In an interview given in April of this year, Vancouver author, multimedia artist, playwright, and now filmmaker, Douglas Coupland relates his first experience of the “glocal”:

There’s this experience I had, and it was long before the Internet—everything’s pre- or post-Internet—where I was in Helsinki. And it was the middle of December, and I was so homesick and so bored. I turned on the TV. And it was pre-satellite, so they only had four channels. Three of them were showing made-in-Vancouver movies and the fourth was CNN. So I was watching CNN in real time and flipping the channels to Vancouver. And it was glocal! A glocal moment!

For Coupland, the glocal is the moment when the local becomes global, and the global reveals itself as having a local dimension. The term itself was derived by Roland Robertson from the Japanese term dochakuka, which refers to the business practice of “making products for particular markets.” In appropriating this term for sociological analyses, Robertson defines it in terms of “the simultaneity—the co-presence—of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies” such that glocalization is “simultaneously homogenizing—making things the same—and at the same time, making things different.” He traces the origins of this dynamic to the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, when the role of the international community began to assert itself alongside traditional national configurations. Robertson further notes that the concept of globalization entered the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, comparative literature and political science long before it entered the domain of economics. Robertson describes the dynamics of glocalization in terms of relativism and indigenization and cites the example of the fatwa pronounced against Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses, which was prompted by the feeling that indigenous Islamic views were being relativized, a controversy recently revived by the awarding of a knighthood to Rushdie.

As both Robertson and Coupland note, the experience of the glocal pre-dates the Internet; it was, in fact, Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who theorized this experience half a century ago in terms of a “global village,” and you don’t have to go too far in Coupland’s work to start finding McLuhan’s influence, as Coupland acknowledges in the jacket notes to Wired magazine’s reissue of War and Peace in the Global Village, where Coupland writes that McLuhan is “the Dad we want to impress, the one to whom we say ‘Betcha didn’t think this would be happening,’ or, finally, the phrase that might either chill him or warm his heart: ‘Hey
Marshall—guess what—you were right**(4)

McLuhan first began writing about the idea of the global village in the early 1950s, calling it at that time “the Earth City.” As he wrote in 1951, “Henceforth, this planet is a single city.”(5) The Earth City was a product of electronic media, and what McLuhan understood profoundly about electronic media was that they were fundamentally spatial in orientation.(6) Electronic forms of mediation, in other words, did not simply speed up communication; they also created new spaces of communication, and these spaces would be increasingly layered, increasingly complex, as in an extreme form of cinematic montage, in which the images were not simply juxtaposed, but simultaneous.

It was this notion of simultaneity that urged McLuhan toward a reformulation of the static notion of the “Earth City,” which implied unlimited expansion, to the dynamic notion of the “global village,” which suggests a simultaneous explosion of our awareness of the global and an implosion of our sense of the local, a concept McLuhan formulated at the end of the 1950s. The concept of the global village implies not only that our experience of the world around us is expanding exponentially (commonly known as “globalization”) but that it is also, and at the same time, shrinking, such that it takes on tribal proportions. Our response, suggested McLuhan, to an increasingly globalized worldview would be an increasing tribalism, and it was this dynamic that McLuhan understood to be fundamental to the era that would come most powerfully under the sway of electronic media.

McLuhan’s first major discussion of the idea of the global village came in his 1962 masterpiece The Gutenberg Galaxy.**(7) In that book, McLuhan writes about the immense influence that the rise of print culture had on Western culture, where it broke down the monolithic worldview of oral culture, thus laying the groundwork for nationalism; created individualism; promoted abstract rationality; and valorized the domination of vision over the other senses. Written in retrospect, by someone who has entered the domain of electronic mediation, McLuhan argued that the new media would mark the end of both individualism and nationalism. “The new electronic interdependence,” he writes, “recreates the world in the image of a global village” (GG, 31–2). “[U]nless aware of this dynamic,” he continues, “we shall at once move into a phase of panic terrors, exactly befitting a small world of tribal drums, total interdependence, and super-imposed co-existence” (32).

The Gutenberg Galaxy begins with a discussion of Shakespeare’s late play, King Lear, and among the many sources which critics have advanced for McLuhan’s understanding of the dynamic quality of the global village, I would like to add that of the double plot in Renaissance drama. McLuhan, we should recall, received his doctorate from Cambridge University in Renaissance literature, and he never abandoned his interest in this literature. What fascinated McLuhan about King Lear was the way in which Shakespeare doubled the Lear / Cordelia plot with the Gloucester / Edgar / Edmond plot, and how these two plots both complemented each other and were dynamically opposed at the same time. The notions of doubling and reversal had profound implications for McLuhan. Doubling—“the ineradicable power of doublets” (CA, 108)—informed McLuhan’s central notion of dialogue (dia logos)—two voices interacting intersubjectively—and was foundational to his Laws of Media, whose tetrads (which
represent McLuhan’s attempt to work outside modalities of linear narrative) juxtapose the doubled laws of enhancement and obsolescence, reversal and retrieval, as in the following (edited) tetrad for “radio”:

diffusion broadcasting: world reverses
the multilocational into talking picture
audience as actors participating in their own
audience participation

access to entire planet
everybody
everywhere Global Village Theatre

tribal ecological environment: wires and connections
trauma; paranoia and physical bodies

RADIO was an invasion of Western end of rational and lineal:
culture, phasing out 2,500 years
of culture and literacy. It end of Euclidean space
brought to the surface an
‘instinctive’ tribal sensitivity end of Western time and space

As you can see from this tetrad, McLuhan expresses the notion of the Global Village in terms of the theatre. In his 1970 book, From Cliché to Archetype, McLuhan noted that the Theatre of the Absurd tended to be associated with “expatriates alienated from their own countries,” which he saw as expressive of “the universal human condition today in a period of rapid innovation” whereby “[e]very culture rides on the back of every other culture” (9). This suggests that McLuhan’s insights into the effects of mediation can be traced to the diasporic movements inaugurated by the era of printed maps (and we remember that King Lear opens with Lear brandishing a map); hence, in another of Shakespeare’s plays, The Tempest, the island to which Prospero is exiled is at once in the Mediterranean and in the Bermudas, suggesting that the Mediterranean had been displaced from the middle of the earth through the effects of mapmaking while still occupying that position culturally. This tension was exacerbated by electronic media. As McLuhan noted, “[s]ince Sputnik put the globe in a ‘proscenium arch,’ … the global village has been transformed into a global theatre, [whereby] the result… is the use of public space for ‘doing one’s thing’” (12). McLuhan refers here to the notion of the “Happening,” a spontaneous theatricalization of a public space that depends for its effects on “radical juxtaposition” (195), especially of public and private spaces. The Happening “accepts the environment … as a colossal Gestalt” (197) implying that what we take to be natural is in fact already cultural: “The Happening … is the repetition of an environment as a means of offering some control to the perceiver” (198); art, in this regard, takes on the role of critique: “[i]n the world of electric circuitry, entire environments are kept in a state of interface and dialogue among themselves” (199). Here we enter into the context of what John Mighton has called Possible Worlds, where every gesture is infinite, every self multiple: we have no choice but to think globally when we act locally, for each action is capable of infinite permutation. “Each of us exists in an infinite number of possible worlds” writes Mighton, capturing thus the anxiety of living in a global village where all time is now and all space is here.

This “paralleling and overlapping of different
temporal and spatial realms,” as Peter Dickinson has put it, has manifested itself in various ways in Canadian cultural production, most evidently in cinema, where the montage effect is central to the grammar of filmic expression. Stellar examples of this technique are to be found in the work of Robert Lepage (on whom Dickinson is commenting), who explicitly imports this filmic technique into his theatrical productions, as in his cinematic adaptation of Mighton’s play Possible Worlds. As Lepage remarks in an interview, current technologies allow him “to invite film and /or television into the theatre. … The audience we are telling stories to in the theatre nowadays … are being told stories through rock videos and commercials in a narrative way that … we never had access to … twenty or thirty years ago, so people know what a jump cut is, what a flash forward is, they know what a completely discursive montage can be, so I think you have to embrace all of these narrative rules and try to impose them [on] the theatre.”

Lepage remarks in the same interview that he considers himself an “interdisciplinary artist” and that for him the “borders or … barriers [between disciplines are] very, very vague.” This is reflected in his interest in “intercultural exchange” and manifests itself in his plays in the form of astonishing juxtapositions, such as his treatment of the two mourning brothers (both of whom are played by Lepage) in The Far Side of the Moon (2001) in tandem with the space race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s (precisely the era that McLuhan understood as inaugurating the complexities of the global village). In this play, Lepage even manages to glocalize the stage set, so that a washing machine door becomes a spaceship hatch, while “[t]he grief of losing a parent” is paralleled to “the shudder of vulnerability mankind experienced on beholding the earth for the first time from the moon.” As Lepage describes the play, “I think it has to do with that weird paradox that if you want to do something that everyone identifies with, and if you want to touch universal themes, you have to be extremely local.”

Lepage, whose plays owe much to electronic technologies of representation, brilliantly captures the way in which these technologies both extend and alienate the self by staging the opening scene of The Far Side of the Moon with a huge mirror that he rotates to face the audience, with house lights up: “Lepage looks at us; the audience watch themselves watching him. It’s an uncanny introduction to the theme of narcissism, of that separation we all experience from our own images.”

The filmic technique of montage has considerable resonance with the juxtapositional structures of drama, as I was suggesting earlier, and in a number of Canadian plays this technique is employed to advance the concept of the glocal. In Tim Carlson’s Omniscience, electronic media once again take centre stage in a play about the effects of surveillance in post-911 society. The play opens with a powerful image of the glocal: “Satellite images of Earth progressively closing in on cities, airports, industrial areas, to a security camera image of a subway platform” (9). This scene gives way to another: “Lights up on WARREN in his editing suite at Channel One, the company that creates all media for the government of NorthWestOne. He slouches in front of a computer, headphones clamped to his head. He edits footage, creating a montage of war imagery—from satellites, battle clips and other media.” (9). Here the element of montage is directly related to our hyper-mediated
experience of the political environment, almost exclusively available to us via television and the internet. McLuhan argued that these mediated experiences were profoundly violent in that they were not only extensions of ourselves—in our consciousness and awareness—but also amputations, in that they produced a deep alienation: we are of these places yet displaced from them—“discarnate,” as McLuhan put it. As an advertisement for the documentary that Warren is working on states: “Exclusive footage obtained by Channel One’s guerilla camera crew puts you behind the scenes in explosive precision battle sequences. The latest in miniaturized ordnance technology delivers bone-crushing action” (40). Hence it comes as no surprise to find that Carlson’s play is about the alienation inherent within a surveillance society. As Warren asks at midpoint in the play, “Remember when war was something strange, something foreign? Not here-and-now, not just another aspect of the day-to-day … like taking out the garbage?” (41). Here, the function of the glocal is to highlight that alienation (quite a different experience from Coupland’s ecstatic experience).

In terms of fiction, one can trace the glocal element directly to the notion that Canada is a nation of immigrants, such that displacement powerfully haunts one’s sense of national belonging. A paradigmatic figure in this regard is the early 20th century Canadian author Frederick Philip Grove, who kept secret his identity as Felix Paul Greve, a German author who had been at home in the literary salons of London, Paris and Berlin but who eventually faked his suicide to escape a number of personal difficulties and assumed the identity of F. P. Grove in Canada. In Grove’s 1922 story “Snow,” the glocal element takes on the form of superimposition. Putatively a story about Grove the school teacher making the 34 mile weekend trip home on a sleigh during a snowstorm, it is also about the displacement of “home,” which for Grove was at once the Manitoba scene about which he was writing and the European literary milieu he had suddenly and reluctantly left behind. (17)

The sea is the major metaphor invoked by Grove in his description of the snow that he must travel through to reach his home. Grove imagines himself as Odysseus, journeying through the “wine dark sea” towards his Penelope: “Unaccountably two Greek words formed on my lips: Homer’s Pontos atrygetos—the barren sea.” (18). The effect of the snow is thus to superimpose another landscape on the one Grove is describing, a landscape that is “millennial-old … antediluvian and pre-adamic” (194). The new world, in short, must also and at the same time and in the same space become the old world if Grove is to go home, because home is at once in Canada and in Europe. Thus, the scenes that he describes sunder both time and space, as in the following example:

I shall never forget the weird kind of astonishment when the fact came home to me that what snapped and crackled in the snow under the horses’ hoofs, were the tops of trees. Nor shall the feeling of estrangement, as it were—as if I were not myself, but looking on from the outside at the adventure of somebody who yet was I—the feeling of other-worldliness, if you will pardon the word, ever fade from my memory—a feeling of having been carried beyond my depth where I could not swim—which came over me when with two quick glances to right and left I took in the fact that there were no longer any trees to either side, that I was above the forest.
world which had so often engulfed me. (202) At once above the trees and beyond his depth, in the snow and in the sea (and Greve had faked his suicide by drowning), himself and someone else, in the midst of the action and observing it from outside, Grove superimposes on the prairie landscape he is describing another landscape, in order that he may go home by coming home. If we reflect this example onto McLuhan’s theory of the global village, we will understand the extent to which his media theories were informed by the profound sense of displacement that characterizes the colonial experience, as well as his notion that the era of electronic mediation would exacerbate this sense of displacement, such that our very being would be placed in question.

A contemporary example of the glocal is available in Michael Ondaatje’s novel The English Patient, where a number of spaces coincide and overlap. Like Lepage, Ondaatje has been profoundly influenced by new technologies of representation. As he notes in his 2002 book of Conversations with film editor Walter Murch (who edited the Godfather movies as well as The English Patient), what he has learned from film is how to splice narratives that use “radical jump cuts” in order to produce “‘verbal cinema.’”

The English Patient splices two WW2 narratives: the romance of Geoffrey Clifton, his wife Katharine, and her lover, the “English patient”; and the anti-romance of Kirpal Singh (Kip) and the Canadian nurse Hana, who is likewise attracted to the patient, whom she nurses after he is horrifically burned in an airplane accident. In this way the geography of decolonization is made to collide with the Eurocentric geography of romance.

The conflict of these spaces remain unresolved. The last three pages of the novel take place after the war, although the time and place are not recorded. Kip is now a doctor in India; Hana is in a Canada defined for him by memory and imagination. “Now where does he sit as he thinks of her?” asks the narrator, and it is significant that this simultaneous space is not available to the novel’s narration. The space that embodies Kip and Hana—at once here and there, local and global, material and abstract—is unrepresentable in terms of linear narrative, and Ondaatje self-consciously alludes to this fact by refusing to narrate the scene. At the end of Ondaatje’s novel, its Eurocentric cultural geography has been radically destabilized by a postcolonial space that simultaneously includes Canada and India.

Ondaatje’s novel represents a local/global dynamic in a number of ways, including its representation of Canada as geographically displaced, given that the story that it relates largely takes place in Europe, with brief scenes in North American and Asia, though all of these spaces are conflated in various ways. How are we to understand this glocalism if not in terms of linear narrative? The concept of the network presents itself here as a viable alternative. One advantage of understanding a text as a network is that it allows us to address the ways in which the new technologies are now intermediated with literature. Ondaatje gestures toward this moment when he questions the possibility of narrating the glocal space evoked at the end of his novel. Moving into the present tense, he brings us with him in the urgency that we locate ourselves in that networked space and that we do so by encountering it critically.


(3) As Robertson notes, it was in that period that both Japan and the United States—two global nations, though global in different ways—“entered … the international community,” and he further argues that this parallel encounter with the global was at the origins of the “violently problematical” relationship of the two nations at mid-century. It may be for this reason that Canadian playwrights such as Robert Lepage (in The Seven Streams of the River Ota) and Marie Clements (in Burning Vision), focus their plays on the U.S. atomic attack on Japan, and why Ondaatje chooses to focalize the conclusion of The English Patient with the same event.


(9) McLuhan, with Wilfred Watson, From Cliché to Archetype (N.Y.: Viking 1970) 8.


(11) Peter Dickinson, Screening Gender, Framing Genre: Canadian Literature into Film (Toronto: U Toronto P, 2007) 152.


(15) Tim Carlson, Omniscience (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2007); first performed in Vancouver, May 2004.


(21) Iyer is quoting the legendary Canadian biographer Leon Edel.