

JUNCTURES

An open letter addressing the issues and state of affairs within cultural journals; we solicit opinions, critiques and submissions.

Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory

ONE of the many ironies of North American intellectual life in the 1980s is the way it has moved to institutionalize the previously marginal body of French post-structuralist and/or deconstructive theory. It's a migratory institutionalization, where established leaders and self-conscripted students gather and move through punishingly intense conferences, lectures, and writings with a focussed attention more appropriate to life in the intellectual and social institutions which this theory is meant to deconstruct. It's a one-way choreography of knowledge, which empowers the voices of the previously disenfranchised. No doubt a defensive practice, but one which has some unfortunate results. It defends itself through a thick wall of fascination. Is this Hollywood, then, hypnotized by its key performers? No, obviously not—the collected bodies peer suspiciously at selected signifiers and decry their villainous historicity, ruminating on their total loss of meaning, extricating themselves from commitment to them. It is as though this ostensible Death of Meaning in culture of all forms propels its livelier priests into a series of encyclopedic wakes. There, freed from the tired/vivacious contexts of daily life, distanced from the discourses of Official constraints, in a spell of privileged concentration, they may celebrate this death, these recurrent deaths, as occasions for their own hypnotic speculation (while waiting for their own rebirth as guardians of the Long Wait).

The theory itself springs from an uneasy but fruitful confrontation between thought, power, institutions, and the thinker, which French theorists (of a very particular thought, power, and place) have brought to the centre of critical theoretical work. The uneasiness of this project is intensified in its encounter with the locations of practitioners in other social and intellectual contexts. The encounter between European and Canadian traditions precipitates a series of reflections and strategies that inevitably raise questions about theory, practice, and place. It is not surprising that there should come into being a Canadian journal dedicated to making sense of these intellectual confrontations, while imposing its own imprimatur of nationalism on its "reading" of the others' discourse. This exercise could easily become an occasion for saying that what these theorists are saying is either not worth saying or has been said better by us because we are here. *The Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* seems to have avoided either of these traps. It reminds us that there is writing outside of Canada which is relevant to us, and that the critical strategies and intentions of much of this theory can force a renewed perception of our own writing—and our own histories, and lives—and of how they have helped to form how and what we think. These encounters with theoretical projects originating in other cultures but resonating

in our own, point to ways of unearthing the very grammar of our thought. Through a very particular appropriation of this plentitude, *CJPST* has endowed Canadian Writing with a cosmos.

Thus George Grant has been described by Arthur Kroker as "the Canadian Nietzsche" (more recently, in his *Technology and the Canadian Mind*, revised to "Christian thinker of the fatalist kind on the history of justice"). But if Grant is the Nietzsche of Canada, why read Grant? With what voice, what place and time, are we in dialogue? *CJPST* always puzzles us in this way, forcing us to question why these European, American, or Canadian theorists are chosen. What are they doing there? What are we doing here? And why does the Journal present itself to us with such authoritative urgency that we feel it *must* be read before the bells are paid, the letters answered? What has Kroker put together this time? Kroker? Well, that's it: the question can't be avoided. Whose words has he inhabited now? What is the urgency of his provocation/solace? Because the strength and weakness of *CJPST* is that this is Kroker's journal, his personal vision of theory and culture and Canada. And so we remain beholden to him, he who finds us each in turn and then dumps those whose language becomes inappropriate to his grand design; it is Kroker who masterminds the series of "dialogic" sessions from year to year at gatherings of Learned people in Toronto, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Vancouver, Montreal; it is Kroker who proves himself each time the master of nihilistic cannibalization of other peoples' voices and texts, so that in the end there is no dialogue, but rather the triumph of the Event, experienced in the name of the Other with whom we work and the Other with no being.

CJPST has become, since Issue 4, the journal of the sign, the celebration of the metaphor where nothing is real, not even thought or action. *CJPST* presents us with Elvis Presley on its cover, a brutal pink; a dual image, young and old. What sense are asked to make of this? The image of the old imposes on us. The kingdom of signs destroys us, as it destroyed him. VD. Dope. Death. The Mirror Image of Production swamps us in its nihilism. Now it is Boy George, and Michael Jackson, who prove that the social is truly, finally, dead. Again the power of the image valorizes the discourse. But whose image? What discourse? There is no discourse if we assume that we are all dead, and the culture a spectacle for the narcissistically entertained. In spite of Kroker's plea to understand the humanistic against the technologically rational, there is no space in which we can begin to understand this place, this life, this country. Behind the intransigent object, only emptiness is permitted; even ethics has disappeared from the object-laden scene, having bowed out some time since in search of the authoritative/absent Other. In search for this, we are left only with the hemorrhage of self.

CJPST invites us, in *Beyond Dependency* (Vol. VII, No. 3) and

Quebec (VI, Nos 1/c), to contemplate ourselves in relation to those Others who stand as the marginalia of our own structures. (Soon even feminism will find a place in these pages). But what does such contemplation produce? Manifestoes from Quebec sit beside articles for whom the issues raised in the manifestoes do not even exist (with the exception of Ray Morrow's piece on Rioux/Crean, Tom Naylor's on Canadian dependency). We feel as though the voice of living, *social* people has been ignored in favour of the seductive nihilism of having no voice, as though what is posited as ours is finally an echo, a shadow of Baudrillard's imploded imagination, appropriated so benevolently to the space left by the ostensible absence of any voice.

Of course this absence, this death of meaningful practice which we supposedly, in intellect without recognition, is an intellectual *product*, sprung from an imagination which tends to celebrate its own productivity and to disdain the rest. In that imagination we will never be where our own principles or actions or thoughts or desires lead us; never join with the others who allow us to be social; never indeed recognize ourselves in our particular differences and strengths as women, men, French, English, black, white, or green—no, we will be forever imprisoned in the netherlands of technology/language, spectators to the choreography of others, trapped in language, trapped in the structures and sign-systems that impose themselves on us.

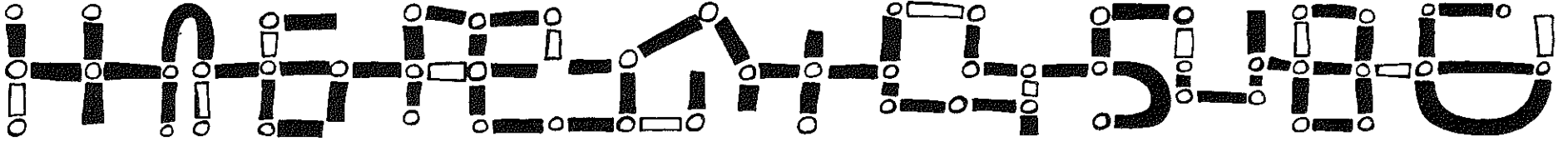
But the families with whom we live, the jobs or sexuality that we negotiate, the ethnicity or religion which we cherish and fight for and against, the institutions that form us and which we fight for and against, the bodies through which we move, the battles which we dance to, the songs we struggle to win, the prisons (real and imaginary) we inhabit—these are not part of the Canada of Kroker's journal. They exist in spite of his categorizations and take form apart from his theory, which then is no theory at all. *CJPST* has apparently finished with the real world we try to come to terms with in theory and in practice; with the enthusiasm of the boy prodigy grown articulate, it casts us adrift on a sea of negations. Which plank would you choose? Is it, in fact, moving at all? By foreclosing the debate, except to a loyal few, Kroker has doubly liberated us. The nihilism of his dialogue already finds an elaborated eruption from other voices, who know already the perils of the zero-sum text, who have encountered those enclosures in other places and who, seeing them now with better eyes, know they must and can be moved beyond.

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Journal of Popular culture
Journal of Canadian Culture

ONE sense of popular culture is bound up with a feeling that it is *mass* culture or even the *mass media*. If the Media are American, there is little point from this perspective in studying Canadian popular culture at all because it must be a spin-off of American culture. Thus even the *study* of Canadian Popular Culture becomes a branch-plant activity: all it can do is replicate studies done elsewhere. Thus we learn nothing about ourselves, but in a manner similar to Hollywood movies located in Toronto, simply see ourselves as a carbon-copy of *them*. We have stopped doing this with literature or even music: we learn to think about growth, identity, comparison.

Obviously popular culture does have elements which are imported, but the imports can be either technological or ideologically. The media are not intrinsically *technologically* American, George Grant notwithstanding, though they may become ideologically American if we are prepared to accept hegemonic paramountcy. If we accept that technology is necessarily imperial and hence necessarily incapable of being transcended by people in their own forms then we fall into the ultimate pessimism of intellect which sweeps everything from vacuum cleaners to nuclear weapons into the same bag, a position which is as fundamentally silly as seeing *all* technology as beneficial. The equation that popular culture = mass culture = capitalist control of technology = false consciousness is one that dominates most thinking on popular culture. The major fallacy of this equation is that it assumes that the mass media implies thought control, that if everybody watches *Dallas* or sees commercials they necessarily believe or perhaps even become these products. Mass culture, a superficial unity of people: on the other hand, the study of popular culture assumes what E.P. Thompson once termed the "stubbornness of being." It is not simply that people are manipulated by the mass media but that also the media are used by people, almost as they choose, from a location which operates on separate rules and experiences from the one-dimensionality of the media.

The study of Canadian popular culture should not emphasize the structural relationships of capital, media, technology, and then impute a consciousness to the inert masses (for a study based on such premises would simply return to pleas for reorganizing relationships between those structures). It should rather take popular culture as the making sense of daily life in terms of the appropriation of whatever symbols and strategies the people have at hand. Only then can we begin to discuss the 'effects' of the media on popular action.

There is, of course, a major problem in saying that popular culture is simply what *any* defined group of a society does, thinks, reads, feels. Such ethnographic

eclecticism, however noble its democratic (or sectional) sentiments, ends up writing and doing research for the sake of being eclectic. An example of such an exercise is found in the USA with the vast output surrounding the work of the Popular Culture Association, where it appears that popular culture is simply the studying of anything that relates to the culture, past, present or future, that might be common to groups great or small or to the appropriation of those elements by individual authors. Hence *everything* is popular culture, but in another sense nothing, because none of the major theoretical issues are ever discussed. The study of popular culture becomes an exercise in intellectual slumming: academics may come out of their closets and declare that hockey or baseball or stripping or *Star Wars* or the occult or Mark Twain or even *Jane Eyre* can be dabbled around with but by avoiding any moral judgements or political analysis—popular culture is *fun*: let's turn the study of it into an industry, a sort of Disneyland of the literary imagination.

But perhaps the Association's work and publications should be taken a little more seriously than what this dismissal implies. After all, not only has the PCA published occasional pieces on Canadian culture in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, but it has also commenced publication of the *Journal of Canadian Culture* which establishes an intervention in Canadian culture and research which makes a series of assumptions about the Culture of Canadians which should not be taken lightly.

The working assumption of the PCA's work is eclecticism: essays on hockey, or film, or Huck Finn, or the importance of the ballad in W.H. Auden's poetry sit side-by-side, as surely they should. But the PCA's dig into cultural archaeological excavation displays little sense of knowing whether connectedness is important or not. My copies of *JPC* contain little that allows me to put that culture into any context. It is a supermarket version of what culture is about, as if theoretical or political connections are unimportant. The *JPC* is little more than an archive: it offers me nothing that I cannot normally get in a library or a shopping mall. It does nothing except record what appears to be there; it has no opinion, no connectedness, no self-reflection, and also, in a bizarre way, it is devoid of any sense of choice.

The *JPC* has not chosen to discuss other journals which deal with popular culture, as if those journals were in a sense queering its pitch. This is particularly disastrous when viewing Canadian culture, because in no society has its culture been so discussed in print. The first issue of the *Journal of Canadian Culture* completely ignores the long, serious debate on Canadian Culture that has taken place in journals like the *Canadian Forum*, *Saturday Night*, *Canadian Dimension*, the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, *Canadian Studies*, *Queen's Quarterly* (though Giles Pronovost provides a cook's tour of Quebec cultural nationalism). Instead it

injects itself into a debate at no fixed point. It is possible that the impact on Canadian discourse will be profound—that people will stop thinking about their culture and instead lean back and contemplate it in its rich fullness—but that is doubtful. The chances are that the PCA's intervention in Canadian Culture will be read as yet another American appropriation, suitable only for Americans who wish to experience other cultures as the Erntatz. As with the Hollywood mozarties or the British view of the Orient, or male versions of chauvinism, the *Journal of Canadian Culture* will be slotted into American views of what they want to know about Canada. (A similar phenomenon is displayed in the latest issue of *Yale French Studies*, devoted to Quebec literature.)

That is why the absence of theory or politics is so unfortunate about the PCA's venture into Canadian Culture. Theory and Politics imply discourse: the PCA's journal invites no discourse. But, then, the PCA never invited discourse. Even the short-lived attempt to include Stuart Hall from Britain's Birmingham Centre as an advisory editor ended in non-committal disaster, and it is instructive to see what the *J of PC* does when it addresses popular culture in the rest of the world. Take, for example, Vol. X, No. 4 (1977), subtitled "Popular Culture Around the World," which included some 20 pieces, over half on Europe (mainly France and Germany) and the rest from India, China, USSR, Argentina, Yiddish literature, and the USA (on Nazi stereotypes). What immediately strikes one about such a collection is why are they all there together? The obvious answer is that the world is an arena to be plundered for any material that strikes the editor's fancy. On closer inspection one notes a certain preference for understanding how or why other nations view Americans the way they do, or 'use' American popular culture in peculiar ways. Popular culture in the rest of the world is not approached for its intrinsic interest and certainly not to discover any alternative way of viewing American popular culture but rather to confirm the predominance of American hegemony. The rest of the world is searched out for examples of American clonism, for horrible stereotyping of Americans by foreigners or for providing evidence of *real* unAmerican activity (the essay on China in this particular issue is on the contemporary Chinese hero as developed from Zhdanovism). Popular culture is the secular religion of the intellectual: his task is to search the world for Huck Finn or Rocket Robin Hood wherever he may be found.

Of course, Americans may study their own culture in any way that they choose, and they may, if they wish, call ad-hocery theory; they may define popular culture as "all aspects of life that are not academic or creative in the narrowest and most esoteric sense" (blurb for the *Abstracts of Popular Culture*); and they may even choose to ignore any set of theories that are uncomfortable: but when the PCA takes on world culture in order to appropriate it, we

who are in that world have a right to ask for what reasons and to what ends we are being appropriated. The PCA model of cultural research is therefore interesting not because of any intrinsic theoretical or methodological contribution to studying ourselves but as a penetration of quite distinctive alien values. It should be examined as such.

What might be a more appropriate point of departure is suggested by many other authors—Canadian, French, American, British, German—all of whom adhere, more or less, to what might be called the humanist-historicist version of neo-Marxist theory. The central issue in studying popular culture as action must surely be to specify what kinds of actions *matter*. And *that* invariably leads us back to considering both the social structures and technologies and also to the dominating ideologies and hegemonies. The study of popular culture is thus a study of the genesis of reactions to institutions, values, ideologies and also of the interpretations (and perhaps appropriations) of those reactions by the existing hegemonic orders. Popular culture is thus a dynamic study: we act by playing out the contradictions. As Simon Frith has noted of rock music:

One of the reasons why rock has been the most vital form of popular culture in the last twenty years is that it has expressed so clearly the struggle involved: Rock has been used simultaneously as a source of self-indulgence and individual escape, and of solidarity and active dissatisfaction.

If one takes this view of the importance of the study of popular culture, then the issue becomes not simply how to construct an ethnographic map which would do justice to all the discrete groups that are found in any country, but to specify which are strategically important, not simply in terms of themselves as genre, but in terms of their relationship to people's sense of their own liberation.

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