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Andrew Burke
Hinterland Remixed: Media, Memory, and the Canadian 1970s

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In January 1975, *Maclean's* took a backward glance at the shift from the 1960s to the 1970s, proclaiming it a slip from "hoping to coping." According to the magazine, any rebelliousness that may have existed in the previous decade had given way to a robotic generation who were apathetic when they were not concerned with conspiracy theories and the energy crisis. TV had become a way for people to tune in while dropping out of politics. Andrew Burke's *Hinterland Remixed: Media, Memory, and the Canadian 1970s* complicates this sketch of a still ill-defined decade by offering a provocative look at this period through its media forms. Structured

in five chapters with an introduction and coda bookending them, the text is broken into a set of case studies. The first three concentrate on material from the 1970s, while the last two examine ways material from the decade has been re-purposed and re-imagined by contemporary artists. Burke's book offers an intriguing way into the decade, suggesting it has never come to a clean end. Situating his text between the two Trudeaus, from the afterglow of 1967 to the shadow of 2015, Burke suggests that the residues of the 1970s endure to subtly influence the present and help shape how it is understood. He advocates for a "hauntological" approach that highlights the way that the desires and forms of the past persist to unsettle the present. The results, I would argue, are uneven.



Relying on the "incidental rather than the blandly representative," (4) Burke's book promises to study the circulation, remembrance and remediation of these artistic residues to "extrapolate" what the decade was like. He goes on to state that the "guiding principle of this book is that a fuller sense of any national cultural formation can be gleaned from experiments rather than exemplars" (4). This principle also seems applicable to the contemporary artworks that he selects to help filter the remains of the 1970s, through. The problem of mediation then stands as one of the basic pillars of his analysis, filtered to a substantial degree via

formal and structural discussions that catalogue the aesthetic models and materials Burke has chosen, whether it be Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale* (1971), SCTV (1976–84), Glenn Gould's *The Idea of North* (1967), or the regional television footage re-purposed for *Death by Popcorn* (L'Atelier national du Manitoba, 2005).

While there have been books, in art history as well as cultural and political history more generally, fleshing out the divergent facets and debates of what defined the Canadian 1960s, the 1970s remains a more enigmatic period. Books dealing with the Canadian 1960s often cast the era in terms of more general (counter)cultural shifts, such as the collected essays of *The Sixties: Passion, Politics, and Style* (2008), or in terms of the effects of media in the time leading directly to Burke's period, such as Paul Rutherford's *When Television Was Young: Primetime Canada, 1952–1967* (1990). Burke's approach is quite different from these, concentrating strongly on media forms as indexical moments of material history and their subsequent remediation. However, the book also does not provide the reader with much detail about the socio-political history of the Canadian 1970s. There is scarcely a gesture at establishing what the Canada of the period was beyond something leading to Mulroney. As a result, the Canadian 1970s operates in the text as a somewhat abstract theme as much as a historical period. The hazy situational detail Burke does provide is taken almost exclusively from an adoption of English cultural theory (Raymond Williams, Mark Fisher), a little Derrida, and an overtly autobiographical engagement with his curated materials (5–8). The historical vagueness produced from this strategy is essential to the hauntological approach that Burke adopts, allowing him to figure the 1970s as a trauma that has left its traces but no clear sign of its events.

Borrowing from Raymond Williams, Burke argues that art has the role of preserving a "structure of

feeling” belonging to an era and which is impressed on the materials specific to its culture. The first chapter detects this structure in the *Hinterland Who’s Who* (1963–1977) TV spots which highlighted potentially imperilled wildlife. Burke claims these spots as a form of social democratic pedagogy, a kind of apologia for governmental care of the environment and the welfare state. With their set, reiterating structure, the short films suggest to Burke a funereal dirge, both for the loss of nature through the nation’s modernization and of the feelings tied to it. This, like much else described in the book, is the affect of what he terms a “banal nationalism” bound in its own idiosyncrasies. One starts to register that, for Burke, the decade, or at least its material remainders, has the figurative function of a potentially threatened wildlife species. The “banality” he introduces is reanimated and remediated through contemporary environmentalist concerns and then complicated with a “weirdness” he examines in several forms.

For instance, the chapter on Snow’s landscape film *La Région Centrale* is analyzed in light of ecological anxieties present across media at the time of its production, particularly as Burke locates them in horror and sci-fi films. But it is clear from his discussion that the greater horror of the film is its structuralism and the extent to which it is determined by the camera used to make the film. It is a horror of the inhuman, of the world seen through the gaze of an unsentimental and autonomous machinery. Horror, in effect, is radicalized weirdness or estrangement, and much of Burke’s text, particularly in its second half and not always consciously, is the attempt to limit the potentials of horror by reintegrating it into the social. In a way, what Burke’s book performs is akin to the anxiety sometimes associated with photography and its creation of an image-world autonomous from subjects and social narrative. While Snow’s structuralist film can

be seen to lean quite heavily on this production of strangeness, it is also apparent in less austere instances.

What interests Burke about *scrv*, the topic of the third chapter, is how it functions as an archive for televisual forms. He highlights the ways these forms are the base from which most of the show’s humour was derived. The exaggeration, distortion, and estrangement of generic clichés and recognizable character types that was so central to its satirical procedures allowed it to take a cutting snapshot of the structure of feeling at play, while the material qualities of *scrv*’s production were impressed by the specificities of the various places from which it abstracted its imaginary world. One of the curious things about watching *scrv*, at least in my experience, is that, like much satire, the comic structures and the jokes are decipherable, although time has dulled their affect. The material and formal remainders, which Burke insists are suggestive of the “textures of the real” (122) persist, while the affective dimension decays with far greater rapidity than magnetic tape. It is in this fashion that *scrv* unintentionally does something very similar to Snow’s film.

Burke’s book is a fascinating rumination on a very limited catalogue of formal tics specific to singular works, examined most extensively in his rich fourth chapter on *Death by Popcorn*, but it is stymied by the simultaneous attempt at a more general cultural diagnosis that is never rigorously formulated, let alone demonstrated. For example, his superficial discussion of Gould and the appropriation of his work by various Indigenous artists lacks the institutional or formal critique that would allow it to convincingly carry the substance he accords it. As such, Indigeneity functions as a cliché deployed to humanize the potentially formalist, and even anti-humanist, reading of Canada present in the works from the 1970s. One might argue this exploitation of 1970s residuals is as much a

comforting contemporary mythologization carried out through state institutions as it is a matter of haunting or disruption.

Burke suggests that there is “often something deeply unsettling about the aggressive ordinariness of the 1970s” (95). One of the text’s governing anxieties is a frequently stated will to redemption, however, contra Burke, this seems to be a redemption more in the sense of a conversion or reterritorialization. It is not a redemption of a past which refuses to go away, but of the concerns of the present threatened by the apparent impersonality of the work of art and its persistence as an alien residue from an era it cannot reconcile with itself. Given Burke’s loose socio-political narrative, something approaching an analytic material history in which to moor the “material” of his analysis would have provided a necessary foundation for the diagnostic strand of his argument. Although his book superficially acknowledges that the works from the 1970s were often operating out of the specific rhetoric of Anglo-Canadian nationalism, he ignores the peculiar temporal logic common to its aesthetics, most obviously found in Joyce Wieland, John Boyle, and others, and in subtler ways in the works he discusses.

Writing on Canadian cultural history has not been benevolent to the decade, which tends to be overshadowed by the more glamorous 1960s. The apparently unintended but most persuasive aspect of Burke’s book is to give the Canadian 1970s glamour. Most strongly, this registers for him in the decaying media forms that the decade left behind and which he treats with affective relish, constructing the 1970s as a long, lost decade, rife with “extended, messy weirdness” where the past persists to haunt or “estrangle” the present. As a result, Burke’s rendering of the 1970s registers more as a low-definition texture than a period. The problem is less that the 1970s remains, as he admits, primarily a fetish object, but that it remains little more than this. ¶

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Jennifer Nelson

Disharmony of the Spheres: The Europe of Holbein's Ambassadors

University Park (Penn.), Penn State University Press, 2019
216 p. 19 ill. coul., 24 n/b
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Itay Sapir

L'ultime friandise dans le magasin de bonbons qu'est (parfois) l'édition en histoire de l'art est la monographie consacrée à une seule œuvre. C'est un véritable miracle: prendre un rectangle de toile couvert de pigments—ou un morceau de marbre, ou une série de gestes performatifs, peu importe—et à partir de là, créer tout un monde; s'offrir le temps d'approfondir chaque détail, chaque circonstance, chaque incongruité; tenter, sans réel espoir bien sûr, d'épuiser le sens d'une proposition artistique—voilà qui est le summum de notre métier. Et lorsqu'il s'agit d'une œuvre, comme *Les Ambassadeurs* d'Holbein le jeune, sur laquelle tant a déjà été dit et écrit, le défi est encore plus grand: que faire d'une énième étude de cette peinture intrigante mais si canonique qu'elle a peut-être déjà été épuisée par les historiens de l'art, les historiens et même les psychanalystes qui l'ont regardée?

Si Jennifer Nelson réussit ce défi, si elle nous offre la friandise tant désirée, c'est qu'elle opte pour une interdisciplinarité que l'on pourrait qualifier de «radicale». En effet, Rebecca Zorach, dans son éloge ornant la quatrième de couverture, semble hésiter sur l'appartenance disciplinaire de l'ouvrage: «*This is one of the most engaging*

monographs in art history», commence-t-elle, ajoutant sans attendre, entre parenthèses, «(in fact truly interdisciplinary, but with a strong foundation in art history)». Le livre est tellement interdisciplinaire et ses horizons si larges,



que l'auteure se permet d'abandonner presque entièrement la peinture qu'elle analyse, et la peinture tout court, pendant les trois chapitres du milieu (sur cinq), faisant confiance à la patience de son lectorat, mais surtout à l'agilité de son écriture et à la sagesse de son raisonnement pour nous mener à la rencontre de plusieurs contemporains d'Holbein jusqu'à ce que l'on retourne aux *Ambassadeurs*, essoufflés mais ravis, pour un dernier chapitre jubilatoire.

Il va donc de soi que l'ouvrage de Nelson n'est pas une «Introduction aux *Ambassadeurs*», encore moins «*Les Ambassadeurs* pour les nuls». De telles études existent d'ailleurs déjà pour cette peinture si célèbre et énigmatique dans ses détails, et l'auteure les utilise judicieusement pour fonder son édifice interprétatif. Elle ne tente pas de tout répéter, de tout raconter, de proposer la synthèse indépensable des interprétations possibles. Sa démonstration repose sur un seul argument principal, mais complexe, qui se déploie en un fascinant arc argumentatif filant, imperturbable, du premier chapitre jusqu'au tout dernier paragraphe.

Autant l'argument-phare de Nelson est (faussement) simple, autant sa démonstration demande une

exploration approfondie des arcanes du monde intellectuel du xvi^e siècle. *Les Ambassadeurs* a été trop souvent, croit l'auteure, interprété comme une dénonciation du «désir vain pour la correspondance entre les choses» du monde (p. 4); cette lecture «mélancolique» passe à côté d'un univers culturel où la différence soutenue est un attribut positif. Si cette idée peut sembler suspecte pour sa similarité évidente avec l'esprit de la gauche universitaire actuelle et sa propre tendance à faire l'éloge de la différence, Nelson ne s'en cache pas: elle se situe explicitement, au début et à la fin du livre, dans le monde d'aujourd'hui (notamment p. 9 et 136). Elle sait, pour avoir lu Mieke Bal et d'autres, que l'historienne n'est jamais vraiment plongée dans le passé au détriment de son présent. Ici, spécifiquement, on se fait rappeler que les questions de liberté, d'harmonie, de pluralité religieuse, du local et de l'universel, sont aussi urgentes aujourd'hui qu'elles l'étaient dans les premières décennies de la Réforme protestante en Europe, la période où vivaient Holbein et les autres protagonistes de cette étude.

Mais comme le sait toute historienne qui prend sa vocation au sérieux, l'ancrage du livre dans le présent de l'auteure n'enlève rien—au contraire—à sa validité historique, à la véacité de sa description du passé, description qui, d'ailleurs, ne se propose pas ici comme exclusive ou définitive, mais comme éclairant un aspect trop souvent éludé de l'Europe du xvi^e siècle. Le portrait historique de Nelson est d'autant plus convaincant que son travail de recherche est irréfutable dans son exhaustivité—elle a lu, et elle relie entre eux, un nombre impressionnant d'écrits venant des cercles intellectuels et des mécènes européens entourant Holbein, entre l'Allemagne, la Suisse, l'Angleterre, la France et les Pays-Bas.

Le premier chapitre du livre fait le choix peu étonnant de s'intéresser surtout à l'élément qui a rendu cette peinture d'Holbein si célèbre: la tête