



TELEVISION AND THE “OBJET a”: Psychoanalysis and the “Boob Tube”

By Gregory C. Flemming

It was Metz’ project, as Baudry before him, to position the filmic apparatus within its ideological framework in order to expose the medium that had been hidden beneath a discursive concentration on content. Metz and Baudry did not only interrogate the machinery of the cinema – the camera, the projector, the screen, the theatre – but also the position that its subject assumed to it: The cinema’s audience was not an external element, but its constitutive suture. And it was not just that the film industry created this position to empty the pockets of her patron’s; for Baudry, it represented the fulfillment of a centuries old desire to obtain a realer-than-real, as first manifested in Plato’s creation of the hypothetical cave-come-prison. So too for Metz the cinema was “a veritable psychological substitute, a prosthesis for our primally dislocated limbs” (15). My analysis here is similar to that of Baudry and Metz, though its object is different. Here television is unearthed from its content, described in its function as a member of our bodies, psyches, and social environment.

This is done with reference to Lacanian psychoanalysis. For Lacan, the individual is created through the process of symbolization. By entering into the symbolic realm the subject is separated from the amorphous ether of which it was once a part and is then cast into the world of the Other. Symbolization is never total, however, and the gestalt from which the subject was born resurfaces as identity’s constituent. This is the *objet a*, a portion of the lost mother reconstituted in extra-symbolic form. It is through this unnameable object, this impenetrable pith, that the subject comes to desire. It is in the failure to approach the object and to transgress the fantasy that surrounds it that one is driven. I propose that on a psycho-social level such an object has also been created as the invisible object of consumer society. Television is the primary object

through which many people in the western world come to desire as members of a consumer society, owing to the conditions of its creation and development. Television is also the construction that retroactively confers meaning upon the space of the state: where one would expect a national identity to be constructed as the state grew, it was instead created as a post-script that inscribed a culture upon the people who inhabited it.

The rise of the private suburban home and the nuclear family shortly after the onset of the industrial revolution came at the expense of old forms of contact. Broadcasting arose as a response to this atomization by bringing shared national life directly into the home. At first, the radio receiver was the technology that made this contact possible. Since the Second World War, television has assumed radio's place as the main means of social communication in the western world. It served to provide the contact that was lost, and positioned itself within an idealized reconstruction of that lost social formation. As industrialization progresses and capital moves into a different stage, the nature of broadcasting and its relation to national identity also changes. The rise of the narrowcasting and satellite television changed the audience with which one shares the spectacle. This change in viewership mirrors the changing nature of capital, the role of the nation state, and the culture that arises therefrom, and this effects our description of television. It is first necessary to take into account the historical genesis of the medium, accounting for the role of the home, the nation, and the identity that arises from them.

A mainstay in television scholarship is Raymond Williams' *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* ([1973] 2003). Williams outlines how radio and television did not cause social change but were instead the product of the changes in social organization that were occurring at the turn of the twentieth century. It is Williams' assertion that communications fill an already existing social need, that new technologies fall into existing social conditions that determine their form. This is in distinction to technological determinism,

a term that Williams uses to describe the work of Marshal McLuhan and its evolution from an aesthetic theory to an ideological screen – from message to massage. For Williams, technology never fills an arbitrary need or has deeply felt effects that are the product of an innate feature of a medium. Instead, dominant groups direct development in accordance with imperatives that serve their interests. While in the early twentieth century the means of industrial production and the means of communication that enabled its coordination over great distances were well developed, means of social communication that would accommodate new forms of living were not (10). It was into this social and economic forum that broadcasting was introduced.

According to Williams, the content of film preceded its distribution, the latter devised as a means of "controlling and organizing a market for given production" (18). Both radio and television broadcasting differed from film and other forms of social communication in that they were "systems primarily devised for transmission and reception as abstract processes, with little or no definition of preceding content.... It is not only that the supply of broadcasting facilities preceded the demand; it is that the means of communication preceded their content" (18-19). That is, broadcast systems were devised as empty structures that would fill a social role – that of linking the private home to industrial capitalism's social and political matrix.

Williams holds this to be true of the industrialized west in general, and a discussion of the genesis of national broadcasting in Canada proves instructive. In his paper "Technological Nationalism" (1996), Charland describes how English Canadian nationalism rises from the Canadian state. English Canada, in this formulation, is held together not by a common culture or identity, but by the process of communication itself. Where the railroad brought Canada together economically, broadcasting was an attempt to bind it culturally and ideologically:

As with rail service in Canada, broadcasting was consciously regarded as a means of creating a Canada with sufficient commonality to justify its political union, while simultaneously, it was also considered a means of simply enabling Canadians to be aware of each other and their already constituted values and identity (205).

According to Charland, the rhetoric surrounding national identity and communications' place in the constitution of that identity was contradictory in that it was to be an empty, unified place that would disseminate a heterogeneous voice. He calls this rhetoric the discourse of technological nationalism.

The Canadian Pacific Railroad (CPR) served to integrate the west into the political and economic systems of the east. It allowed the federal government to populate the west as well as establish a military presence, and thereby prevented the United States from expanding northward. It was more than simply a response to a political and economic need, however. As Charland argues, the promise of a railroad was not necessary to ensure Canadian confederation – British Columbia only requested that a wagon road link it to the rest of Canada. The CPR was the product of a political will that saw, along with economic union, the “possibility of developing a mythic rhetoric of national origin” (200). The strategy to compose a Canadian state consisted of two elements. Firstly, the technology itself, and secondly, the creation of a discourse that addressed the people as Canadians who would realize a coherent nation by granting political power to a centralized national government. Only by creating a sense of identity that could be shared by people from coast to coast could the federal government counter arguments for increased provincial autonomy and prevent annexation of any of its territory to the United States. This, then, is the technological nationalism which Charland says “undergirds Canada’s official ideology and guides the formulation of federal government policy” (197): The power of the Canadian state is predicated on the creation of an identity that is based on the

mythic power of the railroad to bring the country together (197). Without this identity, "Ottawa's power would dissolve" (202).

While the railroad was able to bring together Canada as a state, it was unable to create the culture that would constitute a Canadian nation. It was to this end that national broadcasting was developed. Radio was to play this role, and began the fulfillment of its nation-building project on the rails. CN Radio started by being transmitted solely into parlour cars as a way to foster tourism, its image, and the "project of nationhood" (203). By 1924 CN Radio became a network of stations in major cities across the country that provided English Canada with an image of itself as a nation. A national policy on radio, however, was not developed until much later. While commercial radio stations had been in operation since 1919, a unified national system controlled by the government did not come into existence until after the Radio Broadcasting bill of 1932. This bill was intended to nationalize commercial radio-stations and institute a national broadcast system that would foster a distinctly English Canadian identity and offset the threat of American signals and their content. Officially, broadcast legislation and the reports that led to its creation touted the need for a communication system that could create a shared culture in the face of the constraints of space and regionalism. The rhetoric focused on a "defensive expansionism" that would counter-act the penetration of American signals into Canadian territory. While there was discussion of the need for a forum for Canadian interests as well as the need to curb the influence of foreign content, there was no discussion of what Canadian content would be. The ideal behind a national broadcast system was then a

privileging of the *process* of communication over the substance of what is communicated. Consequently, if radio were to bring forth a nation by providing a common national experience, that experience would be one of communication, of sheer mediation. ... The content of the Canadian identity would be but technological nationalism itself (206).

The federal government's inability to compete economically with the United States in terms of content production, and its unwillingness to nationalize commercial radio or significantly invest in new facilities resulted in the failure to realize a national system. As a result, Canadian radio broadcasting took on the better-developed model of the American system, leaving Canada to be culturally united through its own technology, but largely through American commercial content.

This leads Charland to dub Canada the "absent nation." That is, Canadian identity and the nation to which is bound are both present and absent in that they exist only as mediation by a space-binding technology that is without content. The official rhetoric that surrounded the development of broadcasting constructed it as an object that was to create a national identity that could not exist without broadcasting - an object that was needed to fill a political gap. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, this is the role of the – the object-cause of the desiring subject. Žižek explains how the *objet a* functions as the object-cause of desire:

The *Objet petit a* is not what we desire, what we are after, but rather, that which sets our desire in motion, in the sense of the formal frame which confers consistency on our desire: desire is, of course, metonymical; it shifts from one object to another; through all these displacements, however, desire none the less retains a minimum of formal consistency, a set of phantasmic features which, when they are encountered in a positive object make us desire this object – *objet petit a* as the cause of desire is nothing other than the formal frame of consistency (Plague of Fantasies 39).

Canadian broadcasting is this formal frame - it provides the structure of the desire for a unified nation in the form of a national identity for its citizens. And because television is filled with glossy images birthed in the South, they become the objects of our fantasies. While the *objet a* provides the form of a system of desire, or to abstract further, a system of meaning, it also hides the fact that it is not in fact

what the subject thinks it is. The *objet a* is the horrible nothingness that makes a coherent system of meaning possible. In Canada, that hidden lack is national identity itself:

Significantly, this rhetoric [of technological nationalism] sees a Canadian nation and identity as exegetic of the state itself. Ninety years after Canada's political constitution, a national identity is still so ephemeral that the state, and its agencies feel compelled to create it. Technological nationalism refuses to consider that Canada is not a nation but a state, and that Canadian cultures could exist outside of their technological mediation (Charland 211).

Much as discovering the emptiness of the real sees the end of systemic consistency, so too Charland asserts that without the suture of "nation" – the idea that Canada exists as a unified whole – "Ottawa's power would dissolve" (202).

The *objet a* is the foundation of identity as without desire, without lack, without separation of self and object, there is no subject. In structuring desire the *objet a* is the foundation of the subject. For Charland, the Canadian subject is structured by broadcast technology itself, and not by its content. As noted above, Žižek differentiates between what, for our purposes, could be called medium and content. Hence, the lack of Canadian content on television and the predominance of American programming fill the Canadian nation with American consumer goods and ideals as the central objects of desire; occupying the empty place of the *objet a* raises the occupier to the level of the sublime. This is one of the fundamental contradictions of technological nationalism: Canadian identity provides the basis for American intrusion. Without the national object-cause, the *objet a*, the Canadian subject could not exist. Being unable to produce an ample supply of content at a reasonable cost because of a small population base makes Canadian broadcasting dependant on foreign product. English Canadian identity, then, comes from both within and without. That is the position that Lacan ascribed to all subjectivity; for Lacan, the subject is necessarily split.

For Zizek the *objet a*, the Real, is that which lies at the heart of ideology. It is the laying bare of the known yet unspoken/unacknowledged contradictions of being that empties ideology of its power. In opposition to Arendt's "banality of evil," he asserts that it was the maintenance of dual discourses that allowed the German people to know and disavow the atrocities of the holocaust: "The Holocaust was treated by the Nazi apparatus itself as a kind of obscene dirty secret that was not publicly acknowledged," and this level of acknowledgement created the atrocities of torture and murder as pleasurable transgressions (Zizek, *Sublime Object* 156). To have revealed this contradiction would have undermined its social permissibility and libidinal support in German society – its horror would no longer have been "gentrified", nor pleasurable. The denial of contradiction, of the Real of ideology is also what belies the "new racism" of multiculturalism. In *Civilization and its Discontents* Freud proposes that the Christian dictum "love thy neighbour" disguises the ambivalence that the human animal necessarily feels towards its others in a claim of universal love, and that its shadow will assert itself elsewhere (Fisher, 1991, 121). And so Zizek dubs his paper on racism "Love Thy Neighbour? No, Thanks!" to underline the thesis that acceptance of cultures without acknowledgement of the antagonisms that they contain displaces our own ambivalence towards them. Canadian Broadcasting legislation provides a good example. The definition of ethnic programming as put forth in the *Ethnic Broadcasting Policy* is as follows: "An ethnic program is one, in any language, that is specifically directed to any culturally or racially distinct group other than one that is Aboriginal Canadian or from France or the British Isles" (CRTC, 1999). This statement is indicative of two trends: first, that some cultures are privileged over others, and second, that the differences within cultures are elided. One need be either French, British, Aboriginal, or other, and competing groups within each category do not garner cultural legitimacy. Within this contradiction lies the ideology of multiculturalism, that one group has power over another, and that differences within and outside these

groups do not need acknowledgement. The acknowledgement of the "multi-racist" discourse at the academic level does not, however, take the power out of the legislation. The only way to do that is to have it acknowledged by those in power and the legislation changed. Where television is a socially created medium, it can only be challenged at a political level.

Broadcast television serves as the *objet a* in two ways: Firstly, as per Williams, it represents the reconstitution of the lost – the remaking of an idealized social contact. Secondly, a la Zizek, it serves as the empty base for an identity that is to fill the unspeakable antagonism that belies political power. Television, like radio before it, served to create a national identity that justified the existence of federal power. But as national interests wane in the wake of the transnationalization, so too does the role of television in the maintenance of national identities. This is the topic of another paper. This paper concludes at this point with the assertion that television stands as the technological substrate of a federal political unconscious, as the externalized unconscious (the Real) of English Canadian identity.

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