket-wheel image itself is suggestively critical: the bucket-wheel excavator was discontinued in the 1990s (Gismondi and Davidson 2012), so it appears here as an obsolete icon of extraction machinery, as if to signal the unsustainability and ultimate failure of the Pandora mine and to suggest the combined obsolescence and rapacity—the living death—of fossil fuel technology in general.

Across a range of different media and genres, then, Canadian representations of the tar sands invoke Frankenstein to depict and question
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this industry’s scale, danger, and obsolescence; in the process, they demonstrate how Canadian culture and industry have both popularized the general discourse of technology as human-made global monstrosity and promoted public awareness of the causal relation between fossil fuel use and climate change. Taken as a group, these texts also provide a grotesque critical vocabulary of images for Canada’s tradition of technological nationalism—which the oil business restructures as a transnationalism—and for its postcoloniality: if Canada is sometimes positioned as a “dutiful daughter” of Empire or a victim of the cultural imperialism of US popular culture, texts like those analyzed here articulate and dramatize how the resource extraction industry anchored in the tar sands has made Canada a neoimperial economic leader in its own right, with all the predictable failures of democratic integrity and environmental stewardship that such leadership tends to confer (Shrivastava and Stefanick 2015). Taken together, these texts tell a story—which itself may trade in the oversimplifying interpretive closure of “technological reduction” that has fuelled Frankenstein’s global popularity—in which the tar sands are the mad scientist, and climate change its monster.

And in a further Frankensteinian irony, the climate change exported by Canada’s tar sands has accelerated a polar melting that now brings Big Oil to the Arctic for exploration and extraction (Al Jazeera 2012; Chazan 2008). Recent Frankenstein scholarship reflects this trend: “Arctic exploration was in the news at the time Mary Shelley was working on her novel, much in the same way that the circumpolar region is in the news in our own time due to global warming. It is probably for this very reason that most of the articles on Mary Shelley’s Arctic have been published within the last ten years as we become conscious of and concerned with Arctic issues once again” (Bachinger 2010, 162). Like Mary Shelley’s novel, Big Oil’s own Frankenstein story of technological backfire is destined to press north, towards greater hubris and atrocity; and it will all too likely end, as well, in self-destructive conflagration.