

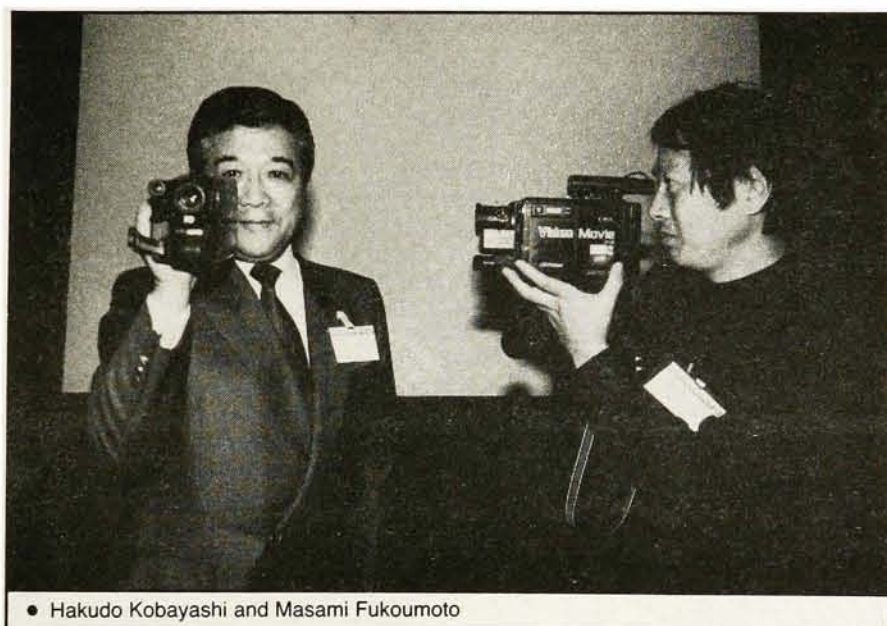
VERGING ON THE CON:

by Michael Dorland

The contemporary civilizational crisis we inhabit, McLuhan taught, results from the shock (or, less dramatically, the interaction) of two contradictory forms, culture and technology. The former, based on the circulation of the printed word, has given rise to centralized media (books, specialists, cities and nation-states) in economies of scarcity. The latter, based on the technical transmission and reproduction of the non-written, would give rise to decentralized media (TV, computers, conferences, and globalism) in economies of excess. The gap between the two systems provides the content of the current confusion or crises. Understanding 'crisis' as ranging in acuteness anywhere from hyperconsciousness to a general state of culture shock or numbness, it has spread to a level of ubiquity that informs the clichés of our time – e.g., the crisis of culture, TV or film; the crisis of the nation-state, etc. To varying degrees, these forms of crisis were much in evidence at *Convergence II: Transcending the Hardware*, an international forum on the moving image held at Montreal's Sheraton Centre Dec. 8-11.

In this second installment of the highly successful *Convergence I* of 1984, the conference itself was showing many of the signs of contemporary crises. Conferencing, as McLuhan predicted it would become, is one of the fastest-growing industries in North America. As in parallel inflations, what ensues is a rapid increase in quantity combined with a proportional diminution of quality. In the case of conferences, this means more speakers on the one hand (here 90-odd speakers on 24 panels) who, on the other hand, have less to say as a result. And if the conference has the ambitious aim of 'transcending the technology,' this becomes problematic.

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• Hakudo Kobayashi and Masami Fukoumoto

photo: Linda Dawn Hammond

For the point about technology is very exactly that it's not transcendable. Technology is world-making; it creates worlds; technology does not and cannot transcend technology, only *older* technologies. And among the worlds it creates, some will of course resemble the old worlds as the content of a new technology is the old technology; some, though, will be new, and it is these that are both the hardest and the easiest to see. Easy because they are visible everywhere; hard because they have to be given a name to be seen (as understanding and not just appearance). In other words, to be seen they have to be heard. Which is why what was most interesting about *Convergence II* was not what was said but what was not said.

An Overview of Convergence II

Silent Canadians

Most striking among these silences, and all the more so as a Canadian-hosted and Canadian taxpayer-supported conference, was the Canadian silence – a general apathy from the attending public, a refusal almost to believe in further mirages, be it the global marketplace or BBC's Channel 4. The *Convergence* 'names', though, (Beineix, Altman & Laurie Anderson) seemed at least to attract the 'culture groupies.' If there was roughly (though not always) one Canadian per panel (19-odd), an overly large American delegation (32-odd) meant that concerns invariably shifted towards American views of the media world which became the norm against which everything else was relativized. While this may accurately reflect America's domination of global media systems, despite American protestations that the new globalism is genuinely international, it tends to reduce the possibility of a hearing for alternative discourses. This was particularly noticeable on one of the very first panels the first day on the future of theatrical exhibition.

When French director Jean-Jacques Beineix (*Diva*, 37.2° le matin) attempted to raise the issue of cultural policy which he defined (wrongly) as "a typi-



• Jean-Pierre Laurendeau in the shade of new technology

photo: Linda Dawn Hammond

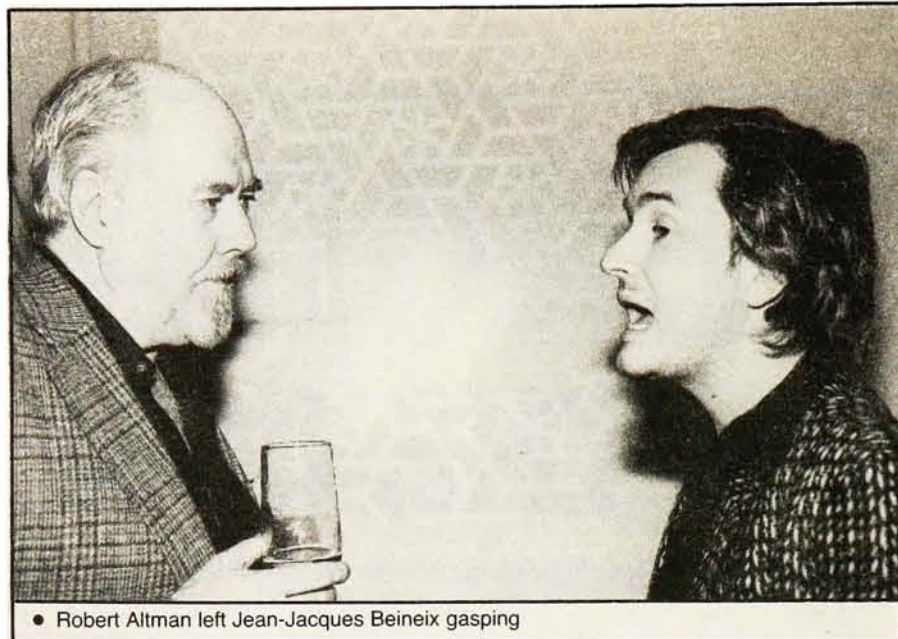
cally French concern," he was met with blank stares of incomprehension from the three American panelists (journalist and moderator Stratford Sherman, Lucasfilm technical director Tom Holman, and independent exhibitor Richard Fox). Likewise with the Canadian panelist, Astral Bellevue's head of distribution Gord Guiry. He shared with Beineix a concern for cultural policy as one of the prerequisites for the survival of smaller nations in the teeth of the American media juggernaut and might have had something to say to the Americans about living with the vertical integration of media, one of the constants of Canadian experience that Americans are only now rediscovering as the 1948 anti-trust consent decrees crumble. Except that the Americans were either not interested or are so completely unable to grasp any experience that differs from their own immediate experience that discussion beyond banalities (e.g. that movies have a theatrical future) proved impossible.

This pattern of other nationals being forced into frustrated withdrawal because of American obtuseness was visible at several key panels, notably those on cultural sovereignty (Dec. 8), on copyright (Dec. 9) and on documentary (Dec. 10) where the same dialectic was played out on the more modest level of 'personal filmmaking' and alternative distribution/funding circuits. Of little help in such a situation is, as CBC president Pierre Juneau put it during the panel on cultural sovereignty, "the typically Canadian ability to sit on both sides of the fence."

This in turn gives rise to the well-known Canadian diplomatic compromise-posture of 'the honest broker' or go-between among squabbling nations – to the detriment of Canadian national or self-interest. In Juneau's case, while he could criticize the neo-conservative conception of the marketplace as 'totalitarian,' he would argue that the future of cultural sovereignty and/or public broadcasting institutions lay in mediating between a global 'superculture' and a publicly supported local, regional or national culture.

Juneau's perhaps typically Canadian position would be characterized as 'optimistic' by Australian Film Commission CEO Kit Williams who was utterly uncompromising in his argument that "the Australian film industry is entirely the product of government intervention. I believe national cultures to be profoundly fragile," Williams went on to say, "and it is difficult to take the optimistic view my colleague has just advanced," a position that the respective states of the Canadian and Australian film industries might incline one to support.

Part of the difficulty, as Williams saw it, stemmed from the fact that "Cultural imperialism is one of the most important political issues of our time," a stance fully endorsed by West German copanelist Hans-Geert Falkenberg of public broadcaster WDR, moderately so by moderator Les Brown of New York-



• Robert Altman left Jean-Jacques Beineix gasping



• Les Brown, Pierre Juneau and Hans Geert Falkenberg

based *Channels of Communications* magazine, though not engaged with by Juneau and vigorously combatted by the other American panelists, Turner Broadcasting vice-president Jack Petrik and New York corporate lawyer John Eger. Both Petrik and Eger were adamant in their insistence that the words "cultural imperialism" should be abolished. As Petrik put it, "With the advent of the satellite, the time has come to bury the word 'cultural imperialism' and replace it with global, free cultural trade. For Eger, "The fact is our business is global and nothing you or I or governments around the world do are really going to change that. It's something we don't like to admit: that nation-states are too small to deal with the problems of the world."

Among other effects of such a highly debatable proposition (which has been the global position of the American government since the late 19th-century and that of the American media industry since the 1920s) is that it forecloses the politics of such a globalism; indeed, depoliticizes the debate and deadends it. What results is the complete polarization of discourses and so their mutual incommunicability: politics and policy on the one hand; business on the other.

Depoliticized debate

The depths of such a divergence of discourses became fundamental in the panel on copyright (Dec. 9). For that turned into, though perhaps not surprisingly given a panel of four lawyers, a fascinating debate on the different conceptions of law that separate Canada and the United States; in the former case, that law is an extension of public policy, and in the latter, that law is an extension of individual or natural rights. The debate pitted Montreal lawyer Michael Bergman against Jonas Rosenfield of the American independent film industry lobby, the 80-company American Film Marketing Association.

The underlying issue, though never fully clarified as it does involve a far more systematic discussion of the difference between Canadian and U.S. legal ideologies than such a forum could offer, concerned the 'right' of Canadian media policy in the name of the national interest to encourage non-remuneration of proprietary rights of U.S. media production where the entitlement of the latter to such rights is a matter of legal dispute. (Canada and the U.S. have for over 100 years fought repeatedly over such issues in areas that always involve Canadian perceptions of U.S. en-

croachments on its sovereignty, be it territorial or media-related as in spectrum allocation.)

Bergman was in the difficult position of having to speak for the Canadian government on issues where its policies are not always clear, but for Bergman, and in keeping with Canadian tradition, public policy has priority over individual rights. (Thus, for instance, Canada's long grope throughout the century with constitutional questions and more generally with institutions.) Rosenfield, firmly anchored in the American constitutional sense of natural rights, however, had his thunder blunted by sharing a place on the panel with a representative of the American government, Robert Kost of the Congressional Office for Technology Assessment, who, somewhat like Juneau on the cultural sovereignty panel, here played the 'Canadian' in being able to see both sides of the fence. It was incidentally very refreshing to hear from someone with a sense of American public or policy issues for a change, as opposed to, as is too often the case at such industry fora, American private interests. And it was Kost who reminded Rosenfield that the U.S. Supreme Court did not share his view that American producers were necessarily entitled to claim rights to Canadian cable retransmission of U.S. broadcast signal spillover across the U.S.-Canada border.

However, other than revealing some fundamental differences, the debate did not go further. Everyone stubbornly held to their respective positions. Complicating matters is that the issue – as Kost explained, "what the technology does is take a relatively clear field and creates wholly new opportunities and ideas that completely scramble the old field" – involves more than an inter-North American dispute over fundamentals of law. Here the issue becomes truly global and possibly entailing a new conception of international law or at least one less simplistic than the neo-conservative ideology of the global marketplace. To take the case of the 12 nations of the European Economic Community, as described by Norbert Thurrow, West German member of the EEC commission that has elaborated a discussion directive for "simultaneous and unchanged" retransmission of broadcasting services in nine languages throughout the European Community; such an approach, which won't be decided upon until next year, is only possible to the extent that the EEC is treated as one market. Things get considerably more complex, as is visible in current confusions over videocassettes for instance, when a plurality of markets and languages is involved.

On the survival of the documentary panel (Dec. 10), Canadians Brian McKenna of CBC's *Fifth Estate* and independent documentarian John McGreevy (*Peter Ustinov's Russia: A Personal History*) continued to fight the valiant Canadian war with Canadian institutions. McKenna was stubborn in

photo: Linda Dawn Hammond

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his desire to air Canadian documentaries on Canadian TV even though, as he put it, "you need enormous legal resources" and "what the CBC regards as a certain kind of political support" in order to do so. For his part, McGreevy, while willing to take the institutions as they are – "We mavericks who work in documentary pull off heroic achievements every time we put a documentary on TV" –, felt that relentless persistence was the documentarian's only hope these days of breaking through institutional barriers. The American independent distributor Mitch Block urged the Canadians to think more globally, while Polish-American filmmaker Marion Marzynski – when he wasn't fighting with Block – raised the Polish battle-cry that you fight on, no matter what the odds. If the documentary, which all the panelists agreed is an "obsession," appeared to have become the last refuge of the ideology of personal filmmaking, that ideology would also by-and-large be shared, within the limits of the possible, by feature film directors like France's Jean-Jacques Beineix, U.S. independent Robert Altman and British independent Stephen Frears (*My Beautiful Laundrette*) during a free-wheeling panel on Dec. 11.

Technology's grand reduction

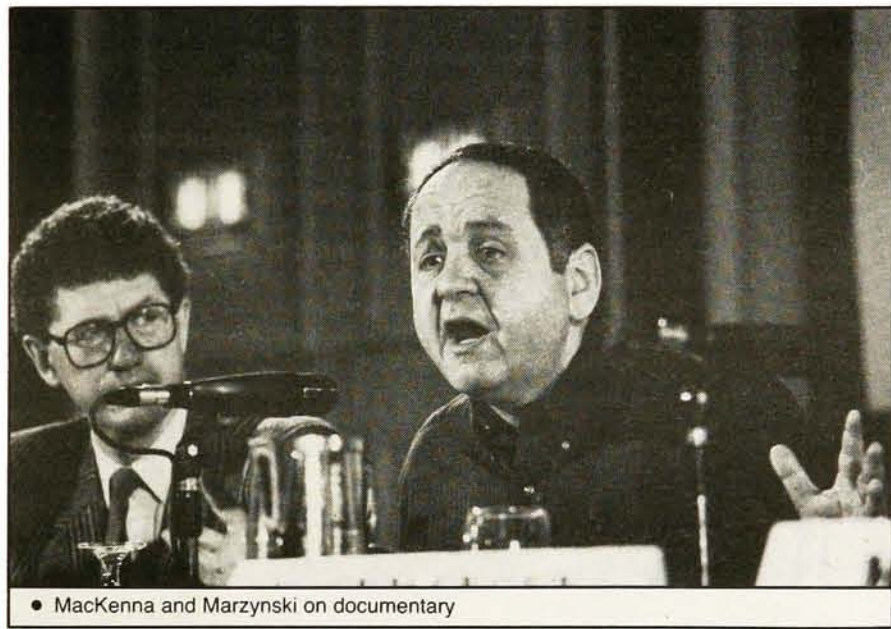
The American or neo-conservative ideology, then, is an attempt, in the face of something far more complicated, to effectuate a grand reduction. In a first step, what are in fact global political issues are depoliticized; the world, from being an uneasy competition among political entities (nations, empires and military alliances, multinational corporations and associations such as the U.N.), is reduced to a giant bazaar of sellers and buyers. In this global reduction (or what H-G Falkenberg called "a global pseudo-culture"), possessive individuals are free to either buy or sell; there is no other kind of freedom nor need for any other kind since politics and governments have been transcended by the global commonwealth in which there are only distinctions of wealth. In this utopia, everyone benefits from an abundance of media that disseminate the infinity of information and/or entertainment that would result from unimpeded global cultural exchange. As the American video artist Dan Reeves put it in his brilliant tape, *A Mosaic For The Kali-Yuga*, "When society reaches a stage where power creates rank, wealth becomes the only source of virtue, falsehood the source of success, and sex the only enjoyment, then we are in the Kali-Yuga." In Hindu mythology, the Kali-Yuga was "the final age."

The Final Age

If technology (and the ideologies of proponents of global technologization) engages in formidable reductions, traditional culture dealt in enlargement (heroes). While classical media culture also



• Cinematographer Pierre Mignot



• MacKenna and Marzynski on documentary



• Kim Williams on the fragility of national cultures

dealt in enlargement (Hollywood stars), as we move deeper into technological culture it is the medium itself that grows larger (HDTV's 1125 scanlines, 70mm film or 126mm in the case of lasers) whereas the content grows smaller. What was thus disturbing, in sharp contrast to *Convergence I*, about the panel on visual experimentation (Dec. 9) was the acceptance of the participating

artists to working within technological art; that is, the subordination of art to science and technology that is the hallmark of modernism.

Gone were the fiery postmodernist deconstructions of the artists of *Convergence I*. With the possible exception of Australian artist Lorraine Gill who, in the case of her fallback upon Australian aboriginal art, repeated the

escape-pattern from the closures of modernism that Picasso *et al.* found in African art, or moderator Linda Sexson's insistence on seeing technological art as a new Renaissance, the other artists seemed simply content to problem-solve within the rules of technology. Thus French cine-holographer pioneer Guy Fihman, in a fascinating account of current experimental laser work in what he called "motion sculpture," was, as he admitted, retracing in a new technology the chronophotographic work of late nineteenth-century cinema pioneer Etienne Jules Marey. In trying to develop the technology of seeing with both eyes (as opposed to the camera's current monocularity), Fihman paid backhanded tribute to recent Canadian techno-experimentation (at Expo 86, to which a panel was devoted on Dec. 8) as "the absolute limit of one-eyed cinematography."

A clue as to why the *Convergence II* artists might have been so technologically comfortable (read: uncritical) was given by Charley Levi during the panel on advertising styles (Dec. 10). Levi, along with partner Alex Weil, has built ad agency Charlex Inc. into a \$10 million U.S. corporation. Furious experimentation with postmodern (i.e., pastiche) styles in advertising had resulted, Levi explained, in a hunger for (techno) traditionalism or at least something cleaner than postmodern chaos. With widespread use of such graphics technologies as Paintbox, endorsed by artists like David Hockney, Levi said "It's as if Michaelangelo were on-staff; there's nothing you can't co-opt." In this sense, there wasn't even the shadow of a debate on the artist's panel as to art vs. technology. Art has become the content of technology as one of Levi's clips, an ad for U.S. cable movie web Cinemax, showed with a cleaning lady (actually a man in drag) vacuuming up old masters like Da Vinci's Mona Lisa to reveal underneath the gleaming, pseudo-steel logo of Cinemax, dispenser of today's disposable and forgettable art. As interactive video artist Myron Kruger's computer put it, "Response is the medium!"

And if response has indeed become the medium, then as John Eger said: "It isn't the medium so much anymore, it's the message." And if that is true, the message behind *Convergence II's* attempt to transcend the hardware and forget about the nuts and bolts¹ would be that, in fact, it's only the hardware, the nuts and bolts, that matters; all the rest is merely so much excrement. And so the last word goes to U.S. ad exec Bob Levenson:

"In America today, the number of hours per week people watch TV is 50... We ingest TV, it's part of our digestive system and it will only increase as time goes on."

¹Which would be why *Convergence's* technical panels, which ranged from high definition TV, to dramatic lighting for tape, to timecode, were by all accounts the most successful. In the reigning pragmatism of working within the technological world, the only metaphysical question that's valid is: how to?

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