

Cyberculture, Québec Identity and Globalization

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As a further step following on a friendly request from my colleague Florian Sauvageau, who set up a series of seminars on the theme of *American cultural influence*, I have tried to reflect on the difficult question of whether there is a form of “Americanicity” built into the design of certain technical devices, parts of what are now called “technologies of information and communication” (TIC) (Chambat, 1994). I would like to return to the subject here (Proulx, 1999). I should mention from start that I have built up my definition of “Americanicity,” by taking inspiration from what, by analogy, Barthes once called “Italianicity,” in his famous analysis of an advertisement for Panzani pasta (Barthes, 1964). Barthes placed the emphasis of the image, on the presence of a connotative system, whose meaning was the “putting together of tomato, green pepper and the tricoloured tint (yellow, green, red) of the poster,” and what was meant was “Italy, or rather Italianicity.” According to Barthes, the knowledge called up by that sign was typically “French,” as it was based on the knowledge of certain touristic stereotypes about Italy. For me, the expression “Americanicity” also calls up a system of connotations which embody a style, ways of doing, choices for producing rhythms, etc., which are usually attributed, willy-nilly, to the people of the United States of America. My question can be put that way: are the technologies of communication that we make so much use of these days, influencing our cultural representations over the strict content they carry? In other words, is the very design of tech-

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nical devices found on the market of mediated communication also carrying a configuration of possible uses that could be connected to a connotation system which might be called “American” — in the same sense as cultural products spread the world over, such as McDonalds or Coca Cola, are considered to be typically American?

1. A CULTURAL MODEL BEING DEBILITATED BECAUSE OF THE BANALIZATION OF USES

In a paper I published in the book edited by Florian Sauvageau, I discussed many answers to the question of whether communication devices could generate, as technologies, their own culture, independent of the content they carry. I put forward the idea that those technologies could be defined as *intellectual technologies*, that is that they dictate a *way of thinking*, a framework opening only to specific conditions and possibilities of cognitive production. When I looked more closely at three communication devices of the second half of the twentieth century in America, I was in a position to describe the components I found as being a peculiar technological culture. The culture of writing was replaced by the culture of image, of simulation and interactivity. “Cyberculture” would constitute a place of synthesis for the diverse elements thrown into relief during the previous waves of change. Indeed, cyberculture is becoming the culture of the mediated image, put into action and movement as a result of a sophisticated apparatus of simulation and interactivity (Weissberg, 1985).

Let us come back to the question of Americanness, whose subtle presence can be found in the design of various technical devices of communication. Each of these technologies was first developed in the United States. Each is impregnated with the respective sociocultural universe in which those who conceived them were immersed. One can think then that a certain form of Americanness is present in the programming of the first devices that each innovation produced. When use of the devices gains some distance from the first stabilized techniques, their Americanness tends to lose its importance. We can draw here an analogy with the automobile.¹ In 1949, the cars produced in the United States represented 90% of all the cars in the world. Forty years later, their share of the market was less than 50%. One could imagine that the culture of mobility which resulted from the advent of the automobile began as an expression of American values. But, as the car became commonplace throughout the world, the differentiated ap-

¹ This analogy was suggested to me by Simon Langlois. I am grateful to him.

appropriation of this novelty in various countries led to a culture of the automobile which, ultimately, had not much in common with the initial American context. By the 1970s, the Americans began abandoning some of their production techniques and adopting European technologies of production.

Let us now focus our remarks on the most recent innovation in communication: the interactive systems mediated by the computer and the “cyberculture” they generate (Jones, Ed., 1995; 1997). The Internet was initially an American invention which involved the armed forces, universities and then, more and more, the forces of the capitalist market. This “network of networks” is coloured by that birth, through the Anglo-American language which is heavily emphasized in the protocols of interconnection and in software languages. This is not said to minimize the efforts of other linguistic communities to assert themselves in the design of specific interfaces and protocols of the Internet. But the markup protocol is, no doubt, one of the most visible signs of the initial American predominance on the *web* — even taking into account the fact that some planners think the English language will not occupy more than one third of the territory on the information highway in 2002, because of the growing involvement of other countries in the network, such as China (Bélair, 1999). Or that, for example, in a chat on line between and among Francophones, it is still necessary to use English words like *list*, *act* or *display*.

But, as Internet use becomes more widespread throughout the world, the cultural models built around this technical invention are going to be plural, hybrid and heterogeneous; they will gradually distance themselves from their Anglo-Saxon culture of origin. Technical innovation is a process of dynamic creation: the outlines of the apparatus are constantly being modified. On the one hand, the balance of power goes up and down inside the sociotechnical networks where innovation occurs (Bijker and Law, Eds., 1992). On the other hand, the network takes on the influences of uses and reception, borrowing and re-invention (Perriault, 1989). We can easily anticipate that the wider the area of dissemination of innovations becomes, the easier it will be for the logic of these technical devices to differ significantly from their initial configurations.

2. QUÉBEC IDENTITY AND CULTURAL GLOBALIZATION

As for networks of interactive communication and *cyberculture*, I have tried to show that the status of the human subject participating in the process of cultural creation is doomed to be radically changed. The

foundations of the identity of the cultural receptor are shaken up. The plural identities of the human subject living in the interactive world will be perceived by him as unstable and floating (Baltz, 1984; Turkle, 1995). This question of the “floating identity” of the new communicating subject is worth some attention. Those *interactors* are working in new spaces of communication opened up by the convergence between the classic cultural industries and the new interactive systems, two domains largely under the influence of American knowhow.

It is necessary, it seems, to have second thoughts about the relationship between, on the one hand, what is called usually the *Québec identity* and, on the other hand, the ways of doing things imposed upon us by our southern neighbour through their design of software, and the technical configurations of systems and interfaces. One would be tempted here to refer to the metaphor of the *technological Trojan horse* — used by Yves Toussaint (1992) to describe the intrusion through new media, of public space into the private universe — to display clearly the fact that with an unconditional adoption of a technical device like the Internet, one is also importing its organization of communication and knowledge, and its values and ways of doing things. At the same time, it seems clear that the interactors are learning something new through use of the device — as much about the content they create or exchange as about it itself — and that the new knowledge isn’t necessarily linked with the technology through which it appeared. This is the way one could state that the network is transforming itself constantly and dynamically; but still, the *technical configuration of the device* is, in a way, a kind of “programming” of the possibilities of its uses (Woolgar, 1991). In the last resort, it is not because this new technical culture is American in origin that there is a danger that it could undermine the identity of the communicating subject. It is more because this technique introduces a new relationship to the world. The Americanness of its creators is secondary when seen as a source of influence, in comparison with the cognitively structuring force of interactive communication networks taken as an intellectual technology.

Interactive communication networks, in generating their own culture, create the question of a new technological culture that may change the identity foundations of *Québec Internet users*. We face here a tension between two knittings of contradictory cultural forces. On the one hand, their active participation in the construction of a “planetary cyberspace” (Benedikt, 1991) could make them forget that, being part of a society which is demographically small (such as Québec or Canada), it is necessarily vital, for individuals and the groups they belong to, to vigorously assert their *primary identity*. On the other hand, the question

of their basic identification is upset by the process of globalization and hybridization of cultures the world over. The openings set up by cyberculture could then allow for a renewed strengthening of Québec's identity through the multiplication of new intercultural dialogues with countries far away from the usual geopolitical axis of the circulation of information.

Everything is there to say that henceforth it would be necessary to introduce a third term for thinking about the Québec's identity and cyberculture — i.e., the process of cultural globalization. Here again, information and communication technologies play a major role in the carrying out of that process. Enrolling themselves against the trend to cultural homogenization (as criticised by Mattelart, 1999), the networks allow the instant and global circulation of numerous diverse bits of information, and heterogeneous cultural models, so that each individual can define himself these days as simultaneously being part of a set of cultures (Wallerstein, 1997; Proulx and Vitalis, Eds., 1999). This process of planetary diffusion of cultural models is provoking an explosion in the re-thinking of identity.

A thorough study of globalization's process would presuppose taking into account at least four levels of concern (individuals, nation-states, transnational systems of regulation, civilizations). Looking only at individuals, the process of cultural globalization affects the social construction of individual identities (Robertson, 1997). Globalization is opening up "affinity communities" of a new kind: for example, members of a group considered a minority in a given society can find it easier to identify themselves with similar groups all over the globe. Those minority groups will then develop a new transnational identity. Their situation of being in a minority is thus relativized.

We can see, on a planetary level, the expansion of a movement toward the deterritorialization of cultures (King, Ed., 1997) and the complexification of identity referents, which are becoming plural (Hall, 1997). Out of that, we could formulate the hypothesis that this process of globalization will provoke, at some future time, an important transformation of what Québécois will call the constitutive elements of the hard core of their primary identity. Since the Second World War, some layers of that core have slowly disappeared: among them, the agricultural component of French Canadian society disappeared with the coming of modernity, and then the religious component diminished with the coming of the Quiet Revolution. Today, the French language is at stake in the struggle to define the hard core of Québec's identity in a context where the demographic weight of Francophones is diminishing in favour of Allophones who often prefer to adopt English as the language of their daily life.

The expansion of *cyberculture* could weaken that identity element. Is there a danger to the linguistic security of Francophones when they devote themselves overwhelmingly to the games of “virtual floating identities” appropriate to cyberspace? If it exists, the risk of identity dilution would be found at the level of individual users of the network. Would the danger of identity destabilization of users (who are part of a territorial collectivity) increase with increased and intensive use of the network? Or, on the contrary, would this expansion of interactive planetary communication networks, to repeat an expression of Jocelyn Létourneau (1998), become a privileged place for “*in-thinking*” the question of Québec’s identity — that is for defining a radical alternative to the customary history of our collective memory? The symbolic traffic of Internet users would constitute then, for an observer, a revelation of the boiling up of identity referents — as individuals and as a group — both in their plurality and their ambivalence. In an era of cultural globalization, it is time to have radical second thoughts about what would constitute the hard core of Québec’s identity, multicultural and in constant transformation. Furthermore, should we retain the metaphor of “hard core” as a category to think about cultural identity? In such a context of radical reconsideration, the ways of doing and the values of “Americanicity” become one source of influence among many others in the process of the social construction of contemporary Québec’s identity.

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