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An Artist's Perspective on Visual Arts in Canadian Television Programming

On 28 October 2001 my partner Miriam Jordan¹ and I presented a video on The New PL, a television station in London, Ontario (Canada). The video, entitled *Big Toe Frank and Tea Master Ubu in the Teacup is Dead*, is a simple collaged animation that hybridises cultural and social narratives,² focusing on the concept of death; we specifically conceived the work with the medium of television in mind. Our video is exactly thirty seconds in length and subverts conventions found in advertisements and public service announcements³ by challenging the stereotypical forms of public representation that surround issues of value and death. In creating this work we were aware of the extreme difficulties that we would face attempting to present an artistic video in the predominantly commercial environment of Canadian television broadcasting, but this problem was precisely why we undertook the project. As emerging artists in the Canadian cultural field we were troubled by the lack of visibility, or in most cases complete ignorance, of the larger scope of cultural and artistic production within mainstream television; to put it bluntly, I rarely if ever see the cultural field I participate in represented on television in any meaningful or considerate manner. Part of our intention

in creating this video and then going through the process of broadcasting it on television was to address this discrepancy, that we experience as media artists dealing with mass media, by making the process itself visible. Although we were eventually successful in having our video aired, albeit not in the most ideal of circumstances—it was presented within the context of a Speakers' Corner public broadcasting programme, segregated from normal or “real” programming—we have not followed up on this project due to the cynicism that the experience engendered.

As a result of this artistic intervention into the world of television I began critically questioning the programming policies in Canada—and by default, programming in the USA—specifically in terms of the inaccessible nature of television as a self-professed medium of the public. One of the reasons for my cynicism is the apparent inability of television programming to make *time* for representing the culture being created by Canadian artists, especially given the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission’s (CRTC) mandate of *Canadian content*: “TV stations must make sure that 60 per cent of their programming over an entire year is Canadian.”⁴ Although all three of the major national English-speaking networks—the publicly funded CBC, as well as the private CTV and Global channels—follow this directive, much of the time allotted to *Canadian content* is news- and sports-based programming: programming that is produced at minimum expense for maximum profit. There is some humour in the fact that even though stations need to show this content in order to have their broadcasting licences renewed, there is still an unwillingness to allow the arts community access to this medium for anything but commercially viable purposes, even though they are technically *public* property. The programming that is aired on Canadian television

stations is regulated by the CRTC, a public commission whose make-up is regularly and conspicuously devoid of artists, consumer advocates, film directors, writers, musicians—in short, the bulk of the Canadian cultural community.⁵ Such *conspicuous absences* of content and representation have steadily increased with Canada's drive towards commercial rather than social wellbeing.

I believe that, on the whole, television programming is irreparably damaging the artistic field of Canadian culture, specifically the manner in which it presents a world-view that is strictly in terms of commodity value; this focus elides use value—that is, the value which items or events possess in terms of their influence, enjoyment and experience. In place of the mass media view of television as a predominantly commercial venture meant to serve the “public”—a view that is ironically accomplished by limiting the public’s access to the medium on the grounds of *time* restraints⁶—I would like to speculate on the possibility of programming that encourages social and political engagement on the part of its viewers by simply introducing back into the medium a sense of the use or experiential value that forms of cultural expression can give. I believe the best way of presenting alternatives to dominant models is through example, which is the reason that Miriam and I formulated a video that worked within the strict parameters of television time allotments—relegated to allotments divisible by thirty—in order to present a perspective on the topic of death that would contrast with the dominant cultural ideals typically presented within mainstream public broadcasting. From the perspective of a practising contemporary artist, I am interested in considering the possible applications that television has to offer towards an open social and cultural dialogue.

I would like to draw upon the example of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who, in a similar act of intervention, broadcast two lectures on French television in May 1996. The circumstances for this broadcast were admittedly exceptional, since Bourdieu faced no time limit, was able to present any topic of his choosing, and had no television authority standing behind him to keep him in line; in other words he was given “*control of the instruments of production* which is not at all usual.”⁷ Through this *unusual* access, Bourdieu was able to address the social and political concerns he had for television—as well as journalism, which I will not be directly discussing—through the medium of television itself. It is this type of intervention into public broadcasting, using television as a means of presentation, which I believe is necessary for the contemporary Canadian visual arts community to undertake in some capacity as a means of resisting the prescribed view of the world as presented on television, which “is one that lies beyond the grasp of ordinary individuals.”⁸ Such a world-view encourages apathy and non-engagement in the social and political events that determine the lives of *ordinary individuals*. This, I believe, is the primary cause behind the public apathy towards television programming, which is proscriptive and self-serving in nature—the medium of television serves to secure and support television as a medium. It is easy to accept this fatalistically as *just the way things are* but it is within the grasp of ordinary individuals to change it, and Bourdieu sets a great example by actively taking control of the very instrument used to convince individuals of their lack of control.

Such an opportunity is difficult to find and I admire Bourdieu’s efforts in gaining the access needed to use the medium of television as a vehicle for presenting a critical analysis of what he views as the main faults of television as a medium. In the preface to

his first lecture “On Television”—which is also the name of his book that textually presents and contextualises both lectures⁹—Bourdieu makes the bold statement:

I think that television poses a serious danger for all the various areas of cultural production—for art, for literature, for science, for philosophy, and for law. What's more, contrary to what a lot of journalists—even the most responsible of them—say (and think), undoubtedly in all good faith, I think that television poses no less of a threat to political life and to democracy itself.¹⁰

According to Bourdieu the damage that television inflicts is focused on the autonomy of the various individual cultural fields;¹¹ television has undermined the ability of a field to determine independently its own criteria for entry and success within the designated field, by allowing individuals to symbolically or literally *buy* their entry and/or success. The threat Bourdieu is addressing comes from individuals who use the authority of television to circumvent the authority of the specified field they wish to enter. A person's opinion on art, for example, can be arbitrarily privileged over that of an artist or historian within the field of art, not due to any specific knowledge or perspective that s/he may possess but because of the visual authority that television imbues upon them through their public appearance in the medium; this circular argument is the reason many people do not question the authority of the “experts” on television: they are “experts” *because* they are on television. This type of logic is precisely why Bourdieu views television as a threat to the various fields of cultural production: it circumvents the autonomous authority of individuals within a field, which is replaced by an ungrounded authority based upon dominant commercial logic.¹²

Let me return briefly to Bourdieu's concept of the cultural field, which I believe to be a model for understanding and resisting the degradation of culture that Canada is presently facing.¹³ Separating cultural productions and producers into different fields,

each with its own democratically established laws and logic, punctuates the fact that different areas of practice rely upon their own unique perspectives and processes that are not always compatible with those of other fields. For example, the logic that governs the decisions made by a doctor is not the same as one that is practised by a politician; the obvious reason for this difference is that the practices in each of these areas have been established to conform to the needs of the field and are often established by individuals practising within these fields. One of Bourdieu's main problems with television as a medium is "the fact that extension of the audience is used to legitimate the lowering of the standards for entry into the field."¹⁴ This lowering of standards comes at the cost of overlooking the internal logic of a respective field in order to maximise the potential audience.

From a visual arts perspective this means that the ability of a Canadian artist to present work freely within society is unduly compromised by the need for a universalised understanding of all potential television audiences—which, in all honesty, is contrary to the goals of most contemporary art which claims to challenge the dominant cultural perspectives that are universally understandable. The solution that has been imposed through television *standards* is the levelling of intellectual content to the lowest common denominator, a process which negates the possibility of programming that is challenging in any way to the dominant views of the society or world; the *democratic* methodology used in television programming is one of the simplification of perspectives in order to eliminate differences. Inherent in this *democratic* perspective is the levelling effect of commercial competition, which facilitates public interest through public opinions on the

programmes being offered. This basis for claiming that commercial interest is equal to democratic voice on the part of the viewers is fundamentally flawed because

competition regresses continually with the concentration of the apparatus of production and, more important, of distribution: the multiple communications networks tend increasingly to broadcast, often at the same time, the same type of products, born of the pursuit of maximum profit for minimum outlay.¹⁵

The desire to expand the audience is placed above the need for free expression, not only within the world of television, but also within the world represented through the lens of a televised perspective—how much of the world do people actually experience? This, I believe, is the fundamental problem that artists face in the shadow of television: the world-view of television supersedes all other world-views and is therefore incompatible with alternative views that challenge dominant social and political positions. Since challenging cultural and social norms is often laid claim to by the contemporary artistic field, it would make sense that television as a medium would, as Bourdieu believed, actively threaten this perspective.

From my own experience, I find that representations of the visual arts on television are based on simplistic social stereotypes of the crazy paint-eating, hermetic artist, or the artist who wastes money on useless creative indulgences. This, in my view, is because television itself depends upon stereotypes to shape all other public forms of expression through their distorting lens; this allows for a simplification of information and narratives that would otherwise not allow themselves to be understood by anyone watching. In his article “Sometimes in Anger: The Struggles of Inuit Video,” the journalist Michael Robert Evans points out the problematic nature of public media coverage of events, stating that journalists

strive to make things clear—and in so doing, they often make things simple. Where subtle distinctions and multiple layers threaten to muddy an issue, the journalist will try to carve out camps and factions and territories, each with its own spokesperson/leader. Complexity abounds in the real world, but simplicity is the king of the mass media.¹⁶

In the late-1990s Evans spent nine months in Igloolik, Nunavut (Canada) studying the growth of Inuit video production, specifically through the group Isuma, a creative form that developed as an attempt to present a truly Inuit representation of themselves. Many of the people in this community felt that the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC)—which, after being formed in 1981, used as a model for its structure the dominant television programming it was supposed to be replacing—was not accomplishing this. The desire to represent their own perspective on the world—ironically, similar to the Canadian desire to represent Canada in a medium dominated by American programming—caused many Inuit artists to take the video camera and create their own field of production. The tendency of the mass media to simplify issues in order to make them accessible not only elides the Inuit quest for cultural autonomy, but ultimately misrepresents the events as being “a mere showdown on the dusty streets of Igloolik.”¹⁷ The continuing development of a cultural identity or field is too complex to represent on television, where the attention span of a viewer is so short, so the material is made to fit the medium by presenting the situation as a stereotypical conflict between older and newer generations; such a perspective overlooks and undermines the significance of what the Inuit have accomplished: taking control of the means of production.

The value of having separate fields of cultural production is not always obvious and usually depends on long-term benefits; this is in strict opposition to the need for immediate return that commercial television requires—not to mention that sector’s

insistence on solid financial returns on their investment. Ironically, the infrastructure and technology that allow for the achievement of short-term gains depend upon the long-term experimental efforts of artists who have developed many of the modern forms of digital technologies used in television production.¹⁸ When asked why artists rather than scientists are able to perceive technological relationships and foresee trends, Marshall McLuhan answered,

Because inherent in the artist's creative inspiration is the process of subliminally sniffing out environmental change. It's always been the artist who perceives the alterations in man caused by a new medium, who recognizes that the future is the present, and uses his work to prepare the ground for it.¹⁹

What McLuhan saw as the artists' greatest strength in the world of technology was their ability to see and capitalise upon the inherent creative potential of new media—that is, to see not only what something is in itself, but also what it could possibly be used for in the future.²⁰ Such an ability to think beyond conventions is the primary territory of the visual arts field, and has facilitated many of the contemporary innovations upon which Western culture prides itself. I find it inconceivable therefore that we as a society have granted the authority of our cultural development to the financially motivated *entertainment* of television. As a medium, television cannot spare the time²¹ necessary to represent the cultural innovations and contributions of our own society—such as the aforementioned video and film work of Isuma, a group that went on to create the award winning “Canadian” film *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001)—as anything but a stereotype.

The active restrictions that keep Canada's visual artists from participating in the future development of television as a public medium are detrimental to the very fabric of Canadian culture, and the potential benefits that emerge from cultural practices. This is

ironic in the light of the CRTC's often-repeated mantra of *Canadian content* that never materialises in a meaningful way. Bourdieu's use of television as a forum and topic for public debate, again, should encourage other cultural practitioners to engage actively in

defending the conditions necessary for the production and diffusion of the highest human creations. To escape the twin traps of elitism or demagogic we must work to maintain, even to raise the requirements for the *right of entry*—the entry fee—into the fields of production.²²

In order to allow the visual artists in Canada to continue expanding and improving the cultural heritage of Canada, they must be allowed to decide for themselves the standards for entering into the field—by which I mean artists should decide what is important and worth presenting to the public, not be guided by television audience ratings or profit. The instrument of television should therefore not be used as a means of measuring the success or failure of an artwork or practice—since inevitably the general audience will be presented with an over-simplified representation of the artistic project, due again to the time restrictions imposed by the medium itself. The alternative, as I see it, is to use television as a forum for presenting alternative cultural perspectives or points of view, and not relying upon dominant modes of representation for all forms of programming.²³ Attempts have been made to address this lack—with channels such as Bravo—but even these types of so called “cultural” programmes do not deal adequately with the threats that unchallenged commercial television poses to Canadian culture.

That television has potential as a culturally viable medium is not simply the perspective of individuals from the visual arts field. In fact, the 1988 National endowment of the Humanities (NEH) report in the USA seems to come to the conclusion that if the future “research in the humanities was a clear and present danger to literacy

and Western culture, television was in a position to be its savior, perhaps even its replacement.”²⁴ Such an optimistic view of television begs the question as to why so few individuals have attempted to intervene in the medium, and utilise its resources for the purposes of cultural exploration and dialogue with a mass public: how free is the public to engage? Examples such as Bourdieu’s lectures broadcast on television, as well as the grassroots work of Isuma in presenting an Inuit perspective on the world through their televised video and film projects, have raised the possibility of such interventions without the usual prescribed limitations of commercial interests that govern most televised programming, creating situations in which public discourse is possible. Canadian television programming, as entrenched as it is in American consumerist television, does not allow for this public discourse specifically, because to do so would undermine the ability to achieve *maximum profits for minimum outlay*. Dialogue encourages individuals to question and consider various perspectives, and this is precisely the goal that I believe practising visual artists should be working towards.

In this essay, I have by no means attempted to present an exhaustive study of the effects of television programming on the Canadian visual arts field. I have instead tried to discuss the questions that I believe are relevant to any consideration of the medium of television in relation to cultural producers and productions. In my own artistic practice I have gone through the difficult process of presenting an artistic video on television because I believe that such an intervention, no matter how significant or insignificant, is an important step in establishing a presence for the arts in Canadian television programming: not as a commercially viable product but as an open dialogue with the audiences who witness it. The video that Miriam and I presented on television was our

attempt to create a dialogue with our surrounding community—locally, nationally and internationally—in which preconceived perspectives on contemporary culture would be questioned and possible alternative points of view considered. The stereotypical public vision of contemporary art as presented in television programming must be confronted if the field of cultural production is to retain its autonomy. In a 1997 interview with P. R. Pires concerning *On Television*, Bourdieu is asked for his opinion on the possible role of the intellectual in the “mediated” world. At the end of his response he states: “Artists, writers and researchers... have the capacity, and the duty, to combat the most malign of the threats that this global production implies for culture and democracy.”²⁵ I view this as my *duty*—to explore the possibility of using television as a medium of cultural exchange and experimentation, as a medium with the potential to open up critical discourses on Canadian and world culture, not to silence them.

¹ As much of our work is collaborative and the individual work I do depends heavily upon Miriam’s input and editing, I would like to acknowledge her contribution to this text.

² The characters in this video include Big Toe Frank, a Native trickster figure with an enlarged toe—supposedly due to environmental toxins—and Tea Master Ubu, a hybrid between Alfred Jerry’s *Ubu Roi* and the Japanese tea master Sen no Rikyu. Together these characters form hybrid creations based upon an amalgam of cultural and societal histories and/or mythologies. In the video, Big Toe Frank breaks Tea Master Ubu’s teacup and, through a well placed philosophical question about the nature of death, Frank is able to rationalise the accident away as it being “the teacup’s time to die.”

³ In the process of interacting with various television stations we were encouraged to simplify and focus the *moral* content of the story in a manner that would be instantly recognisable, so that it could be used to fulfil their public service requirements: a request that we did not honour.

⁴ Ian Austen, “Culture Between Commercials” in Jeannette Slonioski and Bohdan Szuchewycz, eds., *Canadian Communications: Issues in Contemporary Media and Culture Canadian Communications* (Scarborough: Prentice Hall, 1999), 271.

⁵ *Ibid*, 274.

⁶ Public access to television is typically limited to non-prime times, basically times when few viewers are watching and the commercial potential is minimal; such an ability to control the time allotments is secured by the broadcasters—who also control the means of producing the programming—whose decisions on the uses of time are based upon its exchange value, primarily in terms of selling slots for commercial

advertisement. In this way, granting public access to television time, although possibly more culturally valuable, is defiantly not commercially valuable and therefore is not commonly practised.

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, trans. Priscilla Ferguson (New York: The New Press, 1998), 13.

⁸ *Ibid.* 8.

⁹ Bourdieu's book *On Television*, which was a national best seller when it was published in France in 1996, serves both as a documentation of the lectures delivered on television, and as an account of the process and reactions to this intervention. Quite simply, this book is an example of what can be done in terms of integrating critical, social and cultural perspectives into public television broadcasting.

¹⁰ Bourdieu, *On Television*, 10.

¹¹ Bourdieu defines a cultural field as

a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which the various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field (*On Television*, 40).

¹² It is important to note that I am not stating that the cultural fields do not possess or engage in commercial based interests, only that these interests are governed by the laws established to accommodate the logic of the specific field. The commodification of artwork has been a long-standing tradition and debate throughout the history of art, and it has been decided by each new group of individuals who participate within the field. My fear—which Bourdieu seems to share—is that individuals and groups, who are more interested in creating money than culture, are using the authority of television as a means of focusing cultural production that serves short-term commercial desires over long-term cultural needs.

¹³ The 1951 government-sponsored Massey Report, which directly responds to the influx of American commercial television programming, movies and publications and its effects on Canadian culture, “argued vehemently that the very survival of the nation was in jeopardy,” because “Without a common culture, without at least a basic set of common beliefs and ways of doing things, there could be no orderly discussion, and people couldn’t live together” (quoted in Centre for Canadian Studies, Mount Allison University/Canadian Heritage, “Canada at the Movies: Movies, Culture and National Identity” in *Canadian Communications: Issues in Contemporary Media and Culture Canadian Communications*, 306). This cautionary report regarding the loss of Canadian identity has not only gone virtually unaddressed, but has also served as an ideal means of drawing attention away from the threat of commercial interests upon not only Canadian culture but many cultures worldwide. In other words I believe that the Massey Report points the finger at the wrong cause for Canada’s cultural decline: it is not the American content of the television programming that threatens Canadian content but the commercial basis on which American broadcasting is based.

¹⁴ Bourdieu, *On Television*, 65.

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, “Culture in Danger” in *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market* 2, trans. Loïc Wacquant (New York: The New Press, 2003), 69.

¹⁶ Michael Robert Evans, “Sometimes in Anger: The Struggles of Inuit Video” (*Fuse Magazine* 22.4, January 2000), 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ In the early 1970s, several pioneering video artists, such as Nam June Paik and Stan Van Der Beek, were given free access to professional broadcasting equipment in the USA, at the Artists’ Television Laboratory at WNET (Public Broadcast Corporation) in New York, and were “allowed to experiment for aesthetic effect.” In fact, many of the devices they designed “were vital to software and hardware developments in producing the new generation of powerful but inexpensive computer/video instruments later built commercially” (Margot Lovejoy, *Postmodern Currents: Art and Artists in the Age of Electronic Media*, 2nd ed. [New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997], 114, 121).

¹⁹ Marshall McLuhan, “Playboy Interview” in Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone, eds., *Essential McLuhan* (Concord: Anansi, 1995), 237.

²⁰ In 1952, Italian artists such as Lucio Fontana and Alberto Burri began conceptually exploring the medium of television, authoring the *Manifesto del Movimento Spaziale per la Televisione* (Manifest of the Spacialist Movement for Television). This manifesto was a prediction for a possible future advancement of television as a tool of creation, a prediction which was never realised by these artists, but something that became influential in establishing an interest in the potential of television and electronic broadcasting as

artistic media. And this is, in fact, one of the texts that has come to influence my work as a contemporary media-based artist.

²¹ The concept of time is integral to understanding the medium of television, in that it has been *evolving* into a faster and faster form of communication; the most surprising aspect of Bourdieu's broadcast was that he was not limited in his time, which would have limited his topic, opinions, and every other aspect of the points he wished to communicate. Time in this context should be understood as the primary mechanism through which society is controlled and ultimately suppressed, because no one has *time* to question the views of the world that television media present.

²² Bourdieu, *On Television*, 65.

²³ Although Canadian broadcasting has followed almost entirely in the footsteps of the USA commercial television model, countries like the Netherlands have not. There is actually no commercial television in the Netherlands at all. All the channels on the Dutch television network are shared among a group of government-approved broadcasters, and at least 20% of their programming time must consist of cultural content. It is therefore important to remember that commercial television is not the only example of how the medium can be used. See Emile Fallaux, "Waar Heb Dat Nou Voor Nodig" in Dorine Mignot, ed., *Revisions: Art Programmes of European Television Stations* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1987), 58-65.

²⁴ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1-2.

²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, "Return to Television" in *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: The New Press, 1998), 76-77.