

# CHAPTER 15

## Launching the Global Village

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It's hard to remember what the world was like when pay television first appeared on the horizon in 1976. That was the year Montréal hosted the Summer Olympics, and the Parti Québécois was elected for the first time. The experimental studio theatre 15 Dance Lab was two years old; Maggie was still with Pierre; and the photocopier (noisy, orange-lidded Xerox machines) was the hot new technology transforming the inner workings of business, education and the media.<sup>1</sup> On television *The Muppets* was all the rage; Adrienne Clarkson had just made the leap to *The Fifth Estate* from daytime TV; Jan Tennant had crashed the gender bar in TV network news only the year before when she was the first woman to anchor *The National* on the CBC. To be sure, there were portents of the future we now live with every day. Toronto's upstart CITY-TV with its edgy, urban approach to current affairs (and the infamous Baby Blue movies) was one. The arrival in the newsroom of computers and ENG – electronic news gathering, which eliminated the need for processing as with film – were two more. But the CBC, CTV and (newly licensed) Global TV still ruled Canadian airwaves in 1976, competing for audiences with

the usual plethora of American sitcoms and talk shows packed with ads.

In the world of broadcasting and telecommunications, cable television was the big news. A technology that was proving to be immensely profitable, it nevertheless lacked the lustre of broadcast television because it was all medium and no message. Like a telephone line, it simply delivered content provided by others.<sup>2</sup> For that reason, cable executives were unkindly referred to as parking lot attendants, though they themselves argued cable was merely a technical extension of existing broadcast signals otherwise being distributed by microwave. The industry, of course, was trying to avoid Canadian content rules, but in 1968 cable was folded into the broadcasting system and subsequently licensed by the CRTC (the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission) like any television network or radio station and subject to the Broadcasting Act. Though by no means universally available, cable had a “penetration rate” of 2.7 million households by 1976, and Canada was on its way to being the most cabled country in the world.<sup>3</sup>

All of this had implications. Cable implied the possibility of a multi-channel universe, for instance, and hinted darkly at the dispensability of broadcasters.<sup>4</sup> The new electronic medium of video implied the possibility of cheap, independent production, and a challenge to the program monopoly of the CBC and the National Film Board of Canada.<sup>5</sup> With satellites blurring borders and erasing time, television, and all the media connected to it, seemed poised for dramatic change. And Canada seemed ready, in more ways than one, to meet the challenge. It was Marshall McLuhan, after all, who gave the phenomenon, the Global Village, its name.

At the other end of the technological continuum, down where coaxial cable meets content, visual artists were busy developing something called video art, having seized the electronic medium and put it to service creating new art forms. It was a moment when the Canadian documentary tradition fused with a radically new visual sensibility and a liberating new technology, producing award-winning video artists such as Toronto’s Lisa Steele and Vancouver’s Paul Wong. Artist-run galleries, including A Space in Toronto, and the Western Front and Video Inn in Vancouver, appeared in inner-city back streets and began

organizing events and collaborations, acquiring video equipment and setting up editing suites for members' use. A Space, as symbolized by the indomitable Marien Lewis, the video/performance artist who ran the place and did the grant applications for years, was a multidisciplinary centre for all sorts of debates, a crossroads for artists who shared the same commitments and were experimenting with different media. Poets and musicians were involved, as well as dancers, writers and artists working with video and its cohort, performance art. It was a stage for all sorts of related activities, including a gutsy newsletter of artist-written arts criticism called *Proof Only* (later *Only Paper Today*). This scene was repeated all over the country.

As artists set out to explore the possibilities of digital technology, they also diversified. They had already started setting up facilities for themselves, banding together to start their own production companies, and the number of independent magazines and record companies, new music, dance and film collectives, indie theatres, co-op galleries and bookstores grew. It was an era of unprecedented cultural expansion both at the official level within the arts (the established performing arts companies, public art galleries and publishing houses), and at street level, where an unruly artistic underground was busy building an alternative network of Canadian culture that remains in place today.

As the ideals of the sixties sank in and spread to the mainstream, grassroots movements organized for the long haul, nowhere more visibly than in the arts. The National Question, which informed much of the political debate at the time, was a rallying cry for artists all over the country. They saw the erosion of Canadian control in business and industry playing out in the cultural field. Walter Gordon's famed Royal Commission report on the Canadian economy had signalled a sea-change in Canadian politics on the subject of ownership and sovereignty in the sixties, exemplified by the emergence of a militant nationalist wing within the NDP known as the Waffle.<sup>6</sup> In the arts, the pressure built for policies supporting the development of Canadian-owned cultural industries in the interest of ensuring original Canadian production. During this period, partly because of artists' activism, the well-established principle of public enterprise and regulation in broadcasting (as exemplified by the CBC and the CRTC) was extended to Canadian filmmaking, recording and

publishing. The branch-plant economy offered a simple choice when it came to culture in those days as it rationalized Canada as an extension of the United States' market, easily supplied from south of the border. Local production was not part of the plan. Operated on the commercial model, Canadian culture made no economic sense. So it boiled down to the choice between "the State or the United States."<sup>7</sup>

Artists noticed something else. Well-endowed professional theatre companies, symphony orchestras, ballet and opera companies, and public art galleries in all parts of the country very rarely, if ever, performed or exhibited anything Canadian. The situation was pervasive, and it was not the result of a colonized economy so much as a colonial mentality. Taking this on was a radical move and it necessitated collective action. There were high-definition moments, for sure. Like the ceremony in 1970 at Grossman's Tavern in Toronto anointing poet Milton Acorn (who had just published his first major collection, *I've Tasted My Blood*) "the People's Poet" after he was passed over for the Governor General's award in favour of an American teaching at the University of British Columbia. And demonstrations at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1972 protesting the hiring of an American chief curator, when Acorn and photographer Michel Lambeth (dressed as Uncle Sam) chained themselves to office furniture. However, the long-lasting radical change was in artists themselves, in their determination to by-pass the branch plants and the old guard, to find a home-grown audience for Canadian art.

Acorn, Lambeth and their contemporaries belonged to a generation of creative artists who started lobbying publicly for fundamental changes in institutions like the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Canada Council for the Arts and the CRTC, and who also began organizing politically, establishing unions and collectives to manage their rights. For example, CARFAC, the visual artists' union, had been created in 1968 and the Writers' Union of Canada was founded in 1973. Their activism grew out of their art.

Lawrence and Miriam Adams, the co-directors of 15 Dance Lab, were part of this creative ferment. For the Adamses, the transition began when they left the National Ballet of Canada in 1969 and set off on their own. Lawrence had already established Adams and Yves, an antique shop on Markham Street, with National Ballet principal dancer Yves Cousineau. They opened an-



Lawrence and Miriam Adams in *Miriam's Watch Me Dance You Bastards*, 1978 / Photo: Lynn Rotin

other shop across the street that housed an art gallery and framing service. Their circle widened; through Adams and Yves, the Adamases forged associations with all sorts of then-emerging visual artists such as Charlie Pachter and Jane Martin. In 1972 they formed 15 Dancers and two years later founded 15 Dance Lab, a space for experimental dance. 15 Dance Lab was a magnet and catalyst for all sorts of emerging artists working in a diversity of fields, much as A Space was. Indeed there were a number of cross-over artists, including dancer/video artist Elizabeth Chitty and dancer/performance artist Margaret Dragu, who were involved with both organizations. Lawrence and Miriam collaborated with A Space too, and were part of Video Ring – the project which allowed artists in Toronto and London, Ontario, to share use of a self-contained studio called the video van, equipped with everything necessary for shooting and editing on the road. They used it to shoot and edit parts of Miriam's *Sonovovitch*, a parody documentary about Kirov Ballet dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov's defection in Toronto in 1974.

As Miriam remembers, "The art gallery was a turning point for us, as was the way visual artists could talk about their art

form, with significant knowledge of history and context. We were ballet dancers, and that was not part of our upbringing. Our conversations revolved around bodies, aches and pains. So this was enlightening, and it planted the seeds of Lawrence's mission to preserve dance history."<sup>8</sup>

By 1976, the two were already old hands at the new media. "We started in when Portapak weighed 400 pounds," Miriam jokes, poking fun at the primitiveness of their tools, which nevertheless were transformative.<sup>9</sup> From the beginning, the motivation was twofold: to use video as a tool in training, and to develop it as a means of documenting the achievements of dancers and choreographers in this ephemeral art form. "We would go to Dance in Canada conferences in various cities across Canada, and we'd lug the Portapak with us so we could tape interviews with people and record performances. Lawrence understood that it was important for dance people to become camera astute, and in this he was ahead of his time."

In June, a pebble was tossed into the pond. The CRTC unexpectedly announced it was going to entertain suggestions for a Pay-TV system, reversing a decision it had made only the year before to shelve the whole idea. Nothing had changed; predictions still held that the private sector would be the winner and its profits would soar while Canadian programming would suf-



Stanley, Miriam and Lawrence Adams on the set of *Night Lights*, 1981

fer a commensurate decline that would challenge current policy, not to mention the economics of local filmmaking. Nonetheless, the Minister of Communications, Jeanne Sauvé, declared Pay-TV was going to happen and that the move was inevitable. What may seem odd now is the fact that so few people had any functioning idea of what pay television would look like, much less how it might possibly work in Canada. Most assumed it would follow the pattern of the systems cropping up in the United States, mainly cable-delivered commercial-free movie channels featuring a bit of soft-core (hard-core in hotels) and some live sports events. They imagined that movies, particularly movies from the U.S., would be immensely popular, and it didn't take research to see that this would siphon audiences and revenues from Canadian programs, or to understand how it would translate into a bonanza for cable companies. But what would Pay-TV do for Canadian culture? The community was deeply divided; Pay-TV was either the business opportunity of the century or a national travesty in the making.

In August, the Canadian Broadcasting League held a conference, *Crisis in Canadian Broadcasting*, in Halifax. In Toronto, the Council of Canadian Filmmakers (CCFM) held a seminar on the impact of Pay-TV on program production. The CCFM also spearheaded a multi-purpose research project that resulted in a hefty report on Pay-TV for industry wonks, and also a special insert in *Cinema Canada* magazine, which pulled together the best ideas and analysis of what was at stake. In his editorial, Kirwan Cox concluded, "Canada has no Pay TV errors to overcome (as we have in film, commercial television, radio and cable). We can design a Pay TV system from the ground up that is suited to us. We must apply vision to its design. We must not be afraid to be daring."<sup>10</sup>

The Pay-TV crisis was first and foremost about Canadian programs and the fear that the pay channels would fragment the national television system, impoverishing Canadian production. Nationalists and the CRTC were looking for mass communications systems with programming that reflected the country and the people living here. A fledgling film industry was looking for a market to flourish in and, frankly, the same kind of leg up that CanCon regulations on radio were giving Canadian music and songwriting by mandating percentages of Canadian content radio stations were required to play on-air.

It was probably inevitable that a man with Lawrence Adams's proclivities would end up in the thick of the effort to harness the promise of cable television for the arts community. Both he and Miriam came to their role as activists naturally; it grew out of the need for a milieu to cultivate their work as dancers. And it formally began with the Visus Foundation, set up in 1974 at the same time as 15 Dance Lab to document the history of Canadian choreography on video. But it was equally rooted in Lawrence's since-boyhood-fascination with things mechanical and scientific, his ease with technology and his huge desire to understand how things fit together. By the time of the Pay-TV announcement, the Adamses were already doing a weekly spot featuring the performing arts on Rogers Cable channel and had a thriving video production centre for artists. Their interest in the arts, politics and the city, and their network of connections and collaborations, eventually led to the creation of a weekly review of the local arts scene called *Night Lights*, which ran on Channel 10 for four months. The show featured reviews and commentary, as well as arts news and interviews. On-air hosts included Hank Bull from Vancouver's Western Front, and a string of local artists, writers and intellectuals who dropped around to air their often controversial views. The show was serious yet informal; full of Toronto, but not full of itself; downtown, edgy and curious.

As if taking Kirwan Cox's advice, Lawrence and Miriam decided to expand the concept into a proposal for a Pay-TV licence. When the CRTC called for applications in 1981, they joined the fray with their arts and culture channel focussed on the city of Toronto. Toronto Tele-Vision (TTV) promised a schedule of ninety percent Canadian content, with fifty percent of its budget (\$1 million) going into new production. Its approach and even its schedule stand up well after thirty years; in fact, TTV seems decidedly up-to-the minute with its promise of "A television service designed for Toronto, reflecting a national and a local perspective, with current information on Toronto's arts and cultural life, and a venue for Canada's individual film and video producers."<sup>11</sup> TTV pitched itself as the ultimate indie service. The proposal naturally garnered local and community support, but also had some business backing (notably the moral support of Rosedale stockbroker Strachan Bongard, who'd been on the board of the National Ballet), enough to put a serious application together.

Completely improbable today, the idea was a bit crazy even then. Here were a couple of community-based artists with more moxie than money bidding with the major players for a commercial TV licence. The main contenders that were licensed – C Channel, First Choice and Star Channel – have long since disappeared, and it's tempting to wonder if TTV would not have fared better. It was a miracle, of course, that the CRTC even short-listed the proposal. Perhaps it was the optics, visible proof that the process was open to all sorts of contenders, for CRTC hearings had become hot political events where citizens, businessmen and bureaucrats argued over the application of Canadian cultural policy and the ownership of the media. So there were Lawrence and Miriam, the bearded guru and the programming whiz with her corncob pipe, hyping their proposal in the air-conditioned formality of an Ottawa hotel, milling about the hallways with the executive suits. None of the stereotypes applied with those two; they had even arrived in Ottawa by bus.

Lawrence and Miriam saw that the media landscape was being transformed. Pay-TV was both evidence of the upheaval afoot and a catalyst for further change, and their response was to get in on the action. They understood the possibilities and went to work with what they had. In retrospect, we can see that Pay-TV did indeed spell the beginning of the end of the single public broadcasting system as Canadians had known it since the 1930s. At the same time, it signalled the end of the effort to turn cable into a tool for local cultural enterprise. As the string of non-profit, community-owned cable-TV co-ops slowly disappeared, so did the hope of developing a community-based public ownership model for the media, one to fit the so-called satellite age. (The only vestiges of that movement today are a few community radio stations like Vancouver's Co-op Radio.) By comparison, the model Lawrence and Miriam pioneered *has* persisted. To wit: the private-sector initiatives, the small, entrepreneurial, owner-operated and based-on-local production projects that built the cultural industries in the eighties.

The debate about Pay-TV seems quaint now given the Internet. But it definitely was the thin end of a wedge, even if it wasn't quite the wedge we thought it was at the time. True, Pay-TV did entrench broadcasting in the private sector, pushing public television aside, yet independent production acquired some traction

in the evolving multichannel, multimedia universe. Looking back and reading the runes, there were indeed portents there. For example, the *Cinema Canada* Pay-TV Special Section I edited with filmmaker Kirwan Cox in 1976 prompted us to seek an interview with Marshall McLuhan, who was known to take a dim view of the nationalist project.<sup>12</sup> We didn't expect sympathy for the filmmakers' concerns, but we were desperate for insights and imaginative forecasts.

The *Cinema Canada* insert featured a photo of McLuhan sitting cross-legged on the ground, hands clasped between his knees and grinning broadly, a Ferris wheel in the background radiating like a huge halo around his gleeful expression. He obviously enjoyed tweaking the nationalists. "Nationalism is an old form of activity based on hardware and hardware production. We're moving over to a world of software," he declared as soon as we got the tape recorder rolling. "I just finished a monolithic essay on the subject of Canadian identity," he continued, "and it's called 'Canada: The Borderline Case'.<sup>13</sup> My theme is quite simply that Canada has no identity because it has too many borderlines. Diversity does not create identity. It creates a very low-profile thing.... A borderline people don't have an identity; they have hundreds of identities." He went on to explain that you have to close off borders if you want to forge a unitary identity, which is why cataclysmic events like civil war can shortcut the process. He then offered this extraordinary comment: "The TV generation kids don't have a personal identity. They are so close to each other and to the rest of the world that they don't have any private identity left. When you are at a ball game you are a nobody, and these kids are at only one ball game around the world. They have no private identity and no goal. It's a new situation caused by electronic involvement with each other and it's never happened before so we can't judge."

Cox and I were mesmerized, but kept prodding, searching for clues. How would Pay-TV affect Canadian culture? McLuhan wasn't buying that one. "But the user is *always* the content of any program," he retorted. "Doesn't matter if he's a Hindu watching a Canadian program, it's a Hindu program. He translates it into himself, that's all." This seemed to contradict the famous thesis about the medium itself being the message and the content of the communication. But the professor was adamant. He finally

proposed we talk about what kind of new service Pay-TV represented instead, and he noted the degree to which the idea “really depends on the instant replay.” He was thinking here of the “pay-



per-view” approach that was leading the way then, but he was also reading the cultural signs implicit in the new media, in the growing individualization of television consumption. Curiously, he also noticed that Pay-TV had ties to both the computer and the photocopier. “You should be able to dial your computer terminal and get any show you want any time of the day or night,” he pointed out. “This is quite feasible. With a computer terminal you don’t have to wait for the channel to go into action.... Xerox, incidentally, should be very closely linked to Pay TV. It’s a service that has a lot in common. Xerox thinks everybody’s a publisher. Pay TV makes everybody a producer in a sense; it’s really producer-oriented not consumer-oriented.” You could swear McLuhan had been browsing YouTube.

Similarly, Lawrence and Miriam Adams’s TTV proposal possessed all the hallmarks of one of today’s specialty channels, and it would fit right into the contemporary scene. Think of it as the *NOW* magazine or the *Georgia Straight* channel. Of course, you can’t help wondering what would have happened had the CRTC had the courage of the Council of Canadian Filmmakers’ conviction, had it been willing to engage TTV’s promise. For what Miriam and Lawrence understood (and McLuhan never did) was that while culture can be expanded endlessly into networks girdling the globe, it still is rooted in the individual imagination and anchored by community.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and his wife Margaret were sometimes referred to as Maggie and Pierre, as in the play *Maggie and Pierre* (1980) by Linda Griffiths.
- <sup>2</sup> Broadcast television was traditionally distributed via microwave and received off-air by individual rooftop antennae. Cable television is delivered via coaxial cable laid underground. It eliminated reception problems and, most significantly, brought in distant American channels. Once satellite communication was added to the mix, television was able to reach communities which had little or no service before, such as the far North.
- <sup>3</sup> Hon. Jeanne Sauvé, Speech to the Canadian Cable Television Association, Toronto, June 2, 1976. Reprinted in *Cinema Canada* (August 1976), 7.
- <sup>4</sup> Cable is not limited, as broadcasting is, by the finite number of frequencies available. Originally the industry’s greatest asset was the free programming

it took off-air, its sole investment in production being the CRTC-required community channel (channel 10). Pay-TV ushered in the world of non-broadcast channels delivering service across the country by cable and satellite. Hundreds of specialty channels have subsequently been licensed.

- <sup>5</sup> Video opened up the possibility of home-programming through movie rentals and VCR machines. But it also drastically reduced the costs of production, in part by reducing the size of a crew.
- <sup>6</sup> Gordon chaired The Royal Commission on Canada's Economic Prospects whose two reports, released in 1956 and 1957, raised concerns about the growing foreign ownership of the Canadian economy. Gordon subsequently was elected to Parliament and was Minister of Finance between 1963 and 1965.
- <sup>7</sup> Graham Spry, often called the Father of Canadian Broadcasting, uttered these words before the Parliamentary Committee on Broadcasting in 1932 that was contemplating the establishment of a publicly owned radio network. "The question before the Committee is whether Canada is to establish a chain [radio network] that is owned and operated by Canadians, or whether it is to be owned and operated by commercial organizations associated or controlled by American interests. The question is, the State or the United States."
- <sup>8</sup> Miriam Adams, interview by author, Fall 2004.
- <sup>9</sup> The original Portapak, introduced by Sony in 1967, was a battery operated, self-contained video-recording unit that one person could carry but was usually operated by two. Later versions had playback capacity and cassettes lasting thirty, and later ninety, minutes. It made motion picture production available to artists, activists and communities.
- <sup>10</sup> Editorial, *Cinema Canada* 3, Pay-TV Special Section (August 1976): 4.
- <sup>11</sup> A proposal for Toronto Tele-Vision, prepared by Arts Inter-Media, 155A George Street, Toronto, title page.
- <sup>12</sup> Kirwan Cox and S.M. Crean, "It Will Probably End the Motor Car: An Interview with Marshall McLuhan," in *Cinema Canada* 3, Pay-TV Special Section (August 1976): 26-29.
- <sup>13</sup> Marshall McLuhan, "Canada: The Borderline Case," in *The Canadian Imagination: Dimensions of a Literary Culture*, ed. David Staines (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1977): 226-248.