The Idea (of an Idea) of North (Of the North): Glenn Gould's Piece at 50

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Abstract

AMBIENCE On December 28, 1967, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation debuted a radio piece by famed pianist Glenn Gould, titled *The Idea of North* . Opaque yet spacious, this experiment would become the first in a trio of ambient documentaries to be produced over the next decade. Each episode explores the theme of solitude from a different geographical vantage, co-implicating form and content;

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Canadian Studies, Cultural Studies, Digital Media, Documentary



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AMBIENCE

On December 28, 1967, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation debuted a radio piece by famed pianist Glenn Gould, titled *The Idea of North*. Opaque yet spacious, this experiment would become the first in a trio of ambient documentaries to be produced over the next decade. Each episode explores the theme of solitude from a different geographical vantage, co-implicating form and content; for, as Gould demonstrates, telegraphy had long since complicated isolation as a lifestyle. But Gould's obsessive pursuit of this ideal produces a multiperspectival portrait of settler consciousness, at the same time as it thematizes and intervenes in its medium as a technical means of colonial expansion.

With an ear to Europe, these radio pieces were assembled after the fashion of major postwar developments in tape music and collage. Stylistically, *The Idea of North* seems conspicuously stricken with an anxiety of influence befitting of an incipient nationalism; for it was clearly Gould's intent to furnish his avant-garde composition a local character. As to whether Gould meant to modernize Canadian content, or to Canadianize modern form, his approach presumes ambiguity, to make strange a standard broadcast format. In Gould's hourlong intervention, the soothing probity of the professional narrator's voice is edged out by so much overlapping and uncertain talk. While certain formal precedents for this collaged approach de-emphasize semantics in favour of timbral and or 'purely musical' characteristics of source sounds, Gould's regionalist reply preserves the referentiality of each sound as recorded; if only to sublate them altogether in a narrative tapestry.



https://youtu.be/TwIbUdbVqQE

Would it have been uncomfortable for general interest listeners—a postulate from which proceeds the mandate of national radio, but who actually identifies with this mean temperament?—to encounter *The Idea of North* in 1967? At the time of the original broadcast, it had been more than three years since Gould's last public performance, during which hiatus he had come to champion recording as a frontier, commending radio to his purposes. But where these compositions are

concerned, Gould's method of assembly sought to bewilder certain basic expectations of the medium, and moreover, the idiom, of public radio. In *North of Empire* (2009), Jody Berland extols the eclectic texture of a favourite radio drama; yet even as she praises its narrator for imbuing each of his characters with individual depth, her attention, she tells us, remains fixed on a voice "replete with storytelling pleasures and the sonic signature of the CBC." The voice of radio itself is most salient; a guarantor of sense and place.

THE UNSOLITARY SETTLER

Gould's *Solitude Trilogy* evokes three differently isolated places; the Northern territories, a Newfoundland fishing village, and a Mennonite community on the prairies. The first-person accounts of each terrain that Gould collects are often contradictory, and left alone; for any commentary would thwart the sought-after intimacy of the vignette. Each is a sample—yet none an apt synecdoche—of a nebulous "Canadian" identity. For this reason, Mark Kingwell suggests in his biography of Gould (2009) that Gould's evocation of the fugue is a red herring, for his radio works defy the expectation of resolution that defines the form. As Kingwell notes, Gould himself uses a critical alter-ego to offer that "the real counterpoint is ideological, between the exercise of individual freedom and the 'tremendously tyrannical force'" of the social, which one must overcome in order to gain from solitude. (131)

The Idea of North enacts a tussle with a landscape too variously vast to be interiorized as home. This fact appears an obstacle to any attempt to forge or describe a monolithic Canadian identity; so it is encouraging that Kingwell finds in Gould's radio work a not-so-covert theme of hospitality, an openness to the "novelty of the unknown person" thrust upon one in an unknown clime. Even so, the North, cast as a contiguous and unfathomable neighbour-threshold, exists for the southerner Gould "to dream about, to spin tall tales about, and in the end, avoid." In this regard, a reactive refusal of hospitality is geographized so as to obscure the political stakes.



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Screen Capture from the CBC television adaptation of The Idea of North

To rethink Canadian identity on the model of hospitality is to name an obvious standard by which to flunk the extant state. Following the work of Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos in *Indigenous Sovereignty and the Being of the Occupier* (2014), one might suggest that hospitality requires a frank response to the question "where do you come from?" Any such self-accounting is specifically repressed in the conscience of the settler, and the romantic conception of North America as a vast wilderness, untrammelled and unpeopled prior to European influence, is an outcome and requirement of this repression. It is possible, and moreover desirable, to think the contrapuntal weft of voices comprising Gould's radio play as a practice of hospitality; but first one must acknowledge the degree to which, after the means of its realization, this open narrative remains a one-sided overture.

According to Avital Ronell's *The Telephone Book* (1989), what operates behind the radio in its appeal to "a tremendous national ear" is an obscure sense of the absolute priority of the other to oneself. (21) As seen above, a latent dialogue haunts every monovocal broadcast. However, one should complicate the too-readily metaphysicalized trope of the other with reference to the specific preoccupancy of a specific space by specific people, rather than fetishize otherness as a philosophico-poetic model for the production of pleasurable moral quandaries. Gould's radio play would suggest as much, if negatively.

COMPOSING THE NATION-STATE

The fascinating effect of radio, R. Murray Schafer observes in *The Soundscape* (1994), has to do with the manner in which "broadcasting is separated into independent information channels so that the confusion of simultaneity, so often present in the soundscape at large, is absent." (234) This facilitates the "deliberate attempt to regulate the flow of information according to human responses and information-processing capabilities." (ibid) In short, radio functions as a half-conversation, an analysis turned in on itself, facilitating fanaticism and transference. Its domineering guise is the voice on which Berland fixates above, a sonic signature eliding content.

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Glenn Gould publicity photo for The Idea of North, courtesy of Canada's BiblioArchives/ LibraryArchives

Gould bewilders this unitary vision, insisting upon crowded conditions, interruption and subjective chafe. In this regard, his programme is not only contrapuntal, as argued by Kingwell, but enacts a spatial intervention directly analogous to those undertaken in modern music. Schafer explains that the radio technician must account for perspective. The technician, he writes, conceives of the sound-scene in three main parts—the Immediate, the Support, and the Background—the interaction of which permits the listener to hierarchicalize and excerpt information. "The three-stage plan of the radio technician corresponds precisely to the classical layout of the orchestral score with soloist, concertino group and tutti accompaniment." (234) Gould, after the fashion of his maverick performances, which involved a kind of escalating competition between the orchestra and the soloist, revels in conditions of uncertainty as to which features of the soundscape are ground and which are figure. At crowded moments, the determination of semantic signal and ambient support, is at the listener's discretion.

"I was fascinated by the country as such," *The Idea of North* begins; and this abstraction collapses back into the desire that it originates, for the speaker's geographical cathexis manifests a country from above, a mottled sublime: "I felt that I was almost part of that country, part of that peaceful surrounding, and I wished that it would never end." The "almost" of this encounter is Gould's theme. One speaker contradicts himself in tracing the evasiveness of an imaginary terrain: "I can't conceive of anyone being in close touch with the North, whether he lived there all the time or simply traveled it month after month, year after year. I can't conceive of such a person being really untouched by the North for the rest of his life." By this conflicted account, one can neither touch, nor remain untouched by, this terrain. That the idea of the North will never coincide with any terrain seems logically apparent; for the object under discussion is designated by a cardinal

direction, an expression of spatial relation. One must be south of North to perceive it as such: the idea would be necessarily southern.

Gould frequently qualified his vantage over the course of his life: his composition was ineluctably nostalgic, shaped by southern biases, and so on. This modesty is itself a token of mandatory modernity, mediated by professional politesse. But the work largely concerns the composer's own difficulty before intransigent material. "It's not da gold, it's de finding da gold," one speaker quotes in order to affirm his own designs upon the landscape, and the phatic article before the questing verb suggests a more salient problem of definition: "I think the North is process," the ruminant continues, without specifying the (innocent or sordid) processes in which one's fantasy may be enrolled. "North is multiple, shifting, elastic," Sherrill Grace writes in her book, *Canada and the Idea of North* (2007), suggesting that Canadians can change their ideas of this destination, in spite, or because, of their unseemly and persistent attachment to myriad partial representations. (17)

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In 1967, however, Gould's panel reproduces a paternalistic depiction of the territories and their denizens. "Considering a place romantic means that one doesn't know too much about it," our first speaker opines, professing helplessness before communities she had intended to rescue. At this telling point in the collaged "discussion," which evades a certain burden of representation by evacuating the narrative center, a pointed racism crests, albeit in a version intended to ambiguate pernicious stereotypes by distributing them across so many unreliable voices. But the denominator of this chorus is all too Canadian. However multiple, the voices that were selected to depict a democratic and multi-perspectival clamor did not have the least moral difficulty ruling upon the communities that they encountered in pursuit of their own obscure desires.

TALKING BACK

Grace titles the penultimate section of her book "The North Writes Back," attempting a theory of Northern discourse to broadly refute colonial description. The voices presented here run counter to the documentary attempts of Glenn Gould, Pierre Berton, and so many others outlined in the first chapter, "Representing North." Inuit artist Alootook Ipellie furnishes an epigram: "Let us put, without hesitation, a voice in the mouth of our silent mind." (227) This rebukes the repeat characterization of (the idea of) North as a state of silence, vacancy, or isolation; and the secondhand zen of the willfully itinerant settler, determined to meditate unto epiphany upon any unassimilable strangeness. The silencing conditions to which Ipellie addresses himself may well be the din of interlopers and their presumptions, rather than the manifold soundscape of their common destination. To place voice in the mouth of mind is to reply to silencing conditions: the operative distinction between voice and mouth evokes a talk-back capacity implicit in receipt, if unrealized.

Artist and DJ Geronimo Inutiq's 2015 work, *ARCTICNOISE,* commissioned by curators Britt Gallpen and Yasmin Nurming-Por, responds directly to Gould's radio play. A multilingual, multimedia portrait of the sovereign voices of an irreducible North, Inutiq's installation extends the discursive counterpoint of Gould's composition, spanning platforms as well as perspectives. As Sydney Hart remarks in his essay, *Reading Contrapuntally* (2016), Inutiq's formal extrapolation of Gould's structure resonates with Edward Said's musical thoughts on postcolonial literature and its plurality of voices. Contrapuntal reading entails a "simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts." (62)

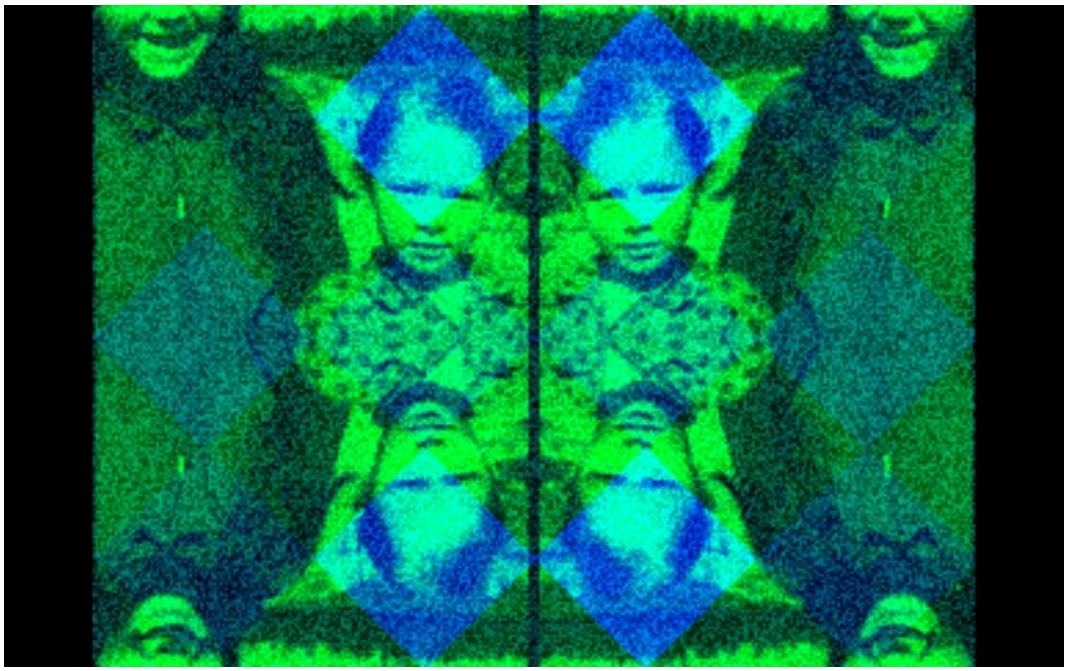
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"ARCTICNOISE" Still from 2015 Installation, image by Trinity Square Video and imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival

In Inutiq's installation, multiple video projections appear at cross-rhythms to each other, abstract digital art contrasting documentary interviews and archival footage. This juxtaposition aptly demonstrates the uneven contours of international development, mapped over the immersive course of Inutiq's multipanoramic presentation. The context is combined and contradictory: resource extractive projects impelling settlers North, technological and military expansion into contested space during the Cold War, and a gallery-backed effort to create and claim Inuit artistic production, ready to market, as a national treasure, all play a part. These angles on the North are strategic abstractions, too; but to map them in simultaneity allows for a concerted, and concrete, critique.

Grace's attempt to consolidate a "Northern" reply to a southern settler's imaginary stalls upon qualification, as her ungrounded anthropology finds an innocuous "topographical and meteorological diversity" recapitulated at the highly localized level of attendant practice. By comparison, Inutiq's *ARCTICNOISE* foregrounds interference in its very name. To call the multidiscursive clamour of the landscape 'noise,' an antecedent backing of any strong signal, is a totalizing gesture in the negative; at least where the transmissibility of identity to the state is concerned. In *As We Have Always Done* (2017), Nishinaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson cites nêhiyaw (Plains Cree) and Dene Suline scholar and artist Jarrett Martineau, describing Indigenous artistic practice as "noise to colonialism's signal." (198) This work, Simpson says, operates at an "elegant level of protection and disruption," declining any susceptibility to a settler's interception or interpretation, such as I cannot render here.



"ARCTICNOISE" Still from 2015 Installation, image by Trinity Square Video and imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival

This complicates the philosophical trope of counterpoint, which requires the horizontal elaboration of two or more mutually dependent themes, as well as their vertical separation in space for clarity. Settler colonialism and capitalism alike oversee any number of encroachments, such that this meaningful categorical distinction lapses into convolution. If Gould's ideal is a melodically assured phraseology, each soloist empowered to give a self-account, Inutiq's challenge restores a prerequisite space to the arrangement of voices. The additive model of liberal civics—the progressivist notion that we only need for more diversity of talk-for-trade—swaps the necessity of a collaborative space for more and greater time, in which span all will be forgiven. To visually recompose Gould's ad hoc townhall, with greater geographical and cultural specificity, is a powerful reminder that the purposes of any settler-artist's pilgrimage may coincide with a place of their choosing, but never essentially.

PROGRAMME MUSIC

What does the radio voice shore in a Canadian context? Gould's selective chorus is a demonstration of certain normative commitments, formally reiterative of an impasse of representation. The difficulties implicit in broadcast cannot simply be addressed at the level of more and authoritative voices, for it is not the radio voice that is the problem here so much as the body from which it is presumed to emanate.



Screen Capture from the CBC television adaptation of The Idea of North

"I am indeed a Northern listener then," the Virgilian surveyor McLean proclaims late in the broadcast, "and the pity of it all is that I'm not always able to select what I want to hear. I hear what other people inflict upon me. You know, the noise, the noise of civilization and its discontents." In this vulgarized Freudian remark, the speaker identifies 'noise' as a claustrophobic condition, from which one might escape. While Freud's text details the aversive attempt by an individual ego to differentiate itself over-against bracing reality, Gould's soloist attempts identification with a synthetic perspective straddling this opposition: "I do believe able to reflect on that selection makes you more than the mere analyst that most of us claim we are [. . .] in detaching and in reflecting and in listening I suppose I'm able to synthesize, to have these different rails meet in the infinity that is our conscious hope." However multiply determined, this identification—of transportation infrastructure with a vastly collective desire—remains laudably materialist, emphasizing the production of heretofore unheardof proximities in space.

In heavy handed analogy to symphonic form, *The Idea of North* ends more or less where it began, generically *elsewhere*. The metaphorical journey by train concludes with the armchair philosophical pontifications of panelist W. V. MacLean, backed with a defamiliarized recording of Sibelius' fifth symphony, which threatens at moments to swallow MacLean's climactic speech. Paraphrasing William James, MacLean posits struggle against provisional alterity as a psychological necessity and subjective virtue. Today, he posits brazenly, "the moral equivalent of war is going North." Gould concludes the piece with this *bon mot*, a surprise analogy that relies for its effect on the presumption that Canadian designs in this direction are more often peaceable than not. This is far from certain, and Gould's finale reminds the listener that the vehicle of this idea is itself susceptible to weaponization, as radio develops in periods of conflict and conquest. Then the least technologically contingent aspect of Gould's epochal docudrama would appear the most bizarre today—the desire to test one's conflictual mettle in flight.



Screen Capture from the CBC television adaptation of The Idea of North

CODA

How these examples speak to today's post-broadcast episteme would require another survey altogether. Surely today's ideological counterpoint would sound far more dissonant, a disputatious and often collaborative din. But this idealized polyvocality may itself manifest a one-sided desire, a dialogic fantasy of which agenda national radio is but one diagram. Practical matters, of land and its capture, are obscured by this restaging of the stakes of colonialism as a conversation rather than an occupation.

A key theme of *The Idea of North* would be the practice and depiction of utopia for loners, but a counter-message sounds as clearly: that wherever one travels to find oneself, one is forever destined to find other people in their place. There are no definitive arrivals, and everything depends upon what happens next—on hospitality contra the arrogance of occupation. One historical staging of this quandary has been named "Canada," and Gould's mythopoetic play for voices is a crucial document of its becoming, flaws and all. As with any broadcast, it is up to each listener to imagine a possible reply.

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Featured Image:Screen Capture from the CBC television adaptation of The Idea of North

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