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Conference: *Annual Meetings at the Congress for the Humanities and Social Sciences*

Rencontres annuelles dans le cadre du Congrès des sciences humaines, Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, May 30th - June 2nd, 2006 Du 30 mai au 02 juin 2006, York University Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Session: Field studies of technology and knowledge creation

Papers:

1. Title: Photographic Encounters and Mediations of the Canadian Frontier

Presenter: Kalli Paakspuu, paakspuu@yorku.ca

2. Title: Racialized Discourses Created In and Through Video Game Technologies

Presenters: Alicja K Muszynski, Matthew Patterson, alicja@uwaterloo.ca

3. Title: Fostering Innovation: The Case of the Industrial Revolution in Tree Harvesting

Presenter: Michael J Clow, mclow@stu.ca

Chair: Anabel Quan-Haase, Faculty of Information and Media Studies and Department of Sociology, University of Western Ontario (aquan@uwo.ca)

Commentary:

Anne Beaulieu, Virtual Knowledge Studio, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (anne.beaulieu@vks.knaw.nl)

It was a pleasure to read these various papers and to consider how these different projects related to issues of fields and knowledge creation. In the remarks that follow, I will stress the relations of each paper to notions of the field, and note the particular ways in which each paper conceptualises knowledge creation. The format of conference session, and the fact that I'm responding from a distance, in relation to full written papers, invites this kind of comparative approach... This of course doesn't take away from the fact that each paper can stand up on its own, in relation to its particular project and ambitions.

First, a few words about the notion of field.

For Paakspuu, the object of study is the photograph of native people. But the photo is not to be extracted from the field. Rather, the artefact of the photograph is but a moment in the analysis, a snapshot of the back and forth movement in the constitution of the field and representation. The photo tells of colonial relations and representational history, while also being constitutive of these relations and furthering the tradition of representations of colonised others. If photography evokes mechanical objectivity, Paakspuu insists that this is only one of many elements that sustain the role, significance and meaning of representations. This paper highlights the relation between object and field, and insists on the importance of conceptualising the creation, meaning, circulation and connections to other cultural forms. The decision to focus on this element sets up a complex apparatus for analysis, which made me

curious about a possible next step in the project. Does the material presented in this paper lead up to a following discussion, where the ‘empirical’, the photographic oeuvre from the photographers of Canadian Harry Pollard and American E. S. Curtis will be discussed? Let me first put this very plainly: in this paper, I missed a discussion of the pictures themselves. Or to rephrase the question in slightly more elaborate terms: is it possible to use this sophisticated characterisation of the complex set of relations around this kind of photography as a background to the discussion of these particular photographers’ work? Can the photographs be constituted as an empirical terrain, and brought forward for analysis, without endangering the important epistemological commitment to situated knowledge?

The way Muszynski and Patterson present the field is in radical contrast. On the one hand, the representations of racial identity in these video games stand alone, as the fruit of a technology that is immensely popular, and different from other cultural forms because, in the words of the authors, of the “realism” and interactivity it makes possible. Aware of the real and urgent social issues that follow from racism, the authors are deeply committed to investigating racism empirically. This commitment is evident in the care taken to sample, retrieve information about games, and in the combination of qualitative analysis of a game’s narrative and a quantitative description of the types of characters found in the games. In terms of the place of representations, this paper could be seen as the mirror image of Paakspuu’s paper. The representations stand alone, they are categorised and counted in terms of their content, and so the particular numbers of representations and the subaltern or superior roles of each is presented—the results speak for themselves: in these tables is racism and inequality. It seems to me that it is important to think about what we know about games, from considering these figures. How do these representations work in the field? How do players experience them? The authors make a couple of suggestions about the potential ways in which players understand these figures, but it could be very useful to consider this in more detail. This would shed light on the particular kinds of characters, a notion that is central to this paper—do users have the same racial categories as the authors? If not, can the authors be more explicit about the assumptions that underlie their classifications of various characters? Another strategy might be to consider, as Clow does in his paper, how a comparable case sheds light on the analysis—are there games that are seen as non-racist by certain groups of players, and how do different representations figure in the success or failure of these games? Or are there cases where the games are seen as racist by developers, and therefore revised? In other words, what is the context in which these games are operating, and what does this tell about the racism that might be attached to the characters?

In Clow’s paper, the field is evoked perhaps as broadly as in Paakspuu’s paper, though with greater emphasis of the corporate and the industrial elements of technologies of tree harvesting. Certainly, reading a paper that makes the setting of the forest quite vivid made me realise that the metaphor we used for this session, that of the ‘field’, is a strongly agricultural one.

The analysis includes, as I said, many aspects of the development of technologies—social, economic, technological and institutional. I wonder whether more might not be said about the symbolic and cultural aspects of these developments. I raise this point because the symbolic and the cultural are two registers that have been so important in recent discussions about what the opponents of ‘tree harvesting’ call ‘logging’. In

these terms, the agricultural harvesting, gathering the fruits of man's labour, are contrasted to the gathering of resources, and the moral valence attached to these labels makes very clear the importance of the cultural idioms used to describe types of work and technologies. Specifically, I was very curious about some of the names and the labels used, such as 'Arbomatik'. What do such names tell about the hopes for new machinery? These elements might also be a useful link to other quests for full automation and mechanisation in this period of the history of (industrial) technology.

Let me move now to a second set of comments, around the topic of knowledge. If my first set of comments was intended as stimulating and prodding the papers in hopefully productive directions, I now want one way in which these papers are wonderfully thought-provoking.

Each paper addresses the notion of knowledge; in Paakspuu's paper, we are invited to consider the richness of visual knowledge, constituted by and constitutive of cultural relations, and embedded in both technologies of representation and colonial governance. This paper highlights the importance of retrieving and understanding the non-innocent contexts of production and reception of these images, as contributions to a more responsible and responsive consideration of this visual heritage.

Clow's paper addresses a particular kind of knowledge, namely 'innovation'; knowledge that makes a difference because it is new. It is also knowledge that is embedded in new technologies for industry. As such, the focus of this paper is perfectly aligned with the discourse, alive in the Netherlands as well as in Canada, about the need to develop, sustain and cash in on the knowledge economy. Indeed, there are elements of this analysis that could help in thinking about setting up industry consortia for facilitating technological innovation. But this analysis differs from this policy hype and shows the value of this kind of inquiry by revealing the crucial links between technology, markets and labour issues.¹ Innovation, in this case, is predicated on changes in the conditions of large sectors of the work force, no longer so malleable and available. As knowledge that matters, innovation is political as much as it is cognitive, material, organisational and technological.

And in relation to knowledge and social relations writ large, Muszynski and Patterson focus on stereotypes, which they take to be a very particular form of knowledge that is both effective and limiting. They draw attention to the way characters in video games rely on a mode of stereotypical representation, a kind of knowledge that may convey certain ideas so effectively that it also limits the ways in which we might come to know others.

I would therefore like to end this commentary by thanking the presenters for making so clear that the study of knowledge is a political issue, and one which is highly deserving of scholarly attention.

¹ I should probably footnote that my knowledge of this is both scholarly and biographical. I hold a PhD in science and technology studies, earned on the basis of research on the deployment of innovative medical technologies. My grandfather, Phillipe Beaulieu, practiced subsistence agriculture in the summer, in P'tit Ouest, outside Kedgwick, and, when he could get the work, went out to the logging camps in winter.