Art versus Mediocrity, Imagination versus Fear: Can we take our heads out of the Tar Sands and put them in the classroom?

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Responses
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“Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing.”
George Orwell, 1984

“Great is truth, but still greater, from a practical point of view, is silence about truth.”
Aldous Huxley, Brave New World

As an adolescent in the Canadian school system my peers and I were made to read George Orwell’s 1984 and Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World. In my memory these pieces of literature were foisted upon us to develop some understanding of how modern, efficient, technocratic and centralized states could run amuck on humanity. The literal exemplification of such totalitarianism, we learned, were the Communists in Russia or Red China, Nazis in Germany or even, it being the tail-end of Vietnam and Watergate, Nixon’s America. The lesson was rounded out by setting these totalitarian states and their infliction on humanity in contrast to Canada. Canada was put forward as the anti-thesis of the same, a superior, lily-white prince amongst nations, a democracy, un-Communist, the good country – much better than America – where Canadians cared for Canadians and reflexively cared for the rest of the world.

Absorbed, as such lessons are in grade school, this Canadian mythology of moral superiority, bred in the Cold War to fill the vacuum left by receding colonial attachments to another country’s King or Queen, seems as firmly set in Canada’s current sense of itself as it was when I learned of its veracity in the 1970s. All countries were forced in one way or another to respond to the Cold War and the grip of totalitarianism, the defining condition of human society throughout much of the 20th Century. When the Iron Curtain lifted most countries evolved, shedding or revising their mythologies with the times, many taking on board the lessons of free speech and critical discourse that Orwell and Huxley exemplify. The European Union being one good example. In Canada, however, the mythology rooted in the Cold War, has remained largely static. An adolescent amongst nations, Canada still plods along, the mythology of its superiority largely unshilled, content in the soft-pastel of undeniable perfection, contemptuous of criticism internal or external that dares suggest anything otherwise. Canada tells itself and the world, without irony, that the world needs more Canadians. Critical reflection or self-appraisal are not Canadian traits. Indeed in some circles such reflection is deemed unpatriotic.

Are Orwell’s and Huxley’s masterpieces ideal primers by which to understand Canada’s political and civil society? Orwell’s and Huxley’s art, a commentary on centralized, technology driven, efficient states, organized around imperatives invented by elites, incisively cuts to the chase of what strangled much of human society for most of the 20th Century. A Brave New World and 1984 are about places where no critical thinking, substantive discussion or debate can be allowed for fear that such might contradict whatever the central power deems worthy and correct. Of what I remember of these novels, the bromides, the state’s language of cheery euphemism and double-speak, are even more chilling and insidious than the direct, blatant repression. The authors direct us to a world of extremes where nothing is what it appears to be and nothing can be trusted - least of all anything emanating from the power at the centre.

Canadian society is structured around a relatively few large, public and private, institutions run by a relatively small interchangeable bunch of CEOs, bureaucrats, accountants, communications professionals, pollsters, and the odd ideologue. The level of centralization might make a Soviet central planner blush. With
little notion of the public good and few ideals or ideas about making the world a better place, they fill the resulting moral vacuum with a curious mix of personal entitlement, institutional imperative, moral superiority and free market ideology. The latter, more often than not, is most staunchly advocated for by those the furthest removed from any market, safely ensconced either in the bureaucracies of large monopolistic corporations or public sector silos, safely isolated from either the market or public accountability. The larger they are the more intent they seem on defining their own agenda as the public agenda (also known as spin), leaving in their efforts no stone unturned in incrementally bankrupting, in the name of whatever imperative, public trust and integrity. Justifiably, Canadians cannot and do not trust public institutions, the various levels of government where politicians and bureaucrats are reflexively reviled, public interest institutions, NGOs promoting one or another narrow point of view especially if it helps with “development” (fund raising), a media where reportage is usually facile and editorial or both, or business institutions where actual good old fashioned creativity, innovation and productivity is not nearly as celebrated as a corporate culture of greed and rule-breaking.

All happily bathing in the same tepid, yellow bathwater, virtuously swimming (when not out for a jog) around in each others’ social circles (without making waves), the leaders of Canadian society seem intent on forming society in the image of their mediocre selves. It is a world of cultivating the status quo, shunning intellectual challenges, avoiding responsibility, and shying from risk except where such risk can be foisted onto others. Their efforts set ever lower standards for public engagement and their behaviour is centred around a profound lack of respect for the public they are intent on influencing. Swim a little with each group to discover just how many adjectives and adverbs can be mobilized to describe the contempt so many have for the public they purport to represent or whose needs they purport to cater to. Environmental NGOs, politicians, senior bureaucrats or business people, all seem to have language describing just how stupid and malleable the broader population is, in particular those segments which cannot be convinced of their particular agenda.

I can’t remember if the invention of foes and the cultivation of conflict within and external to a society as a foil for avoiding meaningful discussion and debate within that society is part of either Huxley’s or Orwell’s commentary; if it is, Canada might be Exhibit A. Name calling is All-Canadian, where in lieu of seriously addressing the myriad of issues and concerns facing Canadian society, the common, knee-jerk response is to attack the character and integrity of critical individuals or organizations and/or to quickly direct and oversimplify inconvenient issues into an us-versus-them argument that has little if anything to do with the issue. It is meaningless, unhelpful, of no substance and so very boring. It is also intentional. The endless screaming matches of east against west, rural versus urban, one city against another, French versus English, enviros against industry, are all rather the same: each party relying on yelling to simplistically help define itself against the other, content to never go beyond the safe predictable antagonism – a little akin to staged pro-wrestling, minus most of the entertainment value - and risk meaningfully addressing the issue, one’s supposed opponents or even oneself. Doing anything else risks redefining oneself and possibly evolving, rising beyond the mediocre to become intellectually and morally engaged with broader society.

In this uncritical, thoughtless and mediocre culture, the most serious victim is probably public process and citizenship. What is lost is the notion that public interest can and should be mediated through representative public institutions where different, competing interests are grappled with within open public forums with generally agreed-upon conduct that values individual and collective contributions both for the sake of these contributions and the integrity of the public process. Notwithstanding the many claims to the contrary by those very institutions that actively undermine them (much of Canada’s public administration, where the civil service is neither, and most of our political parties where being anti-political is the new politics), Canada is a society in which public engagement is increasingly nominal, where people have simply
given up in the face of being unable to trust much of what is foisted on them by institutions, public or private.

The development of the bitumen deposits in Northern Alberta is a poster child for what ails Canadian society. Their development has happened absent the checks and balances that a mature, democratic society might have in place to protect the public interest, however that might be defined. It represents what Canada’s elite can come up with when they all work together to achieve their own self-defined interests, working largely behind closed doors in the context of opaque relationships within close social circles where the overlap between private and public domains is blurred and the protagonists neither recognize nor, it seems, understand the difference between their own interest and public interest. I don’t believe that Orwell or Huxley could have invented a better or more representative phrase than that authored by the elites themselves, the so-called “Declaration of Opportunity” of 1996 that became the blueprint for the unprecedented, massive industrial project in Northern Alberta.

It was a mix of being contrarian, being an artist and just plain curiosity that drew me to Northern Alberta to photograph the massive industrial project that is the development of the bitumen deposits. People in the tens of thousands were streaming from all over Canada to the oil patch, Canada’s latest and greatest Shangri-La. In 2007 the tar sands and Fort McMurray had become a kind of Mecca, a cultural pole in Canada’s psyche, drawing Canadians (and people from other countries) who saw in it the potential to fulfill aspirations as varied and complex as each aspirant. After ten years of preferential public policy and subsidy and with a healthy dose of luck in the form of unprecedented oil prices, Fort Mac was becoming as iconic as the Klondike once was. It had become its own metaphor: not only an Opportunity, it was defining Canada in the image of its aspirants, elite or otherwise. Nevertheless, despite being the talk of every town and coffee shop, despite having become a cultural constant, it was most curiously almost entirely absent - and certainly absent in proportion to its economic, social, cultural and political importance - from Canada’s public institutions, its media and within its political process. How could something so big be so absent for so long? How could this get so little coverage in Canada’s media and such little space in Canada’s political discourse? While some has changed in the last while, with fairly constant media coverage since late 2010 (after James Cameron visited Fort McMurray) and, for the first time in mid-2012, the leader of a major political party substantially addressing the issue (followed, most predictably by almost universal editorial mockery, how very Canadian) there are certainly some questions that Canadians should ask themselves about how this issue has been handled (or not handled).

What I found when I flew over the tar sands was overwhelming. Perhaps the only thing in my experience that came close in scale/industrial devastation were the ruins of factories and entire towns in East Germany or Romania shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and those were minuscule in comparison. It was like traveling to a distant country, exotic, bizarre and otherworldly. Within minutes of flying over this fantastical scene I blurted out “Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness.” Some emotion associated with reading this book, also in my adolescence, was triggered by what was unfolding below.

As an artist it was simply child’s play to respond to this industrial landscape utterly enormous in its scale and fantastical in its detail. It is a kaleidoscope of incredibly beautiful shapes, lines, movement, colour, smoke, dust clutter and calmness. Whatever opinions I might have reflexively harboured as a contrarian, to think and believe that this must be bad, melted into a heady, singular experience of simply responding without editorializing, to just see it for what it is, unfiltered. It was easy to respond with honesty, with integrity to this thing below. That first experience was jolting; the effort to record what I was seeing morphed, I think, into recording what I was feeling. As much as my preconceptions and prejudices drew me to the place, these fell away.

My views evolved. Since that shoot, the project took on a name “Beautiful Destruction” and I set about trying to learn about the industry and its activities, sometimes delving into onerous technical detail, at other
times trying to situate what I had recorded in its broader context. There is much good about the project, as there is much bad and as such the development is as complex and contradictory as we are as humans. There is certainly drama here, substantiated by anyone I have met with a real relationship with the project – workers commuting from somewhere else in Canada, people who grew up in Fort McMurray, activists from Fort Chipewyan, and many others who, whether for or against, or more interestingly both, express conflicted views about what they are part of.

In some manner that I do not understand completely, my response to the project, these images of the development, seem to touch a nerve, not primarily around the polarities cultivated by the protagonists – although they do that too – but in another space where it becomes OK to contemplate the imagery for its form and aesthetic, where room is created, perhaps even in anti-thesis to the simple polarity, for people to think, imagine and contemplate on their own terms, according to their own ideas and values. When this happens, and it seems to with regularity with often very different people, then I, as an artist, no longer own or control what is happening. The viewer does. Firmly in the domain of the imagination of the viewer, this could not make me happier.

I opened this essay with reference to the art of Huxley and Orwell. They left me with an impression, just as they have for countless millions, whereby with their art, the crafting of prose, they stimulate the minds and imagination and thereby made some very important, critical points about the social and political conditions of their time. I’ve used what I understand of their art to help me make my points, to share my opinions, about the development of the bitumen fields in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Of course, in invoking them, I risk being pillared for implying, by association, that Canada is some Stalinist or Fascist state. Though it is by no means impossible that Canada could become such a thing (one only has to look to Argentina to see how a similar resource extraction country that was culturally, economically and socially on par with Canada at the end of WWII can disintegrate) that is not my intent.

While the development of the tar/oil sands is without doubt of serious environmental concern, the real problem is how Canada as a society and culture arrived at this point. By invoking Orwell and Huxley I’m attempting to point out what is in my view the real problem, not particular to the tar sands but most strikingly exemplified by it: that Canada has a weak and tepid civil society in which its feeble political institutions and subordinate public administration have become a hand maiden to only one sector of society. There is a slippery slope here, where the checks and balances only count for some and not for others, where the legitimacy of the public realm becomes ever less and the public, seeing the cards stacked only in favour of one sector withdraws from the public domain and in so doing further de-legitimates that domain. The irony, of course, is that without an active civil society and political process, without real checks and balances the industry, also, after all, part of society, is equally un-protected. That protection counts for all, even for those Canadians and Canadian institutions who seem unable to grapple with the reality of what they have created in Canada’s backyard. If one tilts the playing field far enough, all the pieces fall off including industry and government.

Are there any footholds where educators can brace themselves to stem the tide of eroding public trust, of mediocre, misleading or even false messaging, of incessant hollow jingoistic patriotism and a climate of fear where even the choice of word tar or oil before sands can create connotations? The short answer is a categorical yes and that is with art. As I hope I have demonstrated by mobilizing the work of Orwell and Huxley, as well as my own work, art creates space to tackle this issue, allowing for insights which become the foundation for substantial discussion and debate. Rather than avoiding controversy, an all too common response in the classroom, embrace it not through the simplistic mobilization of the two different viewpoints (the Canadian media does that already, confusing content with controversy, squeezing the content out and leaving the reader with little more than a couple of opinions) but by using art to set a tone and create an environment where students can imagine and think for themselves. Do that and you as an
educator will have planted the seeds of engagement and citizenship. Not only are Orwell and Huxley insightful, they have become metaphors unto themselves rendering meaning and stimulating discussion with the mere invocation of their names. There is really no reason why Fort McMurray should not be celebrated in the classroom for what it already is, a metaphor for what Canada has become (not all bad nor all good). In allowing your students to engage themselves and their peers, Canadian society might eventually be served by a new, more imaginative and principled generation than the present lot.

Editorial Note:

Please consider downloading the file containing a selection of Louis Helbig’s artist impressions of the Alberta Tar Sands project, here:

www.wepaste.org/Resources/Helbig_Beautiful-Destruction.pdf

Please also consider visiting her website focusing on this project, at:

www.beautifuldestruction.ca