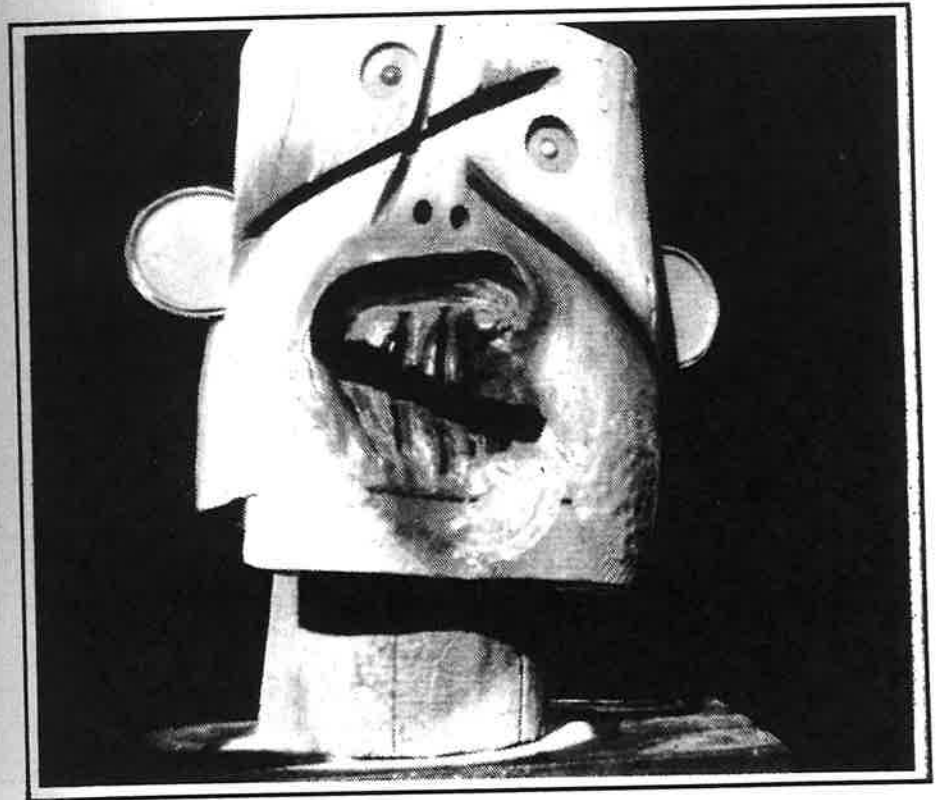


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The Tyranny of Images¹

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The built and natural environments which surround us, the artifacts we use and the technologies which serve us are shaped by and, in turn, mould society. Energy-wasting buildings; wind tunnels in our urban cores; gardens, parks and landscaped areas suitable for only one season; fads and fashions which do not suit the climate; electronic media threatening domination by one culture; and the unanticipated, adverse impacts of technologies, are not just problems of science. Crean (1976) stated clearly a decade ago that 'our culture has a lot to do with what we eat and how we cook, how we arrange our homes, factories, and offices, what we wear [p.9].'

Problems of design and control of technology have many cultural components. These include cultural perceptions of the natural and built environment; the value systems we use to evaluate and make decisions about designs and technologies; the tools used for expressing ourselves about design issues; and our cultural understanding of the appropriate role of imitation in design and technological change. The arts, therefore, have strong but often unrecognised influences on technological change and the design of the environments in which we live, work, and play.

Canada and Australia face very similar problems with respect to these questions of design and control of technological change. The climatic extremes are opposites. However, the cultural cringe, the search for identity, the colonial mentality are very much the same. Geopolitically the countries are very similar. Therefore, in geopolitical and cultural terms, Canada and Australia are excellent 'mirrors' for each other. Australia is a particularly useful mirror for Canada because of the understanding of a colonial mentality that Canadians can gain through examination of a case very similar to our own, and vice versa.

The arts influence design and the selection of technology because they are a source of knowledge about, and affect perceptions of, who we are and where we live. They participate in shaping and communicating our national self image and, therefore, could be important in controlling foreign influences and the role of imitation. The arts should be sources of comments and criticisms which prevent imitation from displacing design and innovation as the processes which shape our development.

Design (as a verb) is the set of processes of organising form and function to meet predetermined ends, and is also the end product(s) (the noun) of that set of processes. The sciences, technology and culture converge in design. It includes industrial design (door knobs and motorcycles), architecture, landscape

architecture, urban design, and the selection and use of technology. It is a spectrum from creativity and innovation on the one extreme, through adaptation, to imitation, which is no longer design. Design is necessarily purposeful and, therefore, it requires goals and means of evaluating effectiveness in achieving those goals. Good design is site-specific and culture-specific.

C.P. Snow (1964) argued that there was an unbridgeable gap between the arts and humanities and the sciences. While Snow might have been correct in his analysis of the more obvious links between arts and humanities and the sciences, a more rigorous analysis would have revealed extensive, if not pervasive indirect influences. Pure science is curiosity motivated and is an important part of culture, but not if it is 'me too' science motivated by desire to imitate. Few scientists are educated or do their research in a complete cultural vacuum. The members of the arts communities reap the benefits of modern technologies unless they are hermits, and they are not immune to its adverse impacts.

In his 1981 keynote lecture to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Northrop Frye (1981) discussed the impact of descriptive, logical and metaphorical languages on perceptions and the relationships between Snow's two cultures (the arts and humanities and the sciences). He argued that the semi-transparent envelope called culture or civilisation determines the views of nature, and hence, presumably, our responses and reactions to it.

In his penetrating analysis of Canadian thought about technology, Arthur Kroker (1984) has made very explicit links between the arts and technology. In *Technology and the Canadian Mind*, one introductory paragraph, admittedly a long one, includes references to the rock group Rush, Bruce Cockburn, the Group of Seven, Christopher Pratt, Alex Colville, Ivan Eyre, Northrop Frye, Margaret Atwood, Dennis Lee, Alice Munro, Don Shebib, and the National Film Board. Kroker (1984) argues that 'what is at stake in the Canadian discourse on technology is always the same: the urgent sense that the full significance of technological society cannot be understood within its own, narrow terms of reference [p.12].' He later stated that 'exhibiting as it does conflicting tendencies towards emancipation and manipulation, technological society presents us with the fateful, but opposing models of the engineer and the artist as ways of relating to the new society of technique... (so that) left to its own imperatives, technological experience is just dangerous enough as to force us ... to rethink the deep relationship of technology and civilization [p.125].'

Kroker outlines George Grant's lament about dependency upon technology, Marshall McLuhan's optimistic, utopian humanism, and Harold Innis's realism which views control of technology as a political struggle. In each case he uses a piece of art to illuminate his analysis: Alex Colville for George Grant, Georges Seurat for McLuhan and Don Proch for Harold Innis.

Pierre Dansereau (1973) has directed the attention of land use planners and environmental scientists to the relationships between the 'Inscape and Landscape': 'Man ... has had a selective perception of the world about him and in turn a highly discriminating way of modeling the landscape to match his inner vision

[p.ii].' The inscape has been defined as a poetic penetration of the outer into the inner world and its rendering in graphic or verbal symbols and, therefore, 'the force of imprinted images and the shift of re-assorted ones into designs and plans [Dansereau, 1980, p.71]' become part of the environmental sciences and design. 'In other words, the richness of our inscapes is preliminary to good management of our landscapes [Dansereau, 1973, p.29].'

George Seddon (1982) has shown that Australian science has been distorted by Eurocentrism and a colonial attitude to science and has listed a number of '... ways in which the practice of science in Australia has been shaped not by universal truths but by the bias inherent in European experience and preconceptions [p.446].'

If Marshall McLuhan (McLuhan, Fiore & Agee, 1968; McLuhan & Fiore, 1967) is right and the phonetic alphabet indeed translates the audible and tactile into the visible and the abstract, then the alphabet, and later, the electronic media may have changed our relationship to the local environment in three fundamental ways. They blurred the distinctions between the local environment and foreign 'exotic' environments. They reduced the experiential aspects of getting to know an environment by living, working and playing in it and increased the more abstract book- and media-derived knowledge. Therefore, environments became a more abstract concept rather than a living reality. Finally, they introduced other sets of cultural factors which affect indirect perceptions of landscapes.

In earlier work McLuhan (1964) recognised the important role of the arts in anticipating and in maintaining equilibrium in the face of rapid change:

the power of the arts to anticipate future social and technological developments, by a generation and more, has long been recognized ... While the arts as radar feedback provide a dynamic and changing corporate image, their purpose may be not to enable use to change but rather to maintain an even course toward permanent goals, even amidst the most disrupting innovations [p.ix].

To be successful, designers must have an accurate perception of the physical and social environments into which their designs must fit. If designers cannot perceive significant elements of a new environment or are unaware of changes in an existing environment, then the 'fit' of the design and the ease and elegance with which it meets its goals must be less than optimal. The arts provide some of the vocabularies with which our natural and social environments are described. If a designer does not have a vocabulary which is adequate to interpret the environment, then the designs he/she produces must necessarily fail to incorporate those factors which are not understood.

The classic examples of the adequacies of vocabulary with which to describe local realities come from native (indigenous) languages. The Inuit and Finnish languages have very extensive vocabularies to describe snow in its various forms with distinctive characteristics which one must understand to survive in winter conditions. Similarly, the Cree language includes a wide range of terms which describe water according to how safe it is for travel. Again, the vocabulary is intimately involved with survival.

One can also see the influence of 'vocabulary' in the history of the visual arts in Canada and Australia where early painters who were otherwise skilled, failed, because their palettes, their perceptions, and to some extent their techniques were not suited to the landscapes (MacLaren, 1985). In his book on landscape painting in Western Canada, Rees (1984) has noted that 'all European views of Western Canada were conditioned by the backgrounds of the viewers and their expectations of the region [p.1].' Those landscapes were not bland and unimpressive: 'the power of the land irresistibly dominates those who come to western Canada [Render, 1974, p.10].' But some landscape artists visiting the prairies thought that the unembellished landscape was inadequate.

Even A.Y. Jackson, when painting near Pincher Creek, Alberta, was not satisfied with a landscape which presented stark straight lines. Between the original sketch and the final painting minor adjustments and adornments were introduced until the final work was something which better suited the non-Prairie origins of Jackson's vocabulary (Reid, 1982, p.42). This is *not* to suggest that Jackson, or any other painter, does not have the right to paint as they see fit, but they must understand that there are limitations to what they can see and how their skills and vision will allow them to fit their work to the subject. It would be a flaw in an artist to have an incomplete understanding of how a view of the world was affecting his/her art. Similarly, designers must be aware of how cultural artifacts, whether domestic or foreign, influence the fit of their designs to the world for which they are intended (Thompson, 1981).

Designers' views of a region and, hence their designs, are conditioned by their backgrounds and expectations, whether those backgrounds and expectations were developed through direct experience or through the literature and visual arts related to that region.

One of the strongest factors inhibiting good design in Canada is our colonial mentality. Even with relatively undistorted perceptions and sound knowledge of the environment, a self-deprecating mental image will tend to place less value on local knowledge and designs, and more value on designs imported from societies which are perceived to be superior.

Wilden's *The Imaginary Canadian* (1980) is clear on Canada's colonial status:

We were not born with a 'colonial mentality'. We were brought up and trained to be this way, in our collective history as in our personal lives ... Colonized people are taught Imaginary histories in which they play the role of the 'natural' inferiors [p.2].

He goes on to state that 'practically by definition, colonized peoples are inexperienced peoples. Colonization ensures that they are misinformed about each other and about the rest of the world [p.49].' In a somewhat similar, but much more pessimistic article, McQueen (1973) has called Australia 'an outpost of empire ... derivative, dependent [p.5].'

It may be significant that Canadians only ceased being 'British Subjects' sometime during the last couple of generations, depending on which piece of legislation is thought to have emancipated us (the 1935 Treaty of Westminster or some later version of the Immigration Act). That is, it is relatively recently that

Canadians have officially been Canadians without secondary (or primary!) allegiance to another country or empire and its cultural influences. Being subjects of a monarch who is never resident may also provide difficulties. Her majesty has expressed a preference for a European name to replace one of local origin (Thompson & Nelischer, 1979, p.143). The colonial mentality at times tries to rename, redefine, and sometimes reshape the landscape to make it more like home rather than perceiving and defining it clearly (Thompson, 1981).

One of the most articulate essays on the difficulties faced by a poet/artist/designer is Dennis Lee's (1974) 'Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space':

Canadians were by definition people who looked over the fence and through the windows at America, un-selfconsciously learning from its movies, comics, magazines and TV shows how to go about being alive [p.156].

More and more of the ideas I had, my assumptions, even the instinctive path of my feelings well before they jelled into notions, seemed to have come north from the States unexamined [p.158].

After ten years of continentalizing my ass, what had I accomplished? ... I was a colonial [p.158].

... I never wanted to spend time again chasing somebody else's standards of what was good [p.159].

In a similar vein, Canadian composer Murray Schafer (1984) has stated that 'what I am concerned to express is an attitude that leads to maturity ... unless you let your culture mature, you will never mature: you will always remain someone else's clone [p.16].'

J.J. Brown's *Ideas in Exile* (1967) fully documents the fact that Canada has had the technological and intellectual resources to make technological breakthroughs: North America's first jet passenger liner, a working prototype of the electron microscope, the first automatic mail sorting equipment, variable pitch propeller, etc. Frequently, Canadian inventions are developed and exploited abroad or abandoned altogether. For example, in 1949, the A.V. Roe company built and flew two prototype jet passenger aircraft out of Toronto. They set mail delivery records in the USA because they were the first North American aircraft of that type. The Canadian government decided to abandon that industrial lead and bought 51 aircraft from the British. This was more than 15 years before the similar abandonment of the better known Canadian-built Avro Arrow jet fighter (Robinson, 1975). In the last decade the federal government has spent hundreds of millions of dollars trying to re-establish an aircraft industry in imitation of other industrialised countries, after they had twice given up a clear advantage. At the same time, the federal government allowed a British Columbia based company to flounder because they would not support their efforts to manufacture what was then considered by some to be the best single engined amphibious aircraft of the last decade (Ross, 1975, p.37).

The point of the aircraft industry tale of woe is that this is a failure of science policy and industrial strategy but the cause of the failure is not scientific,

technological, or even political. It is cultural. The same attitudes which condemned our arts and literature as second rate and colonial, also condemned our designs and technological developments. In a culture in which imitation and colonial subservience are dominant, it will not be possible to recognise and advance creative excellence very easily in any endeavour whether it be in the arts, design, or science and technology. We cannot hope to control and use Canadian design and technology if there is not a strong cultural foundation to support it.

In a discouraging way it is interesting to note that one of the few other histories of science in Canada confirms the colonial mentality of both the authors and the branch plant which published it by asserting in its title that Canada should quietly maintain a snivelling colonial attitude: *Let Us be Honest and Modest* (Sinclair, Ball & Petersen 1974).

Amilcar Cabral (1974) has suggested that the religion, technology and military power of an invading society (whether by invitation or not) are best resisted by a strong indigenous culture:

culture has proved to be the very foundation of the liberation movement. Only societies which preserve their culture are able to mobilize and organize themselves and fight against foreign domination [p.243].'

A society must occupy its intellectual space with enough vigour and confidence so that it is not perceived by either those inside or outside as a void to be filled. The ability to occupy intellectual space has as much to do with the quality of the knowledge as it does with the strengths of the convictions and the cultural forces behind it. Ideally, intellectual space would be occupied but not so filled that ideas from outside, or innovations from inside, could not be accommodated. It would also be desirable for a culture to have a high enough intellectual profile that those entering it could readily perceive the wisdom of taking its skills and knowledge seriously.

The goals and values, the ends and means used to achieve the goals of a society are the most fundamental determinants of individual and collective roles and options. The setting of goals and values is part of cultural processes and the arts are necessarily involved. Imitation is a complete abdication of any responsibility for setting goals and developing a set of criteria (values) to develop and evaluate alternative means available to reach those goals. Imitation denies the value and the legitimacy of creativity and innovation.

While the arts might not specify the processes for setting goals and evaluating progress, they can be part of the processes of challenging old goals and identifying and establishing new ones. Contrast for example the engineering mentality and the challenge of subduing the hostile environment which is clear in the lyrics of the 'Air' from Handel's *Messiah* and updated in Gordon Lightfoot's 'Canadian Railroad Trilogy', with the rejection of the domination of nature theme in Joni Mitchell's 'Big Yellow Taxi' ('They paved paradise and put up a parking lot') and Murray McLaughlan's '16 Lanes of Highway'. This is not to claim that the earlier goals were wrong, but that the values used to assess the relative worth

of the physical environment weighted the natural environment more heavily once it had been subdued and had become a scarce commodity. As an example of changing values which changed attitudes to landscapes, and then the landscapes themselves, John Stilgoe (1984) has recently examined the changes in how American society valued 'privacy and how that was reflected in landscaping through the use or the demolishing of fences and hedges.

Australian architect Robin Boyd (1980) cast a very critical eye over the landscapes and architecture of Australia and outlined his concerns about the more gross forms of imitation in his very articulate, but somewhat dated, *The Australian Ugliness*. He asserted that not only did imitation displace design in Australia, but that Australians tended to imitate some of the least attractive elements of other cultures. Donald Horne's *The Lucky Country* (1964) coined a term which many still misinterpret. Australia is the 'lucky country' not because of climate or resources or lack of war, but because Australia 'lives on other people's ideas ... in a social climate largely inimical to originality [Horne, 1964, p.220].' Australia and Canada are 'dependent, second-hand and second-rate [Horne, 1964, p.9].' 'Australia has not got a mind. Intellectual life exists, but is still fugitive [Horne, 1964, p.22].' Horne was sarcastically arguing that Australia was lucky because there was no perceived need to think or to be original.

In his novel *The Cut-Rate Kingdom* (1984), Thomas Keneally's Australian Prime Minister comes right out and asks: 'What do you think people need more? A House that looks like a palace, or a House that takes after a bloody branch office?' [p.3]. From then on in the novel the Parliament House in Canberra is called the Branch Office. If this was the case in Canberra, it is most certainly the case in Ottawa. Canada's current Progressive Conservative government appears to be committed to making a freer trade agreement with the USA, perhaps at very high cost. There are those who are concerned that a freer trade agreement could only be reached with the Americans if Canada were to allow American control of virtually all aspects of the economy and, therefore, our culture. That could mean that Canada would lose even the status of branch plant. Until the details of the negotiations are available it is impossible to do anything but speculate about the possible outcome (Cameron, 1986).

Alan Lawson has attacked the issue of colonialism in Australian literature head on. In 'Acknowledging Colonialism: Revisions of the Australian Tradition' (1980), Lawson states that:

Our cultural, historical, educational and literary preconceptions have been moulded, inevitably and often unconsciously, by an imported English education, [the results of which] are inevitable and indelible: they inescapably and permanently affect our ways of thinking and seeing. There is nevertheless a need, especially in an unfamiliar landscape or at least one not already abundantly supplied with verbal and visual images, to test a writer's (or painter's) perception against some assumed common empirical reality (typical landscape). These images are vitally important components of a people's possession of a place, of their competence in it [p.135].

Herman Kahn (Kahn & Pepper, 1980), the American 'futurist', wrote a report

on the future of Australia which was panned by the Australian press and was probably an embarrassment to the Australian corporations which had commissioned it (Preston, 1980; Charlton, 1980). Kahn criticised the Australian interest in sports and the out-of-doors and basically recommended that the faster Australia took on the characteristics of corporate, right-wing USA, the better off she would be. There was absolutely no recognition that Australia could, or should, set her own goals and use her own values and be anything other than an imitation of Kahn's view of the United States. It is very interesting to contrast the study of Australia's future conducted by two Americans who did not know or understand Australia with a similar study done under the 'guidance' of Kahn's Hudson's Institute, but written largely by Canadians (Drouin & Bruce-Briggs, 1978). In that study, Kahn's Introduction noted that 'since, however, the Canadian reality is quite different from that of the rest of the world, the discussion should, at least eventually, reflect these realities [p.24].' He also noted that 'Canada does not feel big and important because it is so dwarfed by the United States [p.24].'

The best of the examples of bad design, or of poor decisions due to imitation, are probably closer to outright errors or stupidity than they are to a weakness of the indigenous arts and humanities. However, they illustrate very graphically the seriousness of the failure to fully understand local conditions; the weakness of 'foreign expertise', which will not demean itself by dealing with what is thought to be local trivia, or inferior skill and knowledge; and the folly of relying too heavily on imitation.

'Going native' was treated with a great deal of disdain by the British during the exploration of the area controlled by the Hudson's Bay Company. However, the successes of Kelsey, Henday, Kearne, and Rae, who all 'went native' much to the disgust of their superiors in England, must be contrasted with the disaster of the Franklin expedition which chose to explore the Arctic fixed to the traditions of the British navy and to British perceptions of nature (MacLaren, 1984).

The Antipodes provide some of the most glaring and costly examples of ecological and economic damage caused by people importing plants and animals from home to make the 'exotic' local landscape more acceptable. The prickly pear cactus, the blackberry, and the rabbit were introduced to Australia and have been both economic and ecological disasters.

Other obvious examples which are closely linked to the influence of the arts and humanities are found in architecture and landscape architecture. In both cases, styles were imported and established with little consideration of the social, biophysical, and climatological environments into which they were to fit. The international style of high rise building design was the same whether used in Hong Kong or Yellowknife. Considerations of climate, sun angles, social systems and land uses/values were swept aside by the dominant image of what an office tower must look like. The same 'international style' dominated single family dwelling design and, therefore, such things as vestibules, which were a very sensible feature in extreme climates, were abandoned for the 'better homes and

gardens' image of what a house should be no matter where it was. In the same vein, landscape architecture set a style in which expensive and frustrating efforts were made to reproduce European or English landscapes in climates in which that was extremely difficult.

On the Canadian prairies landscaping should provide shelter from north and west winds, control of drifting snow, summer shade, and such light and warmth as a low angle winter sun allows. Further, designers should recognise that exotic (foreign) species of trees may not do well, and that south facing, sun-dried slopes are naturally treeless due to lack of moisture. Native trees proliferate on cool, moist, north-facing slopes. Unfortunately there are tendencies to imitate designs from warmer, wetter climates or to design with only warm weather in mind. The results are lack of wind protection or, even worse, wind tunnelling, blocking of sunlight when and where it is needed, little or no control of snow. Efforts to promote growth in adverse conditions by using exotic species or by placing native species in locations where they would not naturally grow lead to water- and labour-intensive maintenance. Similar examples at the other climatic extreme are easily found in Australia.

Architecture and urban design should also take climatic factors as very important design determinants, rather than simply imitate designs from abroad. However, especially in colder Canadian cities, it is far too easy to point out examples of imitations of mild climate design which have ignored or have been executed in ignorance of local conditions. The results are buildings and cities which do not work as well as they should, which are more expensive to live in than they need be, and which have a quality of life which is less than it could be with good design.

It would seem patently obvious that designers should consider climate of paramount importance. Although the scientific data on climatic conditions is generally available, or can be estimated accurately, that has not been enough to produce good design consistently. For cultural reasons there have been tendencies to imitate or to try to capture an incomplete or inappropriate mental image.

Good design is site-specific and culture-specific. It has a strong cultural component and is not simply a matter of sound science and carefully developed technology. To help ensure good design the arts must help ensure that society perceives its environment well; provide the tools for accurate and persuasive descriptions and depictions of it; and strengthen society's ability to restrict imitation to a supporting rather than leading role.

That conclusion seems reasonable enough if the colonial mentality still prevails. Clearly it has been a strong concern in both Canada and Australia. In Canada, concern about the extent to which imitation was influencing higher education prompted the Association of Universities and Colleges in Canada to appoint the Commission on Canadian Studies. Tom Symons' report (1975) on the work of that Commission produced some significant changes in Canadian universities and in universities abroad, but it is not clear whether strengthening

'Canadian Studies' within Canadian universities can adequately remove or compensate for a colonial mentality. The establishment of enclaves of Canadians knowledgeable about Canada within a system that continues to imitate will not be adequate. The problem for the present is to determine the extent to which the colonial mentality still influences decisions.

Cyberneticist Stafford Beer (1974, 1975) has warned that using out-of-date information for planning and decision making can lead to poor, if not disastrous, results. If the colonial mentality has been or is being replaced by a strong sense of national identity, then to continue to argue about it would be, at best, a waste of time. The difficulty is how do we obtain the up to date information which Beer insists planners and decision makers should have?

The colonial mentality still dominates some very influential people in western Canada. For example, organisers of the cultural events to accompany the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary chose for one national exhibition, five artists who are resident in eastern Canada, one Canadian resident in the USA, and one American. There are, however, arguments that the colonial mentality is no longer a significant element, that concern about it is overly pessimistic, and that worrying about it does not give credit to the strength and vitality of either Canadians or Australians.

In Canada, those who favour freer trade with the USA without protection for our cultural industries insist that the Canadian arts, broadcasting, publishing, music and film are now strong enough to stand on their own against, if not displace, their American competition. Alomes' (1981) argument that Australia is a 'satellite society' has been criticised by Stockley (1981) and McLaren (1981) as being out-of-date and not cognisant of 'modern reality'.

An optimistic note is being struck by more recent works of Canadian literary criticism which have moved away from themes of the bush (Frye, 1971), survival (Atwood, 1972), and isolation (Moss, 1974). This optimism is based on the suggestion that it is only those on the periphery in a colonial society who really have any hope of perceiving a need for change and of acting on it. Dennis Lee (1977) has pointed out that '...if one's mode of being is exclusively to control, one is damned. And if the mode of being one inherits from one's civilization is to control, the same is true [p.107].' Powe (1984) is not very complementary of Lee's *Savage Fields* but he also suggests that 'what ever we write and read should stand up to the question of what it means to be alive now. Then the examinations can begin. Then a true involvement in our time [p.92].' That theme is presented in even more stark terms by Salutin (1984):

In the world today the margin is the only place from which you can gain a clear view of what is happening; the view from the centre is hopelessly distorted [p.8].

If Canada and Australia are emerging from their colonial states, the arts will have been one of the forces behind that emergence, and they will help provide a clear perception of who we are, where we live, and where we should go from here.

Notes

1. This is based on an earlier explanatory essay (Thompson, 1986).

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