

Technology and the Canadian Mind

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Abstract

Social science and science grew significantly, in Canadian universities during and after Second World War. This growth, along with consumerism and mass culture, signalled the decline of the centrality in humanities, in the curricula of Canadian universities and then came the rise of the technological society. Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and George Grant were the leading critics of the trend. Their criticism, was shaped by the home front experience of Canada, during Second World War and the economic boom which followed the war.

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The Canadian discourse on 'technology' was directly connected to the "spearhead of modernity" in the United States. The Canadian discourse on one hand, tried to show the pressure of 'the technology' and 'the Empire', that threatened the popular culture of Canada and Quebec. While on the other hand, it also tried to represent a creative and a courageous struggle, outside the horizons of technological society.

Thinkers like Marshall McLuhan, having a cosmopolitan mind, for the first time saw, technology as "electronic minds" (an Aquinas of the electronic age). Politician's like David Crombie, with a conservative mindset said, that the 'Canadian identity' was like the 'new voyageurs of the electronic age'. While, the Canadian minds including writers like, Margaret Atwood, imagining the technocratic dimension said that "I am a site where action happens" (Kroker 13).

This was the time, sometimes poetical but mostly tragic, reflecting on the price paid for the consumer's solace of the technological society. Like, George Grant critiqued the Capitalist suburbia; McLean Brothers' musical tribute to the Canadian life; Patricia Marchak's studied of the relationship between technology and its dependency in the Canadian history. Based on the course of thoughts, traced by McLuhan, Frye, Atwood ('technology as Reason') they became the proponent of the "Technological Humanism". The term "Technological Humanism" refers resuming a technique from within, by letting go the creative possibilities, that lies innate to the technological experience. And, thus McLuhan described his contemporary century as a 'cosmic era', and a new 'Finn cycle' where myths became integral part of the electronic media, creating a 'pentecostal' condition. Technology was like the Tower of Babel, but this time, advantaged with the relationship of technology and freedom due to the technological humanism.

To its complete opposite was the "Technological Dependency". Here, the technology is seen as the point of human domination, resulting in the both, the dependency in terms of political economy also, in terms of loss of cultural heritage. It was for McLuhan, that the technology can make us 'blast', but, for the people like George Grant, the proponent of technological dependency, the fate of the North Americans was like a fish suffering from oxygen starvation. It was more of dying, than living. Being regarded as the Nietzsche of the New world, he says that "technique is ourselves" and so, our purpose as a technical being was to report even the smallest sense of loss. Indeed, we can say that McLuhan and Grant stands as a bi-polar opposite, on the question of technology. But, for Grant, this dependency has "enucleated" the meaning of the modern life, even in the modes of organization like technocratic bureaucracies and liberalism.

In the Canadian discourse on technology, a third perspective mediates the "Technological Humanism" and "Technological Dependency". And is called the "Technological Realism" propagated by the political economist, Harold A. Innis. It was like Grant, propagating a tragic 'lament', McLuhan showing an 'Utopian' possibility, and Innis' ideal aimed at attaining a

balance, between the Empire (Power) and Culture (History). Grant, in *Time as History* tried to recover the 'time' in opposition to that of, the electronic media. McLuhan, in *The Medium is the Masses* tried to celebrate the 'space', as the site of modern experience. While Innis, in *Empire and Communications* as well as in *The Bias of Communication* appealed for reintegration of 'time and space'.

For Innis, the technological truth can never be discovered through, extreme humanism or dependency, but with a combination of the two. As a thinker, he refused to restrict his inquiry, only to the 'centres' or the 'margins', and also, he tried to keep alive the tension, between the freedom and domination, in technological society. And because, he tried to blend the Canadian mind between the technology and civilization, therefore, he came to be known as the Technological Realist. He was critical to the Formalist views of McLuhan, and also critiqued Grant's philosophical despair.

Thus, all the three Giants, with their persuasive approach, structured the Canadian discourse on technology. Grant tried to explore the political and psychological waste of the society, using language as an investigating tool to dive deep into the technological media, within which we are placed into. McLuhan on the other hand, through his use of Aphorism, witticism and irony, providing cluster of meanings through the extensions of human experiences. He was the first artist who adopted an alternate way, to look at the world of technology. And Innis' approach to technology was very methodological in nature. He examined the technique's interchange, with that of culture and social relations, textured with layered interpretations. He made the study of the technology and civilization, as an opportunity to develop a different Canadian way of thinking. In his world of 'Technological Realism' he tried binding, the Canadian political economy and its culture, reflecting on the tension between the centre and the periphery, forming the Canadian history. Therefore, we can call, George Grant as the existentialist, McLuhan as the Catholic humanist, and Innis as the explorer of the dependency and emancipator of the technological society.

The discourse on technology, expressed by the clashing views of McLuhan, Grant and Innis, has an intellectual and political significance, even outside of the Canadian boundaries. As, was the case with the spread of the consumer-culture, in the United States, driven by the technology of electronic media, around the globe. The Canadian discourse on technology, speculates, in revealing the horizon of technological simulacrum within which humans were trapped, and also in revealing the techniques to gain human freedom, by questioning the human fate. It was McLuhan who warned, that humans are being "x-rayed by television" (Kroker 19) and Grant noted that, due to technology, human beings have become "half-flesh, half-metal." (19) Thus, the sense of human exile amidst the technology, came from the

Technological Dependency of George Grant:

Alex Colville, a Canadian artist whose painting, *To Prince Edward Island*, perfectly reflected the tragic vision of George Grant. A Realist painting, in its simplicity evoking the anxiety more

with the emotional effect of an uncanny and vacant stillness, than with the outward rising trouble. It tried to show, the underlying darkness within.

The most fascinating and disturbing about the painting was, a harsh contrast between the seascape calmness and the silence, there was a sense of tension and bitterness in the inner language depicted by a man and a woman, sitting separately on the boat deck. The matter of the double exterminism, is portrayed in the painting. As the man sitting behind, has a silenced and neutralized presence, hidden by the muscular features of the woman. And also, the woman's identity is cancelled, due to the presence of the binoculars. Indeed, it is the binoculars that are the focal departures of the painting, serving the function, camouflaging and screening. The blue lenses of the binocular seems, hostile and threatening, is also liquidating the presence of the woman. It not only blocks the reciprocity between the man and the woman, but also as a matter blocks the possibility of ourselves responding, even with the woman. Thus, we feel the painting as more about, the human personality, where the identity itself is reduced, to negligible or zero-degrees.

In his painting, Colville seems to have a strong visual language, depicting modern human deprivation, whose source is not external, rather internal. It is the realization of the inner void through one's abyss of consciousness. The sky seems to be perfectly calm and clear, but there lies a deadness of the vision in the woman looking from nowhere to nothing. Thus, along with depicting an awful stillness, the painting also depicts hyper-realism underneath the surface. Like the impossibility of escape, the emotional distress, waiting without any hope and looking without any expectation of response, all of which according to Colville, lies centre to the modern world. Human beings are imprisoned in the meaningless social order, and are condemned to live in the nihilistic culture. crisis becomes integral to the human personality.

In a similar manner, Grant also tried to speak about the anxiety and bewilderment of the technical age. He laments over the human deprival and elimination, by the coming of technology as the locus of the modern project. The irreversible loss of human goodness, hinted in the painting, is the philosophical imagination of Grant. He tried to move between the actual realism and the absences in the silence universe. It is the suspension between an unbearable present and an irrecoverable past, the technology and mythology, becomes the prime focus for Grant's reflection on the modern society. The American society by its will to mastery over the technology, has reduced human experience to that of a servosystem. Thus, the Canadian philosopher Grant, shows how humans, in search of the wisdom among the technological society have been dominated by it and are preyed to the, darkness lying within.

In his discourse on technological society, Grant tried to give reason to few of the fundamental questions pertaining to our lives. Also, he expressed his views, that the evil language of science and technology, is the basis of liberalism. His reflections on technology, is deeply rooted in the religious sensibilities than in the politics. He is lamenting rather than emancipating, and contemplating on the historical fatalism of North America. So, his tragic

depiction drops out all the imaginative or the creative possibilities, going beyond technological dependency. Therefore, like Nietzsche, Adorno and Horkheimer, Grant is also known as the 'dark writers' of the modern times.

In a short essay titled , *A Platitude*, in which Grant reflected on the 'technological dependency'. He states: "we can hold in our minds the enormous benefits of technological society, but we cannot so easily hold the ways it may have deprived us, because technique is ourselves" (Kroker 28). So, perhaps more than Nietzsche, he insists on showing the dynamic momentum of technology, which is integral to the modern myth, in fact, we cannot so easily escape responsibility, for spreading the technological imperatives, as the very charisma, the past and future hope, of North America. "Technique comes forth and it stays in our vision of ourselves as creative freedom, making ourselves and conquering the chaos of an indifferent universe" (29). That is the most paradoxical and ambivalent, about the question of technology, that the powers and dominations of technology work in the name of 'creative freedom'. For Grant, as for Nietzsche before him, dependency was no longer was a matter of externalities of human experience, rather it involved a radical colonization from within of the psychology of the modern self. "All coherent languages beyond those which serve the drive to unlimited freedom through technique have been broken up in the coming to be of what we are. Therefore, it is impossible to articulate publicly, any suggestion of loss, and perhaps even more frightening, almost impossible to articulate it to ourselves" (29) is, in a word, the horizon of modern 'culture.'

Technological Humanism: The Processed World of Marshall McLuhan

McLuhan and Grant represented polarities of the Canadian mind, on the question of technology. McLuhan in his, introduction to *Empire and Communication* describes Innis' 'staple theory' of communication, in terms of the rigidity between 'ground' and 'figure'. On the one hand, Grant was the philosopher of the margins, talking of the dependency, but on the other hand, it was McLuhan's favourite aphorism "all centre without margins" (Kroker 52). McLuhan, represents the Canadian imaginations, their perspective is all forms, metaphors and paradoxes. Grant, in his writings was fully tragic in terms of lamentation, rather McLuhan gives it, an assemblage. He talks about the "cosmic man" caught up in an, universal and Darwinian struggle with the competing media of communication. As a result, there occurs a social and psychic extensions, as a disused content of the technological media. As an Existentialist, Grant focused more on the image of the controlled 'self' in the technological society. However, McLuhan as a 'rhetorician', gives more values to the aesthetic creative freedom, that lies centre to the human civilization.

It was Grant, who escalated our understandings of the relationship between 'technology' and 'empire'. But McLuhan tried to break off the enchantments, which the electronic technologies like radio, television, computers, video games, have casted upon the human minds, through their language and power. That is to say, that McLuhan, was a radical empiricist, who believed

that, the technological society can only be known through one's experience. In the electronic age, he understood that technologies, substitutes the 'content' of the media, with an entirely different rhetorical sign-languages. It was the age, where the society was folded within, the metaphors of media. His intention was to create an anti-environment, where the silent message of the electronic media, could be revealed.

In *The Medium is the Massage*, McLuhan insisted, that we cannot understand the technological experience from the very outside. In reality, if we recreate the experiences, then only can we understand how the electronic age works us over we humans, in the world of technology. That is, why he said, that all media completely work over us. They are so persuasive in their personal, political, aesthetic, psychological, ethical and social consequences, no part of human lives are being unaffected, and untouched by it. By his aphorism, "The medium is the message", he meant to say that, any understanding of the social and cultural change is impossible, without the knowledge of, the multiple ways, in which the media work as the environments.

And McLuhan, was very rigid on the relationship between, the technology and biology, saying that now-a-days, the New Media has itself become the nature. And for this reason, the technology is referred to as the, social and psychic "extensions" or outermost part of the human body or senses. In his description of the media of communication, very universally, he studied the communication technology ranging from writing and speech, to the telephone, television, photography, comic books, chairs, money. Because, he observed that all technology, pushed the archetypal unconscious into the social consciousness. In *Counter Blast* McLuhan has pointed that, the environment is not a container, but rather a 'process'. That is, the purpose of all new technologies, is to impose pervasively and silently, their deep assumptions on the human psyche, by just altering the senses. As, all media for McLuhan, was the extensions of some psychic or physical being. We become the first of the humans, to completely live with the mediated environment of techno-structure, by entering into the electronic age.

In his understanding, it is the first time, the technology has become a biological extension, thus, exteriorizing the Central nervous system. And in the process, we have become, the technological simulacrum. McLuhan, explains the theme of narcissism, as our fatal fascination with the technology, which is viewed as 'something external' but, in reality, it has become an extension or projection, of our own sensory faculties.

All the writings of McLuhan, tried to break the narcissus myth, in order to show that, the technology itself is an extension, or repetition of ourselves. In his essay *The Gadget Lover*, McLuhan explained the technical experience of human beings, with the help of the Greek myth of Narcissus. We have become like the youth Narcissus, who is mistaking our own reflections in the water, for another person. By the mirror, when he sees the extensions, he himself is numbed through his own perceptions, till he himself becomes the servo-mechanism of his own repeated or extended images.

As a result of the hypnotic effect of the technological sensorium, McLuhan uses humour, absurdity, analogical juxtaposition and paradox - as a probe, in order to make us totally aware of the technology, as a medium. That is why, McLuhan, attempts to make the reader a 'metonymy' to his 'metaphor'. Thus, we can say that, McLuhan shared an in-depth understanding of 'technique as ourselves', sharing the ideas with Grant and Nietzsche. We are completely envelopment in the dynamics of technological media, so according to him, everything now totally depends on, the creation of an inner peace and harmony.

Technological Realism: Harold Innis' *Empire of Communications*

Harold Innis's, can be better understood by Don Proch, a Prairie artist's sculpture, of the human head titled, *Manitoba Mining Mask*. Where the outer mask details a careful representation of an industrial landscape, an imposed natural landscape, and a mining site. Right away, the vision of the colonization is presented, through the representation of the landscape using modern technology. All-around, there seems to have funeral sense of the victory over the power of death. Fumes were coming out of the mining sites, taking the shape of chicken bones. On the basis of above description, the sculpture showed the very fate of human life, when confronted with the power of technology. And according to the Canadian anthropologist, Edmund Carpenter, the human becomes the same, what they see. It was the suffocating images of life, depicting the fate of the contemporary society. Harold Innis, in his works like *A History of the Canadian Pacific Railway*, *The Bias of Communication*, *Empire and Communications*, has tried to show the impending fate of the society, with the donning mask of technology. It was only Innis who saw from 'within', the basis of technology, as both the centre of the Canadian economic history, as well as the compass of the Canadian fate.

As a methodological, and a moral practice, Innis insisted that, only by understanding the industrial technology in-depth, the politics, economy, culture and psychology, can the political economy of the modern technology be understood. For Innis, it was the relationship between technology and civilization, that was most important for North America. As a whole, through the historical imagination, Innis reconstructs the story of industrial technology, in all his works, pointing out its applications with respect to the Canadian discourse in particular, and the Western civilization in General.

Conclusion

The special contribution of Innis, McLuhan and Grant does not just tell about the practical workings of the hyper society. It was Innis, who got on to the age of radio, not exceeding beyond that. Grant, all the time remained, a man of print, whereas, McLuhan, was the most experimented of the three, who within the historical circumstances, was unable to see beyond the electronic society and the digital manipulations of the silicon chip. All the three concluded

the fact that “technology is the real world”, but it was a modern fate to ‘live’ technology as a kind of second biology. And as a result, everything is defined and limited by the technology, be it from the city architecture, the sound production, the lens of camera eye, to the chemically processed foods. Apart from the discourse of McLuhan, Innis and Grant, the central problem in the world of silicon chip, is the dissolution of the centre and the margins. Everyone, today is peripheralized, by the systemic logic of the technological society. Thus, every centre is undergoing a process of reversal, leading to decay and destruction.

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