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The Trans-canada Highway And The Jumping Pound Grade Separator, Alberta

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Article abstract

The Trans-Canada Highway (1949-1962) was a major postwar Canadian nationalist project. It is also a real roadway, originally constructed to standards acceptable in 1949, and paid for by the provinces and the federal government. It is a clear case of a material object designed under a set of conditions that evolve, adapt and persist through changing circumstances. The highway's physical materiality and usefulness ensures its continued presence; its political and social readings are more ephemeral. Its ambitions of sovereignty were a response to American concerns over geopolitical security. Its routing was a response to American tourism. Its structures — bridges, overpasses, guard rails, verges, signage — are at once intensely local, sited in very particular landscapes, and at the same time follow the lineaments of abstract expressionism — overtly the quantifiable universalism of the modern movement. The Trans-Canada Highway is a case of modernism coming to ground in a local geography.

Performance and Memory

The Trans-Canada Highway and the Jumping Pound Grade Separator, Alberta.

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The building of the Trans-Canada Highway (1949-1961) was a nationalist exercise spurred by forecasts of increased road links with the United States for trade and tourism, and undertaken in the postwar climate of the Cold War. It is an object of national unity coordinated by the provinces, illustrating how a federal government policy was enacted on a series of local sites, by provincial governments often historically suspicious of federal intentions. Besides the road surface itself there are a certain number of attendant structures: bridges, overpasses, tunnels and lay-bys. These were designed and constructed locally (provincially in rural areas, municipally when the Trans-Canada Highway crossed a city) according to Trans-Canada Highway Act guidelines. The building of the Trans-Canada Highway and the engineering works along its route collectively form a piece of material culture very much a product of its time.

In any structure, *technology* and *universality* are bonded to *locale*. It is local soil conditions, building materials, labour, climate, economics, politics and culture that take a universal, modern idea and adjust it to fit local conditions. This is not a matter of choice or a desire to ameliorate universal culture, but a necessity. The adaptation of technological solutions to specific tasks while affirming the aesthetics of specific communities is necessary to material existence and social survival. In this case a simple universal concept, a cross-Canada highway connecting, with a single pavement, all the provinces, met a number of challenges that were inevitably local. The imposition of a single system on an uneven terrain has resonance with the impact of globalisation on an unevenly developed world: access is improved, local identities are in danger of becoming folklorical, the possibility of authoritarian control

is facilitated. The role of highways as channels of development, as deliverers of tourists to the landscape and, as in Eisenhower's justification of the United States Interstate system, a means of military defence, operates with a sense of a larger whole, which is the nation, that the highways render coherent and that in turn renders the highways intelligible.

Jumping Pound Grade Separator, Trans-Canada Highway, October 1999.

The particularities of sited modernism counter the perception of a homogenizing and universal movement. General ideas carried from metropolitan centres to a peripheral site — Alberta for example — can be seen to liberate a host of peripheral events rather than suppressing them. One might say that modernism consists precisely of the dialectic between the local and the universal, both necessary to the other. Here, the Trans-Canada Highway project as a postwar political idea, and one specific highway grade separator, #74596 at Jumping Pound Creek on the Bowness to Kananaskis portion of the Trans-Canada Highway, 22 kilometres west of Calgary, precipitate several interesting issues. Designed in 1963 by the Department of Alberta Highways, it epitomizes an era of sleek, minimal, modernist engineering. If, as Tzonis suggests, one of the basic tenets of modernism is the defamiliarisation of the environment in order to re-present it without the obscuring layers of cultural expectation (Tzonis 1996: 176), then this era of engineering works provided a lens with which to see the landscape defamiliarised

and represented as simple, clean and sublime, not the complicated and difficult nineteenth century view of the Canadian landscape. The bridging of the highway was presented as lightweight and effortless, unlike earlier and often later bridge technology. Jumping Pound overpass was designed in the same decade that Margaret Atwood wrote *Survival*, the last version of the thesis that the threatening landscape had forged the Canadian character.[1]

The Trans-Canada Highway is cited as one of a handful of major national initiatives following the Second World War. The St. Lawrence Seaway, the Trans-Canada Pipeline, the Trans-Canada Highway, the *National Housing Act*, the introduction of government health care, the pension plan — all envisaged Canada as a unity that national projects could traverse (Clement 1984: 40-41). Federally funded, they meant that all taxpayers were involved in these projects, and they were of a scale to engage the collective public imagination during a period of high immigration, internal migration and rising, distracting, household prosperity.

The Iconography of the Trans-Canada Highway

Today, the Trans-Canada Highway seems to sit in the popular imagination only lightly. A flurry of books followed its opening in 1962, by journalists who had packed their families in the car and driven the length from Victoria to St. John's. There is a tangible delight in these accounts about being able to do the trip, to *see* Canada with the unscheduled summertime autonomy that automobile travel promised. And there are new, sobering realisations such as this one from Edward McCourt:

> British Columbia faces south and west. Central Canada faces south. The Maritimes face south and east. The physical structure of our country forbids us to look to a common centre. Many reasons have been advanced to explain our comparative failure to realize that distinctive identity; but no one, unless he has travelled the Trans-Canada Highway, can fully understand the degree to which our physical environment inhibits its emergence (McCourt 1965: 147).

1. Subsequent criticism, such as that of Gaile MacGregor, laid to rest the obligation to find the Canadian landscape malevolent. Earle Birney's *David and Other Poems* of 1942, and Marion Engel's novel *Bear*, of 1976 stand on either side of the divide in attitudes toward Canadian nature.

Then there is a silence from Trans-Canada Highway travellers until Charles Gordon does the trip and writes about it in 1996. His trip however finds the Trans-Canada Highway restrictive — there are more interesting sights on smaller highways.

Unlike the iconographic presence of the American highway with its twentieth century tradition of roadside material culture — the motels, the auto-camps, the drive-in hamburger stands that filled movies and television, Canada's highway presence is often composed of views of the landscape seen from the highway — the highway itself, as a physical object is distinctly absent. When *Route* 66, a 1960s American television program, with its powerful theme music and its indelibly glamorous image of a convertible on the highway was being aired throughout North America, Canada was listening not to Trans-Canada Highway myth making, but to Gordon Lightfoot's *Canadian Railroad Trilogy* — a nostalgic look back at the landscape the railway made legible, the workers who had built it, and the epic beauty of the country.

Unlike the cartographic clarity of the United States Interstate numbering system where east-west freeways are numbered in multiples of 10 and north-south roads as multiples of 5, the Trans-Canada Highway goes by several different numbers, vestiges of the provincial roads that were linked together to form it. It is called l'*Autoroute Métropolitaine* in Montreal, l'*Autoroute de la Capitale* in Quebec City, the 401 outside Toronto, 16th Avenue in Calgary. The only consistent roadside image is the pale green sign with its pallid maple leaf and each province's name added to it.

Unlike Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassidy who forged a new postwar American literature while "on the road", the road is largely absent from Canada's postwar literary production during the period when the Trans-Canada Highway was being built, both as a material entity and a vision of national sovereignty. If one looks at another song that became a Canadian anthem of the mid-1960s, Gordon Lightfoot's *In the Early Morning Rain*, a man is standing in the rain watching a 707 take off and says "you can't jump a jet plane like you can a freight train, so I'd best be on my way…" (Lightfoot 1964). While air travel was a form of mobility denied to those with only a dollar in their hand in 1963, so was the freight train, a romanticised form of travel from the 1930s Depression. No doubt the man in the song was within hailing distance of some segment of the newly opened Trans-Canada Highway but this

was evidently uninteresting as song material. The past was the railway, the present was the airport. The highway, it appears, was either irrelevant, or already naturalised as the everyday and without iconic potential. Nor did the massive youth migrations throughout the 1960s appear to generate a Trans-Canada Highway body of literature and song. Myrna Kostash begins her story of the Sixties generation in Canada with the question

> What did Canada look and feel like in the Sixties? The answer the films [three Canadian films of that era] gave me was: it didn't look like anything. The Sixties took place in the United States of America. Let's pretend, they say, we were all Americans (Kostash 1980: xi).

Not until the 1970s and 1980s does the highway begin to figure as a significant narrative element. Don Shebib's 1970 documentary film *Goin' Down The Road* focussed attention on the highway as something greater than a local road. To go down the road still means to get on the highway in the Maritimes and go to Toronto. The road was the road away from home to a generally unknown Canada. So too, Barbadian contract workers in the agricultural exchange program on southern Ontario tobacco farms use the phrase "slammin' tar" to mean running on the highway, away from the farms, to get to invisibility in Toronto (Foster 1998). Aritha Van Herk's 1987 novel *No Fixed Address* is about a woman caught by class, education and circumstance in Vancouver who, by inheriting a car, finds that she can liberate herself by driving away on the highway. She finds a map:

> It's a map, a beautifully drawn and coloured map of southern British Columbia, twisting roads around the names of hesitant towns. Under the gray light in the bus, the elegant lines convert those curves into longing.
>
> Roads, she thinks. There are roads out there (Van Herk 1987: 89).

The road is the means by which one lays claim to the land, the territory. Van Herk delineates a western country where the railway and airlines are absent; the road and the car are the vehicles of self-realisation and identity.

Two scales then may be distinguished here — one, of the body, with the road stretching out ahead and behind, and the other, the imagined road that traverses the country, represented by the map. The former, the sliding, singular point of view in the act of traveling the

Trans-Canada Highway and its relationship to the latter, the social and cultural conception of the Trans-Canada Highway, can be looked at in several ways. One is through the process of mythification — the signifier and its history becomes a signification so naturalised as to be not only unquestioned but unnoted. Another is the highway as the interaction of materiality and identity — both personal and national. It could also be considered as two different ways of seeing, incompatible and simultaneously held. This is perhaps the modern condition — the discontinuity between the body and the map is both acceptable and understood as an undisturbing aspect of late twentieth century modernity, completely naturalised.

Road as Sign

Roland Barthes wrote his 1956 essay "Myth Today" when the Trans-Canada Highway was in full construction. For Barthes, it was a necessary act to deconstruct the naturalised ideological content inherent in all the social structures of post-war France. The potential of France to fall back on its old and tarnished image as a colonial power, the perpetuation of racism and anti-semitism, despite whatever lessons were to be gleaned from its role in the Second World War, led Barthes to point out that revolutionary language cannot be mythical — "whenever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer preserve it as an image, whenever he links his language to the making of things — myth is possible" (Barthes [1957] 1982: 135). When language is operational, there is only action — true political language. Images, language standing in for things, are open for appropriation, exploitation, mythification and de-politicisation (Barthes 1982: 134-5). Images of heroic and simple producers were not uncommon in the 1950s, from Soviet posters of farmers to Barthes' examples of woodcutters and Africans, and to Canadian images of working men and women found in postwar National Film Board productions.[2] Not necessarily innocent sites, but rather unworldly sites (Palmer 1998: 192). For Barthes society divides itself into those who act and those who consume actions, turning them into manipulable language. The highway was an action that approached

2. The heroic images of Canadian workers were held over from the blatant National Film Board wartime representations of diverse Canadian ethnicities working together to keep up production. The unity implied was presented to encourage non-British Canadians to invest in War Bonds, which they often appeared reluctant to do (Nelson 1889: 135-36).

the terrain as Nature about to be transformed. The highway "acted the object"; the landscape was simply the meaning of the highway's action: the language of action defies mythologising. This emphasis on action can be seen as a lingering after-effect of the habit of action experienced by those involved in the Second World War. Barthes wished to draw the language of action into the decolonisation struggle, deconstructing the myth of the unity of French culture to show its depoliticised imperialism. The Trans-Canada Highway as an action which approached the terrain as Nature about to be transformed was useful to western politicians of frontierist mentality who wished to break free of the myth of unity projected onto the project by the dominion government. The squabbling over the routing by Alberta and British Columbia can be seen as an objection to a paternalistic central government imposing a rough equality on all its parts.

The federal presentation of the Trans-Canada Highway as a geographically simple, large action seemingly free of political appropriation and manipulation was reinforced in many ways, not least by the site of the highway's opening in the summer of 1961 in the Rogers Pass, surrounded by mountains and nature — the essence of Canadian wilderness. Rob Shields writes about how the landscape myth of the true North strong and free provides one symbol of a nationalist discourse that posits "Canadian nature" against "American mass culture". The North in this sense is not merely a geographical region but an empty space within which Canadians can project images of Canadianness (Shields 1991: 165). Mythical Rogers Pass, near mythical Craigellachie, the site of the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1884, is talismanic in nature, an image of Canadianness alienated from the expensive and *local* history of these two projects. When Diefenbaker opened the highway he said,

> It has brought about a renewed sense of national unity. It has brought about a sense of oneness from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean in this generation, comparable to that which moved Canadians when the first Canadian transcontinental railway was completed and the golden spike was driven at Craigellachie.
>
> It is a day for national pride. This is an event that will take its place as another major landmark in the development of a strong Canadianism. Canadians will know Canada better because of this highway.

> May this Highway always serve the cause of peace, and may it never hear the marching tramp of warlike feet (Diefenbaker 1962).

Working backwards through Barthes' diagram of the process by which an object becomes a myth,[3] the myth that the Trans-Canada Highway was a device of national unity and a symbol of national identity, was derived from the concept that Canada must demonstrate its sovereignty as it was losing it. This concept was joined to the need for a truck route through Canada to break the monopoly of the railways. This route, the sign, was the result of the improvement of roads to handle the huge expansion of vehicles associated with postwar North American prosperity. This was aided by the re-jigging of war industries to the production of commodities — appliances, cars, construction materials. The signifier, the original language-object turns out to be a negative — the *lack* of an Empire roadway for British exports to Asia in the event of the decline in the viability of railways and the vulnerability of the Panama Canal; the *lack* of a Canadian transport route that could avoid being penalised by American tolls; the *lack* of an integrated road system built to the standards that postwar vehicles demanded.[4]

It is possible that the relative invisibility of the Trans-Canada Highway today as a subject for the production of popular culture, its absence as a Canadian icon in our imagined community, is because it was based originally on an absence, and that subsequent descriptions are ideological manipulations ungrounded in a tangible material presence. By contrast, the railway, which is still often mentioned in contemporary folk songs, painting and literature, is perceived as an object which itself acted on the landscape. It pushed through where no

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3. 1. Signifier + 2. Signified } *Language*
   3. Sign.
   I SIGNIFIER + II SIGNIFIED } *MYTH*
   III SIGN
   (Barthes 1957: 100)

4. That the railway was doomed had been demonstrated during the Second World War in Germany and Italy where their autobahns and autostrade, built in the 1920s and 30s, carried motorized troop convoys at high speed and high volume across their countries (Stamp 1987: 11-12). While this was cited as the reason for building the interstate highway system and to a lesser degree the Trans-Canada Highway, it is evident that a new form of mass transportation had developed and all countries would eventually use it.

road had gone before. The politicisation of the Canadian landscape effected by the railway was, in terms of Canadian self-realisation, an originary act. Even Diefenbaker's opening speech compares the achievement of the highway to the already existing "symbol of national unity, the transcontinental railway". The mythification of the railway began to appear in song and film as it entered its postwar functional decline. As the Trans-Canada Highway began to bypass towns with their First Streets and Railway Avenues, their stations and elevators, and as Canadians took to the roads for driving holidays, as freight hauling increased on all highways, the railway became an object of romance, nostalgia, and yet another symbol, especially in the west, of an essential Canadianness. The huge immigration waves that had, since the 1900s, deposited boatloads of immigrants onto the docks at Halifax and Montreal were over. The epic journey across the country by rail could still be made if necessary, but more likely by the 1960s, the trip would be made by air. The skip from rail to air displaced any rival romance the Trans-Canada Highway might have generated.

Barthes might have seen the Canadian Pacific Railway myth, and its calendar image of the 200 boxcars filled with grain stretched out along the Saskatchewan horizon, as the signification of a national desire for a self, based on the recognition of a "north", in contradistinction to a burgeoning, invasive, urban American mass culture. This kind of image was derived from the concept of Canada as a primary producer of resources delivered to world markets via the railway as it limned the geomorphology of the country. This elemental nature is pleasing. Canadian literary theory and practitioners return to it again and again.[5] And it remains a paradigmatic understanding of Canada delivered to us by the heroic building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, with its history of Chinese and Ukrainian labour, the empires it created in steel, in meat, in property. The Trans-Canada Highway by comparison is but a slight thing.

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5. Recently, in fiction: Dionne Brand, *A Land to Light On*; Marilyn Bowering, *Visible Worlds*, about the Arctic; Sid Marty, *Leaning on the Wind*, about the Chinook area of southern Alberta; Thomas Wharton, *Icefields*, about the icefields of the Rockies; Sharon Butala, *Garden of Eden*, about the Palliser Triangle; Jane Urquhart, *The Underpainter*, about the north shore of Lake Superior; Jack Hodgins, *Broken Ground*, about northern Vancouver Island.

Road as Discourse

While this analysis of semiotic structure producing meaning is in line with the specific philosophical context of the 1950s as the Trans-Canada Highway was being both literally and figuratively constructed, it is a universal or essential reading of the nature of the project. However, the relations of power, the social practices that recognize the Trans-Canada Highway are constantly changing.

Coincident with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the opening of the highway were the Meech Lake Accord of 1987 and trade liberalisation between United States and Canada leading to the Free Trade Agreement of 1988, two episodes of material and visual intangibility. Paralleling these potential losses of unity and sovereignty, was the publication of *Silver Highway* (*circa* 1988), a jubilee photographic competition, Edward Cavell's *Sometimes a Great Nation* (1984) — Canada as defined by its photographic history, and the publication of the first Canadian encyclopedia by Mel Hurtig in 1988. These are all national projects — assertive representations of national unity and a self-reflexive sovereignty. Benedict Anderson discusses how "imaginations of fraternity" emerged in a "nineteenth century United States fragmented by the most violent racial, class and regional antagonisms" (Anderson 1983: 203). The narration of Canada as a nation — in the encyclopedia, in rediscovered photo archives, in photo contests whose given subject is a postwar project of national unity — emerged at a time when the country appeared to be politically at its most fragile and inward looking, when it was no longer possible to experience the nation as coherent with the desire for selfhood.[6]

The highway is just a roadway, but it becomes the Trans-Canada Highway in spirit within the context of several repetitive issues of Canadian identity. In terms of the original arguments about the highway's necessity, sovereignty appears to have maintained a persistent hold on the public imagination, while integration into the American interstate highway system seems to have made a relatively marginal contribution

6. One could, perhaps, gauge the fragility of the political state through attempts to define the national state. *Canada: A People in History*, produced by the CBC in 2000, presents an "exciting" past, putting forward "heroes" — this in a year that saw a federal election and the increasing management of Canada as a business. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer who suggested I consider this program.

to the understanding of what the Trans-Canada Highway is. The discourse of Canadian postwar reconstruction, with its issues of immigrant assimilation, full employment, increased domestic consumption, Canada's brief role as an international power in the face of European devastation and its increasingly integrated economic relationship with the United States, constructed the Trans-Canada Highway as a symbolic, unifying, governmental presence in the country. It needed to exist in that particular discursive formation for specific and temporal reasons. What it became, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, was a usable, domestic road whose discursive formation was less engaged with representations of Canadian identity than with the accommodation of postwar prosperity. The conditions of economic freedom that allowed the Trans-Canada Highway to be experienced at all, supplanted the distance covered by the road as its important characteristic. In 1963 it was a startling enough trip from coastline to coastline that books written about the experience had some currency. In the following two decades, very little was written about the Trans-Canada Highway in any form or in any context. It appears to have quickly become everyday, taken for granted.

The thought that the Trans-Canada Highway might be obsolete occurred in the mid-1980s with the introduction of higher-speed, provincial toll roads. The fragmenting of federal-provincial relations, the lack of accord found for Meech Lake and ongoing devolution of power to the provinces provided a discourse in which the unbroken Trans-Canada Highway was, like universal health care, pensions and subsidised higher education, a romantic fragment of an earlier era. *Silver Highway* sought to recuperate the original iconic status of the Trans-Canada Highway and it displays a popular understanding, in the late 1980s, of what the Trans-Canada Highway is for. It is for *seeing from*, rather than being looked at, as either a figurative or literal object.

Road as Performance

Within this discussion of the meanings accrued by the Trans-Canada Highway over its life span is the question of whether material objects have an essential, base quality that attracts and forms certain meanings, or whether objects are completely formed by discourse. If the Trans-Canada Highway is considered as a text which is ideologically formulated and reformulated, era by era, then the road surface itself, its materiality

— the asphalt, gravel, tar, drainage slopes, the painted lines — is no more than the paper pages of a book, a carrier of markings representing language and thus meanings. However, the highway has other functions — as a roadway, as a dyke (its role in the 1997 Manitoba flood), as an animal barrier (its problematic effect in Banff National Park), as a site of protest (the First Nations June 1, 1998 blockage of the Trans-Canada Highway east of Calgary). Political and material functions exist simultaneously: one does not invalidate the other. However when it is not ideologically strategic to use the Trans-Canada Highway in a symbolic sense, its meaning defaults to a different discourse, one based on the movement of bodies and vehicles through material space.

Joan Vastokas has written that material culture is not text, but rather performance — the interaction of object and body (Riggins 1994: 339). And Homi Bhabha in "Signs Taken For Wonders" outlines here the fluid status of objects invested as cultural significands. Objects are only available for appropriation and recuperation because they are ubiquitously and materially present. And as props in repeated performances they offer themselves as negotiants in the production of culture and meaning (Thomas 1998: 102). Objects (the material world) are in a state of flux as much as social relations are. The dialogical relationship between objects and social relations is a process of negotiation that develops recognition: culture is a structure of knowledge that brings the material world into intelligibility (Thomas 1998: 98).

The Trans-Canada Highway was an invented symbol, constructed deliberately to satisfy social, political and economic desires of topical concern after the Second World War. The Trans-Canada Highway is also a material object with a cost, a value and a function. The effect of the building of the Trans-Canada Highway was to install a representation of national unity; then, alienated from the discourse that originally accompanied it, it was available for transformation into other uses and meanings.

One of the things that argues against material objects having an irreducible nature, is that they are created for social and cultural reasons which determine form. No cultural object comes into being without a formative need articulated by some kind of discourse. Considering objects as irreducible, with exclusive and unitary meanings, allows cultural or social objects such as the Trans-Canada Highway to be

rendered culturally or socially obsolete, their continued material presence an embarrassment. However, it is clear that a myriad of discursive formations are present at any one time, casting and recasting material culture into an ever changing array of meanings. The irreducible functionalist aesthetic of modernism — the striving for essences — simply did not admit that any other kind of discursive formation could be recognizable or have meaning. This does not mean however, that other meanings were not present, nor that the Trans-Canada Highway's early representation as an image of national unity is absent. It is possible that the Trans-Canada Highway has subsided into a continual reenactment of its role as a national project. Canada's simultaneous struggle to maintain a separate identity from both the old British empire and the new American one in the 1950s and 1960s, resulted in a number of visibly nationalistic declarations of which the Trans-Canada Highway and the Canadian flag were but two. These overtly nationalist projects took place at the same time as an overwhelming barrage of popular culture from the United States entered Canada which, far from being rejected, was enthusiastically embraced (see Kostash 1980: 298). Over the forty years that the Trans-Canada Highway has existed and the thirty years that the flag has been flying, Canada's national identity has negotiated a relationship with American culture whereby certain symbols of unity and coherence are performed as a matter of routine.

As an example of a banal signifier, the Trans-Canada Highway's performative role occurs every time it is driven upon. It demonstrates the unity of the nation over the provinces at near-invisible provincial border crossings. That interprovincial trade barriers and tariffs still exist serves to illustrate that those economic conditions have no literal evidence "on the ground". The Trans-Canada Highway is not called upon to perform that scenario, so it performs another: that of open borders, hiding from view the degree of autonomy or resistance enacted by the provinces. Billig discusses the necessary forgetting required to render the extraordinary self into an everyday relationship with the world (Billig 1995: 42).[7] The details of the Trans-Canada Highway — the years of debate about the routes, the local disruptions, the high-

7. That Quebec's license plates reiterate daily, hourly "*Je me souviens*" is an example where the exhortation to remember replaces actual remembering and installs instead a forgetting — of details, of sequence, of circumstance.

handed land appropriations, the costs, the labourers — all are forgotten. It has become unquestioned Canadian landscape. However, the Trans-Canada Highway, besides being a road, performs as a viewpoint from which to see the country — the nation state, and the "countryside" — the landscape, the geomorphology and flora and fauna of middle North America. The "seeing" is both controlled by the road and is a performative enactment of the road.

Road as Lens

Vision, in modernist terms, is perception, not interpretation. The Trans-Canada Highway project is a profoundly modernist work — not because it was constructed in the middle of the twentieth century, but in its fundamental assumptions about the role it plays as the viewpoint from which to observe the country.

Seeing, viewing and observing are not actions without filters: seeing is selective. What is seen is an abstraction of what could possibly be seen. Jenks sees abstraction as an issue of perspective — "the size and prominence of certain phenomena are altered relative to their original place", presenting a partial view which, in its partiality, offers the opportunity for manipulation and control (Jenks 1995: 8). The use of abstraction allows us to encounter unsettling realities from a safe distance. This often inadvertent, but equally often deliberate decision about what is or is not viewable, reinforces the idea that vision is a cultural practice and is socially constructed. The modernist vision, the innocent eye, which proposed that only that which could be seen could be believed (knowledge was empirical) operated hand in hand with the processes of abstraction which established a hierarchy of things worthy of sight.

In 1958 the National Film Board made a 58 minute film called *The Trans-Canada Summer*. The information bulletin describes it as

> … an intimate coast-to-coast portrait of Canada as it might be seen from the Trans-Canada Highway and some of its branch roads. Photographed in superb colour during the height of summer, the film takes us on a nation-wide tour to show not only stages in the highway's construction, but how it reveals, mile by mile and province by province, the ever-changing pattern of life and industry in Canada. Like a kaleidoscope full of the unexpected, the film presents many facets of life along the twisting, turning ribbon of asphalt which is to provide

> a five-thousand-mile national thoroughfare (National Film Board Information Bulletin, *Trans-Canada Summer*, 1958).

It has long been affirmed that the objective presentation of facts is illusory and that the inner existence of the documentarian is an inevitability (Stott [1973] 1986: 5-7). The National Film Board's *Trans-Canada Summer* is no innocent eye. It presents the Trans-Canada Highway primarily as a nationalist project:

> Almost five thousand miles separate this Atlantic coast from the Pacific in the west. Unless it be linked by transport overland, it has little real meaning as a nation (NFB file #106 C 0158 141. Transcript reel 1, 219).

The film dwells largely on industrial development within the scenic context of each province. Only Quebec is discussed in social terms of the family, church and history. Ontario appears to consist entirely of ports, atomic research laboratories, and the Sudbury nickel smelter. The mechanisation of prairie agriculture demands vast quantities of fuel found, handily, in the western oil fields. Building the Trans-Canada Highway through the mountains poses many difficulties. In the absence of industry through most of British Columbia, other than the smelters at Trail, the construction of the Trans-Canada Highway emerges again as most important, until Vancouver looms: "fish… lumber… hydropower… minerals… art… packing houses… a great university… shipping to the Orient, to New Zealand, to Australia" (Transcript reel 7, 289). *Trans-Canada Summer* is an abstract view. The west is almost unpopulated; the east is rich in cultural heritage; the ambitions of the railway and the highway to link the country east to west are quixotic; the industries are proud; resources are abundant. The camera is our eye, we see what it tells us to look at. The Trans-Canada Highway is also our eye, we see what it allows us to look at. The multiple framing of the country by the camera, the director, the mandate of the National Film Board, and the route taken by the highway itself presented a "modern" nation whose vastness could only be understood via the empirical act of travelling the Trans-Canada Highway — or by watching the film. *Trans-Canada Summer* was expected to be popular with all audiences but particularly to Social Studies classes in junior and senior high school (National Film Board Information bulletin). As National Film Board films circulated for years, this representation of the Trans-Canada Highway would have taught the entire, enormous baby boom generation how to see the country as a function of the highway.

The Road as a Species of Modernity

What of the Jumping Pound overpass in this account? This too determined a way of seeing that is highly abstract. This too makes the rough way plain: not only are mountain grades kept at 8% and curves flattened, denaturing the arduous act of putting the highway through hitherto impossible terrain, but social realities of farm roads, local traffic are also denatured by bridges and overpasses of abstract simplicity.

There was a "look" in 1950s visual arts, architecture and industrial design that was streamlined and angular, and concentrated on surface quality and its relationship to structure. Although it is held that the streamlined modern style was an automatic result of technological changes stemming from industrial innovations, this alone does not explain why the smooth seemingly apolitical styling was so prevalent in the two decades after the Second World War. The minimalist angular stylistic hallmarks of 1950s and 1960s modernity in architecture and engineering structures were influenced by other forms of visual culture as much as by developing technology.

The American New Deal programs of the 1930s and early 1940s, which had nurtured a generation of artists, were assaulted during the postwar McCarthy era. The blacklisting of artists, writers and filmmakers and the banning of books, led to a rejection of the realist tradition which, in the United States, referred to the use of figuration to connect to the "appreciative needs of ordinary people" and characterized much artistic production of the 1930s (Thistlewood 1993: 12). Documentary realism had changed during the war into an illusionary and often propagandistic picture making — the viewer was expected to passively consume a seemingly complete scenario of "nature" and this continued on into the Cold War. Abstract expressionism, a direct rejection of realism, was a visual declaration of a critical distance established between abstract artists and contemporary American society (Craven 1992: 8).

The abstract expressionist movement fell generally into two camps: one was intuitive and improvisational, the other a calculation of the irreducible in painting — an aesthetic of exclusion, the extreme extraction of essences from one plane to another. Painting, Rosenburg says, "was conceived of as a kind of marathon of deletion" and painting strived to achieve a kind of point zero — the dialogical relationship between picture and viewer uncontaminated by an easily misinterpreted realist imagery (Thistlewood 1993: 8).

Abstract expressionist linearity, the organic and the expressive was quickly appropriated by popular culture, especially advertising, making it accessible to a wide audience (Jackson 1991: 21). The flow of images into Canada, most of them from the United States, in the form of art, magazines, television and film, contained the myths that were the ideological exports of the McCarthy era, and at the same time, disseminated an aesthetic movement of resistance based on the expressive quality of the organic line. It is a false syllogism to say that because something *looks like* something else, it *is like* it. The Jumping Pound overpass looks like a Franz Kline painting, and looks like a cousin of an Eames chair, but its borrowed aesthetic means something rather different in its particular geography than Kline or Motherwell do in theirs. The abstract expressionist ground zero aesthetic — an act of resistance to postwar ideological myth making in the United States, was exported to Canada where it served not as an aesthetic of political resistance, but rather as an influential visual style signifying an ambitious modernism. It is this visual style that informs the Jumping Pound overpass. To use Arp's sense of the term *concretion*, designating the solidification of the volume defined by bodies in motion (Arnason 1986: 141), Jumping Pound's stress diagram is *concreted*. While abstract expressionist painting demanded engagement from the viewer, a request so rigorous it alienated the general public, the abstract expressionism of engineering works relieved the public of any anxiety by presenting complex structures as self-evident. For an Alberta Highways structural engineer in Edmonton in 1964, who claims never to have looked at a design magazine, the abstract expressionist aesthetic must have come through other, more popular media and seemed useful for this highway overpass.

The postwar need for a view of nature as a safe abstraction, rather than nature as threat is perhaps a response to the repeated and exhausting threats from the First World War, the Great Depression and the Second World War. Northrop Frye in *The Bush Garden* offers a valuable insight to how Canada was poetically perceived up to and including the 1960s.[8]

> I have long been impressed in Canadian poetry by a tone of deep terror in regard to nature… It is not a terror of the dangers or discomforts

8. Gaile McGregor calls the cult of primitive wilderness worship a direct result of the influence of the frontier thesis on Canadian historiography (McGregor 1981: 278).

> or even the mysteries of nature, but a terror of the soul at something that these things manifest (quoted in Atwood 1972: 47).

Nature consisted of both the distant view and the close experience, from mud underfoot to mountains that loomed, interfered and killed. The tradition of nature as malevolently indifferent to human claims painted nature as Other, Outside, and was reinforced by rail travel where travelers were locked in their compartments dependent entirely on the train to convey them through the difficult landscape. The coming of the Trans-Canada Highway, however, placed little individuals, little families, into "nature", into the Other, with a high degree of personal autonomy. Rather than this being a frightening thing, the road and its engineering reassured travellers that the way had been paved, for them. The road readjusted the relationship between nature and the act of seeing, by replacing the gaze with a physical and individual access, defusing the manifest terror of the unknown.

It is not only the flattening of hills and the bridging of chasms that denatures the landscape, but also the aesthetic claims exerted by highway structures. The Jumping Pound Overpass indicated that there were no problems incapable of being solved by modern engineering. The brief flourish of steel overproduction in 1963-4 allowed, because of steel's strength to volume ratio, reductive solutions producing structures of maximum thinness and greatest unsupported span. The viewer's position on the road and the landscape framed by such structures do not stress a troubled view, rather the view is abstract, the old terror of nature removed. On the railway, where untrammeled wilderness pressed up against the tracks themselves and one was only safe within the carriage, one was not allowed off the train. Now, on the highway, in a 200' cleared right of way, nature becomes a rolling scenography within which the traveller is a performer, simultaneously involved through their autonomy, and alienated by the intervention of a modern highway.

These ways of seeing give more clues as to how modernity enters everyday life, not just by the presence of new material objects but as newly adjusted ways of perceiving the relationship between outside nature and inside mind.

Road as Memory Device

In the 1990s the highway as a way of seeing is controlled by the same road surfaces, the same overpasses as in the 1960s, but the

intervening 30 years have changed the understanding of the visual aesthetics of the Trans-Canada Highway. Garnet Rogers in *Golden Fields, Kenora Ontario — Regina, Saskatchewan*, 1996, registers, literally, the Trans-Canada Highway as Barthes' "royal road by which we best understand a country… [where] essentially there is no country but that of childhood" (Duncan 1992: 36):

> I was but a boy here, twenty years ago, staring out this window at this same dark road. Heard the night wind whisper, heard the whine of the wheels, felt all the lure and the mystery of these golden fields (Rogers 1997).

And again in *Night Drive, Yellowhead Highway*,

> I know this road and its every curve… Years have slipped beneath my wheels, dwindling in my rear view mirror (Rogers 1997).

The country, the approaching mountains, the prairie night, the wind, the fields, the highway itself lead him into memory. The highway is not inert, waiting to be consumed, rather it actively transforms and is transformed by memory.

A bridge such as the Jumping Pound overpass, unchanged since its construction and with evidence of maintenance nearly absent, assumes a fixity in a landscape long since taken for granted through habitual exposure. It is not charged with the burden of newness, it no longer realigns sight, the unchanged land use in the Jumping Pound District has exerted little pressure for change, the bridge simply stands as a historic artifact still in use. In contrast, the discursive formations that registered the Trans-Canada Highway as a national project in a modern nation have changed radically: the Trans-Canada Highway does not appear to have much special stature in Canadian society at all. It is largely absent in literature, songs and art. In Wilson and Roland's *Moving People and Resources, Studies in Transportation* (1991) highways are not even included.[9] Instead, when the Trans-Canada Highway appears, it is as a personal project (Van Herk 1987; Rogers 1997), a local condition (16th Avenue North in Calgary) or a political opportunity (the blockading of highways by First Nations groups who reject the confines of provinces and instead use the Trans-Canada Highway as both a

9. The significant modes of transport are canoes, national railways, the St. Lawrence Seaway and Great Lakes shipping, northern pipelines, light rail transport and air travel.

metaphoric and literal road to Ottawa). In the placeless suspension of travel, understanding is articulated as a personal experience triggered by the Trans-Canada Highway, its functions, its history and its presence.

Frances Yates shows how architecture and art are used as memory *loci* — thoughts and ideas occupy a house full of entrances, hallways and rooms: think of the room and the thought will assert itself. The mnemonic is not a representation of an idea, rather it is a device that orders ideas for recall (Yates 1966: 320-340). If this is, as Yates proposes, central to Western thought but only rarely used because of our dependence on print media, the capacity to use the material world, the *loci* of landscape, buildings, road systems as mnemonic devices probably still exists. Rather than thinking of the Trans-Canada Highway as the *representation* of an idea, it can be seen as a device that orders ideas for *recall*. Thus, for Garnet Rogers, the unrolling of the highway triggers the unrolling of memory. What is striking about considering the Trans-Canada Highway in this way, is that its relationship to individuals is singular and personal. Its primary relationship is not social, or cultural, but rather personal, intimate. This does not obviate all the other meanings discussed above, rather it includes them in the pool from which individual memory and experience are drawn. Although not designed as a memory system, the Trans-Canada Highway and all its artifacts act like one anyway. Perhaps because it is an inadvertent memory structure rather than a didactic one, it is most accessible, most ready for use.

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