A Culture in Suspension

All culture is simply a random collection of artefacts isn't it?

The Gulf War marks the high point of the Mulroney government's running battle with everything that has smacked of opposition. The record of this government is depressing enough without adding a knuckleduster to the Pentagon's war-machine. But it is important, for all of us, to set out that record, before the carrion-crows return from Arabia Deserta with Canadian flesh in their beaks. For what has happened in the last few years is an emasculation of all that was, and might be seen as the core of our culture – in the interests, one presumes, of making the economy more efficient and more pliable to market forces.

The list of measures taken by the government that actively affect the ways that we live, socialize, create, communicate, read like a litany for the dead:

- the CBC subjected to repeated cuts to the point that neither Saskatchewan nor the Gulf war can be adequately reported, let alone represented;
- a Free Trade deal with the United States which leaves the entire hardware of communications and the ownership of the means of communication open to predators south of the border;
- a Via Rail hatchet job, which reduces the whole country to communications between a few major cities, which, coupled with the privatization of Air Canada (and its pending appropriation by multinational concerns), means that none of us can get anywhere;
- reductions of grants to the Canada Council;
- the axing of grants to native peoples' and women's groups;
- the elimination of subsidized postal services for Canadian periodicals;
- abortion laws (based on the abject rhetoric of a few who rely family against sensibility) that discriminate against women's rights, but now sensibly vetoed by the Senate;
- the introduction (via GST) of taxes on reading and all forms of communication and socializing;
- a Media that is little different from a public relations department of some big corporation;
- a state eager to sacrifice democracy to the god of efficiency and success;
- a Climate that recognizes no consistent points of reference, objec
tively testing everything;
- the government that has placed itself on the viable future of the country.

These are the immediate and continuing targets of the Mulroney government. The image of Canada that it seeks to create is that of a modern, efficient society with no pretensions to a culture of its own. The native and the women, the artists and the intellectuals, are pushed to the Archangel Michael of the modern corporation as the people who make the system work. The culture of Canada is, in the government's eyes, no more than a collection of artefacts that can be substituted by products that are defined as more efficient, more efficient, and more efficient.
a Meech Lake non-accord which did little for Quebec, nothing for native people, and which emphasized that secrecy was more important than democracy;

- a shoot-off at Oka which demonstrated the government's fear of being either decision or honest;
- a stalled copyright bill which does not even begin to address the issue of "university," seeing themselves as the
- a Charter of Rights which still does not recognize the right of workers to organize, nor the rights of soldiers to be conscientious objectors (retaining the possibility of the death sentence for objecting, as well as siding and abetting objectors);
- the involvement in the Gulf War which has put back (perhaps for a long time) the notion that multiculturalism is a viable option for this country;
- ultimately a coordinated strategy to render as impotent as possible all definitions of difference within Canada as well as all definitions of Canadianness which respect a system of communications which is not controlled by a philistine market.

The consequences of this envelop us. Publishing houses (Lester & Orpen Denys are the tip of the iceberg) founder on the continental deal; film (where is Hollywood North now? not to speak of imaginative renaissance creations) is frozen; magazines die (even Saturday Night is pushed to making a deal with Southam to stay afloat); the CBC, and hence an independent audio-visual eye, is eviscerated beyond belief; A & A tries to salvage what it can from a pending bankruptcy; the cultural activities of native people and of women are savagely truncated; theatre is slowly drained out of space, except for the imported spectacles in Domes and vamped-up old music-halls; free speech, free thought, free expression dies a lingering death as the Market takes over; even the University becomes more corporate intelligence, sell out to Japanese shipbuilders, real estate developers, multinational electronics concerns.

Welcome to the Terrordome, to the Nintendo War, to the Supercrass of culture out of which the Teenage Mutant Emergence in a world which does not know Django Reinhardt, Ozie Mandelson, Tom Thomson, the power diatribe or even Marshall McLuhan, but which signs itself off with curious signatures: Donatello, Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo - Don, Mikey, Raffi and Leo to you. Zap! I've got you covered, but Hey, Dude, don't take it bad... All culture is simply a random collection of artifacts, isn't it?

Now that we know that the Mulroney government is playing the ultimate, cynical post-modernist trump-card, self-destructing itself and us in a series of brutal measures, it is time to take stock of where we are now. The major cultural institutions in this country have, over time, been established on the principle of "arm's-length" government support - the CBC, the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council, the National Research Council, the Canada Council, the National Film Board, Téléfilm, the National Arts Centre, the Federal Museums and Galleries, and, to a lesser extent, the Universities, Colleges and Schools. In addition, cultural support has come directly through various ministries and Crown Corporations; notably the Secretary of State, External Affairs, Manpower and Immigration, the Post Office. These are the sources that are being systematically killed off, leaving the field to the "private" agencies whose sources of funds are largely American and Japanese, and putting a very large onus on the provinces to pick up the pieces. All of the Federal agencies were essentially connecting and enhancing ones, across the country and between the social fragments. As they slip away, two features become evident: the fragments remain even more fragment, and the connecting links are progressively forged by the dominant significations of the multinational (i.e. American) media.

We are, of course, not alone in this fix. The countries of Central Europe have been deluged with marketization, and many other countries have been overcome with the monetarist ideologies who care little about indigenous cultures and much more about unfreezing what they see as frozen assets, i.e. unleashing the products of Hollywood Babylon onto a beleaguered, destitute population. Our status in relation to the moguls of Wall Street is a little better than Hungary or Poland, but a good deal worse than France or the UK, countries that trade on dead reparations. Here and there the living culture of a people is denied.

So what can we do (unlike those who wallow in apocalyptic, mordant, postmodernist anguish, ranting about the fin de siècle, fin de millennium and the absurdist periodization of a culture which was apparently all prefigured in the Book of Revelations)? Nihilistic essentialism is not part of our mandate. Mulroney is a real person, though espousing essentialist policies. Real people are being killed with real bullets in real wars. Living journals are dying. The creative impulses of a people are being squandered on lining up for jobs, social welfare, trips to Buffalo or Seattle in order to find commodities that they can afford.

So what we do is to recognize that a culture does not die. Under such conditions it is transformed into summatid, is expressed in subterfuge gatherings, tries to make a space for itself in conversations, performances, exhibitions that argue for the continuation of discourse. It is, of course, a culture in animated suspension, a process that is familiar to our colleagues in Central and Eastern Europe. Above all, it is a culture that necessarily becomes international, because that is the only route by which we come to understand our peculiarities and the commonalities, and, until the frontiers get closed off, the only route that we can take to fight an iniquitous, anti-intellectual regime. In a more serious way than we ever thought possible, Mulroney has given us a political task; it is time to get on with the task of making politics a subject of cultural engagement.

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