

PREFACE

MEDIASCAPE

The Computer Has No Memory

There was a grisly advertisement in a recent issue of *The Canadian Forum*¹ which has a lot to say about the silent, but very real, impact of computer technology on Canadian society, and about how in the absence of a deep ethical and philosophical reflection on the human context of computer technology, the computer also imposes its (technocratic) form: quietly, pervasively, and seductively.

This advertisement consists of a group shot of the most upscale members of Canada's literary, cultural, and publishing establishments (from Margaret Atwood and Jack McClelland to Peter C. Newman, Veronica Tenant, and Harold Town) posed around the real star of this event: "*A. Macintosh*", an equally upscale personal computer from Apple Computer, Inc. As if to emphasize, and thus to enhance, by way of contrast the moribund, tory roots of Canadian culture and the new technological utopia made possible by Apple Computer, Inc., the setting is properly Victorian, even classical: from the heavy wooden furnishings and the dreary drapes to the classical bust in the corner. It is the perfectly seductive *future* of computerculture versus a dead and dying (because technologically obsolete) representation of the *past* of Canadian culture.

The copy makes the point perfectly. "Announcing the retirement of Canada's most famous typewriters":

Twenty-five of the finest imaginations in Canadian literature, art and broadcasting have surrendered the traditional tools of their trade for Macintosh personal computers.

This historic event is only the beginning of a major commitment between the writers, editors and artists of McClelland and Stewart and the engineers, software wizards and computer evangelists of Apple Canada, Inc.

Which means that soon the entire McClelland and Stewart organization will be operating their business on Macintosh Office network of hardware and software products.

In the meantime, Canada's finest minds are already busily creating words and pictures on the world's finest computer. And trying to find decorative uses for their typewriters.

Harold Innis — Canada's most trenchant critic of the social and cultural impact of technological media — always warned of the dangers of "cultural astigmatism" when confronted with new technological innovations.² In

MEDIASCAPE

Innis' perspective, the immediate effect of any new technological medium, from the fur trade and the cod fisheries to television and computer technology — is to induce in its participants an overpowering sense of astigmatism, to blindsides those who are being processed through the technological sensorium on the silent impact of technological media on the "social heritage".

If Innis is correct in noting that "cultural astigmatism" is the silent, social context for the mis-reception of new technological media; if Marshall McLuhan is right when he warns us of the very real dangers associated with the "exteriorisation" of the mind in the technoscape; and if, in fact, computer technology, as the most advanced expression of the digital media of information society, imposes a silent language of technological discourse on Canadian society, history, ethics, and political economy, then "twenty-five of Canada's finest imaginations in literature, art and broadcasting" may *not* have just surrendered the "traditional tools of their trade". In suffering "cultural astigmatism" on the real effects of computer technology, they may also be well on their way to surrendering their *literature* (for the dead storage systems of information society), their *history* (the computer has no memory, if by memory is meant a sense of aesthetic judgment and historical remembrance), their *time* (computer technology is a "space-binding" technology which works to privilege the spatial sense, and to nullify the lived, and thus real, time of local culture), their *minds* (McLuhan's grisly vision of the "exteriorisation" of the mind as a servomechanism of electronic, and then digital, media), and even their *country* (communications media as the spreading outwards of empire and technology).

The Canadian Paradigm

This sense of cultural astigmatism on the question of the social and cultural impact of technology is particularly unfortunate because as the various contributions to this special thematic issue on *Mediascape* demonstrate, there exists in Canadian theoretical reflection an intellectually compelling, intensely original, and internally divergent discourse on technology. Indeed, three key theses on the Canadian discourse on technology are put in play by this volume:

1. An *ideological* thesis: Technological nationalism is Canada's dominant ideology.
2. An *ontological* thesis: The Canadian discourse on technology consists of a critical debate among three competing theoretical perspectives (*technological realism, technological humanism, technology as degeneration*), each

MEDIASCAPE

of which brings to the negotiation of the technoscape fundamentally clashing perspectives on the meaning, constitution, and ends of technological experience. This is just to say that three "root metaphors" structure the Canadian discourse on technology: technology as *freedom*; technology as *degeneration*; and technology as containing fully *ambivalent tendencies* towards domination and emancipation.

3. An *artistic* thesis: There exists in the Canadian artistic imagination generally, and in the visual art of four contemporary Manitoba artists specifically (Esther Warhkov, Don Proch, Tony Tascona, Ivan Eyre) a remarkably original and emancipatory vision of the limits and possibilities of technological experience.

Technological nationalism can be Canada's dominant political ideology because the language of technology is the ideolect of the liberal state. In Canada, technology, both in the form of the rhetoric of technological nationalism and in the actual development of technological media of communication, is the basic condition of possibility for the political formation of the Canadian state and its deepest justificatory ideology. This is, at least, Maurice Charland's pioneering thesis on "technological nationalism", and it finds its resonances in all of the articles in *Mediascape*, each of which demonstrates that if Canadian social and political theory is deeply structured as a prolonged and intellectually divergent meditation on technology this may be because Canada itself is that peculiarity of a New World society in which Nietzsche's "technique is us" takes on a special historical significance. For Canadians, technology is always *all threat* (Meisel's *Escaping Extinction* before the American media blast; O'Neill's Foucauldian re-reading of the Innis/McLuhan matrix into a grisly account of "bio-technology"; Atwood's "power is a fish-hook in the eye"); *all freedom* (Theall's eloquent account of McLuhan as a civic humanist par excellence; Cook's deconstruction of Havelock's modest proposal for taking our freedom where we can find it, namely in "dead storage systems"); and *all ambivalence* (Finlay's "Leiss" as a big oscillation line between Habermas's liberal pragmatism and Foucault's relational power; Wernick's "Innis" as a thinker who managed to undermine himself by understanding the New World mediascape so well that he actually subverted his Old World cultural legacy; and Morrow's "Rioux" as a thinker at the crossroads of pluralistic socialism in the twentieth-century).

MEDIASCAPE

If the Canadian mind can negotiate the postmodern condition so well, it may be because as the Montréal curator, Bruce Ferguson, has said: In Canada, the technological media of communication are actually viewed as "high works of art". For Canadians, technology can be *first* nature because it is both a necessary means of survival in the northern tier of the New World, and even an integral aspect of the perceptual field itself. Thus, as Don Proch, the Manitoba artist, once noted: technique (farm implements, fencing, and telephone poles) actually provides a third dimension — a "vertical gradient" — to the otherwise atopic and perfect horizontality of the prairies. In a similar way, Canadian *being* is a direct product of a big technological paradox: as a *social* community, Canada only exists because of the spatializing qualities of the communication grid (from canoes and snowshoes to the computerscape) which makes possible discourse across the "distant madnesses" of the wilderness; but, as a *political* community, Canada's existence is undermined by the confluence of power and media — what Marike Finlay calls "powermatics" — which is the deepest language today of the perfectly cynical, but perfectly relational, world of mediascape. Thus, the Canadian fate in the '80s: *all neon brains, techno-bodies and electric egos as we are processed through the mediascape; and all artistic imagination as we try, and desperately so, to "create" our way out of the deeply deprived and seductively nihilistic culture of postmodern technology.*

In the same way that Harold Innis once cautioned that "what you don't know *will* hurt you", Canadians cannot afford *not* to understand technology, both in terms of the "intimations of deprival" which are impressed upon us now as a negative absence in the midst of the spreading outwards of the will to the technical mastery of social and non-social nature, and in terms of the creative and emancipatory possibilities associated with ultramodernism and quantum science. The Canadian discourse on technology is too *Old World* in its cultural sensitivity; and it is too *New World* in its understanding of the quantum condition ever to overlook the ambivalent legacy of technological society. If, in fact, it is the Canadian fate to live with the grim reality (after Thucydides) of "having consciousness of much but the ability to do nothing about it"; then it is also the Canadian circumstance to be in a privileged position to take the full measure of European skepticism and American hyper-pragmatism without surrendering either to fatalism or ecstasy. In the great historical course of things, it is not particularly heroic for a culture such as Canada's to content itself with the therapeutic tasks of lancing the boil in the European mind by *provoking* the crisis of skepticism; and of making the world safe *from* the worst distempers of the revenge-seeking American mind by letting a thousand new "internal checks" bloom and then throwing them one by one into the bonfire of the American

MEDIASCAPE

conflagration with the faint hope that one might catch on and serve as a break-wall before (our) disappearance into the scorched earth policies of the American dynamo. This is to admit, though, that while the American symbol might be the conquering *eagle* and while Europe might trace its founding mythology to the *wolf-pack* of Romulus and Remus, the great icon of Canadian national culture is the beaver.

As cultural mythologies go, the beaver would have to be ranked in a modest way. It has none of the magisterial qualities of the preying eagle, and compared to the myth of Romulus and Remus, wherein the figure of the wolf is central to the foundational myth of European culture, the beaver is like a mythological free-fall. There are, however, two qualities about the beaver which are noteworthy and which, taken together, might suggest the beaver as an apt model for a Canadian intellectual strategy. First, the beaver is quintessentially New World. In an intellectual scene in which "burnout" is the new code word for the prevailing *fin-de-siècle* mood (French intellectuals may talk about the "shock of the real" but *Vogue* magazine does them one better: it talks about the "shock of the stiff"); in which "exhaustion" is Michael Weinstein's apt term for the new piety of conservative liberalism (Rorty style) in the United States; in which the *stratégie fatale* is the valorized dead-end of New French Thought; the beaver (just like Canadian theory) is embarrassingly industrious and, even as we live in the grisly shadow of the year 2000, carries itself with a high serious mien. Like the last citizen of the kingdom of the Protestant Ethic, the beaver just keeps working. And why not? The beaver has a broader cultural strategy in mind: a strategy which is instantly set in motion by the slightest sound of running water anywhere, and which instinctively involves the building of dams, both to regulate the flow of the swift currents and to provide a safe habitation *within* the medium of running waters.

Now, refusing the European model of Romulus and Remus and turning away from the American icon of the soaring eagle, *Mediascape* operates under the more modest, but entirely appropriate, cultural sign of the beaver. Why? The mediascape is running water *in extremis* and, as such, represents both a danger and an opportunity. Left unchecked, it will flood the cultural terrain (and *us* with it). However, put a dam across it and the mediascape, just like so many other swift currents before it, may be regulated in its flow and its own energies transformed into something which enhances, rather than destroys, human culture. Damming up the mediascape like cultural beavers '80s style, that's the agenda of this 10th anniversary volume.

This is just to say that it may be part of the Canadian primal to understand, almost instinctively, the *formalistic* and *mirrored-reversals* of the mediascape. After all, Canadians have always lived inside-out in the real mediascape: weather. When Canadians go outside, they actually go inside

MEDIASCAPE

(the winter weather as refrigerator); and when they go inside (their homes), they are really going what is outside (for most North Americans). If the Spanish philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno, was correct when he noted that "I am I in the human circumstance and the human circumstance is I", then by climatic circumstance alone, Canadians live inside-out, and thus are almost natural students of the semiological reversals of the simulacrum.

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