

Handing Down of Culture and the Encounter of the Younger Generation With Art

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It is well known that culture, in its anthropological sense, is a characteristic of collectivities and individuals which comes from an intergenerational handing down. Culturally, we are the heirs of our parents. As for the arts, breaking with heritage is the foundation of an artist's approach to his or her work. So, in Québec, it is generally agreed that *Refus global* was a major date in the process of the emergence of an art which was modern and at the same time authentically Québecois. This is why it seems difficult, if not contradictory, to consider the handing down of culture through young people's encounter with art.

The relationship between art and collective cultural identities (ethnic, national, etc.) should be seen as indirect. They can become more direct during certain historical periods, as was the case in the 1960s and 1970s in Québec, when the freedom of expression of artists almost became a vast movement for the collective emancipation of Québecois. But generally speaking, the expression of artists derives from unconscious springs of motivation and approach. The idea, for example, that art should be promoted as Canadian or as Québecois is not only a dubious idea but a dead end. This does not mean that a Canadian or a Québec art cannot exist, but that such eventualities are part of a process which, thank God, neither government nor any other institution (family, school, etc.) can control.

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That said, it is not without interest or importance to try to see how, in today's Québec, the younger generation encounters art — taking for granted that it is through the free expression of the younger generation, rather than through cultural policies, that Québec is likely to contribute to cultural diversity in the context of globalization. “Like living things,” says Fernand Dumont, “cultures do not maintain themselves by keeping sheltered from draughts, but through creative dynamism which shows life is there” (Dumont, 1995: 81).

My presentation is based on research I did with colleagues some years ago.¹ That research was designed to explore more closely the encounter between young people and the arts, not only through cultural activities they were exposed to in the context of school activities or otherwise, but also their own experiences of “creating,” whatever the context or the artistic medium. The perspective we chose was wide, but also flexible, the process being close to exploratory, using an essentially qualitative methodology. The basic material is the content of 39 individual interviews with young persons who were chosen either as audience members at an artistic event (a theatrical presentation at the Théâtre Denise-Pelletier or a dance show at the Agora de la danse), or as “creators” (participants in the Festival de Création-Jeunesse of Oxy-Jeunes, or in a workshop at the Musée d'art contemporain, or students registered in an arts program at the secondary or college levels). They were asked to bear witness to these particular artistic experiences and to place them in the context of a history of their wider cultural life within the family, and in social, school and extracurricular activities. The majority of the young people interviewed were at the secondary level, III, IV and V, but some were attending a CEGEP or, occasionally, a university. In every case, adolescence can be mentioned as a crucial time for the awakening of creativity.

I do not intend to use all the data collected here. I will concentrate this presentation on just one of the two aspects we studied, that of creation, putting aside the consumption of culture for the moment. Nor shall I go into individual cases, even if the data are rich — perhaps the main source of interest in the work. My analysis will not deal with the messages and values upon which young people's thoughts are based (although we have had occasional access to such data). I shall try rather to answer a general question: where does youth's compulsion to make art come from — to see themselves and to assert themselves as creators? Or to put it more sociologically, what are the peculiar mechanisms in society that result in the creative activity of young people?

¹ Several other researchers have, one way or another, been part of that research, including Marie Beaulieu, Guy Bellavance, Louis Jacob, Madeleine Lord, Isabelle Perrault, Nora Tassé. This research was financed by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Thus, my presentation will contribute indirectly and partially to the main questions raised by this colloquium.

1. THE ARTISTIC CREATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IS NOT A MANIFESTATION OF THEIR FAMILY'S CULTURE

In order to grasp fully the meaning and the range of this first statement, which contradicts what sociology tells us about handing down of culture, it must be said that the youth participating in our research were not chosen at random, but because of their manifest interest in art, and especially making art. We are therefore involved with a sample which was deliberately biased in its selection, but biased in favour of the younger generation, that does not mean that there was also a bias insofar as their parents were concerned. The members of the sample are, without any intention on our part, generally from a middle class milieu. Fathers who are workers are numerous and the level of education of the parents is often very low.² In the section of the interviews about their family and its role in their awakening to the arts, there is a sort of leitmotiv: “my parents are not very keen on culture.” During the very first interview, with a young woman registered in a programme concentrating on dance at the secondary level, the disparity of cultural interests between herself and her parents was explicitly stated:

My parents aren't fond of art at all. I once went with them to a dance performance. They didn't like it and I heard them saying: “It is dull. Shall we go?” It was very unpleasant. I don't go with them any more to such performances.

She mentioned also that her boyfriend was like her parents when going to cultural events. On the other hand, her parents and her boyfriend never miss her shows and fully encourage her and are totally supportive of her studying to become a professional dancer.

If there are cases where one can talk of a heritage of artistic creation on the part of parents³ and if there are others where the taste of the younger generation for art is met with opposition, or, worse still, indif-

² The socio-family characteristics of our sample are close to results obtained by the Ministry of Education of Québec, in a survey done at the beginning of the 1980s, which outlined the overall picture of Québec pupils attending the second cycle of secondary level, registered in arts, where it was said that “students registered in arts have the same profile as all the other pupils at the secondary level” (Cloutier and Legros, 1994: 13).

³ But even there, as did François de Singly (1996), one should be careful to specify that, when talking about cultural heritage, the heirs ought to “earn” their heritage.

ference, the situation usually resembles the example described above, where the desire and the pleasure to practice the arts arises independent of family, in a space we could call personal, but can't realize without the central role of a family, offering financial support, and more importantly moral and emotional support. We still find that parents tend to warn children interested in the arts that it is a difficult path for earning money, but we also see a larger trend arising from our study where parents are proud of the artistic achievements of their progeny. The most common attitude of parents facing what their children can do at an artistic level is, without doubt, astonishment, and even more so when a taste for the arts does not arise in the family. Perhaps that astonishment is what children need most when they begin to devote themselves to arts; their parents are often their first and best public.

If this is the way things are going, it should be said that the essential role of the family, so far as an awakening to the arts is concerned, is at least socio-relational, if not more than purely cultural. As François de Singly puts it, "in a society that heavily valorizes individualism [...], individuals, young or adult, succeed in mobilizing their energies, even those of a heritage [...] only if they receive a sufficient dose of personal attention" (de Singly, 1996: 156-158). Consequently, the support and the approval most of the young practitioners say they get from their parents is very important, regardless of whether they benefit from a cultural heritage or not.

2. THE ARTISTIC CREATION OF YOUTH IS NOT IN ITSELF A MANIFESTATION OF THE YOUTH CULTURE

This second statement appears contradictory. Can we not imagine that youth culture is the sum of the cultural actions of those who comprise the younger generation of the population? In terms of pure linguistic logic, yes, but not as viewed as the sociology of youth. Youth culture does not refer to what youth are doing, but rather to what is particular to them as a precise social category. But even here, one should distinguish between a particular age group and a generation.

In our survey, we met youth members who were current or former members of rock groups. We also met some who were "graphiteurs," and others whose first experiences were in cinema and video. But we have met a larger number involved in theatre, dance, painting, poetry, singing or who were registered at a school of music — activities not necessarily linked to youth — and which made them somewhat special

in the group they belonged to. Being involved in the arts was doing more to obliterate than to enhance their belonging to their generation. For some, for whom artistic activity is becoming a quasi life project, this means searching for recognition beyond their peers.

This does not mean that young people who practice art are isolated from their group and marginalized. Most of them are socially integrated in their surroundings. The fact of their artistic activities, which others of their age are not interested in, does not keep them from being participants in the youth culture, either through the music they listen to, the feature films they watch, or the sports they practice with friends who do not necessarily share their passion for the arts. In the daily lives of these youths, their artistic activities do not act as a source of social distinction, but rather as something that makes them singular.

Youth who devote themselves to the arts are not necessarily lonely. Emulation can become a factor in the contagiousness of a taste for arts within the group. Several say that their encounter with the arts was on the occasion of an artistic activity performed by peers, at school or elsewhere. This indicates that as far as being stimulated to devote oneself to the arts is concerned (not to be mistaken with the ability to become a critical audience), an amateur presentation in which people of their age perform can become a more efficient stimulus than a highly professional show. The desire to devote oneself to the arts often begins in a casual way. Perhaps it's no different for adults.

3. THE ARTISTIC CREATIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE ARE PARTLY A RESULT OF SCHOOL AND EXTRA-CURRICULAR CULTURES

As suggested earlier, there are special occasions when young people choose to devote themselves to the arts. Those occasions often arise in school or through extracurricular activities, but also through any activities designed for young people, whether private lessons, festivals, or other municipal and community leisure activities.

Let us look, first at the school and the role of the teaching of the arts as a point of contact with artistic creation. The importance of that sort of teaching varies greatly from school to school. It can range from a course given once a week by a teacher who did not have real training in the arts to a programme con-

centrating on an artistic discipline (theatre, music, dance or the visual arts) where one can find a number of specialized teachers. Regardless of the state of art teaching, our interviews indicate the introduction to the arts through pleasurable activities at school is important.

This does not mean that every youth will derive pleasure from the arts. We are speaking here of those who choose the arts at school or those whose choices take into account the pleasure to be found. We know that the relationship between students and school is one of necessity. They go to school not mainly because of what they are going to find there, but because it is necessary for their livelihood (Cournoyer, 1985). From that point of view, the teaching of the arts to those oriented toward becoming practitioners seems, on the part of the youth involved, to be at the meeting point of pleasure and necessity or, to put it differently, to introduce non-school into school. The following testimony of a girl studying dance puts the emphasis on what it brings her, personally and globally, in the context of other activities at her school:

When I have “dance” on my schedule, it’s wonderful. I very, very much like my dance lessons. I am highly motivated. When I come out of a dance lesson, I am beaming. Really, dance is doing me a lot of good. It is total well being. It’s cleansing. I feel, when entering the dance studio, as if I’m entering... a cocoon. Then, I forget everything else, including conflicts, exercises, everything. I just stand there, totally in the moment.

The students stimulated by the arts are not necessarily weak in other disciplines. The process required to register in a program specializing in the arts, as in any other discipline, tends to exclude weaker students. On the other hand, more than one testimonial shows that the arts often motivate those students; sometimes they become a major argument for staying in school — an argument that could be used more often by those who teach the arts in school).

But there is a counterpart to this association of the arts and pleasure. Some students have difficulty with the more academic aspects of the arts. For example, one girl studying dance in secondary school had always believed, because her teachers told her so, that she was extremely talented. But she hit a wall in college, where she was confronted by her technical weaknesses and her work habits, a corollary of any serious learning in the arts. At the time of the interview, she questioned the pursuit of her college level diploma in dance; she thought of going into theatre, believing, rightly or wrongly, that she would find more freedom of expression there.

And extracurricular activities? Traditionally, the artistic activities of young people have been developed through extracurricular activities. There is, of course, a dimension of liberty, of less constraint, that favours the learning of the arts and especially artistic expression. Different festivals provide occasions for young people who devote themselves to the arts in order to perform before an audience. This dimension of performance is not minor. Despite what one might believe, devoting oneself to the arts is a highly social gesture, particularly for the young. If artistic activity takes place in private or introspectively, its inclination is still fundamentally public. Thus the importance of those occasions in which young people say, “see, I am an artist,” or “I want to become an artist,” or else “I’m trying to become an artist.” Hélène Beauchamp who has written several studies based on field work with young people in theatre, stresses that point:

doing theatre, is the process of playing in front of an audience, of saying something publicly. It is finding oneself on a stage, under the lights, whereas others in the hall are viewing and listening. For the former, playing is choosing to show publicly what is in their womb while having fun and bursting (1988: 47).

4. THE ARTISTIC CREATIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE ARE THE MANIFESTATION OF A PROCESS OF INDIVIDUALIZATION TYPICAL OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

We live today in individualistic societies, where each of us is doomed to see himself as a singular being. Even if all the privileges attached to birth have not vanished, the structural characteristics of contemporary societies are such that the most and the least privileged, at the beginning, have no choice but to perceive and identify themselves as creating their own lives.

That “constraint to individuality” leads to several implications which are more or less difficult to live with, inasmuch as the responsibility for one’s destiny depends in good part on individual choices and actions. It can reveal different faces, one of which is the generalized claim of creation. One can enumerate diverse manifestations of that pretension in the population in general.⁴ Who doesn’t have a friend who went into painting or into the theatre, or is trying to write a novel? Those pretensions are linked to a good range of commitment and actualization, and all those who create do not have in mind the idea of becoming artists. But those diverse manifestations of “creativity” on the part of our contemporaries nonetheless reveal a

deep phenomenon that even statistics on cultural participation are able to take into consideration (Garon *et al.*, 1997). And more qualitative studies, especially those on the motivation and meaning underlying that participation, reveal that a “veritable ideology of art is strongly present in all strata of society” (Pro-novost and Cloutier, 1996: 72).

The attraction of the young for the arts is a throwback to the more general phenomenon one observes in other societies, a phenomenon that calls on people to find “a personal free space” (Robine, 2000: 260). Some, perhaps not many, will try to become professionals. For others it will become a lifelong hobby, whether as a performer or a member of the audience.

5. TO CONCLUDE

The encounter with the arts and the discovery of oneself as an individual are two aspects of the same process. If, through the requirements of academic training, or later as an adult, more young people turn to the arts, it is a testament not just to the particular cultural activities the youth take on as a heritage, but those which come from their families, schools and society in general, and enable them to discover and become themselves. The opportunities offered to young people to take part in the arts and to do so freely are in themselves important factors. Of course, the outcomes of those personal spaces of freedom are uncertain. But that uncertainty is the foundation of future societies, whether large or small.

⁴The book *Vous êtes tous des créateurs* by the art historian Yves Robillard (1998) is an echo of that contemporary trend.

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