

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 knuckling under 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, is, 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 dull rhetoric of a few who reify 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;



EXCURSIONS

◆ a Me
little
peop
secre
deme
◆ a sta
the g
decis
◆ a sta
even
cess
◆ a Ch
reco
nize,
cons
poss
obje
ting
◆ the i
has p
the r
viabl
◆ ultim
rend
defin
as w
ness
mun
a ph

The
Publish
are the
contine
wood N
native
azines
to mak
afloat);
dent au
beyond
it can f
cultural
women
slowly
the imp
vamped
free the
ing dea
the Un
corpor
nese sh
multin



◀ Canadians protest cuts to culture

- ◆ 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 stand-off at Oka which demonstrated the government's fear of being either decisive or honest;
- ◆ a stalled copyright bill which does not even begin to address the issue of access to electronic and media archives;
- ◆ 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 aiding 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 *sui generis* 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 emasculated 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 frozen 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 Universities, seeing themselves as the corporate intelligentsia, sell out to Japanese shipbuilders, real estate developers, multinational electronics concerns.

Welcome to the Terrordome, to the Nintendo War, to the Superbowl of culture out of which the Teenage Mutants emerge in a world which does not know Django Reinhardt, Osip Mandelstam, Tom Paine, Charles Baudelaire 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 artefacts, isn't it?

Now that we know that the Mulroney government is playing the ultimate, cynical post-modern 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 "arms-length" government support – the CBC, the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council, the National Research Council, the Canada Council, the National Film Board, Telefilm, 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 fragmented, 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 lobbies who care little about indigenous cultures and much more

about unfreezing what they see as frozen assets, i.e. unloading 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 reputations. Here and there the living culture of a people is denied.

So what can we do (unlike those who wallow in apocalyptic, mordant, post-modernist anguish, ranting on about the *fin de siècle*, *fin de millenium* and the absurdist periodization of a culture which was apparently all prefigured in the Book of Revelation)? 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 sand. 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 samizdat, 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 made culture political. It is time to get on with the task of making politics a subject of cultural engagement. ◆

Ioan Davies is a member of the Border/Lines collective.