

**BORDER/LINES:** You have been the mediator of intellectual ideas in the press and on radio and TV, especially on TV, and one thing that's really struck me is the way in which in England writers and intellectuals like Jonathan Miller, Melvin Bragg and yourself are hosts and directors of programs, whereas in Canada the media people make their way up to taking these jobs. Do you have a sense of why this should be?

**IGNATIEFF:** I **think** there is an intellectual history to be written of the British television and radio audience, and the key thing must be to go back to the BBC Radio's *Third Programme* (which

was very much before I was born). I have a sense that in its heyday at the BBC an audience was created from the educated and liberal middle classes. I don't think it's a simple left-wing audience, but an audience that's catholic in its politics, that listens to classical music on the radio. All of us in my generation derived from the audience that was created around talks in the twenties and thirties in the early days of radio. In other words, what makes us possible is that we inherit a public service broadcasting tradition together that goes back 60 or 70 years. Before that there must surely be some Edwardian antecedents: the popular libraries, the quality press. At the other level there's the Workers Educational

Association. The ability not to be self-conscious about talking about ideas on television and radio has a historical and cultural preparation and it's all in the audience. Once you've got an audience, then whether it's Ignatieff, whether it's Miller, whether it's Bragg, doesn't really matter. They are bound to emerge to fill that audience need. If they work in a broadcasting culture which isn't always looking at the numbers, or the advertising revenue, then the fact that my audiences are, by television standards, small is never brought up against the shows. Instead, the arguments I fight within the BBC are a bit different, a bit like: "you should have gone for him and then you didn't get him," good, sound producers' questions, and questions about the content and intellectual approach of the shows, but never questions about numbers. In other words, there are two variables here. One is the historical creation of audiences and secondly, a public broadcasting ethos which doesn't look at the numbers and therefore presents you only with the discipline of doing a decent intellectual job.

I understand and I think that is important in understanding what is going on here in Canada. For example, let us take *Realities* with Robert Fulford and Richard Gwynn. One of the interesting things, it seemed to me, as a contrast with what you or Bragg or even Miller have done, is that Fulford and Gwynn weren't really concerned with getting to the point of the idea of the person they were interviewing, but rather with translating it as if translation was absolutely essential. I wonder if that's to do with two totally different cultures? It was actually assumed that if you were interviewing Bertrand Russell (and I remember one interview on BBC radio in the early sixties) that everybody would know who he was, whereas in Canada if, for example, Chomsky is interviewed, it is assumed that no-one knows who he is, and therefore the interviewer has to start from scratch.

In the kernel of that question is a question about translation, that is, what's a person like me doing? Am I translating highfalutin' abstract intellectual questions into words of one or two syllables for an audience? Am I a translator or am I a mediator?

I **see** the roles as being different. I see my role as being a mediator between the audience and often quite abstract and difficult and abstruse thought. It's talk or thought that speaks only to the tribe out of which it comes. If I'm talking to a philosopher the problem with the philosopher is not that what a philosopher says is so goddam difficult to understand, but that a philosopher is not used to talking to people who aren't philosophers, who do different things. My job is to moderate between self-

*an interview with*

# Michael Ignatieff

referential intellectual groups, between specialists and a general audience, to get those specialists to speak the language that reaches groups who don't read the specialist journals, who don't know the lingo, who don't know the jargon. I'm constantly stopping someone in mid-flight and saying, "Now what did that word mean?" That's where I'm doing my job. I don't think my job is to say "What you really mean by some extraordinarily complicated sentence is x or y," except when they really aren't making any sense at all. Then I'm struggling to understand what I mean myself. I do translation, but it's for me, not just for the audience. I make myself the test of what has to be translated. I think of my role in terms of mediation, not simplification, and that cuts to the heart of what I think people like me ought to be doing in the media, and why I'm working in the media at all. The modern world's talk is balkanized to an inconceivable degree. Historians debate among historians, literary critics among literary critics, journalists among journalists, politicians among politicians. The one area, the one public place where all of this balkanized, self-referential, enclosed jargon can reach beyond the converted, is in the media. Most times it doesn't happen. The media can become a stage which is as self-referential as any other, but the ideal to me is quite clear.

Can I just pick up on that for a moment? I have a tape of you interviewing Raymond Williams. I'm not sure where it came from but...

That was at the ICA (Institute for Contemporary Arts, London, England).

I also heard Robert Fulford interviewing Raymond here for TV Ontario. The interesting difference between them is that you actually let Raymond talk, and Raymond was quite capable of talking in his own right and exploring his own ideas, whereas Fulford was only interested in his sense of Welshness. He did the same thing with Edward Said.... Although those are important parameters relating to what Raymond was about it's a curious — shall we say Canadian? — way of getting at Raymond's project. It struck me that the difference between your interview and Fulford's was basically that there was a kind of party agenda, there were certain things one shouldn't allow Raymond, or



## *"Historians* **debate**

*among historians, literary critics among*

*literary critics, journalists among*

*journalists, politicians among politicians.*

*The one area, the one public place*

*where all of this balkanized, self-referential, enclosed*

## **jargon**

*can reach beyond*

*the converted,*

*is in the media."*

Said, to say. I've been concerned about whether that is a different style in Canadian and British thought.

**I feel** strongly that my role is not to take up the airwaves. My role is to get other people to talk. I have another role in my life and I play it all the time: I am interviewed, I have my own views, I write books, but that's a separate thing. I can keep both roles quite distinct. When I'm doing one job I don't need to do the other job. There's an American style of interview in which the only star is the host. Nobody ends up talking but the host. In effect, nobody ends up being heard but the host. Again, the audience is crucial. When I interviewed Raymond Williams at the ICA I could take for granted that the audience knew about Williams and that it would not be appropriate for me to set an agenda.

Again, being a mediator depends on a very intimate set of relations with each audience. I get into real trouble if I think they don't know anything. That's when it starts to go bad because then you get pedagogical, you get heavy with an audience, and they will immediately turn to baseball if you start to do that.

If you were doing a program here in Canada, let's say that you hosted *Realities* or *Arts National*, would you do it differently here than in Britain?

I'm sure I would and I couldn't say in advance what the differences would be.

I would have to **watch** a lot of tapes. The first thing I would do if I was doing a show is not sit down and write a guest list, but just watch a lot of TV and see what's out there. I'd look at some old stuff. I'd watch talk shows all over the gamut, from Oprah Winfrey to Carson, and just try and pick up that enormous tacit range of cultural difference between what I do in Britain and what they do here. We think television in Canada is the same as in Britain or France. But you only have to change national context to see how this medium is radically different from context to context, and nowhere more different than in the style and culture of a talk show.

"We think  
television

in Canada is the **same**

as in Britain or France.

But you only have to change

national context to see

how this medium is

radically different from

context to context, and

nowhere more

**different**

than in the style

and culture

of a talk show."

One example, Bernard Pirot's *Apostrophes*, a talk show about books in France, is unrepeatable anywhere else. It depends upon a whole set of cultural contexts which we cannot reproduce. In answer to your question, the first thing I'd do if I did a show here on the CBC or TVO is watch a lot of the local product and figure out how it works when it works and how it fails to work when it doesn't work.

Of course, in a way, if you were doing it here you'd have the Americans over your shoulder. A lot of the stuff here gets listened to in the States. I think that most Canadian programs don't think of that, they just do it, and that's probably what's right. This actually raises another interesting question, the whole question of the academic or the writer in the media. I suppose that in some ways it's perfectly appropriate that someone like yourself who is of Russian origin and comes from the country of Marshall McLuhan should



want to do it in every conceivable way. And yet very few of us actually dare do it, very few dare to take on the media if they come from academia.

I didn't particularly **dare**. I was just asked. But your question raises the issue of the extreme professionalization of intellectual life in North America. I'm not a media person, I'm a sort of freelance intellectual. I use the media to sustain myself outside of academe. I do lament the passing of a kind of writer who was both a fiction writer and a non-fiction writer, both an essayist and a specialist. It's not merely that everybody has a job in academe now, and so teachers have to grind out a very standardized product for institutional acceptance to the university, with all the consequences to their intellectual integrity, independence and freedom of expression that goes with it. It's also that writers themselves are more specialized. Novelists stick to their novels — one comes out every five years. They never deviate, they never move, partly for market considerations because they feel that once they have established their niche as a novelist, the marketing of anything else is just impossible. There are very few people

who have the range of a John Updike. What I worry about is that this professionalization of the intellectual produces a kind of balkanization of intellectual life, each person acquiring all the professional deformations that go with their speciality, ceasing then to be able to speak to the enormous audience out there, people who subscribe to Harper's, who read Esquire, who follow PBS, who may be lawyers, doctors, Indian chiefs, school teachers, skilled union people, people who just have a hunger for what could be called a general culture. This audience is not being spoken to as well as they should. I enjoy working in the media because I'm reaching that audience which is refusing those specialist boundaries.

Let's be clear about the cost and the risks. The pathos about my kind of position is that you know less and less about more and more. Your legitimacy, your authority as an intellectual diminishes to the degree that you intervene stupidly on issues and subjects about which you really have no distinct competence. This role of the general intellectual requires a kind of discipline and a certain amount of renunciation. There are some subjects that you shouldn't touch because you don't know what the hell you're talking about. I don't talk about science for ex-

ample because I just feel a kind of terror that I might say something inconceivably stupid. I try and choose a number of areas where 15 years of professionalized learning actually helps me to see more clearly. There are tremendous advantages in refusing professional specializations and trying to be a general intellectual. There are tremendous opportunities as well as dangers.

There is also another problem with that because, as we know, the media is high profile. Everybody watches it or listens to it, or reads it, whereas nobody bothers to look at all the academic journals unless they're professionally involved in it. In the media, when one, I think, almost feels obliged to make connections, connections between culture and politics and so on, it seems to me that what you do as an outsider, bystander or observer, is to make a stab at the connection, whether it's on TV or the occasional column.

You have to **acknowledge**

the fact that books that are read by hundreds of people often make a more fundamental change to how we see the world than any number of television programs seen by millions. John Rawls' *Theory of Justice* is a book for specialists

that has transformed the language of politics in the last 15 or 20 years. If you are a "media intellectual" you must respect people that have no media savvy at all. People like John Rawls, who are, as they say, "terrible television." There's a lot of vital intellectual argument in the world which doesn't play on the small screen because it's "terrible television." So the media gives you a very skewed picture of the intellectual agenda at any one moment. At any one moment there will be Umberto Eco everywhere because Umberto is good on television. There will be George Steiner wall to wall. What there won't be is the immense impact of, say, Quine's linguistic philosophy, or Rawls' theories of justice, or some absolutely explosive new theory on particle physics or something which is "terrible television."

In the piece in the *Observer* published during the European elections you tantalizingly called yourself a postmodernist Green and a Canadian, and there was this classy picture of the virgin snow.

A self-portrait greeted with guffaws at the breakfast tables of the nation.

Sure, but how does travelling between two or three countries work? I was intrigued with the whole postmodern thing, but I was much more interested in the Canadian Green.

The more time I spend in England, the less I actually understand the culture. I don't understand the place anymore. Whenever I'm given a public opportunity I find myself almost unconsciously declaring that I am a Canadian. I think there must be some connection between being Canadian and being increasingly Green. I think that political legions like greenery spring out of emotional and personal experience in almost every case, and mine springs from memories of the Canadian landscape, a sense of the unspoiled and the untamed, and therefore the pure and the undefiled. These feelings are constitutive of that sense of indignation that pollution of the environment arouses. In the piece that you referred to I mentioned that my image of purity is white snow, clear white snow, snow so clean that you scoop it off with your mitt and suck it through your teeth. I'm sure Scandinavians would have analogous ones but there are very few places

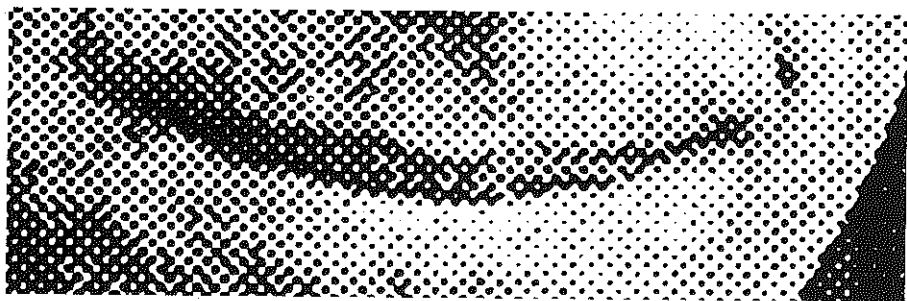
in England where that image of purity would resonate. For an Englishman the images of purity are clouds or willow trees over a flowing brook. They are very powerful reservoirs of English indignation at the despoliation of their own natural environment. Each culture has its own image of purity against which they test the despoliation that is occurring, and mine are Canadian, and I think that's why Canadian Green is not a fortuitous culmination.

As for the postmodern question?

As for the postmodern question, I'm

**dubious** about the word "post-modernity" because I can't distinguish between whether we're simply in another stylistic variation of the modern adventure: which is to say that the Promethean trip we've been on for the past 400 years seems far from exhausted to me. There is a certain contingent style of exhaustion and of irony: what new can we possibly say? Hence, let's make clever variations on everything that's been said before. This is very much in the postmodern style. Yet I can see that pose of exhaustion in a host of earlier moments. I can see it in Vienna in the late 19th century; exhaustion is very much in the work of Klimt and Schiele. I can see it in Weimar in the twenties. What might be new about our exhaustion is our irony towards Bauhaus modernism, towards the hard edge futurist kind of modernism. Yet after every episode of hard-edged utopian modernisms of a Corbusian or Gropian kind there is an ironic recoil. These seem to me styles, oscillations in an essentially modernist project and that's why I don't take post-modernity seriously. We're still on the "Twentieth century Express" in my view, and we will be into the 21st. I think I'm unsympathetic to these poses of exhaustion because I am a Voltairean. A rationalist. I like science. I like progress. I like growth, damn it. I like a world in which people have more consumer goods. I've got no problem with it. I've got great problems with environmental despoliation, but that's a very traditional set of modern problems. It doesn't cause me to despair about modernity or think it's all been a dreadful mistake. ♦

*Michael Ignatieff, broadcaster, writer, is the author of A Just Measure of Pain, The Needs of Strangers and The Russian Album.*



*"There's a lot of vital intellectual* **argument**

*in the world*

*which doesn't*

*play on the*

*small screen*

*because it's*

*'terrible television.'*

*So the media*

*gives you a very*

**skewed**

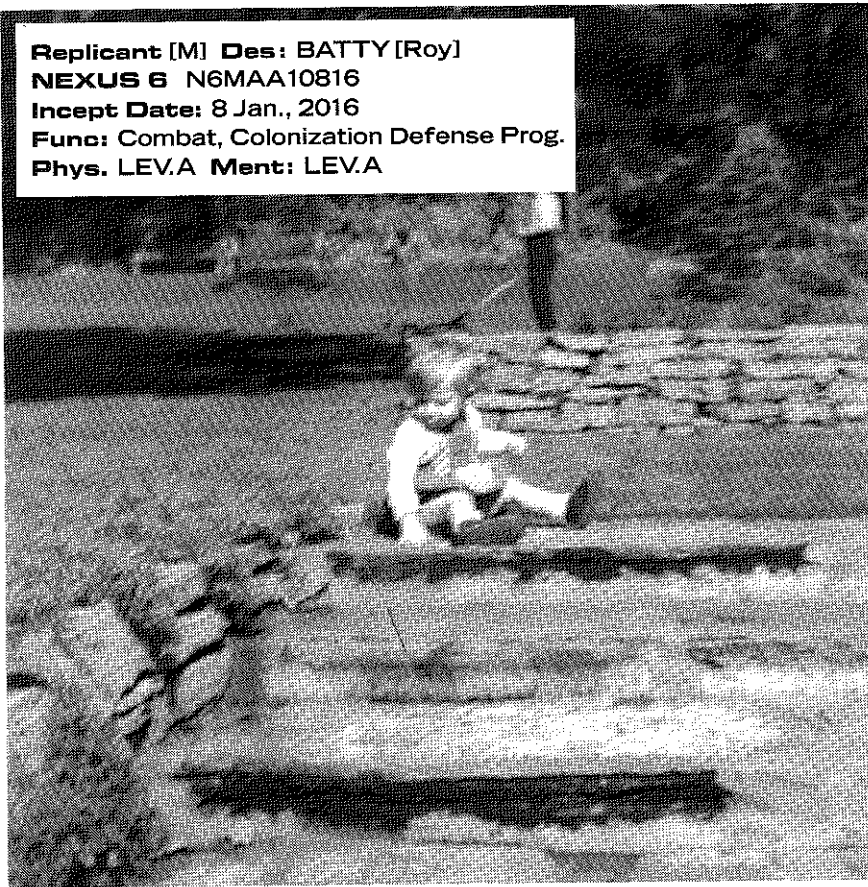
*picture of the*

*intellectual agenda*

*at any one*

*moment."*

Replicant [M] Des: BATTY [Roy]  
NEXUS 6 N6MAA10816  
Incept Date: 8 Jan., 2016  
Func: Combat, Colonization Defense Prog.  
Phys. LEV.A Ment: LEV.A



*Childhood  
Fantasies*

TO  
F  
S  
S

Fin  
Soc  
Oth  
by M

New  
Cha  
1988

With  
*ciali*  
histo  
Mar  
the  
chas  
card  
amo  
of th  
adv  
of r  
topi  
the  
pub  
with  
reco  
Mic  
pres

Jay  
thes  
or p  
er w  
thes  
actu  
than

F  
mas  
now  
in q  
prob  
exa  
such  
of p  
ousl

I  
into  
Wh  
hist  
tho  
som  
crit