One of the first conferences on "communications" was probably held in Rome, in the year 270 B.C., during the reign of Tacitus, and most likely bore on the reliability of messengers, optimal use of the Appian Way, the allocation of air routes to owners of homing pigeons and the effects of triremes on international trade. The first such conference I had the honour of attending took place in Ottawa, in the Year 4 before Pierre Trudeau and was devoted to the regulation of broadcasting and the foreseeable effects of multi-channel television on the country's literary culture. Today still -- and it remains an object of mystery -- governments continue to define "communications" in terms of telephones and cameras. You will understand, then, the need to begin by shedding some light on the too generous nature of this word.

The advantage of coat-rack words such as communications, information, etc. is their capacity to receive all kinds of costumes and dressware. It is not my intention to trim down the definition of communications but rather to show its double meaning when used in relation to culture. To me, the first meaning of the word "communications" refers to the technical, structural aspects of communications, which are in themselves messages that can deeply affect cultures, regardless of their values or their historical importance. I'm thinking here, for example, of the successful religious conversion of a Latin American tribe as told by Claude Levi-Strauss in one of the most beautiful books of anthropology (and of travel) I have ever read, Tristes tropiques. The problem, so to speak, was the following: a Brasillian nation had a solid social system and pagan beliefs that Franciscan fathers couldn't erase. This tribe had always built its huts around a circle, in the center of which stood two big houses: one for women councils, the other for men councils. Missionaries had tried unsuccessfully for twenty years to convert these infidel. One day, the Jesuits were called in. They decided to resort to "communications." They had a nice straight road built a few kilometers from the village and huts rationally aligned along both sides of this road. The tribe was then invited, by force, to move into these new and cleaner huts. One year later, these natives whose culture had always made them communicate in a circle, were converted: the new communication ties created by the straight road had restructured them. Such was the deep, hidden meaning of Western technology applied to the concept of the shortest path.
between two points. I could also mention the case of the village of St. Joseph in Manitoba, thirty-five miles from Winnipeg, where French Canadian culture in the West strove until fifteen years ago. A freeway, split the village in half. At the same time English television was reaching it. Within a few years, St. Joseph was converted from a French-speaking Manitoban village into a "bilingual" suburb of the capital city.

Communication techniques and technology tear cultures apart in often unsuspected ways. In a sense, shopping centers can be considered as a communication technique. Implanting a shopping mall at the outskirts of a small town empties its main commercial street and quickly kills the heart of town. Local people are usually quite proud of their new market place. They don't realize that it belongs to transnational enterprises who reproduce, without batting an eyelid, design and marketing patterns that work in large department stores in the United States where studies have been carried out on the relationship between colours, volume and shifts in customer habits. These patterns will affect the behaviour of small town people and will slowly turn them into California guinea-pigs.

But let's not anticipate.

The second meaning I give to communication is that of a discourse on culture, since the media, after all, "mediatise." That discourse determines the mythical programming of society. Allow me an example: to go to California last year, I flew with American Airlines. I had barely sat down in the aircraft when I saw three thin, blue-eyed stewardesses coming toward me. I said to myself that the first stewardess, who had a profound and sad look, must certainly have divorced recently: one could see the trace left on her finger by a wedding ring. The second was a stewardess only for the time it would take to obtain a role in a movie: she does her hair and smiles like the pale imitators of Faye Dunaway. Still speaking to myself, I thought the third stewardess, more buxom than the others, playfully distributing orange juice all around her, must live in a Los Angeles suburb, with a palm tree in her back yard, own a convertible, like an occasional affair with a passing gangster. I was in that plane only five minutes and here I was fabricating, inventing a past and an adventuresome future for these stewardesses!

I have often flown Air Canada but have never surprised myself distributing roles to that airline's stewardesses. This is not meant as a comment on the looks or appearance of Air Canada's personnel; rather it's a media effect, the product of American film discourse. Since they were Californian, American Airlines' personnel were worthy of the imaginary. To this day, women employees of Air Canada are condemned to the documentary. That's interesting when one stops to think that by definition a documentary is of the public domain whereas fiction is of the private domain.
But let's not anticipate.

Communications are thus both a message and a discourse. The first is of a scientific order, almost quantitative, the second can be seen as a huge retroaction. Unfortunately, there's not much we can do to control, humanize, nationalize or even socialize the technological message of communications which is spreading throughout the world uniformly and insensitively.

A television station, with its electronic hardware, its cameras, its speakers, comes with directions for use. When Canada, for example, gives an African country the equipment required to set up a television emitting antenna, its users will have no choice but to follow instructions regarding the organizational aspects of things, the recording of content and the broadcasting of Western cultures. No one can manage the effects of communication technology on cultures.

Yet one can wonder whether culture, in the anthropological sense of the word, is really threatened by it. Certain culture forms do indeed disappear and if primitive peoples do adopt modern ways, only readers of National Geographic might find it deplorable. It is unthinkable that parts of the world should be deprived of modern means of communications just to satisfy the exotic needs of Club Meds. On the other hand, communication discourse is not less important than its message. Indeed, national sovereignties will rise or fall on the terrain of the media.

Certain means of communication: the telephone, the automobile, the airplane and in all likelihood the computer, will never be anything more than message plumbing. But others like printed matter, television, film, radio, and sound recording, since they are used by creators, allow the transformation of reality [at least our perception of it], the creation of signs, slogans, symbols, desires, scares, dreams, objects of trade, of language and of identity. The representational system which results from all this perhaps the main factor in the scientific, economic and social evolution of a nation and of its capacity to define a common good. It could even be said that those who dominate the discourse of communications create the myths that are the oxygen of a society. We all know, for example, that the American popular culture discourse, as it reaches us through the electronic media, has on small cultures an effect similar to that of acid rain on our lakes and forests.

A small culture, as defined by the Czech writer Milan Kundera, is a culture whose people are always worried, always aware that it might be wiped out.

All forests are not equal before acid rain; their ability to survive depends on the types of its trees, on the strength of their roots and on the direction of dominant winds which move toxic clouds. All cultures are not equal before the discourse of communications. But
to denounce -- as I have often done -- the invasion of our minds by American commercial audio-visuals is about as effective as spitting against the wind! Besides, this anguish we sometimes feel in the face of cultural homogenization produced by the erosion effect of American media, is it really founded? Might it not be inspired by a puritan point of view we inherited from a humanistic education? I think it was Bernard Shaw who defined puritanism as an uncontrollable fear that someone somewhere might be happy.

It was with those noble and sad thoughts that I left Canada last Winter to take up a teaching assignment at Berkeley. I had just completed, with Florian Sauvageau, a short length movie [Quebec Soft] on the evolution of popular music in Quebec, a music which according to French economist Jacques Attali, foretells the eventual domestication of Quebecois culture by the great California cowboy. The last shot of the film is that of an Ile d'Orleans violinist playing in front of an electronic dish antenna, in a typical old Quebec world setting, her rigadoon smothered by the sound of American media broadcasts. Pessimistic images, desperate images even, putting an end to twenty five years of cultural vitality.

As soon as I arrived in San Francisco, I felt both at home and abroad: normal feelings after all since I was landing there knowing the whole history of the American and Californian way of life. Now, to really blend into the Californian way of life, one must first accept to move around in an airtight bubble, with no intention of ever meeting someone. Sole satisfactions must come from money, the great outdoors and shopping centers. There are no yesterdays, no tomorrows: nothing but space. The real Californian is "spaced out," as they say, an absent cosmonaut from this planet's nitty-gritty, and above all, totally oblivious to political realities. In fact, the millions of motorists who drive at fifty-five miles an hour on the best freeways in the world, night and day, represent the best and most frequently quoted metaphor of life in California. Everyone is in his or her motive mobile livingroom, listening to his or her favourite radio station, in Spanish, Japanese, English, music of the forties, country music or heavy metal; never looking right or left, barely a glance in the side-view mirror when changing lanes. Californians going from point A and point B, enclosed in their personal piece of Utopia. Californians spend two or three hours in their cars like we spend twenty minutes in ours; they are not only motorized: they are automotorized. But since they do not have a past (California's history only goes back as far as the invention of railroads), they are constantly playing a role. For instance, on Alcatraz Street, not far from where I lived in Berkeley, there's a wine merchant. It's a small place, owned by a huge man with an abundant mustache, raised on orange juice and Corn Flakes. Now every time you buy a bottle of wine, you are entitled to a speech by a wine expert. Twice weekly, this merchant opens his doors to wine-growers who personally give lessons in wines to customers. Rather like a librarian inviting writers to speak to customers, according to the strictest "yuppy" rules. In the same manner as the motorist hidden
behind his sunglasses, protected by the shiny bodywork of his Porsche, the wine merchant on Alcatraz Street gives his bi-weekly wine-merchant show. All of California is a show and more than a billion viewers looked at the Oscar Awards this year. The great human family reunited by Hollywood. And whether I like it or not, I'm part of that family.

I must admit that I've always taken great pleasure in watching California shows; they are admittedly among the most entertaining in the world. As a matter of fact, American cultural productions are usually so dynamic that they leave you breathless. The American population is forty times greater than Quebec's. California alone is inhabited by as many people as all of Canada. Any company, regardless of its product, has only to divide the American population into market segments and be reasonably assured of a profitable undertaking; whether it be fast-foods or luxury item cookies. Music-hall, burlesque, comedy and melodrama are the mainstays of the whole cultural reference system in California. It sometimes appears exaggerated, even grotesque: but it always works. Furthermore, creative efforts are encouraged in all areas: during the first week of last April, I could have enrolled in the San Francisco Bay Area, into no less than seventeen creative writing seminars. I did not meet in Northern California a single teacher, taxi driver, secretary, grocer or real estate agent who didn't dream of becoming a writer. When novelist Kurt Vonnegut gave a conference at Berkeley ($13.00 a ticket) half the audience (1,000 / 2,000) admitted they wanted to imitate him. Every university in the U.S. has its writer in residence for creative writing courses and most often it is renowned writers who thus give birth to new authors. And nothing in all this is lost for Hollywood which finds in these texts the subject matter it needs for its films and television series. American culture is remarkable both in its complex manifestations and in its shows for teenagers.

The attention given to teenagers is in fact the key to the whole marketing effort of cultural products in the United States. French culture has "serious," intellectual models chosen by adults, as is the case in most European, African, or Asian cultures. In the United States, on the contrary, teenagers are the ones who allow fortunes to be made or lost. It shouldn't surprise anyone that American audiovisual products have a universal power of attraction.

When I was ten or twelve, my father was very critical of products imported from the United States. He used to warn me against what he called an infantile culture. He was certainly right, in light of our own national culture and I met a lot of people in California who, after fifteen years of sunshine, nature worship, isolation, and "superficial" trends and styles, wanted to go back East, to Boston, to New York and even to Europe in order to make contact once again with cultural forms in which thought and discussion are more important than role-playing.
It is often our naivete or our ignorance which leads us to think that everything comes from Hollywood. Take theatre, for example, Los Angeles depends almost entirely on New York which in turn depends in great part on London for quality plays, actors and producers. On the other hand, what must be remembered is that California not only sells entertainment but more important still, appropriates works from the world over, then sells itself as utopia. Ultimately, it can be said that today, all fiction is defined by Hollywood whereas all information comes from New York. This division is interesting because it confers to the West Coast the responsibility of the imaginary and to the East Coast that of the documentary! Information and bad news grow, so to speak, in cold northern countries; good news and the spectacular tend to thrive under a warm sun.

No wonder this division of tasks encourages immigration to the West Coast. Yet one can wonder about the nature of such a strange culture where emotions are found on the Pacific and knowledge on the Atlantic. I started out by reading San Francisco newspapers and found them only interested in very local news, the war on drugs, pollution of marshlands and the disarray of homosexuals concerning AIDS. It must be said though that in Berkeley at least, these newspapers are not as widely read as the dozen or so free, special-interest publications intended for intellectuals, parents, computer fans, worried bachelors, people who have a passion for shows, antique objects or nature, these weeklies all have excellent main features but no "national" or "international" information. What counts is your head, your stomach, your ills and pains, your buttocks, but what happens in the world does not reach the Bay area, not even television news which is sanitized in order not to shock viewers and sponsors. I was forced to subscribe to the New York Times for fear of losing all contacts with my culture!

Berkeley's main communication needs are met by Pacific Bell's telephone poles: thousands of posters are pasted or stapled one to each other on these poles. If you're too lazy to do it yourself, you can resort to one of at least three companies who specialize in stapling your messages for so much a pole.

As far as the press of opinion is concerned, aside from the aforementioned weeklies, it takes the form of posters in windows protesting against the use of nuclear power, or promoting peace, poetry, delta-planes. It is also possible, for one citizen, each day, to express his or her opposition to public authority during thirty seconds on commercial television. Such are the nutshell forms that messages of public interest take in California.

As I was leaving last week, a conference was being held by Public Television stations who these days talk only about money. On the sidewalk facing the hotel where a certain number of conference participants stayed, a solitary demonstrator held a placard over his head reading: "The media are professional liars. We want the truth."
The truth is that we bathe in the most complete intellectual confusion that a strong right-wing movement in Western countries is seeking to take advantage of real errors committed by state political bodies and thereby level out the field of culture. It is always easier to demolish an old historic building and to build a parking lot in the name of technology and profit than to renovate it. That’s where we stand today in the realm of communications. Communication institutions are having their funds cut off and being forced, as noted by Jean-Paul L’Allier, to become private television stations or networks belonging to the state, side by side with profit-oriented television.

Public Broadcasting in the United States is caught in this political windstorm. It can no longer produce great series like those on Vietnam, the human brain or China. It is even succumbing to the temptation to commercialism and one can sense that in all sorts of ways, media discourse is being integrated into consumerism. This blend is creating a curious mythology, rather far from Greek or Semite gods. As Robert Heilbroner observed in Harper’s, if the Russians invented "social realism" as an unsubtle art of propaganda showing real workers and real peasants transformed into the real heroes of revolution, Americans invented "capitalistic realism", where real sportspeople and real housekeepers are transformed into the true heroes of consumerism. The gods of the stadium, of Pepsi, and of fast foods are elated by the heady wine of praise rising from our offerings.

In San Francisco, the educational television station (KQED) enjoys an enviable position: it has broadcast, since the beginning, on one of the nine available VHF channels. Again this Spring, the KQED board of directors turned down a fifty million dollar offer to trade its channel for a UHF one. Now this refusal was inspired less by the desire to better serve its audience than by the hope of eventually staking out its place in the market of commercial television.

For a year now, in New Jersey, in Los Angeles, in New Orleans or in Philadelphia, Public Broadcasting viewers have been exposed to thirty-second commercials identical to those of commercial networks. Last May, General Foods sold its bacon and breakfast cereals during a programme called The Sporting Life. In 1983, private companies spent thirty-eight million dollars for publicity on Public Broadcasting System; last year, that sum rose to fifty-seven million dollars. This year, certain Public Broadcasting stations are expecting an increase of 300% in paid commercials.

The basic issue, then, is whether the commercial discourse of communications -- whose loudest voice is the U.S.'s -- will make us silent. In Rome and Brussels, 85% of television programmes are American.

Because the dominant discourse has convinced them that there no longer exist countries and cultures, that the only thing we inhabit are "markets," politicians cannot conceive the possibility of investing "at
a loss" in indigenous cultural productions. Imagine, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation must spend $350,000 to produce one hour of "Canadian" content! Now for ten times less than that it can buy one hour of American content which has already been paid for in the United States. Is English Canada's cultural independence worth that price?

But the question here is not only that of a country's cultural existence or independence. What is involved is a new form of "class struggle." The elite which used to define the criteria of a national culture no longer represent a "profitable" market. In the name of the people, programming which seduces rather than informs or reveals will be required. In the eyes of those who lean to the right, a shopping centre must be worth an university.

"Cultural" channels in the United States, even private ones, do not survive. In Japan, Nippon Hosš Kyokai (N.H.K.) which celebrated its sixtieth anniversary and owns two television and three radio networks, is slowly falling to pieces. Last year, thirty million Japanese households each contributed fifty dollars to N.H.K. It nonetheless accumulated a 600 million dollar deficit. As a result this year N.H.K. has turned toward programmes that enable it to compete with commercial channels.

The underlying philosophy is simple: according to Milton Friedman, one of President Reagan's advisors, those who use a service must pay for it themselves. It is thus possible to submerge and wipe out small markets. But is it irrelevant whether we are dealing with shoes or culture? The privatization of communication hardware begins with planes, goes on to television and eventually will reach education. Hasn't the administration of certain prisons in the United States been turned over to private enterprise? Interesting dilemma: private enterprise, which is presently paid $23.00 a prisoner, will have to promote crime to increase its profits. More criminals will make for happier shareholders!

This logic is not absurd: it is mind-boggling. All the more so that the driving forces which mark the economic system -- most apparent in California -- originate in great part from the massive injection of public funds in private enterprises manufacturing armaments. Public grants to private enterprises now appear to be "morally" more acceptable than those allocated to State endeavours!

In his recent book, The Heavens and the Earth, Walter McDougall, professor of History at the University of California at Berkeley, describes in an intelligent manner the political evolution of the space age. The single most important historic event since the Second World War, according to McDougall, was the launching, in 1957, of the first Sputnik. At first glance, it didn't appear to be anything more than a step forward in the conquest of space. But in reality, the launching
of this first satellite, which President Lyndon Johnson called a technological "Pearl Harbor," so humiliated the United States that it became a turning point of recent American history.

From that day on, the launching in orbit by the Russians of a man-made satellite around our planet not only turned the Cold War into something really threatening but literally transformed the whole American way of life. Sputnik turned out to be a major political event in the United States, doing away with President Eisenhower's idea of a modest, low-profile, federal government, with a balanced budget, remaining at a comfortable distance from the military and leaving initiatives to private enterprise.

New federal policies arose whereby Washington suddenly assumed the leadership in operations, in scientific and technological innovations -- and later in social initiatives -- with huge deficits -- generously financed university and private enterprise research and development. Capitalistic technocracy was thus born, according to McDougall, from U.S. -- U.S.S.R. competition. He goes on to say that, in fact, this technological competition forced traditional American cultural ways to resemble their Soviet counterparts.

If the United States have taken a line of thought and action whereby democracy has slowly evolved into technocracy and even if personal freedom is still valued in America, McDougall thinks that the sovietization of the American liberal society has been greater than the Americanization of Russian society.

It's an interesting thought. It is true, at least at first sight, that Hungarian discotheques on the Danube, the clothes worn by Czech youth in the streets of Karlsbad, and the crowded movie houses in Moscow where American films are shown appear to indicate that Hollywood is rubbing off on people living on both sides of the ideological curtain. A Hungarian writer who was asked what he thought about this invasion, said it didn't have much importance. He saw California as the melting pot of a new European -- inspired culture and named Germans, Czechs and Hungarians who sign works in the United States that are thought to be American. "What protects us," he said, "are language and history. Youths wearing T-shirts and dancing to Michael Jackson's music, then three months later to Prince's and Madonna's, will become adults and will remain faithful to their culture." Canadians can certainly envy such self-confidence!

In France and Norway, according to a recent issue of Variety, Amadeus attracted more people than Ghost Busters. Could it be a question of differing mentalities?

I'm speaking of a situation without precedent in international relations. The world had never seen a dominant culture invade with such ease national territories. This immediate and sometimes unconscious access to American systems of representation and information is a rather extra-ordinary thing. In a sense, individual liberties, our
own, increase from day to day. Freedom to see, to receive, to judge cultural products and to make them one's own...but it remains a made-in-USA culture.

As you know, the United States last April inaugurated the Worldnet network, broadcasting, by satellite, from New York, two hours a day of television in Europe. European cable will offer these two hours to its customers who will thus receive American television directly: the voice of America now has a face.

In the light of all this, are the communication development schemes of our small countries united by the Canadian confederation, adequate? Doubts arise when we see government, plugging on the two meanings of the word communication, ask creators to think of their work in terms of export as if it was dealing with electronic engineers. Both federal and provincial governments mix up messages and discourse. If the laws of international competition make sense for telephone policies, they are deadly for film policies.

He who controls the noise, says Jacques Attali, controls the world. Canadian society must give itself the means to produce and control its own noises.

To protect ourselves from cultural acid rains, to go on freely receiving all that is produced in the world, to go on enjoying the American media, to help our youth fall back on its Canadian feet, I can identify six areas of intervention which could be the object of intelligent discussion:

1) firstly, Canadian content must be redefined in qualitative rather than quantitative terms. Even, if Radio-Canada or C.B.C. television, for example, had 90% Canadian content, it wouldn't be an alternative to American programmes. Viewers will always choose what pleases them most. In my opinion, it would be preferable, for the purposes of export and of domestic broadcasting, to spend available funds on the production of a limited number of quality programmes or series by renowned and competent people who could count on means comparable to those of Hollywood, rather than on a poor-man's television which can never be more than "token television."

2) We must cease using government grants to the arts, literature, theatre, book publishing or film productions as though such subsidies were part of a job-creation programme. Universal justice which inspired family allowances doesn't have its place in communication discourse. So it is, for example, that the whole
policy of regional grants by the Department of Cultural Affairs in Quebec has deeply hindered Quebecois culture. In this area, the Parti Quebecois brought about its own destruction.

3) We will have to be extremely critical for a long time to come. Private investors in television are either dumb or liars. We all knew, for example, that pay-TV in French would neither be profitable nor a source of income for the domestic film industry. It didn't prevent entrepreneurs and the government from giving us a subsidized pay-television. Same situation as far as a third commercial channel is concerned: and we already know that it will be a subsidized private enterprise, thanks to the Fox fund. It's becoming outright indecent.

4) It is time for Canadians to realize that those who sell hardware are precisely that: salespeople. The micro-computers adventure, the millions of dollars invested in Telidon are sufficient proof that governments dive head first into technological solutions to social problems. Now we are in dire need of adequate language courses, of a revitalized high school system or of philosophy courses than of little electronic trains that amuse journalists, public servants and politicians.

5) In order to fill the available space on cable channels in an intelligent manner, we must make the necessary arrangements to broadcast European programmes. TV 99 is a model that deserves to be improved and reproduced, especially. There is room on cable for the B.B.C., Spanish, Russian, German, and other television programmes which computer-assisted sub-titles would make understandable. During the next decade, Canadian citizens must become the most world-open viewers imaginable. And this can be achieved at less cost than certain ventures proposed by the C.R.T.C.

6) Finally, the future of our culture is being played on CEGEP and university campuses: in all areas, including communications. After spending five months in a California university, I've acquired the conviction that academia is the only place where the founding bases of art and culture can be shown, reviewed, read about, discussed, and explained, without being interrupted by a three-minute commercial.
Since 1960, I have witnessed in Quebec, a remarkable endeavour to promote culture in the classroom. This should be said more often. Quality Quebecois literature, for example, would not exist were it not for the teachers of that literature. To educate is to conserve and transmit social values. If on the one hand there are creators and on the other, a public, it is academic institutions which are the catalyst of cultural products.

Communications (with their hidden messages and their noisy discourse) must be set to the task of promoting our intelligence. I don't believe the ultimate aim of our civilization is that we should become more stupid than our ancestors. And if those who no longer see but the economic dimension of things need reassuring, California offers a convincing example that money is always more attracted by knowledge than by ignorance.

Indeed, the only valid cultural strategy for this country in the extraordinary world of communications, is to invest always more in education; for if we are condemned to become Americans some day -- as pessimistics would have it -- we might as well become enlightened, very enlightened Americans. That is the big lesson to draw from California.

FOOTNOTES

1 Jacques Godbout was the Southam Lecturer at the Canadian Communication Association Conference in Montreal, June 1985. The lecture was translated by Michel de Repentigny.

The French version of the lecture is to be found in Communication, 1986, 7 (3), 9 - 22.