

# Saxophone Countering Trumpet In Relation To Tulips

A response by participant/observer Andrew James Paterson

Blowing the Trumpets to the Tulips. Combining music and flowers. Make that sounds and pictures.

Neither sounds nor pictures necessarily require words. Sounds and images can register emotionally without verbal language. Impulses to utter the vernacular and to represent beauty have traditionally enjoyed a primacy that verbal language has lacked. Finding the right words involves process and thus a delayed response.

The trumpet, and its cousin the bugle, are proclamatory instruments. They herald movements and mobilize troops. They are heroic instruments. Heroic self-sacrifice, during the recent September 11 catastrophe and throughout all history, can be blamed for war, mass-murder, and other dystopian fallout. I'm a sucker for sexy muted trumpets, but I myself am a saxophone. A joke within the classical canon, but an instrument or conduit for some serious improvisational riffing.

Did I say "dystopian"? Then I must have said "utopian."

Utopia?

Are we talking brand names? (I drank a raspberry Fruitopia the other day. I am a fruit. Is Fruitopia some queer paradise? Hardly, my dear.)

Utopia sounds so...revolutionary. So fervent or stridently sincere. So wonderfully optimistic. So very very free. But, free from what? (Censorship, censure, the need to tailor work for audiences? For "the public"? Don't we all wish to be "visible"?)

How can one show his/her/she-he's/he-she's work to diverse and many audiences without being yet another populist capitalist masquerading as an anti-elitist radical or some other generic bean-counter?

I had a friend who once proclaimed to me that it is immoral not to try getting one's work into the mainstream. This individual is a serious lefty, with far better credentials than my own. But that quote is so Canadian Alliance, so Jesse Helms or Preston Manning.

Qu'est que c'est le mainstream? And who the hell are we? Oui?

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I'm glad that this conference has attempted to give preference to the verb over the almighty adjective. *Experimenting* connoting something an individual group or collective does while *experimental* could but shouldn't refer to experimental-the-genre, dominated by those who actually ceased experimenting years ago.

Experimenting for social change? There are still those who might consider this phrase oxymoronic, despite this and similar conferences being overwhelmingly populated by those who insist that radical form and radical content be deliriously symbiotic.

Does this formal-cum-political radicalism, dare I say this rather utopian fervour, by necessity negate “irony”? No, and it can’t. Irony is not cynicism, nor is it resignation or melancholia.

Generational demarcations were constantly referenced throughout the conference. There are post-boomer practitioners who had already absorbed MTV-Land before beginning their practices. MTV, of course, owes more than a few strands to Anger and Deren and maybe even Stan Brakhage himself. And popular culture hasn’t been a forbidden fruit since even before the Roaring Eighties. But today we live in the climate of terrorist fatigue and Oprah. We live in a quagmire of relentless self-help for the chronically helpless. So how can we move beyond what has been eloquently termed “left-wing melancholia”?<sup>1</sup> Do we even want to? And who are “we”?

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Who *is* truly radical? Who makes these and similar decisions?

There have, lately as indeed always, been so many lists. I am a notorious list-enthusiast. The Academy encourages lists and canons. Awards ceremonies are also guilty of such encouragement. Lists and inventories are key tropes of conceptual art.

Is Canada really too bureaucratic (and therefore ironic) to ever adapt a utopian fervour or flavour? I’m nobody’s nationalist, but I hope this maxim is true because I live and work in Canada. Bureaucracy can be a saving grace and of course an impenetrable curse.

Is there such an animal as a non-canonical list?

Works have been presented and discussed that are conceived, executed, and distributed by collectives rather than individual brand-name artists. Some of these collectives prefer to remain anonymous and/or invisible for legal and other clandestine reasons. Why is there still so much debate and argument about reclaiming and even re-canonizing certain individual auteurs when issues of authorship and copyright are in so many people’s minds and even on their lips?

“Jack Smith” became a recurring trope unto himself during the conference. Judith Doyle was curious as to why notorious New York filmmaker-provocateur Jack Smith was excluded from John Greyson’s extensive list of queer male filmmakers with overt leftist politics. “Jack Smith” became a stand-in for other male queer artists (Bruce La Bruce, Steve Reinke, many others) who certainly do flaunt their sexualities but avoid taking fixed, dare I say predictable, political stances. After all, there are at least

two lefts and at least two rights. The Marxist and neo-Marxist left (the one left that I believe has been making a comeback after the nineties' discrediting of "identity politics," which after all did degenerate into serviceable brand-name capitalism) has always been suspicious of pleasure, since pleasure creates markets and other capitalistic exchanges. Andy Warhol was a Democrat, but Paul Morrissey and Bon Collacello were/are Republicans. And Pasolini supported the cops over the students and their new-leftist allies (1968 in Paris and Rome). Authority figures can be much sexier than strident utopian radicals, especially when the latter might be glibly characterized as class-privileged individuals dressing down without enough prerequisite conviction.

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Here are a pair of half-remembered quotes:

"Avant-garde has traditionally been defined as referring to hands-on" (semi-recalled from some Amy Taubin review in some late-eighties or early-nineties *Village Voice*).

Radical, oppositional, or whatever adjective cinema and/or video, for more than just a few practitioners and enthusiasts, refers as much to hands-off, or now contribute and then let go, or pass the hot-potato over to the next committed shit-disturber.

"History is bunk" (Henry Ford—date or context forgotten).

In my early adolescent adulthood, I used to consider Henry Ford a heavy-duty Dadaist/anarchist on the basis of this quote. Needless to say, I was dead wrong about the wretched little man. But the bureaucrat in me still suspects parallels between Fluxism, Random Orders, and the stock-market.

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The roles and positioning of "the audience" have been under debate, as they bloody well should. This insistence is despite avant-gardist defiance of everything mainstream and willingness to concentrate on appealing to the seriously already-committed. (Vanguardist practices became contested by angry-taxpayer types and other censorious advocates of "community-values" when they transgressed rarefied inner-circles or privileged boundaries—when they became dependent upon state or public funding.<sup>2</sup>)

I have at least a mild masochist streak in my nature/psyche. I love a good thriller and I've even read a little Tania Modleski. But I'm a Rodinesque audience-member. I am a fixture at festivals yet I often prefer viewing film and video in art galleries and other more private spaces in which temporality can become much more subjectified than in a theatrical viewing situation. When I'm alone, or even parallel to one or two other individuals, I can provide the laugh track if I feel it in my guts.

The position of the audience should be any possible position in which he/she, she-to-he, and he-to-she might be stimulated and even provoked.

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Performance has also been a conference trope, or rather several tropes.

Performative discourse allows one to posit, to self-portray, while problematizing any left-over demand for authenticity. But, is performative discourse a faux freedom? Is it a freedom only for the presenter and not the audience, as it tends to make obligatory Q&A sessions redundant? Performance might indeed ensure closure rather than creative response or counter-initiative. Except, who could be any more vulnerable than those who choose to perform—the definition of which I will expand to include exhibition and exhibiting.

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Janine Marchessault's talk focused upon cities (not nation-states, but cities) and their generative tendencies to breed "scenes."<sup>3</sup> I am familiar with many such scenes. I'm sort of part of them and then I'm sort of a ghost.

Are scenes smaller than communities, which are in turn smaller than societies? Notice that I avoid the singular.

Actually, *society* I can deal with in the singular. Society refers to social space or public space or any space beyond the self and the solipsistic subjective. "Community" and "scene" imply gate-keeping. Who belongs and who doesn't? Not unlike canons and other definitive lists.

Janine wondered if Andy Warhol could have lived and worked in any other metropolis than New York. I doubt it. Certainly not in Toronto, since Toronto was home-base to General Idea.

Perhaps scenes are the social equivalents of schools. One makes its proclamation and, unless the proclamation/declaration only exists in a seriously hermetic vacuum, both individuals and schools react against scenes and sometimes create oppositional scenes.

I'm unconvinced in general by manifestos. Manifestos are not unlike lists, which are fun but canonistic. Restrictive is another synonym.

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*Is the current anthrax bio-terror the final nail in the coffin of "snail-mail"?*

There are other lingering conference questions. Who is experimental? Who can afford to be experimental? Who and what are the faces of "experimenting"? Who seriously wants to be "out there," meaning both formally politically radical and also meaning visible? Who prefers to remain invisible while analyzing the invisible?

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I like audiences to be performers, in a thinking rather than exhibitionist mode of performance. Seeing, listening, and thinking are, after all, performative activities.

Like Zachary Longboy, I too am a baton person.<sup>4</sup> I like to put shit on the table and then pass it along. The trick is to get myself out of the way.

I savour small changes. I'm extremely suspicious of Big Changes.

Who is in power, and what gives them the right to institute changes? I am afraid of Everything Big.

Populists argue that Big means Known and therefore effective beyond limited and elitist demographics. Leftists have argued that DIY mentalities and activities are routinely co-opted by capitalism and its neo-liberal governmental protectors.

I think anarchy is impossible without radical redefining of exchange and exchange practices. Who would eliminate money, and with what sort of agenda?

I don't believe in Utopias, but I do believe in significant small miracles. I do believe in provocative exchanges and intellectual stimulations, and I love it when they truly occur. I guess this makes me a scene-maker. Scenes are characterized by discourse, by presentation, and by visual, sonic, and verbal literacy, and subsequent sophistication.

Sometimes words fail. Sometimes emotions are so clear that words become redundant. Sometimes pictures speak so much more effectively. Does this privilege the visual at the expense of the verbal? Sometimes, yes.

Sounds and pictures. Often they can exist beautifully without requiring each other. Often the one desperately needs the other. Neither sound nor pictures necessarily need words. But sometimes words can be pretty damn useful.

#### Notes

1 Richard Dyer, "Reading Fassbinder's Sexual Politics," *Fassbinder*, revised and expanded edition, ed. Tony Rayns (*bfi*, 1980): 54-64. See also Walter Benjamin on the poetry of Erich Kastner and the Neue Sachlichkeit, "Left-wing melancholy," *Screen* 15, no. 2.

2 Kevin Dowler, "Art & Scandal: Public Controversy in Contemporary Art," *FUSE* 23, no. 2 (September 2000): 14-19.

3 Janine Marchessault's paper "Film Scenes: Paris, New York, Toronto" appeared in *Public* 22/23, "Cities/Scenes."

4 Panelist-presenter Zachary Longboy effectively performed while twirling a baton, implying that he wished to pass it on to somebody else, and also evoking the muscular sexy baton-twirlers who habitually march in annual Gay Pride parades.