The Politics of the Exasperated: Arts and Culture in Canada

Jody Berland
York University

In recent months, controversies, debates, and changes of heart on the subject of arts funding have been prominent in the power plays of federal politics. Judging from news headlines, both the fundamentalist right-wing politics of Stephen Harper's Conservatives and the social democratic pro-arts positions of the New Democrat are moved to seek popular support by taking positions on whether or not government has a place in the arts. Precisely because this issue has surfaced again and again in the political battle for public approval in Canada, this debate reveals how much policy changes have punctuated and revised our understandings of art in relation to private and public good.

In the period after World War II, arts funding was connected rhetorically to the collective search for cultural sovereignty and national independence. Refining the rhetoric first attached to the campaign to form the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation after the First World War, culture was taken up as a collective resource for national development which would enable, and be enabled by, various kinds of national endeavours, including science and technology, agriculture, health, communication, and so on. Cultural industries were perceived as dangerous to the collective trust; they were calculated, profit-oriented, geographically confined, continen-

ESC 33.3 (September 2007): 24–30

talist smooth operators from which a potentially genuine culture needed to defend itself. It was not hard to build political consensus for the need to establish agencies and resources for the funding of Canadian art. But this art had to declare its independence from commercial, popular, and electronically-mediated forms. Thus modernism was a central organizing rationale for the emergence of a nationalist arts policy in the 1950s and 1960s.[1]

In 1982, the Applebaum-Hebert Report on the arts departed somewhat from the Canadian policy tradition of advancing culture to defend citizenship from commercialism and launched a new ideal of synchronicity between artist, government, and the continental economy. Public rhetoric and the allocation of funding shifted its emphasis to the cultivation of individual artists whose creativity, it was implied, would drive the machinery of progress. The Applebaum-Hebert Report introduced an essentially neoliberal approach to art. The artist became a kind of formalist entrepreneur who was deserving of funding not because the development of an autonomous cultural sphere comprised a public good, or because some things ought to be thought or made independently from the market, but because it was recognized that there are diverse markets for creativity and important political as well as financial benefits to the maintenance of a financially viable infrastructure in the arts predicated on profile. This policy change was inevitably mirrored by changes in the focus of resistance amongst critics and activists concerned with culture. However, negotiations for the first Free Trade Agreement between Canada and the United States (signed in 1988) revived the critical confrontation between understanding culture as a public good dedicated to sovereignty and culture as a private good dedicated to the consumer. All contemporary debates about arts funding are thus rooted in a shifting double binary in which nationalism and the public good are implied rationales for arts policy even when they are not advanced by the specific policies at hand.

I was reminded of this history when Ontario's Liberal government introduced back to work legislation for contract faculty and graduate teaching assistants embroiled in the 2008–2009 York University labour dispute. Premier Dalton McGuinty justified this unprecedented move by saying that we are there to "enrich" and educate the students, as though

Jody Berland is Associate Professor of Humanities at York University. She is co-editor of *Capital Culture: A Reader on Modernist Legacies, State Institutions, and the Value(s) of Art* (McGill-Queen's UP, 2000), editor of *TOPIA: A Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* (www.yorku.ca/topia), and author of *North of Empire* (Duke UP, 2009).

1 See Jody Berland, "Nationalism and the Modernist Legacy: Dialogues with Innis" in *Capital Culture,* eds. Berland and S. Hornstein (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 14–38.

education is an individual experience comparable to a commodity which has been purchased by them. There is no doubt that the organizing assumptions and discourses surrounding culture and education have been gradually transformed with profound implications for those of us concerned with their relationship. The historical willingness of activists and academics to translate across the boundaries of politics and disciplines has made it possible for us to think about culture across the usual boundary lines inscribed by history, theory, or subject matter. Art is not just about art, and Canadian cultural studies can never be singly about culture, because that is a misinterpretation of what culture is. "Culture" is where we make meaning in relation to power, geography, technology, race, language, sex, memory, time or space, weather or animals or food, et cetera, as well as what we ideationally share with others or what we hope for.

These connections continue to have meaning for artists, cultural organizations, and progressive politics. We understand culture not just in terms of meanings and identities but in terms of the ways that meanings and identities are materialized, embodied, disseminated, and transformed in geopolitical contexts. We learned to bridge cultural, literary, media, and policy studies to the degree that "culture" doesn't necessarily mean "high" versus "low," "black" versus "white," "modern" versus "postmodern," or "colonial" versus "postcolonial" culture (although these categories are still much in play). It means deliberating on how cultural politics empower citizens to imagine (and find a space for) their experiences, commitments, memories, and accomplishments. The political will attached to the defense of culture has continued unabated since the 1930s. Even today, political polls consistently show a majority of Canadians supporting government subsidization for culture, whether the subsidy is going to the Canadian Opera Company or *Canadian Idol*, and, perhaps, as Imre Szeman suggests in his introduction, we are asking far too little about this.

Today, continental culture and free trade may be disputed in its particulars, but the principle is taken for granted. More classical musicians are being trained in China than anywhere else, and half the people I see in the streets of Toronto were not born in this country. They (we) are the truth of this country's future. Given all this change, perhaps it no longer makes any sense to talk about Canadian culture. But then, it never did, and that was what made it interesting. And time does not work like this. Just because something is past does not mean it is not present, whether as tragedy or farce, or more likely, in the Canadian context, an ironic blend of the two. Constantly resituated in what Judith Butler has termed the politics of "the exasperated etc," Canadians are repeatedly implicated in the incomplete

politics of identity between nationhood, culture, and justice.[2] Thus we are compelled to insist, yet again, that government has a responsibility to its artists and cultural institutions, even as we continue to call attention to the Enlightenment's failure to emancipate its diverse subjects and the nation state's failure to protect its poor and homeless people or worry about how far aesthetic impulses have succumbed to the combined pressures of Hollywood, the free market, and rampant professionalism.

I situate the issue of cuts to the arts in the context of a long history of public investment in a "public," autonomous cultural sector, without offering any sense of closure on questions about how far this history has passed into the past or belongs in the discursive present. There are theoretical and ethical reasons for leaving this question open to the contingencies of politics and time. For French theorist Michael Serres, time is "dynamic and 'topological' rather than linear and repetitive."[3] Serres calls upon us to understand history multidimensionally and in spatial terms: "As we experience time—as much in our inner senses as externally in nature, as much as *les temps* of history as *les temps* of weather—it resembles this crumpled [handkerchief] much more than the flat, overly simplified one."[4] The current debates about cuts to arts funding are the same and different from their history and in the present conjuncture these cuts must be opposed. At the same time, education in the humanities is being undermined (even without the proliferation of labour disputes within academia) by swelling student numbers and shrinking university budgets. We may indeed need

There are theoretical and ethical reasons for leaving this question open to the contingencies of politics and time.

2 As Judith Butler shows,

> The theories of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and able-bodiedness invariably close with an embarrassed 'etc' at the end of the list. Through this horizontal trajectory of adjectives, these positions strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to be complete. This failure, however, is instructive: what political impetus is to be derived from the exasperated 'etc.' that so often occurs at the end of such lines?… It is the *supplement*, the excess that necessarily accompanies any effort to posit identity once and for all. This illimitable *et cetera*, however, offers itself as a new departure for feminist political theorizing.

Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1990), 143.

3 Carey Wolfe, "Introduction to the New Edition," Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2007), xvii.

4 Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), cited in Wolfe, ibid.

to go backwards. However minutely we trace the folds of the wrinkle, however singular the events of which we speak, the very conditions of tracing and speaking are transforming beneath our feet.

At York, contract faculty and graduate student members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees do 50 percent of the teaching but represent 6.7 percent of the budget. The last decade brought a 46 percent increase in undergraduate enrollment, a 51 percent increase in graduate enrolment, a 27.7 percent increase in tenure-track/tenured faculty complement and a 112 percent increase in contract faculty course director assignments. Our tenuous-track faculty have begun to call themselves "professor TBA" because that is how they are listed in the university calendars; some of them don't know what courses they will be teaching until just before the term starts. With the collapse of manufacturing and other traditional modes of employment, university enrollment is rising. Students of arts, humanities, and the social sciences are walking circles around precarity and the future in a liminal space that can not last. Possible futures and the ability to imagine them differently seem to be depreciating in value.

Imagine we are writing our own history of this present, two hundred years or so from now. "Once upon a time, culture represented the meeting place and best hopes of a progressive and emancipatory resistance to imperialism and war." "Once upon a time, peoples were vanquished because their cultures failed to change." "Once upon a time, people watched the same television shows. And then they didn't." "Once upon a time, researchers insisted upon identifying production and consumption as different stages in the formation of the cultural subject." "Back then, before the internet …" It is not as easy to imagine yourself into the future as you might think. You have to choose your site of speculation. Imagine no borders as we now understand them. Imagine listening to music and voices through implants in our brain which we will struggle to command. Imagine life without air travel, car radios, or cars. There will be no industrial manufacture. The animals will be gone. The world will be powered through windmills and solar power. Environmental catastrophe will have precipitated the ruinous collapse of governments and neo-fascist troops will roam the cities and the reservations with GPS devices and second-hand armaments. Race will be profoundly convoluted. We won't have bodies as we now understand them.White people will leave Earth and colonize the cleaner planets. We will grow our crops on our roofs. Addiction to Facebook will be genetically enhanced at birth. Enhanced intelligences will save us from ourselves. The territories of political management will shrink

to the size of neighbourhoods or grow to the size of planets. We will rise and pass through walls. Everything will be fundamentally the same.

Perhaps we need imaginary futures to gain insight into our wrinkled histories. John Keane's "Whatever happened to democracy?" was one visitation I heard recently from the future; Terry Eagleton's "From Celts and Catastrophe" was equally dystopic. Neither was optimistic, and how could they be, conjured as they were—like Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, published in 2004—in the midst of the Bush regime.[5] In these narratives, science and technology have disappointed the hopes invested in them, having been instrumental in the demise of both democracy and sustainability. No doubt this fracture helps to explain why animals have become so visible in popular and scholastic imaginings, including my own.[6] They are part of an energetic project to re-enchant the technological landscape. But this re-enchantment comes with the dilemma of unsustainable risk at the heart of magic. As the movie *Spiderwick Chronicles* (Mark Waters, 2008) shows, you could find yourself in an enchanted world in which special optics reveal the many creatures around you. But the failure to attend rightly to others could unleash monsters that trespass time-space borders from their virtual world to yours, heralding alternative outcomes in which freely morphing animal shapes ruthlessly crush human and other bodies or burst forth from flowers and take flight in a swirl of hope. "Their world is closer than you think," advises the movie's motto.

These scenarios are not as speculative as their controversial status as science fiction—and our reluctance to imagine *that* as our future—suggests. In education, as in the arts, corporations are setting the agenda, with direct repercussions on teaching, learning, and understanding. These conditions encourage an unsentimental view of future horizons that is beginning to inflect the future imaginings of technotopians; while some began the new millennium explaining that they would be happy to dispense of their bodies if it meant living forever, others wrote more

5 John Keane, "Whatever Happened to Democracy?" Ioan Davies Memorial Lecture, York University, 2003; Terry Eagleton, "From Celts and Catastrophe," Ioan Davies Memorial Lecture, York University, 2006. See the Ioan Davies Memorial Lecture Home Page, York University at www.yorku.ca/ioantalk/homepage/index.htm. See also Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (New York: Seal Books, 2004).

6 See Berland, "Cat and Mouse: Iconographies of Nature and Desire," *Cultural Studies* 22, 3 (2008): 431–54"; and "Animal and/as Medium: Symbolic Work in Communicative Regimes," *Global South* (forthcoming 2009).

ambivalently about "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us,"[7] suggesting that the future needs messy dialogue and joyful debate, not greater corporate power, soliciting and censoring scientists or artists as convenience dictates, training us into complicity with growing inequality and generating ever-enhanced power-protected techno-futures hazardous to life.

And once again, the work begins.

However vague we may be about our imaginary futures, these dystopic worlds are not the future to which critical artists and scholars aspire. We must work together to elaborate critical resources appropriate to the contexts in which we find ourselves. Sometimes we just need to remember what we already know and work through the interruptions, affirming our rights and the rights of others to dream their different dreams about life on earth. And once again, the work begins.

7 *Wired* Magazine, March 2000, cited in Sue Curry Jansen, *Critical Communication Theory* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 146. Jensen identifies the author, Bill Joy, as co-founder and chief scientist of Sun Microsystems and co-chair of a presidential commission on the future of information technology research. Joy writes that twentieth-century technologies—genetics, nanotechnology, and robotics—present "the possibility not just of weapons of mass destruction but of knowledge-enabled mass destruction (KMD … within the now-unchallenged system of global capitalism and its manifold financial incentives and competitive pressures" (ibid., 146–47). In other words, the future does not need us to preclude public interventions or critical dialogue.