Being Postmodern: An Interview with Arthur Kroeker

Arthur Kroeker is one of Canada's best known postmodernist critics. He is politically and philosophically engaged intellectual tackling what he identifies as the larger issues of today's culture, namely technology and power. His intellectual antecedents are solidly Canadian: McLuhan, Innis, and Grant. He also generously draws from French and German thought by borrowing freely from Barthes, Foucault, Lyotard, Lacan, and Nietzsche, without being completely overwhelmed by these traditions.

Indeed, his outstanding contribution to a Canadian postmodernist discourse is his unique synthesis of continental and Canadian traditions. He champions this synthesis through the Canadian Journal of Social and Political Theory which he edits with Marylouise Kroker, and through the Culture Texts series.

What strikes this reader about the work of Arthur Kroeker is the playful imagination that underlines his exploration of contemporary cultural issues. His use of memorable phrases — such as “excremental culture”, “the panic-scene” and “cynical power” — and of a seemingly pessimistic vocabulary to describe the postmodern condition, are part of the subtle quicksilver effect of his language and his thinking. That he frequently descends into philosophic and syntactic oddities no one is likely to dispute. But strip away these excesses and what remains is a prose flecked with satire, and a thinking that is simultaneously ironic and deeply engaged with the issues of the day. His work opens up unanticipated vistas and has the power to startle.

This interview with Arthur Kroeker is part of videotaped series on Cultural Studies and Postmodernism that I have been involved in producing with the aid of the Media Centre at the University of Toronto. The series will be available this Spring. Special thanks to Michel Edmunds of the Media Centre for making this project possible.

Joe Galbo

What do you consider to be your contribution to Canadian postmodernist theory?

I think really two principal contributions that have to do with Canada's leading role in understanding postmodern culture and society. I wrote a book entitled Technology and the Canadian Mind which explores the thesis that Canada's principal contribution to North American thought has been the development of an eloquent, original and highly comprehensive theory of technology, like in the writings of Marshall McLuhan, Harold Innis, or George Grant, or film-makers like Cronenberg, novels like Atwood's and what-not. These are explorations. I think this fact reflects the Canadian intellectual tradition's important contributions to understanding science as the language of power in postmodern culture and society itself. So I edit a journal called the Canadian Journal of Social and Political Theory. The principal thesis that we analyze has to do with the concerns I have mentioned. At the same time, I edit, with Marylouise Kroker, a series for St. Martin's Press and Macmillan's, called the Culture Text series; all of which are attempts to explore the ways in which possessed individualism is the new kind of self produced in contemporary society. So in terms of an intellectual project, I think my own thought is deeply, distinctively Canadian, that it is simultaneously local and national, as a contribution to Canada's discourse on technology and understanding science as a language of power. I see myself as a cultural nationalist. The only way in which we can develop a Canadian culture today is not by going into a kind of coo-coo shell, but in fact by doing what Marshall McLuhan would say, or even Harold Innis, that is, thinking the worst that can be thought about American culture, that it is a grizzly kind of soft fascism; by exploring the strategies of domination by that culture; and on that basis composing a Canadian culture which can defend itself.

What kind of specific strategies do you use in your analysis of culture?

I have been much influenced recently by the writings of Roland Barthes. Barthes, I think, in Mythologies, had a very nice comment on cultural analysis. He said that you go beyond a culture by going into it as deeply as possible. In my own work, then, I try to go into culture as 'deeply as possible', not by using the media of a culture, but by using the media. So for example, recently I have been doing a lot of work on music and I have developed a theory on
crash music. This is music wherein sound is so spectral, so cynical and so intense that the music begins to almost explode before you as a whole sign system of postmodern culture and society. There is a new tendency in musical theory today called entropy music or maximalism, which is, you know, 130 decibels, bleeding ear-drums music, which is like music as a pure information theory itself. But I don’t simply analyze music, I work with composers and particularly one composer, a brilliant person, Steve Gibson. He has developed, for Marylouise and myself, for talks that we give, original compositions using computerized music. Texts like “Madonna Mutant”, “The Postmodern Body as a War Machine”, or “Welcome to the Drug Wars”. We give talks where in we don’t talk about the music, but through the music itself to try to evoke a postmodern sensibility. Our whole strategy is I think not thinking about postmodernism, but being postmodern.

Canadian intellectuals, and graduate students in particular, are greatly influenced by the journal and the kinds of theories you explore. How do you explain the appeal?

For a very simple reason, I think. We started the journal just when I finished graduate school and quickly realized that if I wanted to think theoretically, which is for myself to be an intellectual in this country — not an academic but a Sartrian intellectual who tries to be engaged with their culture — that there was no place to publish one theory article in Canada. I was really shocked and scandalized, while living in Manitoba and teaching at the University of Manitoba, that to publish a theory article I had to go down to the United States or Britain, two colonizing cultures, and you know I have a colonized mentality. So for Marylouise and myself it was a choice of whether to continue that tradition and be a colonized academic, or in fact to refuse it. So we refused it, really, by our own initiative in starting The Journal of Social and Political Theory, which is intended to provide a cultural space in which intellectuals in Canada could critically reflect on the specificities of Canadian culture, but at the same time be fully cosmopolitan, international theorists. They can engage as Canadians with French theory, with German theory, with Lacanian psychoanalysis, which is, you know, the best of the Canadian mind itself. As I see the Canadian mind historically, it has always had a dialectic within it that is simultaneously local, that thinks themes of postmodernism, democracy, nationalism, within the context of Canadian culture, but takes that debate and reads the world through Canadian eyes. The Canadian mind has made a distinctive contribution to world culture and has really brought a civilizing sensibility to other traditions which are in ruins today.

What does looking at culture through Canadian eyes look like?

Take for example one tradition that has been very influential in the postmodern debate — the French poststructuralist tradition, particularly the writings of Lyotard, Baudrillard, Barthes, Derrida. Now when that tradition comes into the United States, for example, it influences the United States through the tradition of comparative literature and it seems in fact to exist as a critique of language theory. It reduces questions of power to language. That, I think, is entirely a misreading of the French tradition and does not do justice to the gristy lesson to be found in the ruins of French theory today. It has never really been a theory of language; it has been in fact a theory of technology. French theory is a theory of possessed individualism. I think the Canadian contribution to the reception of French theory in North America has to begin to turn the debate in French thought and German thought to science as a language of power, of possessed individualism. Derrida, Barthes, Lyotard and Deleuze are really writing about possessed individualism, which is of course ironic because it was a Canadian, a University of Toronto political scientist, C. Macpherson, who gave us that wonderfully gristy term, possessive individualism, the kind of subjectivity that arises in capitalist culture. I think as Canadians we are uniquely suited to explore possessed individualism for the
reason that Harold Innis articulated. Innis said that in
Canada what you don't know about the United States,
which is to say what you don't know about power, will
come back to hurt you or haunt you. I think Canadian
theorists, in terms of defending their culture, have to know a
lot about how cynical power functions in the world today, at
a theoretical and at a practical, political level.

The other influence on your work is of course McLuhan.
How do you integrate McLuhan formalism with your theory
which has a definite political edge?

I think for myself the two Canadians that have been most
influential in my own thinking would be McLuhan on the
one hand, because of his wonderful understanding of
technology, which I think is just correct and is the begin-
ing of Baudrillard's work, where McLuhan says that there
has been a radical change in how technologies function as
power. In fact they perform a kind of dédoublement or they
switch. Your whole being gets exteriorized, and the tech-
nology comes from within, so that technology is no longer
an object which you can hold outside of yourself, but in fact
becomes your identity. Your mind gets externalized, you
have sort of mutant ear-drums to the extent that your nerves
get played by the mediascape. Or you have special vision
to the extent that even your eyesight, your position to see
and to understand certain things, is taken over by the medias-
scape itself. I think McLuhan more than anyone understood
the really grisly notion of technology as the externalization
of the human mind itself. On the other hand, I have been
deeply affected by a thinker that, for myself, is really the
great thinker of our century after Nietzsche in the nineteenth
century — George Grant, who died two years ago. Grant
gave us such eloquent and deep meditations in the form of
laments on the coming to be of what Sartre once described as
the 'thing', as societies which are so demonic that they
take possession of human bodies. Grant named the thing by
saying that, in terms of our own and his own subjectivity,
our present is like being lost in the wilderness, for every
pine, rock and bay appears to us as both known and un-

known. They are therefore uncertain pointers to the way
back to habitation. The value of our ancient compasses is
to call into question, with ourselves, the value of the good
qua good. We live in a society where technology is no
longer freedom, where technology is deep human depriva-
tion. For myself, I am neither really a Grant thinker nor a
McLuhanite. I am Canadian thinker in that I run at the
violent edge, really at the edge, to those two thinkers.
Both thinkers have a deep complicity in a sense, they are
both from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds in their
attempts to understand technology as demonic possession
of human beings, but also as containing possibilities for
real human liberation...crash technology.

What about your background, its influence on your think-
ing, and your revolt from it if there was such a thing?

I not only had a background as a Catholic but I trained
for priesthood and took vows as well, so it had certainly deter-
minate influence on me. But I revolted against it, and
when I left the seminary, stopped training as a priest, I also
left Catholicism. I was a Camusian, I initiated a Camusian
rebellion. I refused to believe in God. So at a very early
stage in my life I performed the act of a metaphysical
rebel. I put my faith in the human history within which I
live and am engaged and I refused to place my faith on a
metaphysical structure or believe in God. So I am a
solitary human being who continuously rebels. But of
course you know, as the philosopher Karl Jaspers says, that
human rebellion begins with an individual human being
who says "no" and who makes their own autobiography
really a point of choice between submission to possession
by demonic technologies or powers outside of yourself and
the possibility for the recreation of human culture and of
the human being.

And part of that rebellion is a negation, read by many
people as a sort of despair. Can you comment on that?

I am always around such terribly pessimistic and bleak
thought, but my own response is that I never feel particularly pessimistic. I am a critical realist. I try to do what Sartre says. Sartre says that real political action can only begin with a human being who feels utter pessimism, who feels the bleakness of the human condition, the human being with no illusions, who is the realist political thinker, who diagnoses his condition in terms of finding possibilities for human action itself. But of course my whole life, my intellectual life, has been an act of revolt and, I think, of human hope, of dispensation, really, of human hope. In the midst of a culture of turtles like Canada, in which there is a lot of colonization of the academic community, Marylouise and myself, with a lot of other people, developed *The Canadian Journal of Social and Political Theory*, which has had an influence nationally, but also a really important influence internationally. We’ve developed a series of books. We do every day of our lives real proletarian labour in the trenches for the recuperation of Canadian culture and of our own possibilities for emancipation. So for myself I can’t see much in terms of pessimism but of course one side of my mind still thinks despairing thoughts. George Grant ended his *Time as History* by saying that the possibility for justice begins with human beings who think the worst that can be thought or imagined — they can hear the screams of the innocent who experience great injustice without the possibility of relief without justice. I force myself always to live with the notion of the injustice of history and of the necessity for struggling against injustice, to live on the violent edge of history. Which is to say, I am an intellectual, I am engaged morally, philosophically and politically in my life.