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ACSANZ '90

EXTENSION OF DEADLINE

The deadline for the proposal of papers has been extended to 1st March 1990. Prospective paper-givers should send a one-page (250 word) abstract to the appropriate Stream Co-ordinator (see below).

Planning for the conference, which will be held at the University of New England, Armidale, N.S.W. on 19-22 July 1990, is well advanced. Numerous proposals for papers have already been received, notably from Canada, and a conference of significant scholarly interest is confidently anticipated. A highlight will be the first Presidential Plenary, to be given by Professor Reg Berry (University of Canterbury) on postmodernism and Canadian Studies. One afternoon of the three-and-a-half day conference will feature a variety of tours to points of interest - historical, wilderness, pastoral, and artistic - on the beautiful Northern Tablelands.

The Registration Brochure for the conference will be distributed shortly. General enquiries may be directed to Professor John Warhurst, Department of Politics or Mr Don Beer, Department of History, University of New England, Armidale, NSW 2351, (FAX 067 73 3122)

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in review

Donald Horne, *The Public Culture*

Jody Berland

Tim Rowse, *Arguing the Arts*

John Harp

Joyce Nelson, *The Perfect Machine:
TV in the Nuclear Age*

Graeme Turner

Donald Horne, *The Public Culture: The Triumph of Industrialism*. London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1987, 264pp.

In a televised debate during the recent Canadian election, Prime Minister Mulroney, Conservative incumbent and leading advocate of the controversial free trade agreement with the United States, said of opponents of that agreement that 'They would leave us frozen in the headlights of progress, as the world passes us by' [October 25, 1988].

Everyone knows what happens to animals that freeze before the headlights of fast-moving cars. Less clear is how statements such as this one could have helped Mulroney win the election. Canada images itself as a particularly benevolent culture with strong commitments to social welfare and public good. How is it that enough of its citizens could respond so strongly to this elaborated metaphor (for the subtle threat of economic collapse and social disintegration, always contrasted with the alternative promise of growth and prosperity, was the key thematic strategy of his campaign) that they would elect its author for another term?

Donald Horne would analyse this statement as an exemplary articulation of several of the principal myths by means of which the 'public culture' of modern industrial society maintains its dominance. This 'public culture', Horne argues, organises assertions about the nature of reality which come to dominate the organisation and dissemination of 'realities' (or socially constructed representations of reality) throughout the society in question. In the instance I have described, Mulroney was giving voice to two of the most powerful: the 'myth' of progress, and the 'myth' of the economic, which is to say, that economics is what politics ('and, for that matter, existence') is really all about, and, in connection with this, that what governments do is manage the economy (Horne, p. 190).

By myths, of course, Horne does not mean concepts which are not true, or types of speech or modes of address, nor does he mean concepts which originate in the deliberate agency of a strategic will to power. This concept of 'myth' comprises a loose (but astutely detailed) synthesis of ruling concepts, principal hypothetical organisers of 'reality' within a common culture, symbolic complexes, shared rituals, hegemonic constructs, common sense. This synthesis produces the occasional jolt to paradigmatic purism; but it enables the author to offer a wide-ranging and unusually accessible discussion of what he terms the 'public culture' in industrialised societies of both the eastern and western blocs. This 'public culture' is comprised of a combination of powerful myths whose legitimacy and exclusionary effects are indispensable components of the stable exercising of bureaucratic state and corporate power.

Horne argues that modern nation-states demonstrate shared characteristics which are of greater political consequence than the differences between state capitalism and monopoly capitalism that occupy so much of the political rhetoric of their symbiotic animosity. They are similar in their reliance on mass media for the dissemination of powerful myths, in their enthusiasm for technological and

technocratic solutions to social problems, in their reification of the importance and beneficial nature of economic progress. Above all, both systems are the result of a lengthy historical transformation of the mechanisms of social control. Where pre-industrial society emphasised the conspicuous display of power, domination, and difference, post-industrial culture is shaped by the compulsion to represent a shared common culture. The consequent paradigmatic representational structures are more fundamental to the maintenance of power, Horne suggests, than overt distinctions between these economic systems.

One of the major features of this general transformation towards an imposed 'common culture', or what Horne terms a 'shared "public and visible culture"' (p. 54), is the increased valorisation of work and the marginalisation of frivolity: in sum, the mystique of the desk. The widespread image of the desk works to reinforce the dominant view of a common (classless) culture built upon hard work as the source of individual dignity. While frivolity is no longer legitimated as a source of political status, leisure becomes the safe, universalising repository of creative or personal needs which have been excluded from the socially privileged but increasingly uncreative work process. While the East and West have partially different motives for disseminating images of a classless society, the repertoire of images which contribute to that myth in both systems are, in fact, strikingly similar. Drawing on Foucault, Horne contends that both cultures demonstrate again and again that 'the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body' (p. 82).

By offering a taxonomy of dominant myths and by arguing their importance as vehicles of political legitimation, Horne's approach draws heavily on Gramsci's concept of hegemony. But *The Public Culture* also departs significantly from Gramsci, arguing that legitimating myths do not have to be centrally believed to be effective. Dominant myths, Horne suggests, work not by mobilising credibility but by fragmenting and dispersing alternative 'realities' (p. 72). This argument is important for cultural studies, because it dispels with overly schematic concepts of 'ideology' or ideological hegemony (along with vestiges of determinism in political economy) without diminishing the importance and dominance of discursive patterns in contemporary 'public culture'. This makes it possible to contend that we are much influenced, shaped, and disciplined by representational or 'mythical' practices, without having to argue that we - audiences generally, that is - are wholly persuaded by or committed to them. The unique contribution of *The Public Culture* is that it makes this argument, a complex and important one in the present terrain of Marxist cultural studies, while appearing to voice nothing more than evident common sense.

A chapter entitled 'legitimisations' reviews the 'diversionary' myths of free enterprise, individualism, and representation upon which the liberal democratic nation-state constructs its political legitimacy. The analysis of nationalism as a privileged social construction is expanded to incorporate the problematics of contemporary political practice, posed in terms of the hierarchical 'myths' of gender, class, ethnicity. The analysis draws on a humanist defense of justice,

critique, and identity, more than a specific analysis of states and international conflicts. The author does make the point that not all nationalisms are equally chauvinist, which is illuminated by the astute observation that the United States and the Soviet Union are similar in their nationalist 'public cultures'. Without diminishing the differences between them (above all the absence of civil rights in the Soviet block), Horne suggests that their patriotic 'myths' are similar, and historically unique, in that both are founded on an origin-myth of revolution that privileges the country's mode of government as the foundation of its superior national destiny. Each possesses an enormous spectacular apparatus dedicated to the iconic and canonical perpetuation and display of the myth of national origin.

This book offers a conceptual apparatus within which a diverse and topical strategy of political and cultural critique can be conducted. It is unusual in that it draws on a hybrid synthesis of cultural studies, semiotics, Marxism, social history, feminist art criticism, and classical sociology, without pursuing precise or pedantic distinctions among disparate paradigms. In that sense it both stimulates and represents what it describes the need for: as broad, popularly based 'critics' culture' within which a new declaration of citizens' 'cultural rights' (p.234) (a potent and explicit cause in contemporary Britain, for instance) can emerge. The author concludes with a re-telling of the 'myths' of modernity, 'in order to end optimistically' (p.244). His conclusion reveals his location, a familiar one to the Canadian reader. Outside of the tortured and insupportable empires of the U.S. and U.K., perhaps it is still possible - and necessary - to argue that:

It is within the public cultures of nations that an important part of the definition of humanity proceeds: the struggles for equality of sex, race and ethnicity take place within the public culture of nations and so do more general struggles for human equality and for prospects of human fulfilment... To be internationalist, one must first be national. But one can still hope for an end to 'the public culture' [p.244].

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Tim Rowse, *Arguing The Arts: The Funding of the Arts in Australia*. Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1985, 143pp.

Tim Rowse describes his book as a 'critical, historical analysis of the rhetoric and practice of Commonwealth cultural policy' (Preface). The historical period chosen by the author is primarily post World War II, with greater attention to developments over the past two decades. Rowse is concerned with the government's responsibility for culture, and this concern leads him into the complex set of issues and debates which historically constitute the politics of patronage.

Included among the principal players are the Australia Council, the Australian Film Commission, and 'those aspects of the Australian broadcasting Corporation which deal with the broadcasting of film, video and the performing arts and the staging of live musical performance' (p.4). The major sources Rowse draws upon in this slim but comprehensive and provocative book include interviews with leading policy makers, various public documents such as the 1981 Report of the Dix Committee of Inquiry into the ABC, journal articles by filmmakers and critics, as well as other historical documents and records.

Historically, the politics of art has shifted from the early voluntarism and rhetoric of self appointed (elitist) cultural leaders (somewhat muted but not altogether silent today) to voices now heard in support of a more decentralised patronage or the demand that a cultural activity cultivate community support. Underlying these changes is a persistent and pervasive tension described by Rowse as the duality of the cultural world. The latter refers, of course, to commercial entertainment versus subsidised 'quality'. The politics of cultural policy, Rowse explains, is about 'the movement of and meaning of this boundary between what is conserved and what is conceded to the market' (p.64). A key element in this process and part of the politics of culture involves the construction of audiences around various cultural forms as Rowse illustrates with his discussion of earlier debates about Australianness in film, dance and theatre. More recently, he observes, the debate has changed to a celebration of pluralism, situated within a rhetoric of liberal tolerance and yielding 'a more complex cosmopolitan and open ended ideal of nationhood' (p.107).

The relation of culture to the market is embodied in the notion of a cultural industry, a term which dates from the early work of Adorno and Horkheimer (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1973). They argued that the production and sale of cultural objects as commodities ultimately deprives them of all genuine content or critical impact. Rowse is obviously less disturbed at the prospect that market forces will appropriate all cultural forms and turn them into images of the dominant culture. He states, for example, that 'There is nothing in the economic logic of either subsidised or commercially financed cultural production which makes either of them inherently conservative or innovative' (p.101).

Today, the term 'culture industry' is widely used to refer to the commercially mediated production, dissemination and reception of cultural artefacts. What needs to be emphasised more than Rowse's account allows are the aspects in which the commodification of forms of popular culture serves to organise popular experience and consciousness. Tony Bennett describes this form of cultural appropriation as follows:

Dominant culture gains a purchase in this sphere not in being imposed, as an alien and external force, onto the cultures of subordinate groups, but by reaching into those cultures, reshaping them, hooking them and, with them, the people whose consciousness and experience is defined in their terms, into an association with the values and ideologies of the ruling groups in society [Bennett, 1987].

What is lacking, therefore, in an otherwise excellent descriptive account of

state cultural policy is an analysis which explains how that policy serves to confirm and reinforce the structures of domination and marginality to which it ostensibly stands opposed. To paraphrase the late Harold Innes, technology always contains paradoxical tendencies toward both freedom and domination simultaneously. In other words, how are we to account for the basic contradictions in state policy for the arts? The debates are, to be sure, about what Australians value. But, as Rowse realises, that is only part of the question. Indeed, the dualities which invariably dominate any discussion of the arts in both Canada and Australia, such as elitist/populist, regional/metropolitan, professional/amateur, and commercial/subsidised, can only be understood within the broader context of a political economy of cultural production and reproduction. In Canada, and perhaps to a lesser extent in Australia, a persistent 'culture crisis, is provoked by the ideological hegemony of the American empire'.

Rowse has given us a detailed historical account, concluding with his own recommendations for cultural policy. Among them he proposes that '... it be made a statutory obligation that BAC put to air a certain number of hours per year of different kinds of material produced through subsidies of AFC and the Australian Council' (p.126). For anyone interested in issues associated with government funding of the arts, Rowse has given us a lucid and provocative account of the Australian case.

References

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- Bennett, T. 1986 'The Politics of the Popular' in T. Bennett et al. (Eds.), *Popular Culture and Social Relations*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

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Joyce Nelson, *The Perfect Machine: TV in the Nuclear Age*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1987.

Publisher's blurbs can do their books a disservice. The blurb for Joyce Nelson's *The Perfect Machine* reads, in part:

TELEVISION AND THE BOMB. These two mass media (sic) dominate our age.... Joyce Nelson explores [their] sinister relationship and the hidden and bizarre roots of a medium that has assumed extraordinary institutionalized power over our lives.

Reading this, one immediately suspects the book of offering journalistic beat-ups, joining the long and rather tedious tradition of books which sustain the demonology of the mass media. This not an entirely fair expectation; the book

offers intelligent and informed accounts of aspects of the television industry, analyses the relationship between it and key institutions within the film industry in the USA, retraces the structural connections between the export of television and film products and US foreign trade policies, and outlines some of the ways in which North American television's programming conventions serve dominant economic interests.

Little of this is new, however; the film and television industry interface, and the links between US diplomatic, trade, and cultural policies have been standard topics in histories of American film for some time. The discussion of the putative physiological effects of television is particularly dated, ignoring the complications developed by European semioticians and post-Freudian psychoanalytic theorists in the seventies. The ghost of McLuhan hangs over the book, while the strong British and European traditions of television theory and research are almost entirely absent. The latter is particularly regrettable, since the kind of connections Nelson pursues are ultimately ideological and this is the Europeans' area of concentration.

The Perfect Machine demonstrates how large a gap still exists between north American and British/European tradition of media analysis, in particular between the political objectives of such analyses. In the marxian British tradition, from Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall onwards, television is a medium and an institution where dominant ideologies may be reproduced in the representations on the screen, and where social relations can be interrogated in textual forms, but also where contradictions and ambiguities signpost divisions and disruptions within the culture. The focus is not on television as a determining technology, nor even as capitalism as a directly determining ideology, but on mapping the complex of social and material relations which enable societies to produce meaning - in all kinds of representation, not merely television. *The Perfect Machine*, however, is aimed at tracking a specific, causal relation between the growth of the two 'mass media' (as the book calls them), the bomb and television. Television is the co-conspirator, doing whatever is required to maintain the interests of the nuclear 'powerbrokers':

we... have been kept ignorant of the nuclear arms industry, its relation to atomic power plants, and the dangers of radiation from a wide range of man-made sources: an ignorance maintained by television for the benefit of the military-industrial institutions. Since TV provides the ideological frame for such institutions, and was itself an outgrowth of the nuclear industry... television has been the perfect machine for constructing a mass populace united around the bomb [p.162].

Like McLuhan, Nelson sees television's social and ideological function as that of the technology itself, not its specific content nor its social relations. Not content with charting what would seem useful parallels between the ideological and economic interests served by the development of television and the development of the bomb, Nelson presents this interrelationship as *the* central, determining, relationship to be discussed. At no point is this a convincing argument.

It is, however, a familiar argument. The field of media and communications

research in the nineteen-sixties was riddled with North American analyses of the dangers of the technology of television: the mythologies of the effects of violence on television, the passivity of the viewer, the conspiracy of advertisers - all seen as the products of the specific technology rather than of (in the broadest sense) history or (even) late capitalism. Liberal-humanist in motivation, the democratic ethic contradicted by a fear of popular culture, and fuelled by a residually Romantic suspicion of technology's 'anti-people', such accounts contributed to a rich theoretical tradition of technological determinism. Within this tradition, there was vigorous resistance to finding out just what kind of representational medium television was, or how it was actually used by its audiences; since television was already categorised as evil, inhuman, and manipulative, there was little need to enquire further into its workings as a medium. While not entirely enclosed by it, it is largely within this tradition *The Perfect Machine* belongs.

To return to the blurb, its disservice is not only that it invokes the demonological tradition of television analysis. Innocently, but accurately, the blurb highlights the book's most serious flaws: its dismissal of those understandings of television which have developed in spite of and since the witch-hunts of the sixties, and its ultimately ahistorical technological determinism. *The Perfect Machine* sees television as a technology which is intrinsically and inevitably in the service of particular interests, and which is always to be used in particular ways by its consumers. An extremely simple version of the workings of representation within culture underlies such an account, and paradoxically discredits the enterprise of analysis itself. As Raymond Williams has said, 'if the effect of the medium is the same, whoever controls or uses it, and whatever apparent content he may try to insert, then we can forget ordinary political and cultural argument and let the technology run itself' (Williams, 1974, p.128).

The most worrying consequence of technological determinism is that it produces a smokescreen around genuinely important historical and political questions, questions which (presumably) are exactly those Nelson would want to foreground. To quote Williams again, 'if the medium... is the cause, all other causes, all that men ordinarily see as history, are at once reduced to effects' (Williams, 1974, p.127). I am in no doubt that Nelson's concerns are broadly historical, but the view of television as technology and cultural form she presents cancels out history; history is seen as a product of the technology, and only in very limited ways is it implicated in the social and political functions of the medium. For a book attempting to locate television in a particular history and ascribe to it a political and social function, this is a crucial deficiency.

References

Williams, R. 1974 *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. London: Fontana.

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