JULIAN HALADYN

An Artist's Perspective on Visual Arts in Canadian Television Programming

On 28 October 2001 my partner Miriam Jordan[1] and I presented a video on The New PL, a television station in London, Ontario (Canada). The video, entitled *Big Toe Frank and Tea Master Ubu in the Teacup is Dead*, is a simple collaged animation that hybridises cultural and social narratives,[2] focusing on the concept of death; we specifically conceived the work with the medium of television in mind. Our video is exactly thirty seconds in length and subverts conventions found in advertisements and public service announcements[3] by challenging the stereotypical forms of public representation that surround issues of value and death. In creating this work we were aware of the extreme difficulties that we would face attempting to present an artistic video in the predominantly commercial environment of Canadian television broadcasting, but this problem was precisely why we undertook the project. As emerging artists in the Canadian cultural field we were troubled by the lack of visibility, or in most cases complete ignorance, of the larger scope of cultural and artistic production within mainstream television; to put it bluntly, I rarely if ever see the cultural field I participate in represented on television in any meaningful or considerate manner. Part of our intention

in creating this video and then going through the process of broadcasting it on television was to address this discrepancy, that we experience as media artists dealing with mass media, by making the process itself visible. Although we were eventually successful in having our video aired, albeit not in the most ideal of circumstances—it was presented within the context of a Speakers' Corner public broadcasting programme, segregated from normal or "real" programming—we have not followed up on this project due to the cynicism that the experience engendered.

As a result of this artistic intervention into the world of television I began critically questioning the programming policies in Canada—and by default, programming in the USA—specifically in terms of the inaccessible nature of television as a self-professed medium of the public. One of the reasons for my cynicism is the apparent inability of television programming to make *time* for representing the culture being created by Canadian artists, especially given the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission's (CRTC) mandate of *Canadian content*: "TV stations must make sure that 60 per cent of their programming over an entire year is Canadian."[4] Although all three of the major national English-speaking

I would like to draw upon the example of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who, in a similar act of intervention, broadcast two lectures on French television in May 1996. The circumstances for this broadcast were admittedly exceptional, since Bourdieu faced no time limit, was able to present any topic of his choosing, and had no television authority standing behind him to keep him in line; in other words he was given "*control of the instruments of production* which is not at all usual."[7] Through this *unusual* access, Bourdieu was able to address the social and political concerns he had for television—as well as journalism, which I will not be directly discussing—through the medium of television itself. It is this type of intervention into public broadcasting, using television as a means of presentation, which I believe is necessary for the contemporary Canadian visual arts community to undertake in some capacity as a means of resisting the prescribed view of the world as presented on television, which "is one that lies beyond the grasp of ordinary individuals."[8] Such a world-view encourages apathy and non-

each with its own democratically established laws and logic, punctuates the fact that different areas of practice rely upon their own unique perspectives and processes that are not always compatible with those of other fields. For example, the logic that governs the decisions made by a doctor is not the same as one that is practised by a politician; the obvious reason for this difference is that the practices in each of these areas have been established to conform to the needs of the field and are often established by individuals practising within these fields. One of Bourdieu's main problems with television as a medium is "the fact that extension of the audience is used to legitimate the lowering of the standards for entry into the field."[14] This lowering of standards comes at the cost of overlooking the internal logic of a respective field in order to maximise the potential audience.

From a visual arts perspective this means that the ability of a Canadian artist to present work freely within society is unduly compromised by the need for a universalised understanding of all potential television audiences—which, in all honesty, is contrary to the goals of most contemporary art which claims to challenge the dominant cultural perspectives that are universally understandable. The solution that has been imposed through television *standards* is the levelling of intellectual content to the lowest common denominator, a process which negates the possibility of programming that is challenging in any way to the dominant views of the society or world; the *democratic* methodology used in television programming is one of the simplification of perspectives in order to eliminate differences. Inherent in this *democratic* perspective is the levelling effect of commercial competition, which facilitates public interest through public opinions on the

> strive to make things clear—and in so doing, they often make things simple. Where subtle distinctions and multiple layers threaten to muddy an issue, the journalist will try to carve out camps and factions and territories, each with its own spokesperson/leader. Complexity abounds in the real world, but simplicity is the king of the mass media.[16]

In the late-1990s Evans spent nine months in Igloolik, Nunavut (Canada) studying the growth of Inuit video production, specifically through the group Isuma, a creative form that developed as an attempt to present a truly Inuit representation of themselves. Many of the people in this community felt that the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC)—which, after being formed in 1981, used as a model for its structure the dominant television programming it was supposed to be replacing—was not accomplishing this. The desire to represent their own perspective on the world—ironically, similar to the Canadian desire to represent Canada in a medium dominated by American programming—caused many Inuit artists to take the video camera and create their own field of production. The tendency of the mass media to simplify issues in order to make them accessible not only elides the Inuit quest for cultural autonomy, but ultimately misrepresents the events as being "a mere showdown on the dusty streets of Igloolik."[17] The continuing development of a cultural identity or field is too complex to represent on television, where the attention span of a viewer is so short, so the material is made to fit the medium by presenting the situation as a stereotypical conflict between older and newer generations; such a perspective overlooks and undermines the significance of what the Inuit have accomplished: taking control of the means of production.

The value of having separate fields of cultural production is not always obvious and usually depends on long-term benefits; this is in strict opposition to the need for immediate return that commercial television requires—not to mention that sector's

insistence on solid financial returns on their investment. Ironically, the infrastructure and technology that allow for the achievement of short-term gains depend upon the long-

ironic in the light of the CRTC's often-repeated mantra of *Canadian content* that never materialises in a meaningful way. Bourdieu's use of television as a forum and topic for public debate, again, should encourage other cultural practitioners to engage actively in

> defending the conditions necessary for the production and diffusion of the highest human creations. To escape the twin traps of elitism or demagogy we must work to maintain, even to raise the requirements for the *right of entry*—the entry fee—into the fields of production.[22]

In order to allow the visual artists in Canada to continue expanding and improving the cultural heritage of Canada, they must be allowed to decide for themselves the standards for entering into the field—by which I mean artists should decide what is important and worth presenting to the public, not be guided by

attempt to create a dialogue with our surrounding community—locally, nationally and internationally—in which preconceived perspectives on contemporary culture would be