# THREE QUESTIONS ABOUT CANADIAN CULTURE

## Interview with Will Straw

This paper grew from a bundle of anecdotes and observations I took with me to the Association for Canadian Studies forum "Canadian Culture and Digital Technology" on October 26-27, 2007, in Gatineau. That raw material was distributed across three broad topics for discussion, which I posed as three questions. These questions, and some of that raw material, are provided here, in the hope that these discussion may go on.

### Where are interesting ideas about culture to be found?

In early October, 2007, two weeks before the ACS forum, I participated in the third "How Canadians Communicate" conference at the Banff Centre in Alberta. This event, co-sponsored by the University of Calgary and Athabaska University, brought together Canadian scholars working on a range of topics, from contemporary Canadian art through the success, in the United States, of Canadian television programs like *Da Vinci's City Hall*. The papers delivered at this conference were, without exception, compelling and well-researched, but there came a point where we realized that few of us were talking about the dilemmas of national cultural identity in the grand synthesizing terms of a few years ago. There are readily available reasons for this: a welcome hesitancy to speak, anymore, of a national culture in unitary, essentializing terms, and the ever sharper realization that Canadian cultural artefacts circulate elsewhere in the world as part of what is sometimes called a global cultural system. What seemed clear, in any case, was that the virtue of current research on Canadian culture is in the details, and in the solidity of its findings and analysis. There is little passion for the development of larger models within which all these case studies might find their place.

In fact, however, there is a lot of excitement in cultural scholarship these days, and much of it concerns developments unfolding in Canada. However, the level at which this work operates is less and less that of the nation. For at least a decade now, we have seen cities take over from nations as the object and incubator of compelling new ideas about culture. Over a decade ago, the proceedings of a conference on the "24-Hour City", held in Manchester, England (Lovett et al, 1994) seemed like one of the most truly innovative contributions to our thinking about culture that I had seen in some time. The "24-hour city" conference asked us to think about cultural regulation and policy in genuinely new ways – by treating commercial night-life as an urban industry, for example, rather than as simply a service sector which replenished the energies of those who returned to "real" jobs in the morning. By now, the economic and social value of nightlife and the cultural sector are widely recognized at all levels of municipal government. Cultural and leisure activities in cities are cherished as "amenities", invested in because they seem necessary to attract a creative workforce, and publicized as lures for tourists. Much of the interesting cultural activism of the past two decades has taken cities as its natural domain of expression, and municipal cultural plans now attract the sorts of public attention which once was directed at Royal Commissions on culture and media at the national levels.

There are a variety of possible reasons for this shift in emphasis, from a discourse on culture concerned with building a national imaginary to one pre-

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occupied with the cultural textures of urban life. In the professional realm of cultural policy-making, we can trace a line of development in which culture moved from being a *scarce national resource* requiring policies and institutions for its development, to the still controversial shift in the 1980s to an emphasis on *cultural industries*. In the 1990s, and most notably in Great Britain, an expanded definition of the cultural industries took shape, one which studied small-scale creativity and entrepreneurship in such industries as those producing clothing fashions or specialized music genres (e.g., McRobbie, 1998; Du Gay and Pryke, 2002). These industries (now called the *creative industries* in government reports and scholarly treatments) very often took cities as their natural field of activity, and it is in thinking about cities that their importance has been most widely acknowledged.

In a slightly later, but nevertheless overlapping development, we may point as well to a shift among those policy-makers concerned with citizenship and social development. Here there has been an observable movement from an emphasis on *cultural capital* (access to cultural resources of various kinds) to a concern with *social capital*, in which culture in its specific sense (as a sector of economic and creative activity) is dissolved within a broader notion of social textures and of what the French call the *lien social*, the social bond (Bouvier, 2005). Culture has become much more about the quality of lives lived in close proximity than about the building of a national cultural sphere in which Canadians might see themselves reflected.

A rhetoric of scarcity, which points to the lack of Canadian cultural goods and decries that lack, seems to resonate less and less at the level of a national culture, now seemingly full of Canadian-made feature films and music CDs we have no time to experience. Claims about a scarcity of cultural amenities may seem more persuasive at the municipal level, where the effects of policy and investment are more directly visible; anyone who travels within Canada makes informal comparisons between different jurisdictions and the cultural resources they offer.

## In what corners of our culture is cultural memory accumulating?

In the street markets of Mexico City, I've noticed a change over several years in the ways in which pirated music is packaged and sold. Pirated CDs were once copies of official releases; an album and its cover were replicated, and street stalls were full of a broad repertory of music past and current. At some point in the middle of this decade, street vendors began filling CD-ROMs with MP3 files rather than CD tracks, offering up to 100 MP3's on single discs. One could buy all the works of Radiohead or REM on single discs. As the table space devoted to CDs was more and more given over to DVDs, video games and computer software, the music that was left for sale tended to consist of a limited number of CDs offering the entire *œuvres* of a few canonical artists.

We should think of these vendor tables as cultural archives of a sort, in which music is gathered up, stored for a while, and then allowed to move into personal collections. As music moves from official CDs to pirated discs filled with MP3s, diversity has been reduced, even if that diversity has expanded immeasurably elsewhere, on the internet and individual hard discs or IPODs. This question of the migration of culture from old to new technological formats is the key question, in my view, facing cultural policy at the national level. The survival of the cultural past in new technological storage systems is what gives depth and "ballast" (McCracken, 1998, p. 131) to national cultures, determining the usefulness of that past in the present. One can teach an entire history of Brazilian popular music using clips available on *Youtube*, and do reasonably well with Quebec music since the 1960s using the same source. Only scattered, unconnected bits of the audiovisual history of English-Canadian pop music have made it there, though the situation seems to be improving, however slowly.

The migration of culture across technological platforms is happening in a variety of ways and for a multiplicity of motives. Canada's Audio Visual Preservation Trust was established in response to "Fading Away," the report of the Task Force on the Preservation and Enhanced Use of Canada's Audio-visual Heritage (1995). The AV Trust typically produces new versions of films (both commercial and non-commercial), sound recordings, and radio and television programs which are threatened with decay or neglect. Its activities, one might say, are devoted to the restoration and circulation of works of Canadian culture whose canonical importance has been established but not fully exploited. It makes such works available in new editions which may involve commercial reissues and elaborate educational programs. The DOCAM (Documentation and

Conservation of Media Arts) was initiated in 2005 as a partnership between the Montreal-based Daniel Langlois Foundation, several universities and representatives of major Canadian museums and art galleries. DOCAM's key objective is that of building expertise among those who deal with media-based artworks (such as video, installation or computer-based art) whose continued exhibition is threatened by the technological obsolescence of the platforms and technologies involved in their original creation. (How does one show a computer-based artwork from the early 1980s when its operating systems, processor performance and storage medium are no longer to be found.) DOCAM is not exclusively concerned with Canadian works of media-based art, but several of its key case studies are Canadian, and the professional and technological expertise it hopes to build within the museum and art communities will certainly help to ensure that the historical depth of Canadian contributions to media artworks will be protected.

Alongside these initiatives, significant levels of cultural migration occur within low-level commercial markets. *Ebay* has arguably done more than any other internet resource to send back into circulation the images from millions of old postcards, movie posters, fashion items, magazines and other kinds of cultural ephemera (Straw, 2007). Items are traded between individuals on Ebay, but as an on-line gallery of images it is something of a public resource. Students, antique dealers and fashion designers use Ebay's images in their everyday work; it has endowed all kinds of minor cultural commodities with the historical depth which thousands of examples serve to create.

More generally, the migration of culture across technological patterns takes place in the constant movement between low-level commerce and the non-institutionalized collector cultures which have taken shape around innumerable kinds of cultural phenomena. The historical depth of Mexican film culture is reinforced when collectors deal in movie posters and promotional photographs, accumulating and cataloguing these and pulling them from the places in which they were stored or discarded. As collectors gather these artefacts up and annotate them, they make of them a form of cultural ballast.

One of the most interesting examples of this migration, in my view, is the 2006 release of the compact disc collection From Jamaica to Toronto. This collection gathers up the rich legacy of soul and reggae music produced in Toronto in the late 1960s and early 1970s by musicians such as Jackie Mittoo, who produced substantial work in both Toronto and Jamaica. The CD is richly annotated, building a strong context for this music, and it is all the more remarkable for having been released by a Seattle-based label (Light in the Attic Records), who have followed it up with more collections of Toronto soul music from the same period. From Jamaica to Toronto is a long overdue memorialisation of this important moment in Canadian musical history. It is, at the same time, an example of the way in which a newer technology (the CD) authorizes the rescuing of cultural artefacts produced in an older technology, gathering them up in a media form which stimulates their renewed circulation and valorization.

### How "virtual" is our media-based culture at the present time?

The third question I wish to raise was prompted by two very different trends which invite us to reconsider culture's relationship to physical locations. The first was Madonna's decision to leave Warner Brothers, her record label throughout most of her career, to sign with concert promoter Live Nation for a fee of roughly $120,000,000 over ten years. This event was widely received as symptomatic of a reordering in the music industries; with CD sales in decline, concert tours had become the only viable means for performers to generate large revenues. In September, 2007, the high-profile Canadian music manager Bruce Allen predicted the death of the compact disc by Christmas, 2008, and noted that live performances were the only way for musicians to make money anymore (*Globe and Mail*, 2007).

The second trend has received less notice outside of its immediate spheres of influence. This is the movement of "art-film" directors away from producing films for theatrical release and towards the production of works which are shown in art galleries or other more traditional cultural institutions. German documentary filmmaker Harun Farocki, and Canadian Guy Maddin are among those who have begun to produce large-scale works for art gallery or ballet settings. Canadian visual artist Stan Douglas has turned to cinema as a form which now lends itself to large-sized installations in art galleries. These "moves" are often short-lived, and they take a variety of forms, but they suggest ways in which the current boom in visual arts, gallery building and art-based tourism has draw, into the gallery space, a wide range of cultural forms.

Arguably, the enormous growth of large-scale galleries in the world today is just as important for contemporary art as is the internet. Filmmakers have spoken of how, amidst the closing of repertory cinemas and the reluctance even of public television networks to show experimental works, the art gallery exhibition has opened its arms to innovative works of cinema. (This was a key theme in a discussion of Harun Farocki's films at the Goethe Institute in Montreal on October 19th, 2007.)

Both these examples point, I would suggest, to the renewed importance of punctual, live events cultural institutions which draw people to physical, specific places. Music and the visual arts may need the spectacle of physical presence to counter the disappearance of music and image into electronic virtuality. Indeed, the exaggerated scale of stadium concerts and wall-sized films may make sense principally as a counterweight to miniaturization and digitization.

Nevertheless, I want to offer another hypothesis. The rise of electronic media, in the early 20th century, coincided with widespread urbanization, so that the two seemed inseparable. In the present day, the migration of cultural expression to digital forms has unfolded just as cities have come to think in serious ways about the relationship of cultural to place and the physical environment. The shift to cultural economies in bohemian neighbourhoods, debates over public art, the ascendance of monumental, tourist-oriented art galleries and museums have all reasserted the grounded, material character of culture as a social resource. In artistic practice, notions of site-specificity continue to resonate widely, just as curators and critics have spent much of the last decade entranced by notions of "relational aesthetics" (Bourriaud, 2000), which see the role of art as that of creating concrete situations in which breaches in the social bond are healed.

Tensions between the material and the immaterial, the virtual and the site-specific, the physical artefacts of our past culture and the new media to which such artefacts may migrate – these, I would argue, are the key tensions shaping present-day cultural life. They have displaced older tensions between the global and the local, or between an officially-sanctioned culture and another which is genuinely popular in either commercial or anthropological terms. Cultural life unfolds now in a space between the city and the digital storage medium, and our difficulty as scholars is that of offering a perspective which encompasses both.

## Notes

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