# Metropolitan Chords and Discords

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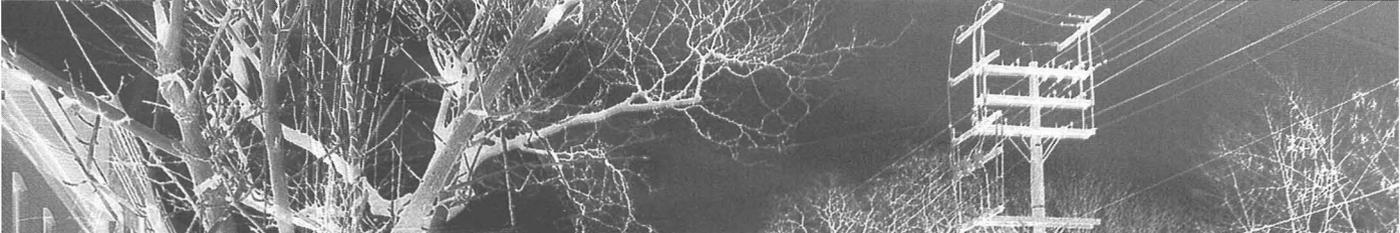
These notes on time and the city started from a position of retreat during a period of convalescence and took form as I began to re-enter my life. They therefore travel from the personal and contemplative through the piecing together of some thought fragments on time as experienced in urban contexts, to instances of art and citizenship symbioses in various media, in each of which time and the city figure differently.

Thinking about the city and why I'm addicted to it, I've had to concede that any notions of speed and efficiency I may have cherished must be delusional.

With road rage as diversion, the meeting of citizens' needs has long been stymied by a demoralized municipal labour force and by the concentric walls of obfuscation that characterize private initiatives. Buck-passing and water-treading prevail. Regarding work and transportation, or just getting things done in general, time in the city can stutter to a near halt, giving the pastoral fantasies that lurk beneath my metropolis addiction a chance to act up.

Despite all that, my studio and living quarters share a downtown storefront along a streetcar route, the sound of traffic my lullaby.

During the period when I was housebound, a heightened state of awareness kept me more attuned than usual to the sounds of the city, to the world beyond my body. Headlines and weather reports came through the door with each nurse, caregiver, or friend. Though I may have wished for solitude, I received instead, in bits and pieces, in disparate threads, a palimpsest narrative of the city. News and gossip, art, love and politics, wove themselves into a second skin inside which I could heal.

Listening became both more necessary and more acute, as my longed-for cocoon of solitude was penetrated by radio, telephone, traffic sound. Police and ambulance sirens, streetcar rattle and screech, provided the background hum; passing voices the cadenza.

Traffic, according to a recent CBC *Ideas* program, is the subject of ongoing research in physics, philosophy, and cybernetics and is said to be diagnostic of human behaviour in its starkest form.

As in all research, models and metaphors abound in the study of traffic. Vehicle motion is variously described as fluid in a pipe, sand grains in a funnel, gas in a tube, a flow of particles or molecules of water, with attention paid to how many of these molecules hit each other per unit time. And detectors in the pavement reveal that the instruments of my downtown lullaby are 2,200 vehicles passing per lane per hour.

Ideal travel time in the city is perceived as a homogeneous, uneventful, unperturbed flow. Experts gaze at walls of video signals from hundreds of cameras in the field and, using instant detection algorithms and artificial intelligence

software to make careful distinctions between what is normal for a given time of day and what isn't, shape that flow. Once a disruption is located, control can be reinstated by changing signal plans in real time to adjust for sudden surges of traffic arriving from affected areas. It's a Wizard-of-Oz phenomenon.

While I was recovering, and feeling in the very same instant that time is endless and life is short, elaborate backstage systems were at work orchestrating the flow of sound that passes my street-level window. And it's all that passing, it turns out, that produces inevitable slow downs. No wonder the city, meeting point of so many diasporas, feels like a nest of paradoxes.

My Toronto neighbourhood, situated in the shadow of a local mental hospital, is changing too fast for my liking. It already has up-market pretensions, though with neither bookstore nor grocery store nearby, no one's quite convinced. The hospital, home of so many myths and memories, some downright dreadful, and of a respected annual film festival on madness, is scheduled for demolition. This is serious. Though I might put it differently, I find myself agreeing with the postman when he shakes his head, and repeats the current mantra: "Once the looney bin goes, there goes the neighbourhood!"

But for the moment my corner of the city still hovers in the realm of the industrial/commercial, which means precious anonymity, allowing me to choose my distances and my intimacies relatively free of scrutiny. This is very different from the experience I recall of living in the village of Bath near Kingston, its collective memory scarred by the knowledge that it was once the chosen, then discarded, site for the provincial capital. There, every item I purchased at the corner store was subject to vivid speculation, an astute material culture survey. Complete strangers felt entitled to quiz me at point-blank range on everything from my house guests to my apparent lack of religious practices.

Well-meaning intrusiveness aside, one of the benefits of my stay in Prince Edward County was discovering the poems of a native son of the region, Tom Marshall. His poem "London Nocturne" gave some comfort during my own exile from Toronto.

> *My nerves are shot*
> *The sky is bruised and blue.*
> *A moon like a torn nail.*
> *Hundreds of city things float*
> *across my sight.*
> *Hundreds of insects.*
> *I hate them all*
> *Indiscriminately.* [1]

A reassuring grumpiness. If the city is really so dreadful, I remember thinking, while batting away a swarm of Bath mayflies, I was well off where I was.

From afar or from within, alongside its excitements and smog, the city has its special form of arrogance and *ennui* underneath which secrets abound. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde has his London-dwelling protagonist, Algernon Moncrieff, mask his pastoral dalliances by means of a clever fiction. "I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury," says Algernon to his friend Ernest Worthing, "in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose." Algernon advises Ernest to do the same once he marries, suggesting that the country has its uses.

Whatever one's marital rescue strategies, the notion of the city as exhausting machine and the country as nurturing haven shifts easily into considerations of technology and power. Interestingly, Tom Marshall, having dismissed London, seems quite happy in his poem "Speedboat" to laud the benefits of technology for his home waters:

> *The machine,*
> *Many poets to the contrary, is not*
> *The enemy.*
>
> *In our just becoming*
> *World, we wish*
> *On motors as on stars.*
> *All the same. All the best*
> *hopes are for motion.* [2]

Psychiatrist and cultural theorist Jeanne Randolph, in her anthology *The City Within*, is more circumspect. A residency on "Technology, Rhetoric and Utopia" at Banff was her point of departure for the anthology and the context for her meditation on the technological ethos in her essay "Technology and the Preconscious."

Referring cheerfully to psychoanalysis as "this historically legitimated, patriarchal bourgeois capitalist theory," she cites Freud as a line in the sand she's about to kick: "The unconscious has no access to consciousness except via the preconscious, in passing through which its excitatory process is obliged to submit to modifications." [3] Randolph sees these modifications as the locus of permeation by the technological ethos.

After announcing her ambivalence about technology, Randolph describes technology's special relation to the preconscious as a process of "finding a vulnerable site within ourselves to achieve its effects." Technology, she continues—working to loosen the grip of unwelcome dualisms—is surely both external and intrapsychic. "Technology…must be both inside and outside at the same time. There is no boundary between the two." [4]

(*We wish on motors as on stars*, writes Marshall). And free of the problems of urban traffic, his speedboat continues:

*Spray. Wind space*
*Reclaimed, a way home*
*Disintegrating in gladness*
*Stung into sweetest pain*
*We are racing.*

Randolph writes further: "Technology has both Eros and Thanatos....Having searched for ways of articulating the inherent political agenda that all technologies bear...and after considering whether what is permitted into consciousness is in some way actually a political question," she concludes that the elimination of ambiguity is exactly what the ideology of technology demands. It is the domination of the technological ethos over any other system for assigning value to experience that concerns Randolph, not technology's essence.

Country/city. Eros/Thanatos. External/intrapsychic. The poet's hatred of the city but love of the machine. Dualisms dissolved...?

Suspended in a realm between internal and external rhythms and thinking about ambiguity, winter, and my lost half-year in a fugitive city of sound and word, I opened Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. On the book's cover, the author is described as leading us beyond our experience of time to a level where time ceases to quicken memory and space is everything.

In his chapter "House and Universe," Bachelard writes of Baudelaire: "Although at heart a city man, [he] sensed the increased intimacy of a house when it is besieged by winter....Behind dark curtains, snow seems to be whiter. *Indeed, everything comes alive when contradictions accumulate*"[5] (emphasis mine).

"Further on in his deep-winter 'artificial Paradise,'" writes Bachelard, "Baudelaire declares that dreamers, among which I include artists, prefer a severe winter....'What they really need,' says Baudelaire, 'are Canadian or Russian winters. Their own nests will be all the warmer, all the downier, all the better beloved.'"[6]

"At whatever dialectical pole the dreamer stands," Bachelard continues, "whether in the house or in the universe...House and space awaken daydreams in each other that are opposed."[7] In the mutual awakenings of tension between interior and space beyond, we are again in the realm of contradiction and paradox that creates the germinating process for art of all kinds.

Not to be led by Bachelard "beyond our experience of time," let's consider the work of composer Murray Schafer. Before he gave himself over to spectacle, Schafer did some wonderful groundbreaking work mapping the ambience of a city through sound. His *Vancouver Soundscape*, in 1973, revealed the city's times and spaces, and its unique audio imprint. He did this through a combination of signals,

textures, and resonances as they attached to and unfolded from a central mid-day marker that I remembered as a clock, but I was mistaken. When I asked a Vancouver friend last week for details, she sent this information in her response:

> For more than 25 years at noon each day, a set of horns atop a downtown Vancouver building played the first four notes of Canada's national anthem, *O, Canada*. The ten aluminum horns were so powerful they could be heard over much of the city, and those nearby had to plug their ears. When the building was converted into a condominium in the mid-90s, the horns were moved to the top of the luxury Pan Pacific Hotel near Canada Place. [8]

Those horns later became part of Schafer's *World Soundscape Project*, in which he united the social, scientific, and artistic aspects of sound, and introduced the concept of acoustic ecology. Time and the city were his twin themes as well as his symbiotic twin instruments.

It's both a long leap and a short step from Vancouver's patriotic horns to the call to prayer of the muezzin in Cairo and the impact of the sermon tapes that citizens there can buy at every street corner.

Anthropologist Charles Hirschkind, in his essay "Civic Virtue and Religious Reason: An Islamic Counter-Public," describes these tapes as prompts for the conducting of public discourse. [9] Like Randolph, Hirschkind considers the difference between media technologies that help democratize religious authority and transform ritual speech into individual assertion, and media technologies that help extend authoritative, religious discourse, subjecting a public to an authority "which promotes and secures a uniform model of moral behaviour."

The ideological power of media technologies, according to Jeanne Randolph, supports an imperative to find "the one best way to accomplish each goal. Thus technology will not concern itself with the experience of the subject, but instead with the materiality of the object." By interrogating the practices of public sociability tied to production and consumption of cassette-sermons in Egypt, Hirschkind wants to rethink this polarity.

While the call to prayer in Cairo creates a pause in the inner and outer traffic of the city, chord holding discord at bay and affecting citizen and stranger alike, the process of purchasing and listening to a sermon tape is both private and shared. The solo experience of listening reinforces shared belief, time opens out into meditation, and meditation fosters discourse.

The tapes being borrowed, copied, and exchanged make no claim to being works of art. What is of interest here is their transformative role in the life of the city. Hirschkind's description of what joins the practice of listening to a sermon with that of arguing with a neighbour as " … the conception of the rhetorical force of ethical speech to shape character" is telling. "The production and consumption of sermon tapes," he continues, "has been associated with the broad movement

known as Al-Da'wa: a summons or call. The preachers who use sermon tapes refer to themselves ... as 'those who undertake *da'wa*'. .... Da'wa emerges not at a point of commonality but precisely at one of difference, where a discrepancy in practice makes argument necessary."[10]

"In Cairo," Hirschkind writes further, "cassette-recorded sermons of popular Islamic preachers…have become an ubiquitous part of the contemporary social landscape. Their recorded voices echo from cafés, shops, private homes, and most forms of public transport throughout the city….in this way creating the ethical conditions for a domain of public deliberation."[11]

Hirschkind makes his point about the role of sermon tapes in the creation of a counter-public as follows:

> Media technologies are often critiqued for being susceptible to propagandistic uses and serving the interests of domination. Production and consumption of audio-cassette sermons in Egypt yield insight into the ways in which recordings can function in the public sphere ... and become a space for the articulation of a contestatory Islamic discourse on state and society ... an institutional framework for the emergence of a domain of practice and critique that to a certain extent remains autonomous from the interests and policies of the state.[12]

And,

> Taped sermons mediate multiple forms of argument and contestation ….cutting across generational and gender lines in ways not possible within the ordered, sex-segregated space of the mosque, providing the foundation upon which opposing viewpoints are articulated.[13]

Another embrace of contradiction. Hirschkind points out the difficulty of controlling a medium that can be so inexpensively reproduced and circulated that it has enabled the cassette tape, far more easily than other media, to evade the regulatory purview of the state. He refers to an emerging counter-public in which citizens' choices are re-politicized and subject to public scrutiny.

Necessary for the practice of da'wa, of responding to a religious summons or call, is courage, the courage to speak the truth in the face of the quite real danger of arrest and torture by the Egyptian state. The young men Hirschkind spoke with "…worried that Egypt would become like the United States, where (they had heard) no one dares to speak or take action in public on behalf of others out of fear."[14]

Toronto, for nearly two decades UNESCO's idea of the most multicultural city in the world (or so we understood before learning of Panama's superior status in this regard), is a city where parallel continuities proliferate, and there are few of those shared experiences, which are possible in a more homogeneous

milieu. For artists who would like to think their work can be useful, heterogeneity presents a challenge to create something that speaks beyond the familiar.

Among the diasporas that converge and cross at the city's intersections, the mixture of harmonies and cacophonies that carry the inherent contradictions of urban life makes time and the city an endlessly changing instrument, and art flows like traffic, but with traffic's perturbations emphasized.

In Toronto, as elsewhere, visual and media artists engage with and reflect the city in various inventive ways, from storefront installations to electronic pixel boards. Two recent projects that centre differently on time and the city, and provide contexts for the work of other artists, are Robert Ouellette's on-line project *Reading Toronto* and Sybil Goldstein's *City Streets Calendar*.

Using the Roland Barthes tagline "The city is a book with 100,000 million poems!" for *Reading Toronto*, Ouellette invited each contributor to provide a seven-day blog centering on his or her experience of the city. These, cumulatively, would constitute the city's portrait. As Ouellette explained in a release prior to the site's launch, "The theoretical centre of this project is the idea that many short stories or narrative fragments about the city will give readers a profound insight into the place as a whole."

On March 30, 2005, the day of the site's launch at Expo 2005 in Tokyo, the *Reading Toronto* invitation was posted: "Join us in a year long exploration of Toronto as experienced and written by its artists, designers and arts institutions."[15]

Another one-year project in a different register entirely is Sybil Goldstein's *City Streets 2006 Calendar*. "The city is an enduring theme for countless artists," she writes, and the calendar "will portray various city neighbourhoods as uniquely interpreted by Toronto's finest visual artists....From the tranquility of the islands, through the outstanding architecture of the downtown core, to the Victorian residential neighbourhoods and unique ethnic communities, the calendar will capture the essence of Toronto's unique diversity....Proceeds from the sale of the calendar will go to The Arts Foundation and city-sponsored programmes for disadvantaged and at risk youth."[16]

Ouellette's project has a good-works mission too: "The flip side of *Reading Toronto* is *Rereading Toronto*...A FREE, online repository and exchange site aimed at bringing books to people who might otherwise go without...[it] works by uniting people who have books, computers, videos, etc., with people who need them. Think of it as a free eBay for literacy."[17]

Clicking or flipping; a cumulative on-line vision garnered in seven-day swatches, or a twelve-month printed calendar—however they may be situated on the Newtonian-Einsteinian *Weltanschauung* trajectory—each project is designed as an instrument for participation and change, with time and the city as its governing dimensions.

One of the most resonant witnesses to city and time came a generation earlier in the form of Barry Callaghan's *The Hogg Poems*, in which a real and imagined Jerusalem is nested metaphorically inside a real and imagined Toronto, and the

author disappears into the skin of the famous Torontonian James Hogg (after whom Hogg's Hollow was named), through whose eyes, heart, and loins we experience the world. Toronto's subway stations become the stations of the cross, and time stands still as we traverse them.[18]

I'm reminded of something dancer, choreographer, and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer, one of the founders of the legendary Judson Dance Theatre, once said to me: "Judson Street would never have become real if it hadn't been written about. We knew that that was part of the job." Also part of the artists' job is to imagine the place they're in as if seeing and hearing it for the first time. Their writings, images, and sound works enter into dialogue with the city, and, pace the technological ethos, bring the city's dualisms and contradictions into focus, and perhaps a step closer to resolution.

NOTES

1   Tom Marshall, *The Silences of Fire* (Toronto: Macmillan Co., Canada, 1969), 26.
2   Ibid, 56-57.
3   Jeanne Randolph, ed., *The City Within* (Banff, Alberta: Banff Centre for the Arts, 1992), 38.
4   Ibid, 40.
5   Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space,* trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 38-9.
6   Ibid.
7   Ibid, 43.
8   The ten aluminum horns can be heard at www.vanmag.com/sounds/wavs/Oh_Canada
9   Drobnick, Jim, ed., *Aural Cultures* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2004). (Paraphrasing W.J.T. Mitchell's term, "pictorial turn," Drobnick refers to a discernible "sonic turn" in the recent upsurge in sound-based scholarship and artistic work, and states that "Most pertinent to this publication is the embeddedness of sound in cultural, political and physical contexts."
10  Charles Hirschkind, "Civil Virtue and Religious Reason: An Islamic Counter-public," in *Aural Cultures*, Jim Drobnick, ed., (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2004), 200.
11  Ibid., 189-90.
12  Ibid., 192.
13  Ibid., 195.
14  Ibid., 205.
15  Reading Toronto, (http://readingtoronto.com), produced by Robert Ouellette in cooperation with the Design Exchange and DigiFest.  Launched March 30, Expo 2005, Tokyo.
16  *City Streets 2006 Calendar* is a collaborative effort involving The Artists Foundation, The Office of Toronto Mayor David Miller, The City of Toronto Cultural Division and the artists involved.
17  http://www.rereadingtoronto.com tag line, "Reuse, recycle, reread the city's 100,000 million books."
18  Barry Callaghan, *The Hogg Poems* (Don Mills: General Publishing Co., 1978).

PHOTO: Vera Frenkel, *State of...*