2014

Life at the 49th Parallel: Media, Space, and the Liminal Perspective

Andy Engel

Wiley College, Marshall, TX

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol56/iss1/10
The Second World is a liminal category somewhere between those countries that are fully developed and exporting their culture, and those countries that are under- or undeveloped and importing the culture of others either by choice or by force. The challenge in studying the Second World, of course, is not imposing First World perspectives and assumptions through one’s analysis. Jody Berland’s North of Empire is a collection of essays that highlights the cultural exchange across the 49th parallel, the largest border that signifies and separates the First World (the United States) and the Second World (Canada). For Berland, a professor of humanities at York University, this line is less of a threshold that one crosses than a space that one inhabits. Canada’s marginal position responds to the influence the United States commands on the world stage, and that influence is reflected in the spaces, media, and ultimately the cultural identity within Canada. The margin is an active space of contestation, not a forgotten space away from the center, as demonstrated by Berland’s definition: “A ‘margin’ is a space which is drawn into the axes of imperial economy, administration, and information but which remains ‘behind’ (to put in temporal terms) or ‘outside’ (spatially speaking) in terms of economic and political power” (77). North of Empire explores the relationship between the United
States and Canada, founded on the influence of the arguably troubled US empire, and demonstrates that, for Second World countries such as Canada, action and even resistance are still possible even from within the postcolonial margin (110).

*North of Empire* is an appropriate title as this text is framed by the “other-than” relationship Canada has with the United States and the fluid natures of space, media, and identity that arise when two cultures meet. She writes, “Each new form of media changes the configurations of space. Cultural technologies work to set the terms, possibilities, and effects of their negotiation” (136). The text’s subtitle, *Essays on the Cultural Technologies of Space*, seems to imply that what is at stake is the way culture-determining technologies affect and influence spaces. While this is true, Berland is making a deeper point about the liminal position that Canada holds as it straddles both its border with the United States and the cultural binaries that border invokes: Canada is both an international entity and a fortuitous colony of the United States’ media and industry (2); it is both fiercely patriotic and self-deprecatingly antipatriotic (35); it is both an active player on the world stage and yet invisible and disregarded, often by its own citizens (38). Berland highlights various cultural technologies—music, meteorology, modes of travel, and digital media, among others—and their symbiotic relationship with the Canadian imaginary. These technologies, and their potential to be reduced to binaries, reflect the conflict at the heart of Canadians’ cultural identity. That conflict is one founded on the complexity of living in the spaces between binaries—the tensions between First World and Second World designations chief among them—and Berland argues that this Second World identity is actually something to be championed, not derided, by such complications. Her use of terms such as “margin,” “dualism,” “tragic paradox,” “anxiety,” and “invisibility” sets the stage for a text that spends its time working against “Canadianization: the loss of sovereignty that arises when you see the world through another country’s eyes” (2). In short, Berland’s goal with her text is to respond to this “loss of sovereignty” by recharting, remapping, and redefining the marginalization of Canadians, their media, and their spaces into an approach that is both active and empowered.

Berland’s most salient point, which she deals with throughout her text, is that power is defined by controlling the exchange of goods and information. And yet, while it is these various means of exchange and transportation that change and influence spaces, it is also the case that spaces are created by the demands of new transportation technologies. Indeed, Berland writes,
“How people relate across distance and history—space and time—is redefined through such mediation [technologies of transportation and communication]. Power over this process is one definition of empire” (73). All of her examples of cultural technologies highlight the challenges and opportunities of relating across (uncertain) spaces and (hyperfragmented) times, which ultimately frame Canada’s relationship with the United States (95).

North of Empire covers a wider range of technology than might be expected at the outset. Berland deals with some of the most common technologies that affect space and time: cartography, railroads, and digital media. Although not in a Canadian setting, these technologies have been taken up by scholars such as Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Stephen Kern, and Henri Lefebvre. In particular, mechanical technologies of transportation and exchange are instrumental in shaping the modern, and subsequently postmodern, understandings of space and time. To Berland’s credit, she avoids the trap of technological determinism and, in addition to the common examples of mutually defining media and spaces such as the railroad and television, there are other examples such as pianos, global imaging technologies, and, most provocatively, the weather. The cultural technology of meteorology brings a welcomed breath of fresh air to the conversation surrounding space and media that all too frequently ignores natural spaces and the outdoors. The environmental heritage of Canada is one that Berland returns to frequently—here is another binary: natural and mediated spaces—which provides a valuable point for connection between Berland’s work and related fields such as environmental rhetoric that have responded to the recent surge in environmental scholarship.

Much of the first half of the text is a defense of Harold Innis, a Canadian scholar who worked at the intersection of communication theory and political and cultural capital. Berland’s use of Innis’s scholarship, however, is more focused on defending and applying than critiquing and complicating. This is likely due in large measure to what Berland sees as the underappreciation of Innis’s work outside of Canadian circles (96). Unfortunately, many of Innis’s arguments are put forth to reinforce Berland’s points symbiotically while her arguments simultaneously justify his. The use of Innis’s excellent scholarship would have been more engaging if his insights had been presented in conversation with other scholars and/or challenged and extended by Berland rather than simply providing the mutual support for Berland’s own arguments and in turn proving Innis right.

Berland’s argument situates “cultural technologies in the context of
their role in forming the spaces of empire” (15). While the framework of the US empire is a productive foil for the mapping of Canadian space, culture, and identity, Berland ultimately troubles this framework in her conclusion when she notes, somewhat offhandedly, that “the American empire is broken” (300). Equally, she begins the book with a hint at the “morphing spaces of empire” (8). Although the text focuses on exploring Canada’s position as an often overlooked respondent to the conditions of a foreign empire, there is not a sense of the new shape of empire or its effects. It would have been useful to the project if Berland had done a bit more to complicate the empire-driven framework upon which her analysis is built, especially since she hints at this possibility at both the beginning and the end of the work. I am not suggesting that Berland unnecessarily shake the foundations of her argument. However, one productive avenue for exploration would have been to use the formative conclusions about cultural technologies that she lays out with respect to Canada to set up an exciting position from which to question the assumed supremacy, immediate relevancy, and the glossy façade of the US empire today rather than simply responding to it as an uncomplicated straw man.

Berland concludes North of Empire by restating her goal: “[T]o analyze culture not just in terms of representations and identities, and the ways they may act as conduits of power, but through the ways meaning and identities are materialized, embodied, disseminated, and transformed through specific cultural technologies in specific geopolitical circumstances” (302–3). Of paramount importance in this effort is the recognition of the give-and-take relationship between mediating technologies and our understanding of natural and mediated space that still persists in all quarters of our private, public, and international lives (303). Even with the changing shape of power structures, and as the empire model wanes, Berland works to show that cultural technologies are relevant and informative, and particularly so in Second World spaces, such as Canada, that are cultural responses to empire and perhaps our best lens through which to explore the First World reaction to the complexity and potential of marginal spaces, media, and cultures.

Ultimately, Berland is making a case for the state of cultural studies today and the work it performs in the margins between disciplines (304). One of the most difficult decisions when considering space is determining where to draw one’s limit. Physical, digital, aural, and the like are all different spatial registers with which we judge contextual clues and the appropriateness of our actions. Space, and particularly so at the scale of a nation, is
North of Empire also deals with the expansiveness of disciplines and bills itself as operating at the confluence of cultural studies, media studies, and geography. Perhaps more than most, these three areas of study are increasingly in conversation, despite not having a cohesive title for the sort of work Berland—not to mention scholars such as Michel de Certeau, Marc Agué, and Leonie Sandercock—is pursuing. Despite the lack of a name for this sort of work within the margins, North of Empire is a successful meditation on the relationship between technology, space, and cultural identity. Through such relationships, Berland makes a strong addition to the conversation that is taking place between technology (old and new, analog and digital), space (personal, public, and national), and cultural identity (First, Second, and Third Worlds). Given the confluence of disciplines that North of Empire takes up, this text would be an excellent addition to the booklist for courses in media theory, cultural studies, and especially postcolonialism. Perhaps the greatest benefits of this text are the many theoretical offshoots that it makes available through its arguments, which are fertile ground for those working in the margins, both students in graduate seminars and scholars alike.

Andy Engel is assistant/lead professor of English at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas. His research and teaching interests are a mixture of rhetorical, spatial, and media theory. He is currently working on a book project entitled “Flickering Cities.”