Book Review


Just in time to commemorate the two-hundred-year anniversary of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus, Mark A. McCutcheon of Athabasca University explores how Marshall McLuhan’s work binds together modern technology, Frankenstein, and Canadian culture in his book The Medium Is the Monster: Canadian Adaptations of Frankenstein and the Discourse of Technology.

McCutcheon rallies the critical term “Frankenphem” as he delves into discursive uses of technology, the societal impact of McLuhan in the 1960s, the resurgence of McLuhan’s influence in the 1980s science fiction films and books, and the creation and presentation of electronic dance music (EDM). Defined as “an image or idea derived from Frankenstein, represented in another text or form” (p. 8) the author even relates the Frankenphem to “popular cultural representations of the Alberta tar sand industry” (p. 10).

Using Canadian pop cultural works as his main evidence to support the connection between Frankenstein and McLuhan, McCutcheon brings together works from David Cronenberg, William Gibson, Margaret Atwood, Deadmau5, The Paladin Project, Maestro Fresh Wes, Phyllis Gotlieb, and Peter Watts, among others. Thinking in terms of intertextuality, it would make sense that creative works belonging to the same genre would contain some reflections of one another. The eclectic collection of evidence supporting McCutcheon’s argument is a quirky mixed bag which he relates through a use of or reference to modern technology and themes from Frankenstein. In these works, technological discourse exists in symbiosis with McLuhan’s ideas. This interconnection between the two becomes the focal point of the work, whether technology is embraced or feared, used as a tool for entertainment or as a warning of destruction.

What is surprising, though, is that during his discussion about the Alberta tar sands McCutcheon glazed over a relatively well-known Canadian dystopian poem “The City at the End of Things” written in 1899 by Archibald Lampman. McCutcheon seemingly assumes that the reader would know the poem intimately and its relevance in using it to describe the tar sands as a type of Frankenphem manifestation. After all, Lampman’s poem (cited in Bennett & Brown, 2003) was arguably the first of its kind and contains deep metaphors of technological determinism. The poem tells the story of a dying city, of people dying only to be succeeded by their mechanized creatures, or rather their monsters, hinting at the Frankenphem that McCutcheon refers to. If there was ever a work that signified Canada’s enduring connection to technological discourses, something that preceded McLuhan’s work before modern technology was es-
tablished, and the generalized societal fear of technological creations being our ultimate doom, Lampman's poem was it.

McCutcheon does, however, briefly touch on important debates surrounding media imperialism. His concern with the pervasiveness of U.S. television and media content in Canada, and the tendency to overshadow Canadian cities, with the U.S. film industry using them instead as popular U.S. city stand-ins for economic reasons, demonstrates how Canadian pop culture is often influenced by its neighbour. Still, he explains that Canadian film and cultural production has been protected as a way to foster sovereignty and to establish a distinct Canadian identity. Recognizing this is an important part of his reasoning concerning the body of evidence he gathers together, as it points to the distinct place that Frankenstein holds with Canadian arts.

He also explains rather elegantly what he means by technology, referring to seven distinct definitions of the word and tracing the word's lineage back to the early seventeenth century. Recognizing how the word “technology” has evolved over time, McCutcheon argues how Shelley's work solidified the current definition into modern English, thus demonstrating how intertwined modern societies are with their technology and technological advancements.

This is why it is perhaps a difficult task to determine exactly what influences our relationship with technology. How we speak about it, and how we creatively express our relationship with it, is extremely complex. McCutcheon's book is designed to make readers think, to illuminate Frankenstein's monster hiding in our every day. But in terms of McLuhan's influence on Canada's relationship with technology, it's a kind of chicken/egg paradox: Was Canada always like this, influenced for years by works such as *Frankenstein* and “The City at the End of Things”? Did McLuhan simply express a general vibe in a way that resonated with the time, or did he recreate it in the twentieth century Canadian context? Or is it something deeper within ourselves that makes us fear our own creations, fearing that one day they will be our ruin despite our pride in them?

McCutcheon's revelation about the creation and cultural representations of the tar sands is illuminating, especially in regard to Arctic oil exploration and extraction. This particular point comes at a time when it is argued that “Canada's tar sands has accelerated a polar melting” (p. 188), and McCutcheon explains how this movement to the Arctic is an echo of Shelley's Arctic scenes in *Frankenstein*. In this, the author seems to peripherally touch on some big philosophical discussions without really meaning to, questions about our need to create and consume despite the inevitable self-destruction that comes with it.

Ultimately, these are big ideas and questions to work through, and McCutcheon's book is an excellent guidepost to start a reader on a journey of technological discourse and cultural exploration.

**References**


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