

<4>

## WALKING A TIGHTROPE

*The Global Cultural Economy  
of Canadian Television*

In 2003, Alliance Atlantis Communications Inc. (AAC)—Canada’s largest vertically integrated television and film production company—announced that it was moving out of dramatic television series production due to the decreasing profit potential of this programming sector. The exception to the company’s long-range strategy would be the number-one-rated *American* franchise series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. At the same time, AAC announced that it would be closing down its recently acquired production company, Salter Street Films. The highly regarded Salter Street had been an important contributor to the Canadian television arena with its incredibly popular sketch comedy *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* and had dispelled the industry notion that Canadians had no interest in homegrown television content. Salter Street entrenched its

Serra Tinic

risk-taking reputation when it produced Michael Moore's Oscar-winning documentary *Bowling for Columbine*, a project that was too controversial for production in the Hollywood system.

The Alliance Atlantis decision is indicative of larger global production strategies wherein economic objectives increasingly take precedence over creative and cultural concerns. As members of a small-market nation, Canadian television producers have come to rely on access to global markets as a means to generate revenue for domestic productions. This has sometimes led to the dilution of cultural specificity due to the perceived need to universalize (often read as "Americanizing") televisual stories for greater international distribution. The presence of the few large companies like Alliance Atlantis had, to some extent, militated against this process by offering alternative avenues of support for television series production that emphasized the local cultural narratives of the national community. Thus, with an eye to shareholders' profit potential, the company dealt a serious blow to the Canadian television production community.

This chapter explores the contemporary landscape of the Canadian television industry wherein longstanding goals of nation building compete with economic contingencies in a transnational media environment. It examines the tensions between television series based on the model of the "global generic" and those that speak to the cultural specificity of the domestic market. The emphasis here is not on a false dichotomy between global and local cultural forces but rather on the ways in which market considerations infuse and inform cultural decisions in television production. Consequently, the discussion focuses on the emergent global framework of the television industry and illustrates the impacts of strategies such as format purchasing and international co-production agreements on Canadian television. Consideration is also given to the ways that the global restructuring of national broadcasting policies and practices has changed the production and programming strategies of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and the impact that this has had on the domestic television industry. It should be noted that the emphasis throughout is on the production of Anglo-television drama as this has long been the weak link in English Canadian broadcasting.<sup>1</sup>

Given the parameters of this essay, what follows is neither an in-depth research analysis of current Canadian television programming nor a close reading of policy discourse. Rather it is a broad overview of the potential possibilities and pitfalls facing the Canadian television industry within the context of global, neo-liberal

strategies to subsume political, social, and cultural spheres into economic decision-making models. Consequently, its objective is to sustain debate about the present and future directions of Canadian television in an era of increasing transnational media commercialization. The discussion begins with an overview of the tensions between market and cultural development goals as evidenced in two dominant forms of global drama programming: international format purchases and co-productions. Set within the context of the different structural constraints of public and private broadcasting sectors, this section argues that there is no inevitable outcome in terms of cultural homogeneity or hybridity in these types of programs. The central problematic, rather, is one of diversity of cultural representations as opposed to mere plurality of domestic incarnations of global forms and the importance of different modes of audience address. The second half of the essay brings the issue of global cultural diversity into sharper relief through a consideration of the challenges facing domestic broadcasting policy measures within the framework of multilateral trade agreements and organizations. As many nations, and most notably the United States, seek to define media content as just another commodity form to be “freely” traded across borders, policymakers must now contend with the fact that cultural decisions are subject to arbitration outside the borders of the nation and within the halls of WTO (World Trade Organization) meeting rooms. As the conclusion indicates, the recent global success of explicitly domestic Canadian television dramas should be seen as a direct result of federal funding and cultural regulations.

### **Trading in Culture: Global Markets versus Global Publics?**

It has been noted that television is a “contradictory industry” in that it is both a site of artistic expression as well as a business concerned with the maximization of markets and profits.<sup>2</sup> The reference here is, of course, to the American model of private broadcasting where creative decision-making is always tempered by considerations of advertiser and shareholder interests. As this commercial model is becoming increasingly prevalent worldwide, countries whose systems had once been predominantly public and national are now experiencing the tensions of a landscape where public and private broadcasting goals compete on an unequal economic terrain. A problem that becomes ever more acute as governments globally retrench from investing in the public sphere in general and the cultural

industries in particular. This is not, however, a new dilemma for the Canadian television industry. It is, in fact, the story of the history of Canadian broadcasting. Since the 1960s, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) has been in direct competition with national commercial television networks. Moreover, this dual market/public model is replicated within the structure of the CBC itself, as the national broadcaster is also expected to generate 30 percent of its revenue from advertising support. The expectation that the CBC produce culturally relevant programming while simultaneously competing for advertisers with private networks, who are able to more cheaply import popular American programs for broadcast, has placed unique structural constraints on cultural production at the national public network. The problem is exacerbated by the small domestic audience “market” for both private and public broadcasters. Consequently, global program sales and production strategies have long been crucial to Canadian television producers—a situation that has marked Canada as a model of the contemporary television industry in a global media arena.

In March 2005, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), arguably one of the strongest national public broadcasters internationally, announced that it would be cutting 4000 jobs in an effort to streamline the institution and reduce overhead costs. The resulting protests and labour strikes eerily echoed similar events during the drastic cutbacks at the CBC throughout the 1980s. The question now facing the BBC is the same one that CBC personnel encountered twenty-five years ago: how will “content” be developed and produced with fewer workers, less funding, and a new television environment with hundreds of competing channels in need of “product?” Similar to its colonial offspring, the BBC has found the answer in the move to out-of-house production agreements with independent drama production companies.

The CBC’s experience with out-of-house production should provide some reassurance to BBC staff who argued that their own: “savage cuts . . . will damage programming as well as the organization and will unravel British broadcasting traditions. The BBC is a unifying British institution which acts as the nation’s conscience, but these redundancies will damage the U.K. at its core.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, over the past decade some of the CBC’s most lauded (and watched!) programs were developed in partnership with independent producers whose programs ushered in a greater diversity of domestic regional voices to the national public network. The aforementioned Salter Street Films is one of the penultimate examples of these

new out-of-house production partnerships. Yet, Salter Street's experience under the ownership of AAC is instructive to the new dilemmas facing national broadcasters, for it is no longer solely the whims of government funding bodies that determine the level of support for public institutions but also the overall financial health of the domestic independent production community that largely affects the future of culturally specific programming. It is here that global diversification strategies, in both private and public television production strategies, have come to shape the Canadian industry.

There is a growing body of literature on the rationales behind, and relative successes of, Canadian international television co-productions measured in both market and cultural terms.<sup>4</sup> Despite this recent interest in the proliferation of international joint ventures, they are not a strikingly new global phenomenon, as their origins can be traced back to the postwar period in which the nations of Europe developed partnerships to rebuild their film and cultural industries during a time of economic devastation.<sup>5</sup> Today, they provide a means for independent producers in small-market nations both to share the high costs of dramatic television production and to access transnational audience markets in territories often circumscribed by national cultural content regulation measures. Having signed official co-production treaties or agreements with fifty nations, Canada has become a world leader in the area of international joint ventures (IJVs). Because of these partnerships, the sheer amount of Canadian television programming increased to the extent that by the early 1990s, Canada was the second-largest exporter of audiovisual products after the United States.<sup>6</sup> The fact that between 2002 and 2008 Canadian producers were involved in 343 new and continuing international television projects underlines the significance of the transnational production sector.<sup>7</sup>

Employing such quantitative output measures as barometers of success could lead us to believe that Canada had overcome the long-standing issue of cultural representation in a domestic television arena long dominated by American programming. However, a closer examination of the *types* of programs often produced through IJVs tells a different story—one that often leans toward the business, rather than the creative side of the contradictory institution of television. IJVs are an integral production strategy for independent Canadian drama producers who have very few domestic television networks at which to pitch their program ideas. For those who seek to develop projects deemed highly culturally

specific or “proximate” to Canadian experiences then the CBC is often the only game in town. Although the private television networks, of which only CTV and Global can be seen as *national* in scope, are governed by Canadian content regulations (CanCon), they prefer to satisfy these requirements with less expensive news and sports programs. This programming practice became further entrenched after 1999 when the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) relaxed the rules concerning the specific amount of dramatic television programming required to fulfill CanCon guidelines. Consequently, there are few dramas produced for private television that speak to the specificity of Canadian settings, issues, and social processes. Despite a few recent exceptions—such as CTV’s *Corner Gas*—when the commercial broadcast networks do purchase Canadian dramas, they often prefer the globally generic form produced through IJVs with the goal of reaching an international market. These types of international co-productions are marked by their tendency to follow established Hollywood television formulas and set their stories in American cities although they are usually filmed in Vancouver or Toronto. They qualify as Canadian content through the citizenship of the key creative participants in the production agreement. Some examples include *StarHunter 2003* (Canada/U.K.), *Riverworld* (Canada/U.K./New Zealand), *Queen of Swords* (Canada/U.K./Spain), *Relic Hunter* (Canada/France/U.K.), and *Stormworld* (Canada/Australia). The advantages of this type of market-oriented productions are manifold. First, as science-fiction/fantasy or action-adventure genres they escape the “cultural discount” that affects dramas too closely tied to the social, political, and linguistic experiences of a particular country.<sup>8</sup> Second, they operate as mimetics of dominant American television narratives that have increasingly become the *lingua franca* of global television markets. Together, these factors enhance the global sales value of these forms of IJVs which, in turn, allows for production cost amortization and a lower selling price. This makes them particularly appealing to private Canadian broadcasters who seek to fulfill CanCon regulations with less expensive “product.”

A newer and increasingly popular variant of these globally generic productions is the format program, which is the licensing and sale of a television program that has achieved success in one country. Here, the complete production “recipe” from sets to story organization is packaged and sold to producers in other nations. Examples of these format programs abound in the proliferation of reality TV, game shows, and makeover programs. Consequently, some of the more popular

programs on Canadian television screens are *Canadian Idol*, *Canada's Next Top Model*, *So You Think You Can Dance Canada*, and *Project Runway Canada*. Format products hold a special attraction to broadcasters due to the low cost of production and their ability to draw sizeable audience cross sections, thereby attracting greater advertiser interest.

Market-oriented IJVs and format television purchasing fuel the fires of ongoing debates over cultural homogenization in contemporary studies of media globalization. Unlike older charges of cultural imperialism wherein the film and television programs of cultural superpowers, such as the United States, were seen to dominate the media landscape of small-market nations (and Canada is often the most cited example in this regard), these new production arrangements find producers throughout the world contributing to the generation of standardized television genres and narratives. Moran presents a more optimistic perspective of this process in his comparative analysis of national variants of formats ranging from soap operas to game shows. He argues that despite the generic rigidity of licensed formats, these programs are subject to adaptation to local cultural experiences to militate against their “foreignness” and make them more appealing to domestic audiences.<sup>9</sup> His conclusions correspond with Robins’ conceptualization of “structures of common difference” whereby audiences across national borders increasingly engage with the same *types* of programs but see localized variation in the treatment of issues and thematics.<sup>10</sup> In many respects, these arguments present a production-side version of the cultural hybridity argument wherein cultural resistance is written into the dominance of genre and format structures. This negation of the influence of format structure over cultural content, however, elides the standardizing impact that often follows market models of cultural production. A parallel example from the global magazine industry is instructive here. In their study of international versions of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Machin and Van Leeuwen found that the overall “formula” of the magazine and its emphasis on individually based problem-solution case presentations affected a discursive closure of alternative cultural framings:

[T]he local becomes an adornment or decoration which is embedded in a basic architecture of the global ... this kind of globalization is the deliberate strategic embedding of certain local discourses into Western/capitalist models. ... Global corporate media may tell stories set in different settings

and dealing with people that have slightly different values and looks, but the fundamental structural reasons for how they behave, for what they want and how they might attain it will follow the same logic.<sup>11</sup>

Whether or not we agree that local cultures are “deliberately” incorporated into Westernized discourses of global capital, it is evident that the structures of commercial television provide specific constraints as to the types of stories produced and how they will be told. Moving away from reductionist theories of cultural imperialism, Barker argues that television as an institution formed within the context of industrial modernization is also a cultural forum for the generation of narratives supportive of capitalist modernity; and with the transnational encroachment of commercial television, these narratives become the global cultural currency.<sup>12</sup> Herein, homogenization is not about the erasure of cultural differences but, instead, the synchronization of bounded discourses underlining modernity and the merits of capital accumulation, such as rugged individualism, consumption, and the importance of personal success. So, yes, *Canadian Idol* localizes a format by placing Canadians into the pop music game show genre but once there they follow the same steps as British, American, Italian, and all other “idols” to compete their way to the brass ring of a recording contract with a multinational music company.

This is intended neither to cast dispersion on commercialized television programming nor to enter into debates about “quality” television. Rather, it is to highlight the different structural constraints that govern private and public broadcasting. In brief, different organizational and purposive logics result in different types of televisual storytelling. As it is Hollywood that has perfected the market model of television entertainment it can be said that the story of U.S. television is also, largely, the story of the private Canadian broadcasters. It has become a truism that the market model of television treats audiences as consumers, as opposed to the public model’s emphasis on audiences as citizens. However, as most contemporary global audiences engage with both types of broadcasting simultaneously, this bifurcation of modes of address becomes significantly more complex. In a mixed media system like Canada’s, audiences more closely approximate Miller et al.’s depiction of the hybrid “citsumer,” doubly hailed into national cultural belonging as well as popular participation in the global market of consumption.<sup>13</sup> The “consumer” side is invoked in classical economic arguments of supply and demand that assert that specific television programs are produced because

audiences desire them. The implication is that the invisible hand of the market will satisfy the diversity of audience demand and thus the consumer is sovereign. However, this is not how commercial television works. The real target audience for private network executives are advertisers and shareholders—viewers are crucial to the extent that they can attract advertisers whose financing will generate profits for shareholders. Profits, in turn, are dependent on minimizing production cost and risk in an uncertain creative environment. This strategy actually militates against diversity in television storytelling as commercial network executives develop defensive strategies to reduce the odds of producing programs that will fail to fulfill the economic logic of the industry. Here we return to the centrality of the “formula” or “format” in private television.

To speak to cultural diversity by providing a range of cultural representations and methods of incorporating them into innovative narrative forms would be an incalculable risk for commercial broadcasters who seek never to divide the potential audiences available to advertisers. The reliance on television formulas becomes a means by which to control the volume of failed programs (read as ratings flops). Following the adage that “nothing succeeds like success,” commercial television at times resembles a manufacturing assembly line where all networks schedule virtually identical programs because of high ratings experienced by particular genres or story premises. The 2004–05 television schedule in the United States exemplified this standardization process and how the system of risk aversion proved to be an imperfect gauge of audience programming tastes. In preparing their schedules for the 2004–05 season, network executives felt secure in their decisions that franchise television (four *Law and Order* programs and three versions of *CSI* as examples) and a heavy schedule of reality programming would guarantee ratings success. The bonus of low production cost in the genre of reality programming combined with track-record genre programming spoke to the conservative tendencies of the major broadcasters. Consequently, CBS and NBC decided to pass on the character drama that would be the only breakout audience hit of the season, *Desperate Housewives*. ABC found itself the overall winner of the television season due to its decision to air the series—a risk taken because the network trailed CBS and NBC and, thereby, had little to lose in taking a chance on the series. In the end, *Desperate Housewives* showed that the death of drama predicted by the major networks had been greatly exaggerated. Interestingly, it was the perceived lack of profit potential in the sector of original dramatic television that led to the AAC

decision mentioned at the outset of the chapter. And, not surprisingly, the success of ABC's new series eventually led to the proliferation of a host of new dramas on the 2005–06 schedules of all the American networks—many of which interestingly resembled *Desperate Housewives* or ABC's other ratings' winner, *Lost*.<sup>14</sup>

As Richard Williams comments, commercial television is a conservative industry when it comes to taking chances with new or untested ideas and: “the trouble with television ... is that even at the fringes it is staffed by people who think of themselves as radical, yet whose idea of progress is to clone the last thing their peers raved about. ... This is perhaps not surprising, in view of television's wholesale capitulation over the past decade to the imperatives of market forces.”<sup>15</sup> The particular manifestation of homogeneity, mixed with moments of creativity and innovation, evidenced in American network programming strategies replicates itself at the global level of television production. It is the type of decision-making that sets the foundation for the more generic forms of IJVs that I have outlined. Globally, market-oriented programs produce not “diversity but plurality” wherein there are “more products but they're spin-offs of a limited set of master templates.”<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, success in global terms continues to be measured in economic terms of output and scope of presence in media buying markets, regardless of cultural content. In fact, Marc Doyle emphasized this business logic in his praise for Canada's leading presence in the field of international co-productions.<sup>17</sup> In a study for the (American) National Association of Television Program Executives (NATPE), Doyle invoked the supply and demand argument in his prediction that the proliferation of Canadian IJVs would translate into a substantial increase of domestic programs on Canadian television networks. Unfortunately, sixteen years later, Doyle's prediction has yet to be realized. The Canadian private networks have long known that the financial bottom-line is better served by purchasing original American programming for prime-time scheduling as opposed to cheap Canadian imitations of these shows. As such, Global and CTV found themselves in a race to have the most shows in the “Top 20” as they went on a buying frenzy of the new American successors to *Desperate Housewives* and *Lost* for their own 2005–06 season schedules.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, there remained a dearth of culturally proximate programming on Canadian network television despite the quantity of Canadian co-productions circulating globally. In fact, there were approximately 16 domestic dramas set explicitly in Canada on the three national English networks that season and nine of those were broadcast on CBC.

Turning to national public broadcasting provides us with another perspective as to how Canada's global presence in television might develop in ways that need not sacrifice issues of cultural specificity while simultaneously providing domestic audiences with stories that dramatize the conditions of their own society. The CBC's mandate to "reflect Canada to Canadians" provides the public broadcaster with a different set of structural constraints from those of its private network counterparts. The expectation that the public broadcaster would be home to culturally proximate programming while, at the same time, generating advertising revenue for part of its production budget has meant that the CBC addresses its audience as the ultimate "citsumers." In an era of government cutbacks and competition with private broadcasters for audiences, the CBC has had to develop new types of programming and production strategies to remain a relevant presence in the Canadian broadcasting and cultural arena. These measures have included developing out-of-house production partnerships, limiting the number of episodes per dramatic series (as well as the numbers of ongoing dramatic series, in general), and more aggressively pursuing international sales of its programming. It is in the area of co-productions and international sales that the CBC experience provides a different vantage point from which to view globalizing processes in television. It shows how, with some measure of government support, the turn to global markets does not necessarily mean that all television production must be homogenized into standardized generic "products." Three examples will be briefly discussed here to illustrate the relevance, indeed importance, of global public broadcasters to the maintenance of alternatives to the global generic versions of dramatic television. The first two are domestic co-productions with independent Canadian production companies: *Da Vinci's Inquest* and *Human Cargo*. The third is *Sex Traffic*, an international co-production with Britain's Channel 4—a television movie that illustrates promising possibilities of work between transnational broadcasters with similar cultural mandates.

As mentioned earlier, the CBC had the dubious advantage of a head start in the government cutbacks that would eventually also affect public broadcasters in other countries. When it was announced that dramatic production would have to move "out-of-house," people began to predict the demise of the nation's public network. However, over the past decade, these domestic co-productions have resulted in some of the most popular Canadian programs in the country's broadcast history as well as provided indications as to how the CBC might begin to

resolve some of the tensions between the market and cultural development goals that define its structure. In this regard, the CBC's partnership with the former Salter Street Films generated domestic comedy programming that frequently won audiences away from the private network's broadcasts of American programs; and its much earlier partnership with Sullivan Enterprises resulted in extraordinary international sales of the period drama *Road to Avonlea*. More recently, the CBC's partnership with Barna-Alper Productions and Haddock Entertainment gave the public broadcaster the top-rated Canadian television drama *Da Vinci's Inquest*. *Da Vinci's Inquest* was based loosely on the "real-life" of former Vancouver coroner and current mayor, Larry Campbell. The character of Dominic Da Vinci drew on Campbell's actual crusade for the poor and marginalized living in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and when the series headed into its eighth season in 2005 it was renamed *Da Vinci's City Hall*, following Campbell's own career trajectory into the mayor's office. At first glance, it would be easy to define *Da Vinci's* success in generic terms as an urban crime drama—a popular formula with audiences. However, what distinguished the series from its commercial equivalents was the direct referencing of the lived experiences of its location, Vancouver, as a source of storytelling. There was no attempt to erase the cultural markers of its domestic setting and, given the show's premise, it engaged with the issues of crime, poverty, and class struggle within this globalizing metropolis. It was also a relatively expensive production, in Canadian terms, at over \$1-million an episode.<sup>19</sup> The production value and genre factored into the show's international success and it was quickly sold to over twenty-five countries after the first season. *Da Vinci* also exhibits other aspects of domestic cultural production that go against the grain of the American commercial mode of storytelling—notably, the ambiguity of good and evil in central characters and the lack of happy endings that wind up the episode's hour. These subtle cultural differences actually enhance the global sales of Canadian dramas, particularly in European markets where buyers enjoy Hollywood genres with less of an American cultural sensibility.<sup>20</sup>

Government funding for the CBC thus provides a buffer that allows the national public broadcaster to avoid complete capitulation to advertising interests and thereby produce projects that address controversial issues in all their complexity (and in recognizable Canadian contexts). The result is that public broadcasting is able to take greater risks in all aspects of the production process

from story selection to narrative development. Two of the CBC's co-produced dramatic mini-series elaborate this point: *Human Cargo* and *Sex Traffic*. Similar to *Da Vinci's Inquest*, these two programs make no attempts to mask their production origins and they have garnered critical acclaim, both domestically and internationally, while simultaneously drawing a sizeable viewership. What is particularly striking about these two mini-series is the fact that while they speak from a specific and recognizable cultural positioning, they both address the human costs of globalizing forces at the intersection of national borders. *Human Cargo*, a CBC partnership with Canadian producers Force Four Entertainment and Howe Sound Films is a stark dramatization of the lives of refugees beginning with the experiences of their persecution in their homelands to the tribulations they endure as they negotiate their way through the labyrinthine mechanisms of the Canadian immigration system. Kate Nelligan, one of the lead actors in the project, described *Human Cargo* as something she had "never seen before"—a mini-series that would "scare most networks with its content." *Sex Traffic*, a CBC co-production with Britain's Channel 4, pursues a similar theme in its dramatization of the plights of East European women sold into the global sex trade in the post-Soviet era. We probably should not be astonished that two productions that explicitly address the darker side of global capital would find little purchase in commercial broadcasting.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, John Yorke, the former Head of Drama at Channel 4 and current Head of Independent Production at the BBC, described *Sex Traffic* as "controversial and provocative ... a big talking thing that rarely gets made these days" and which is the "job as public broadcasters to make."<sup>22</sup> What is most striking about productions like *Human Cargo* and *Sex Traffic* is that they underline that national public broadcasting does not mean a retreat into parochial, isolationist dramas that invent the nation as a bounded cultural terrain that is immune from competing definitions of what it means to be a citizen of that place. Rather, unlike IJVs that seek to exploit market borders by homogenizing cultural narratives into the global generic, these types of projects speak forthrightly to the intersections of global and local processes and emphasize the subnational tensions and fissures that characterize the experiences of people of all nations. While never losing sight of the local, or the "idea" of the national, these types of public broadcasting productions exemplify "diversity" in contrast to the forms of "plurality" generated within commercial television.

Yet, the future of national public broadcasting in Canada and elsewhere remains precarious. As Murdock notes, we live in a climate of increasing “marketization” where market measurements of success [are] the yardsticks against which all institutions are judged, including those still formally in the public sector.”<sup>23</sup> It, therefore, becomes imperative to keep issues of the exclusionary aspects of market forces at the forefront of public and policy discourse; continually to remind decision makers that publicly funded institutions produce and distribute the cultural “products” that do not appeal to the commercial imperatives of market logic. Rather, they redress “the market’s failures.”<sup>24</sup>

In the meantime, the story of Canadian public broadcasting remains one of “two steps forward, one step back.” There have been promising signs in terms of the rhetoric of ensuring domestic cultural representation in the tightening of guidelines governing the subsidization of Canadian television production. For example, Telefilm Canada, as the primary government granting institution, has recently stipulated stricter rules for accessing the Canadian Television Fund (CTF) that supports domestic production. Herein, the guidelines posted on Telefilm’s website ([www.telefilm.gc.ca](http://www.telefilm.gc.ca)) now insist that productions must meet the “spirit and intent” of Canadian content regulations and, therefore: 1) must “reflect Canadian themes and subject matter; 2) must achieve 10/10 points on the content regulation scale; 3) “the project may not be based on foreign television productions, foreign format buys, foreign feature films... or foreign fully developed final-version scripts” and; 4) the project must be “shot and set primarily in Canada.” Another positive step forward is the revival of Salter Street Films after its closure by AAC. Now reconstituted as the Halifax Film Company (HFC), this strong contributor to the domestic television scene underscores the importance of independent production companies being committed to diversity in their willingness to produce television and films that may be political and economic anathema to the powers that be both at home and internationally (as was the case with the company’s support of the work of Michael Moore). However, Telefilm guidelines and the presence of innovative, risk-taking independent producers are moot points without the concomitant government will, politically and financially, to support both the CBC, as the primary broadcaster of culturally specific programming, and the CTF. This support continues to be lacking in Canadian cultural policy decisions and becomes even more crucial as new transnational trade agreements attempt to reduce culture to the category of a general commodity exempt

from protectionist measures. The following section, therefore, provides a very brief glimpse of the challenges facing Canadian cultural policy in an age of cultural and economic globalization.

## Cultural Exchange or Trading Away Culture?

McChesney argues that “neoliberalism is a superior term to globalization” in describing the transnational momentum of capital encroachment into all aspects of public life, including corporate domination in the global media sphere.<sup>25</sup> I am not quite prepared to evacuate the term globalization despite my general agreement about the prevalence of neo-liberal philosophies governing the decisions of most contemporary Western nations. Globalization also encompasses transnational activism, resistance, and cultural sharing that militate against atrocities that can be committed within the “iron walls” of isolated nation-states and, therefore, I would caution against reducing all conceptualizations of globalization to the conservative forces of neo-liberal economic strategies. I do agree, however, that the discourses of neo-liberalism have been executed in the attempt to place cultural productions under the purview of transnational bodies such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and, thereby, subject them to unprotected free trade policies.<sup>26</sup> If governments capitulate to the strictures of these organizations, then the sustenance of national public broadcasting institutions and support for non-market-oriented television programming will inevitably be termed economic protectionism and thus open to arbitration under GATT and GATS regulations. Indeed, Canada again provides an important case of foreshadowing here, when the government’s attempt to support the domestic magazine industry was deemed an unfair trade practice against the United States under NAFTA. As McDowell (2001) underlines, current efforts to use principles of “cultural exemption” in global trade negotiations have failed to garner the support of countries that seek to exploit the market potential for their own cultural products across national borders. As such, McDowell argues for a new rhetoric in global media trade debates that emphasize the need for “cultural diversity” as a driving principle in WTO negotiations.<sup>27</sup> His statements parallel my preceding analysis of the contradictory forces between market and public structures in the broadcasting industries. The goal here is to convince cultural power brokers, such as the United States, that investments in the public media sector are not intended as trade barriers but, rather, as correctives

to market imperfections. Magder's conceptualization of "media and cultural products as public goods" is particularly compelling and provides a framework for effective negotiating at the transnational level. In persuasive terms, he uses the analogy of public parks—a customarily non-negotiable trade sector—to explain the value of national measures to support domestic media forms:

Public parks are public goods, goods for which one's personal use or benefit does not affect its use or benefit for another person (littering aside). Public goods have another aspect: while the benefit they provide may be significant, generally speaking no single person is able to pay the full costs for their production. This too is an obvious characteristic of many media products and cultural goods, from news to drama and entertainment. The strongest version of this argument begins with the acknowledgment that a robust and diverse sphere of public expression is a fundamental prerequisite for a healthy democratic polity. We don't rely on markets to provide us with an efficient allocation of parks; we shouldn't rely on the market to provide us with a sufficient supply of media or cultural diversity.<sup>28</sup>

The force of Magder's analogy is strengthened in his implication that national subsidization of cultural industries is not intended to bar entry of another nation's cultural products but, instead, is put into place to ensure that alternative modes of cultural expression are allowed to exist and flourish in a globally competitive economic environment. This is especially instructive to the Canadian case as the increased permeability of borders to the flow of media products has been an integral component of the growth of the Canadian television industry, both public and private. Indeed, the ability to maintain a thriving global presence through the generic forms of IJVs has generated significant ancillary benefits to domestic—and more culturally proximate—television production.<sup>29</sup> Canada also holds a stronger bargaining chip than many other countries in that policy emphasis has always focused on domestic content regulations as opposed to import quotas. This is crucial to trade negotiations in that you cannot argue for protecting cultural diversity (as a democratic measure) while denying Canadians the right to engage with media products from all over the world. And there is much to be learned from the cautionary tale of New Zealand, which after trading away cultural subsidization measures under GATS, lost in its attempt to later resurrect national content quotas in broadcasting.<sup>30</sup>

Thus far, Canada, in co-operation with France in particular, has been one of the leading nations to keep culture off the free-trade block in transnational economic negotiations.<sup>31</sup> Through the efforts of ministers of culture and media

professionals, a global cooperative—the International Network on Cultural Policy (INCP)—was formed and with the tentative support of UNESCO hoped to set the framework for future rounds of debate on cultural production within the WTO.<sup>32</sup> However, such international efforts are undermined if the Canadian government fails to support existing measures to foster culturally specific programming and institutions on home territory. Without a funding structure to support independent producers who want to challenge market formulas and speak to the cultural experiences (both global and local) of a “small-market” nation, there will be little incentive to produce programs that fulfill the spirit of Telefilm guidelines. As the concluding section indicates, the combination of government regulation and funding, albeit never ideal, has enabled the cultural and industrial growth of a domestic television industry that is now in a position to compete globally without necessarily sacrificing a sense of place or socio-cultural specificity. The question, as always, is whether policymakers see the benefit of continuing to foster an industry that some producers argue is as important a resource as “water and wheat.”<sup>33</sup>

## Back to the Future: Opportunity in Uncertain Times

The proliferation of new technologies, distribution channels, and the concomitant fragmentation of audiences has led to an environment of “indeterminacy” in the global television industries. In the transition to the “neo-network era,” there is a new momentum to “organize and exploit diverse forms of creativity toward profitable ends.”<sup>34</sup> Here we see even American program buyers, working in one of the most closed import markets, competing to purchase programs with an “edge” that allow them to compete against upstart U.S. specialty channels buffered from the more conservative influence of advertising support. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of these programs originate in countries with strong histories of public broadcasting. Canadian producers, due to their cultural proximity to the United States and extensive experience in global production, have benefited greatly from Hollywood’s content crises over the past several years. The reliance on reality programming, in the previously mentioned 2004–05 American network schedule, resulted in a dearth of syndicated scripted programming available to fill the off-prime-time schedule. Consequently, CBS took a calculated risk and purchased *Da Vinci’s Inquest* for broadcast in 98 percent of its market during the 2005 television

season. The series was a major ratings success for the network and defied Hollywood's conventional wisdom that American audiences would not watch programs set in other countries and particularly those that did not follow the rigid formula structures of American television genres. CBS renewed *Da Vinci* through the 2007–08 season and the network's confidence in the series eventually opened the door to other Canadian programs. In fact, when the Writers' Guild of America (WGA) went on strike in 2007, the American networks quickly turned to the Canadian television industry in anticipation of a lack of prime-time programming. A bidding war amongst the networks resulted in CTV successfully selling two domestic dramas: *Flashpoint* and *The Listener*, to CBS and NBS. In the end, the networks did not need to rely on these insurance policies. However, CBS decided to air *Flashpoint* as part of its prime-time summer schedule and the series not only won the night but also continued to dominate the ratings throughout its run. *Flashpoint's* unforeseen success led *MediaWeek's* Marc Berman to state: "There is every reason to now believe the broadcast networks will rely more on quality Canadian programming in the future."<sup>35</sup>

Hollywood's recognition of "quality Canadian programming" may prove to be a double-edged sword for domestic producers. It inspires a new sense of confidence about the maturation of the industry to the extent that masking cultural references may no longer be required to access the world's largest single-language market. However, it also provides politicians with a rationale to divest themselves further from supporting domestic production and broadcasting. The fact remains that these programs probably would not have been produced if it were not for the combination of government financing, content regulations for private broadcasters, and the maintenance of a national public broadcaster. Moreover, there is no guarantee that American interest in Canadian television will continue; this may be a liminal moment in the restructuring of their broadcasting strategies in an era of "indeterminacy." There remains one insurmountable fact in Canadian television: the potential domestic audience will never be large enough to sustain drama of high production quality. As this chapter has indicated, the globalization of the Canadian television industry is rife with both opportunity and constraint but it is too soon to dismantle the infrastructure that ensures a site of domestic cultural expression in television. It is fitting to conclude here with a statement from Laszlo Barna, one of the executive producers *Da Vinci's Inquest*:

Are people entitled to see 100-percent Canadian [content] if it doesn't sell in Yemen? I say absolutely. The day we only make shows that are for export would spell the end to highly personal Canadian storytelling. And that would be a tragedy.<sup>36</sup>

## Notes

1. Serra Tinic, *On Location: Canada's Television Industry in a Global Market* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).
2. E. Meehan, "Conceptualizing Culture as Commodity: The Problem of Television," in *Television: The Critical View*, ed. H. Newcomb (York: Oxford University Press, 1994): 563–72.
3. [www.tv.msn.com/tv/article.aspx?news = 191805](http://www.tv.msn.com/tv/article.aspx?news = 191805).
4. Paul Attallah, "Canadian Television Exports: Into the Mainstream," in *New Patterns in Global Television: Peripheral Vision*, eds. J. Sinclair, E. Jacka, and S. Cunningham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 161–91; C. Hoskins and S. McFadyen, "Canadian Participation in Co-Productions and Co-Ventures," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 18 (1993): 219–36; Tinic 2005.
5. P. Taylor, "Co-Productions—Content and Change: International Television in the Americas," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 20 (1995): 15–20.
6. A.B. Albarran and S.M. Chan-Olmsted, *Global Media Economics: Commercialization, Concentration and Integration of World Markets* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1998).
7. [www.telefilm.gc.ca](http://www.telefilm.gc.ca).
8. C. Hoskins, S. McFadyen, and A. Finn, "The Environment in which Cultural Industries Operate and Some Implications," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 19 (1994): 353–75.
9. A. Moran, *Copycat Television: Globalisation, Program Formats and Cultural Identity* (Luton, U.K.: University of Luton Press, 1998).
10. K. Robins, "What in the World's Going On?" in *Production of Culture/Cultures of Production*, ed. P. Du Gay (London: Sage and the Open University Press, 1997): 11–66.
11. D. Machin and T. Van Leeuwen, "Global Media: Generic Homogeneity and Discursive Diversity," *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 18:1 (2004): 118–19.
12. Chris Barker, *Global Television* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).
13. T. Miller, N. Govil, J. McMurria, R. Maxwell, *Global Hollywood* (London: BFI Publishing, 2001): 178–81.

14. G. MacDonald, "Smart Dramas Welcomed Back," *Globe and Mail*, 31 May 2005: R1, R3.
15. In D. Berkeley, "Creativity and Economic Transactions in Television Drama Production," in *Cultural Work: Understanding the Cultural Industries*, ed. A. Beck (London: Routledge, 2003): 104.
16. Graham Murdock, "Back to Work: Cultural Labour in Altered Times," in *Cultural Work: Understanding the Cultural Industries*, ed. A. Beck (London: Routledge, 2002): 15–36.
17. M. Doyle, *The Future of Television: A Global Overview of Programming, Advertising, Technology, and Growth* (Lincolnwood, Illinois: NTC Business Books, 1992).
18. MacDonald, "Smart Dramas Welcomed Back"; G. MacDonald, "crtv Now Tops on All Seven Nights: Fecan," *Globe and Mail*, 7 June 2005: R3.
19. G. MacDonald, "Made in Canada, Big in Syria," *Globe and Mail*, 18 December 2001: R1, R7.
20. Tinic 2005.
21. Serra Tinic, "Between the Public and the Private: Television Drama and Global Partnerships in the Neo-Network Era," in *Television Studies after TV: Understanding Television in the Post Broadcast Era*, eds. G. Turner and J. Tay (London: Routledge, 2009).
22. [www.channel4.com/corporate/4producers/commissioning/documentarytranscript\\_Drama.pdf](http://www.channel4.com/corporate/4producers/commissioning/documentarytranscript_Drama.pdf).
23. Graham Murdock, "Back to Work: Cultural Labour in Altered Times," in *Cultural Work: Understanding the Cultural Industries*, ed. A. Beck (London: Routledge, 2002): 19.
24. Murdock 2002, 27.
25. R.W. McChesney, "The Global Restructuring of Media Ownership," in *Global Media Policy in the New Millennium*, ed. Marc Raboy (Luton, U.K.: University of Luton Press, 2005): 149.
26. McChesney 2005, 152–57.
27. S. D. McDowell, "The Unsovereign Century: Canada's Media Industries and Cultural Policies," in *Media and Globalization: Why the State Matters*, ed. N. Morris and S. Waisbord (New York: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2001): 117–32.
28. Ted Magder, "Transnational Media, International Trade and the Idea of Cultural Diversity," *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 18:3 (2004): 394.
29. Tinic 2005
30. Magder 2004.
31. B. Goldsmith, J. Thomas, T. O'Regan, and S. Cunningham, "Asserting Cultural and Social Regulatory Principles in Converging Media Systems," in *Global Media Policy in the New Millennium*, ed. Marc Raboy (Luton, U.K.: University of Luton Press, 2005): 93–109.

32. Magder 2004.
33. C. Haddock, "Lights, Magic and Spider Venom," *Globe and Mail*, 7 April 2003: R1.
34. Michael Curtin, "On Edge: Culture Industries in the Neo-Network Era," in *Making and Selling Culture*, eds. R. Ohman, G. Averill, M. Curtin, D. Shumway, and E. Traube (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996): 181–202.
35. Marc Berman, "Continued Summer Success for CBS' *Flashpoint*," [www.mediaweek.com](http://www.mediaweek.com) (accessed 1 August 2008).
36. MacDonald 2001.

