

Technology and culture :

A Cinema Canada special report

In a curious television interview before his death in 1976, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger announced that "Only a God can save us." For the modern world, technology is that new god, and our fate as a civilization is that of its technological project. For technology is us, from before the cradle to beyond the grave, from pre-natal ultra-sound to the mechanical heart of a William Schroeder. And more than any other young country, Canada is a creature of technology, from the railroad that created a nation, to the public broadcasting system that revealed that nation's culture to itself, to the satellite dish that threatens its dissolution. In the Canadian context, the relations between technology and culture meet at a pitch of urgency and a level of public debate that is perhaps unique in the developed world, for they acutely foreshadow the debates that other countries in the satellite era will experience sooner or later.

This special two-part report on technology and culture, then, attempts to address some of the issues as they pertain to Canadian cultural life. If the articles that follow, in this and the next issue, go beyond the immediate concerns of Canadian film and television production, Canadian film and television nevertheless remain at their heart. For nowhere do the debates focus more poignantly than in these key technological means of forging a culture.

In this issue, Arthur Kroker sets the tone with the concluding chapter of his seminal book "Technology and the Canadian Mind", which views the Canadian experience as a unique meditation on the meaning of living technologically. In our simultaneously Orwellian and utopian age, Kroker writes, "the 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."

Focussing on these oppositional models as they surfaced at Convergence, a recent international conference in Montreal on the meeting of film and video production technologies, Michael Dorland, Peter Wintonick, Lois Siegel and Bill Viola treat different aspects of the ideology of technology.

And finally, David McIntosh examines technological change at the level where it happens most directly - in the work-a-day lives of technicians and production workers in the Canadian communications sector.

Previewing some of next month's features, Gordon Thompson argues in favour of the Information Society's presenting that rare opportunity in history: a rational approach to social and economic development. Peter Black reviews the ambivalent evolution of Canadian government policy in communications, its uncertain past and even more hesitant future, while Doug McKenzie traces the effects of technological development in sound production on film and television making.

At a time when the Conservative government appears to be rethinking the role of the state and overturning 'traditional' approaches to Canadian cultural development forged by an earlier Conservative government in the 1930s, it is hoped that this two-part special report will at least contribute to some understanding of the depth and breadth of the issues involved. As Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission chairman André Bureau recently noted in the Commission's annual report, current debates on broadcasting and communications technologies, that is, on culture and technology, not only "raise serious questions of public policy" but is "a subject which has significant, long-term implications for Canada and Canadians."

'Create or perish'

Canada, culture and technology

by Arthur Kroker

The modern century is fully ambiguous, charged with opposing tendencies towards domination and freedom, radical pessimism and wild optimism.

Under the pressure of rapid technological change, the centre may no longer hold but this just means that everything now lies in the balance between catastrophe or creation as possible human destinies. Indeed, central to the human situation in the twentieth-century is the profound *paradox* of modern technology as simultaneously a prison-house and a pleasure-palace. We live now with the great secret, and the equally great anxiety, that the technological experience is both Orwellian and hopelessly utopian. 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.

With the smell of exterminism in the air, we have reached a fantastic cusp in human history. In the most practical and terrifying sense, we are now either at the end of history or, just possibly, at the beginning of all things. Left to its own imperatives, technological experience is dangerous enough as to force us, almost in spite of ourselves, to rethink the deep relationship of technology and civilization. Literally, if we are to survive as a species, it will be due in no small part to the terrible fact that the sheer extremity of the threat to the human species posed by the new technologies (the Bomb as the sign of twentieth-century experience) will have forced a dramatic reevaluation of human ethics. If it is much too optimistic to expect that the Bomb will force us to exercise a new sense of inner restraint in public affairs, then it still might be said that the Bomb has, at least, this great paradoxical effect: on the other side of exterminism, there exist now the objective conditions for a new, universal human culture. The Bomb, just because it is global in consequence, compels us to think of ethics from a universal standpoint. And on the other side of the silicon chip is the, admittedly dim, possibility of a new information order. Technology may not force us to be free; but it does encourage us to rethink the relationship of technique, ethics, and society.

Seemingly, then, this is one of those great transitional periods in which technological innovations, in diverse

Arthur Kroker, editor of *The Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, teaches political science at Concordia University in Montreal.

areas ranging from computers, silicon chips, prosthetic medicine and video, to nuclear armaments, have suddenly leaped beyond our ability to understand the connection between such new technologies and past events, or to foresee their possible consequences. If this is an age of such great social anxiety and stress, then it is so, in good part, because there is now such a radical separation between the swift tempo of public events, based as they are on the rapid unfolding of the logic of the technological imperative, and private life which still works off of traditional habits of perception. We're either "book people" in an age which privileges video or, just when we have adapted to the new realities of electronic circuitry as the model of contemporary politics and society, suddenly electronics itself is made obsolete by the digital revolution! It's as if everything is out of synch: a society with twenty-first century engineering, but nineteenth-century perception.

Indeed, it is apparent, now more than ever, that we are living in the midst of a terrible *ethics gap*: a radical breach between the realities of the designed environments of the new technologies, and the often outmoded possibilities of our private and public moralities for taking measure of the adequacy of technological change. It's as if we live in a culture with a super-stimulated technical consciousness, but a hyperatrophied moral sense. It is this gap between ethics and technology which makes it so difficult to render meaningful judgments on specific technological innovations in satisfying or thwarting the highest social ideals of western culture. Just like "jet lag" in which the psychological consequences of life in the mainstream of technology are experienced only *after* the event is finished, "ethics lag" means that we are blindsided on the real effects of technology until it is too late. What is our practical situation now? It's this: technology without a sustaining and coherent ethical purpose; and ethics, public and private, without a language by which to rethink technology in late twentieth-century experience.

In ways more pervasive than we may suspect, technology is now the deepest language of politics, economy, advertising, and desire. We may not be seduced by television, but it's the image-system at the centre of a burgeoning world culture in lifestyles, fashion and consumer ideology. We may be depressed by the Bomb, but it's the information medium which is shaping and reshaping the politics of the modern century. We may not want to take video rock seriously, but it's the dynamic locus of an expanding and homogenous world environment of sound/images: a type of

popular culture which works in the language of violence, pornography, and seduction. And, finally, we might like to consider personal computers as just the flip side of electronic typewriters until we wake up one day in a society modelled on the pattern of Computerino, U.S.A. and realize that it's we who are being processed into the information bytes of the mass-communication system. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan had this to say of the cultural impact of the new technologies of communication: "How are you to reason with a person who feeds himself into the buzz-saw just because the teeth are invisible?" When television can be used to pump the *mass* full of advertising messages and their associated emotions; when overnight polling can detect any blips in the mood of the population; when the everyday occurrence of transistorized consumers walking to the beat of their Sony Walkman's is a grisly example of *us* as the bytes of the information society: then we are not far from the invisible teeth of McLuhan's "buzz-saw".

The special contribution of Canadian thinkers on technology like Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan and George Grant does not lie just in what they have to tell us about the *practical workings* of the wired society. Innis got to the age of radio, but not beyond it; Grant always remained a print man; and McLuhan, while the most experimental of the three, was by virtue of historical circumstance never able to see beyond electronic society to the digital manipulations of the silicon chip. The relentless speed-up of the pace of technological change which McLuhan could only prophesy has now taken place. We are fully modern beings because the technological media "horizon" us on all sides now. Innis, McLuhan and Grant might concur that "technology is the real world;" but it is a distinctively modern fate to *live* technology as a kind of second biology which, whether in city architecture, chemically processed foods, sound production or the zooming lens of the camera eye, defines and limits the human condition. In terms of the sheer scale and acceleration of technological change, it's as if we are forever separated from McLuhan, Innis and Grant by a new continental divide. This generation of thinkers might have brought us to the edge of the technological dynamo, but it's our fate now to experience the designed environments of technology as *the* most pervasive and basic fact of human existence. And unlike, for example, the beginnings of that other, great technical paradigm-shift prefigured by the industrial revolution, which was marked anyway by a violent and easily discernible *mechanization*

of the institutions of agrarian society, the new technologies of communication *imprint* themselves instantaneously and universally on human consciousness. When *Dallas* becomes a global cultural item; when the Cruise Missile comes to rest in the English countryside and in the Canadian North; when Love Canal and acid rain are everywhere; when Michael Jackson, Boy George, and Men Without Hats explode outwards like new cultural stars in a global media system which works its economic magic in an entirely new, and as yet little understood, grammar of video images and technically manipulated emotions, then it's time for a new Copernican Revolution in thinking technology.

For us, politics can now be so cynical just because it is shadowed by the logic of exterminism; ethical questions concerning human reproduction are screened out by rapid advances in genetic engineering; video rock has become the most dynamic literature of the last decades of the twentieth-century; and television is important to study because it provides the basic, visual language of contemporary popular culture. If it is fair to note, and this following the Polish thinker Leszek Kolakowski, that every crisis contains both a moment of danger and opportunity, then it must also be said that it is part of the modern circumstance in North America to live just between the dark side of the "chip" and the new morning of global communications. In a fundamental sense, we can never go home again to the texts of McLuhan, Innis and Grant; but we must turn now to decipher the human predicament in the New World. The Quebec filmmaker, Jean-Claude Labrecque, once said of the threat of cultural obliteration posed by the new technologies of communication: "It's like snow; it keeps falling and all you can do is go on shovelling." Technology as snow, or maybe as a nuclear winter; that's the Canadian and, by extension, world situation now. If we wish to survive cultural extermination, then our main chance is just what Labrecque says: "we must be original or disappear." Jean-Paul Sartre might have cautioned the Europeans that they were "condemned to be free" as the price of modernism, but Labrecque notes that the Canadian fate is simply this: "create or perish."

(Excerpted from "Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis/McLuhan/Grant," *New World Perspectives*, Montreal, 1984, by permission of the publisher.)