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Ambivalence and Cultural Industrialization in Canada

Danielle Deveau

If Canadian culture can be said to have a master narrative, it is surely one of ambivalence. It is a concept that is laced implicitly throughout Canadian popular culture, as well as Canadian cultural studies. Although Canadianists frequently grapple with the issue of cultural industrialization, especially in relation to cultural nationalist fears about Americanization, it is my contention that these analyses do not adequately consider Canadian popular culture as a process of ambivalent industrialization, which allows certain non-industrial practices to be preserved. This process is particularly evident in the subject of my doctoral dissertation, the Just for Laughs Comedy Festival (JFL), where carnival and industry collide in very public ways.

Comedy, itself an ambivalent narrative practice, is one of very few made-in-Canada cultural products that are regularly well received beyond our own borders. JFL itself is a major player in the international comedy industry, and on occasion even Americans acknowledge the success and value of Canadian comedy talent (Rasporich, 1996; Berland, 2001). My work considers the industrialization of culture as an ambivalent process. In particular, I use JFL to illustrate the continued relevance of carnival and humour in everyday life. I also consider the presence of local, national and international interests at JFL and the contradictions of cultural industrialization that result from these competing interests. This work argues that JFL is engaged in a cultural industrialization process, but that this is not a process of Americanization or neo-liberalization as the term industrialization has come to suggest. Rather, it is a process of ambivalent industrialization in which competing interests contribute to a complex and rich set of spaces, experiences, and media products.

Since its humble beginnings as a four-day francophone comedy event featuring 16 artists in 1983, JFL has grown rapidly into an internationally recognized entertainment landmark and industry hub. The 2008 festival drew over 230, 000 indoor spectators to 78 shows. The street festival was attended by more than 2 million people and included over 350 artists from 10 countries. A number of the indoor shows are developed into TV specials and broadcast in 139 countries and on 97 airlines; major television network deals include Network Ten (Australia), Comedy Channel (Australia), Movie Network and Movie Central (North America), CTV, CBC, TVA (Québec), and France 2. Additionally, the festival was attended by over 1, 000 industry members (mostly American) on the hunt for new talent.



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Branded as a *festival city*, Montréal's summer festivals attract locals, tourists, and private investment to the festival quarter, which in turn renew and reproduce many of the festivals that contribute to this financial growth. JFL is a particularly notable success story in this regard as it is not only a significant feature of the Montréal festival season but also the main international hub for the North American comedy industry and has a number of highly lucrative mass media spin-offs.

Despite its size and prominence within Montréal's successful festival season, JFL has not been the subject of any significant academic analysis. This is perhaps because its size and complexity makes it a challenging topic to narrow down. Where does one even start? Additionally, while it is large and successful, it has a fairly specific audience—stand-up comedy lovers, festivalgoers, and American entertainment industry insiders. As such it is not a ubiquitous cultural phenomenon in the same manner of *Survivor* or *Seinfeld*. It occupies a middle range of popularity that makes it a much less obvious case study. However, what happens at the festival often has ripple effects throughout popular culture. As, for example, when pieces of routines are carried into daily popular discourses or when major network careers are launched following a successful JFL run.

When cultural nationalists oppose the industrialization of culture, it is frequently grounded in fears of Americanization. In a sense, JFL is highly Americanized, as it has always aligned itself with the American comedy industry. However, this is an importation of American culture that does not uphold the norm. As the most significant meeting of new and old comedic talent, Montréal is, for one week, more important than Los Angeles and New York to the American comedy industry. The JFL product—that is, the program of comedians that organizers have handpicked from across the country and around the world—will dictate the future of American network comedy. However, this is not the only industry served by JFL. It also promotes a number of explicitly Canadian comics whose career trajectories will likely be ones of cross-Canada tours and Canadian network specials—for example, Ron James and Bowser & Blue—as well as popular Québécois comedians such as Patrick Groulx and Mike Ward. As such, JFL does not play to any one interest, but instead pursues a range of interests related to the promotion of humour via various comedy industries.

Given this diversity, a number of literatures must be synthesized in this project. In particular, theories of carnival, Canadian culture, and cultural industrialization can be drawn together through the concept of ambivalence. To be ambivalent is to occupy a middle ground between competing or oppositional extremes. This space can be perceived as a relatively unproductive one. In a zero-sum game, the competing interests would cancel one another

out, and we would be left with the status quo—an ambivalent middle ground. However, socio-cultural relations are far too complex to justify such a reductive approach to the study of industrialization. The presence of both industry and public carnival does not *reduce* the experience of the festival to an ambivalent one. This is not how ambivalence operates. Rather, ambivalence is a characteristic of complex relations between competing interests. This notion of ambivalence is in keeping with the Bakhtinian concepts of festive decay and renewal, and is in contrast with more cynical notions of ambivalence, which link it with processes of negation.

A Contemporary Theory of Carnival

Studies of festivals and carnival frequently draw upon M.M. Bakhtin's influential text *Rabelais and his world* (1984) written in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and first published in 1965. This comprehensive study of popular humour and folk culture of the Middle Ages via the literary images of Rabelais dramatically altered the way in which carnival culture and the grotesque were understood by scholars of literature and popular culture. However, his applicability to the study of contemporary carnivals, festivals, and humour remains controversial. Bakhtin himself argues that the grotesque world of carnival inversion is a historically specific one, and that such a practice ceased to exist beyond the Middle Ages. He remarks that only "a vague memory of past carnival liberties and carnival truth still slumbers in ... modern forms of abuse" (p. 28). Contemporary humour is not regenerative, but cold and ironic: "the carnival is far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Folk humour denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture" (p. 11). However, carnivals and festivals continue to be significant cultural practices today, even if, as Bakhtin would claim, contemporary carnivalesque inversions of the social order do not have the same cultural significance as that of the medieval carnivals of Europe.

Festivals and carnivals have, historically, centred around points of connectivity between celebrants (Picard & Robinson, 2006). They are a social safety valve that allows for the controlled release of frustration and angst in order to preserve and reinforce dominant social structures through out the rest of the year (p. 7). As Terry Eagleton suggests, "Carnival ... is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off" (cited in Picard & Robinson, 2006, p. 7). The carnivalesque has been preserved in Canada, and can be seen in a range of cultural products. In literature, for example, the plays of Antonine Maillet draw largely upon inverted worlds and the grotesque (Perron, 1998); Roch Carrier's *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* (1968) offers the paradox of death and renewal complete with a feast

on a coffin; and Susanna Moodie's memoir, *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852), unwittingly documents the carnivalesque when she details the rough, violent, and grotesque behaviour of the masses upon their arrival in a relatively lawless Canada (Kroetsch, 1989). In the case of JFL, the French festival name "Juste Pour Rire" invokes the language of carnival directly through the term *pour rire* which, in carnival, was preceded by the term *roi* in order to signify the inversion of hierarchy as a fool was made King for the duration of the feast (Bakhtin, 1984). During her 2008 Gala performance, Kathy Griffin claimed to have it on good authority that Victor, the little green JFL mascot, was loosely based upon his creator's genitals—no doubt a suitably grotesque idea.

The Ambivalent Canadianist

Like theories of carnival, theories of Canadian culture are characterized by ambivalence. In fact, as Cynthia Sugars (2006, p. 125) remarks, this ambivalence is unifying, as in the case of the celebration of Canadian self-deprecating irony. Sugars notes that, "to a degree, Canadian culture has always been compromised by an epistemological skepticism, obsessed, one might say, by the possibility of its non-existence" (p. 123). Even Sugar's statement, with its "to a degree" and "one might say" is remarkably cautious. That is, even the theorist of Canadian culture cannot quite bring herself to name the issue explicitly. This is not to suggest that to be ambivalent is problematic; in the case of Canadian culture it has been argued that ambivalence mediates between competing perspectives, resulting in civility (White, 2006, p. 456). This points to a productive theory of ambivalence.

Canadian cultural ambivalence can be linked quite clearly with irony. As Linda Hutcheon (1990, p. 9) remarks, self-deprecating irony "has been considered typical of the inhabitants of Canada, that strange country that, according to one historian, rests 'on paradoxes and anomalies, governed only by compromise and kept strong only by moderation.'" Similarly, Jody Berland (2001, p. 145) notes in her discussion of Canada's perceived "invisibility" that "the expression of ambivalence bordering on self-erasure most frequently takes the forms of irony." It is irony, according to this perspective, that has enabled theories of Canadianness to thrive within the paradox of bleak optimism. Descriptions of Canadian civil culture as "petty, anti-intellectual, overly deferential to authority, yet perpetually quarrelsome" abound in contemporary sociology (Dorland and Charland, 2002, p. 15).

These benign nationalisms engage the public through popular culture, a tactic that is frequently taken up by commercial interests. For example, Molson ads that featured a rant about Canadian distinctiveness acted as a collective national shout "aimed at people who do not hear us" (Bégin, 2003, p.

179). This relation of Canadian culture to a dominant Other appears regularly in both popular and academic work. One area in which it is implicitly accepted that they (Americans) do hear us is in the field of popular comedy—with JFL being one example of this phenomenon.

The festival contributes to local, regional, national, and international cultural industries; its financial impacts are varied and diffuse. But, as already noted, JFL is not exclusively about industry. The very notion of a carnival industry is paradoxical and ambivalent. This ambivalence has a steady audience not only in Canada, but also abroad. As Sugars remarks in her study of Molson ads, ambivalence is highly marketable.

The Contradictions of Cultural Industrialization

Perhaps one of the most pressing concerns for those occupied with Canadian cultural protection is the fear of Americanization. As the authors of *Global Hollywood 2* ask, “what is it about *le défi américain* that makes it hegemonic, yet troubles people so? (Miller et al, 2005, p. 1). Contrary to cultural nationalist fears, however, when it comes to cultural production it is not exclusively a matter of the state or the United States. Cultural production in Canada is far more nuanced and ambiguous than can be accounted for by such a simple formula. Cultural industrialization is a reality, but this does not exclusively mean Americanization. In fact, in many cases cultural production involves the balance of government interests at a variety of levels, industry interests (often, but not exclusively American), artistic interests, and finally, the interests of the public (or the audience as the case may be). JFL is a particularly notable example of a complex cultural product that mediates a range of state, industry, and public interests. The cultural specificity required of humour means that it ought not to have international appeal, yet JFL is internationally successful. This is indicative of not only the industrialization of humour, but also the globalization of citizenship. We are no longer socialized only for the successful navigation of local cultures and economies; we must now obtain national and international cultural capital as well. Questions of cultural industrialization necessarily engage with questions of internationalization. As George Yúdice (2003, p. 9) notes in his text *The Expediency of Culture*, “the question of culture in our period, characterized as one of accelerated globalization” must be approached as a question of culture “as a *resource*.” Yúdice points to the “culturalization of the economy” as part of a shift toward endorsing cultural development as a component of economic growth (pp. 13, 17). In the case of JFL, it is true that the cultures of carnival and humour are international commodities, but they are also a number of other localized, complex, nuanced and ambivalent practices. This is the sense in which I use the concept *ambivalent industrialization*.

Author

I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University. My major research interests are Canadian popular culture, broadcasting and humour. My doctoral dissertation analyzes the production and mediation of comic texts at the Montreal Comedy Festival.

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