

City Still Dreaming: Cultural Gridlock in the Post-Urban Age

The scene is thousands of youngish pop star wannabes corralled in a gravel field awaiting their thirty seconds with the judges. We could be almost anywhere in the Western world. The image is certainly familiar. A mortgage broker croons tremulously, a mother keeps a tired watchful eye on her tattooed, belly-button pierced sixteen year-old daughter, a twenty-something secretary fingers her crucifix, closes her eyes and imagines, just for a second, what it would be like to *make it*.

As I said, we could be anywhere. But this is Canada in 2003, and the place is the Canadian Idol tryouts in downtown Toronto. Young people, ages 16 to 26, have been invited to come down to the Metro Convention Centre and tryout for the show, a spinoff of the popular American show (itself a spinoff of the British version). They come in droves, in numbers that surprise everyone and leave the organizers struggling to accommodate a mass congregation of pop supplicants. They arrive as early as Saturday morning, prepared to sit in front of the building until the Monday morning try-outs commence. And they keep arriving. All day Saturday, a mass influx Sunday night, and a final swell -- spurred on by news reports circulating the country -- Monday morning.

“Anyone can become what they want to be,” says 16 year-old Brooke from Windsor. “If it doesn’t happen, you can’t give up, you gotta keep going.”

26 year-old Deliha from Toronto works for the Salvation Army and has been waiting since 4:30 Sunday afternoon. “I’ve been singing since I was very small. It’s a dream of mine to go further with that.”

Everyone I speak to has exactly the same thing to say, regardless of age, ethnicity, what part of Ontario they had trekked from or how many hours they had been standing in the crowd. All of them tell me that they have a good chance, that they have what it takes to be famous, and that singing is their dream. When I ask what makes them different from

the thousands of compatriots patiently waiting beside them who also “have what it takes” they simply reiterate that they want it more because it is their dream and passion. When I ask them how they might feel if they are summarily dismissed by the judges, they are ready for that, too. The kids in line are so steeped in the myth of instant stardom, they are already figuring out how even rejection will benefit their bid. Afrodhasia, a 23 year-old from Toronto, explains that even if you don’t make the final cut “you get seen and maybe picked out for something else in movies, or singing or dancing.” Mark Albay from Hamilton, 17, insists that I use his last name in anything I write. He tells me that it doesn’t matter if he gets on the show, it’s all about the marketing. “I see myself as a singer. I’m doing this for the publicity, to get myself known.”

At the Canadian Idol tryouts I find thousands of bright, funny, interesting, horribly deluded people. Here are young people planning on singing nearly interchangeable pop songs, who all have the same scenario in their minds: each believes that they are a unique individual soon to be recognized, singled out, led to the altar of stardom. They all share the same dream, and pursue it in exactly the same way. Coincidence? Human nature? I don’t think so.

Pop culture transcends geography, appeals just as feverishly to the denizens of the rural and the suburban as it does to city dwellers. We all want what pop culture offers us, regardless of where or how we live. Pop turns real space imaginary, conflates difference in an orgy of promise and possibility. We see from the Idol supplicants how little it matters where you are from – the dream, diffused via millions of flickering tv screens, glossy magazine pages, and grainy newspaper photos – remains the same.

French thinker Gabriel Tarde articulated a mass described as a “spiritual collectivity, a dispersion of individuals who are physically separated and whose cohesion is entirely mental.” [PR, Ewen, 68] Tarde noted how the morning papers set the agenda

for the day's conversation, and wrote of the "increasing similarity of simultaneous conversations in an ever more vast geographic domain." [pr, ewen, 69] Similarly, the English political theorist Graham Wallas compared "the packing of humanity in solid and uniform rows for the enjoyment of a common experience" to the "simultaneous perusal of the newspapers and the magazine." Eureka! The sheep can be sheared even as they graze! "We sit in a crowd," Wallas wrote, "even by our own firesides." [ewen, pr, 72]

Because of the "mental cohesion" pop culture fosters, place is coming to matter less and less. The city and its opposites – the village, the farm – merge. In pop culture mythology, the rural small town is a place to escape to and a place to escape from. It is the paradise of benevolent normalcy where you can be who you are truly meant to be, and the restrictive hick town that keeps you from achieving the stardom you always deserved. Similarly, the city is a dangerous, poverty stricken slum from which one must struggle to emerge. But it is also the holy grail of success – if you can make it here, you can make it anywhere!

Pop's power means that the Western world is, today, characterized by disappearing geography and communities created not out of shared place, but out of shared entertainment fascinations.

And yet, the city remains as symbolic centre, the place you must go to claim the ultimate in self-actualization: celebrity.

On Idol, the teens are told: You're going to L.A.! You're going to Toronto! Somehow the effect would be different if our acerbic but benevolent hosts punctuated hopeful performances with: Congratulations! You're on your way to Poughipsee! You're headed to Moose Jaw!

Despite the collapse of space that pop culture compels, the city continues to

beckon growing numbers of fame seeking I'm Specialites. For the passive pop consumer, anywhere is everywhere. But for the increasing numbers around the world who are prodded by pop's relentless message to take the promise of transcendent individuality and make it real, it is to the city where they must go to pursue their dreams.

If this seems contradictory, well, that's because it is. Pop culture's insistence on special universalizes the Idol fantasy and tells us that we can fulfill our destiny just about anywhere. Fame emerges from the back-roads shack, from the ghetto, from the anonymous suburb. So long as you work hard and go for it and never give up on your dream! But pop overlaps with what we might call "real" life, the practicalities of a global economy that restricts our options, that deliberately crowns only a few as celebrities and leaves the rest of us to work our mundane jobs and watch the party on tv. It is this awkward conglomeration of real life and pop life – celebs can come from anywhere, but celebrity is bestowed by the power brokers of the great metropolis – that compels many to the city.

And what do they find when they get there?

Those trying out for Canadian Idol found barricades, rentacops, a gravel parking lot lined with portapotties. But they also found Ben Mulroney and various camera toting videographers asking them to pose with their pals. They found thousands of their peers, all uniformly convinced that pop fame is possible and accessible and desirable. They are the competition, but they are also reassurance: everyone else thinks they'll make it; so why shouldn't I?

Despite the growing conviction that pop fame is widely available to those who want it really really bad, celebrity is neither accessible nor a particularly likely possibility for the vast majority of human beings on the planet. The Idolites find, then that city is pop culture's fun house mirror maze, a place that keeps exhorting you to follow the fleeting distorted glimpses of the fame you believe you should have.

The lineups at Idol become the clustered teens (from Sarnia, from Etobicoke, from Truro, NS) standing outside City TV's studio and staring through the window at their fave Much Music VJ. This scene is repeated, metaphorically and actually, in cities around the world. "In China," says Zhang Yimou, China's best known movie director, "we now have 20-something young girls who have become famous overnight. The power of those role models is boundless." When Yimou held a star search contest for the leading role in his next film, a staggering 100,000 hopefuls took part. But, notes Miro Cernetig of the Globe and Mail, "In China, just as in Hollywood, the star machine mostly churns out broken dreams." Cernetig talks to one of the 100,000, an impoverished 19 year-old who had one meal a day for months to save money and be able to get to Beijing for the audition. Upon arrival she discovered that her application had been rejected, and she never even got to try out for the part.

So it goes in the big city.

The suburb has Price-Club, the small town has the Wal-Mart that sucked the life out of Main Street. The city has those options – pop culture product dispensers – but also clings to the few outlets that managed to survive the great Nineties retail consolidation. These are the bookstores, record stores, indie cinemas, and art galleries that, largely through luck and personal conviction, continue to operate, though nobody knows for how long. These storefronts serve a dual function – they provide some semblance of a cultural alternative by acting as a distribution hub to material that emerges from local small presses, indie record labels, etc. They also act as defacto communities, quasi-public spaces where news of events and activities can be spread. The difference between the independent bookstore and the ChIndigo is simple: the indie bookstore has a space for fliers and posters announcing readings in the local community; the ChIndigo won't put anything up that isn't approved by owner Heather. This may seem like no big difference

(particularly when 70% of the books offered for sale in the 2 stores are the same), but such is the tenuous hold our city's have on any kind of grassroots and indigenous community culture.

These quasi-public spaces are the only spaces that continue to leave room for local culture. As a result, the demise of an indie storefront often becomes a rallying point. Symbolic, but actually very real, protests against, say, Starbucks's plan to close down and replace a local coffee shop, emerge seemingly out of nowhere to prop up what little is left of community in the city. Take a closer look and you'll see that the local shop serves not just as yet another caffeine haven but also a community hub – one of those quasi-public institutions we can no longer afford to lose.

The last decade or so has seen the emergence of an entirely urban peripatetic movement aiming to reclaim or preserve public space. The equivalent of an environmental group trying to save what little is left of a forest, we see action to preserve what little is left of the shared quasi-communal urban environment. Actual Nineties protest in Toronto's annex neighborhood against the plan to close down fave coffee shop Dooney's and turn it into a Starbucks sets the tone for ongoing struggles (most of them losing battles) to prevent the arrival of any number of chain stores in neighbourhoods across North America. Fuelling these sentiments are periodicals like long running Vancouver-based magazine Adbusters. Adbusters does not focus on environmental degradation and financial inequality. Instead this popular and long running protest magazine concentrates on the mental environment, the pop culture space of relentless advertising that seems to leaves us little opportunity for independent and community interaction. This is middle class protest against a mental cohesion that articulates itself physically in the rise of generic, corporate owned space.

Similarly, the success of Naomi Klein's No Logo suggests a yearning for a different kind of territory, a desire to preserve geographical identity which is, basically, a

lament for lost community. Again, the focus is on logos, marketing, advertising – that process of flattening and universalizing that pop/mass culture has invented and nearly perfected. In Toronto, protest against a Nike-sponsored concert spot and gallery erected in the midst of Kensington Market revealed a rancour as genuine as it was spontaneously confused. Though one would struggle mightily to logically condemn the youth oriented not-for-profit space, nevertheless the evident anger suggested that there was a line communities refused to cross; some urban neighbourhoods simply have to be protected from the ravages of – if not capitalism – then the looming spectre of multinational generica. A new protest magazine, called Spacing, emerged a few months ago from the Toronto Public Space Committee, a ragtag group that focuses on reclaiming and retaining space for community. Their current cause is the re-designed Dundas Square situated at Yonge and Dundas, a privately owned “public” space festooned with the latest in video billboards. Fusing a Yuppie Jane Jacobs NIMBY aesthetic with the latest in anti-globalization rhetoric, Spacing Magazine is nothing less than an attempt to save the city from its burgeoning status as locus for the chimera of the pop promise.

What does all this have to do with Canadian Idol and pop’s promise of individual specialness? Here, again, we see pop culture’s insidious infiltration. What do we want? We want in; attention; the opportunity to see ourselves and our communities reflected on the big screen. So it is that our concerns become increasingly more solipsistic. What seems like an argument about anti-globalization or capitalism is often really about beating back the spectre of pop sameness. 20 year old activists fighting poverty join with aging yuppies protecting their coffee shop. And, in many cases, they want the same thing: a voice, a way to be special, real access to the pop dream that colonizes and flattens even as it inspires and instills millions with the fantasy of special.

In Africa, millions die of AIDS, but in North America and Europe, protest against mental cohesion and the diminishment of locality is becoming a priority. At the same

time, as the world homogenizes, the issue of mental domination becomes more and more important. How can we, as individuals and communities, hope to talk about bigger issues in other parts of the world when we don't even have edifices through which to talk to the neighbour next door?

The unifying link between urban activism and urban community defence can be extended to the predominant trend found in urban independent cultural practice. In the last few years, urban subcultures have been, increasingly, less about any particular aesthetic or artistic practice, and more about finding a way to give people some sense of having an opportunity to be heard.

Found is a zine that consists entirely of notes, diaries, and photos found by strangers and submitted to the indie periodical. It sounds obscure, but its creator Davy Rothbart managed to mount up a giant cross-North America tour, of which Toronto was a stop. On stage, Rothbart pulled another crumpled sheet of paper out of a considerable stack. He read a rant that ended, "Why would I take your stuff, when I can get my own?...Love, Mom." He selected a communique from a jilted lover concluding, "Mario I hate you – You're a fucking liar – ps page me later?"

Smart-ass hipster whose zine mixes irreverent street-cred eubonics with a smarmy appreciation for the stranger moments in life, Rothbart is part of an ongoing movement to turn ordinary people into celebrities. The notes he reprints in his found zine are each given a title and thus an identity. Through this process the anonymous writers are elevated to, within the small found world, fame status. "The more you get into these found notes," Rothbart says, "the more you start quoting them like would quote a movie."

K-Composite is a zine turned glossy magazine that features ordinary people in full colour photo spreads complete with celebrity interviews. The latest issue features several

personalities including Brooke Anne Skinner, a 21 year-old who was born in Iowa City. Multiple portraits of Brooke from soulful to sultry set off questions about her thoughts on the wearing of hats, the getting of massages, and her job at an ad agency.

Then there are PeopleCards “the official people trading card”, each pack containing “7 real people, 1 real artcard, 0 celebrities”. Packaged like hockey cards, they feature such real life personalities as Kathy Ann Pernatt, aka Looney Tunes whose motto is “Honesty is the best policy.” On the front of the card, Kathy floats in a swimming pool. On the back, we learn that the cheeseburger is her favourite food, orange her colour and her hometown is Chaffee, NY. The People Cards manifesto states: “Celebration of individuals in society should focus on real people as often as possible, rather than relying on a handful of predetermined celebrities.”

In the shadow of pop, the urge to turn the ordinary into the celebrity has become a repeated motif in independent culture, as if the tidal wave of fame might be somehow averted by a trickling stream going the other way. We can see how these projects connect to a semi-spontaneous public space protest culture: both are responses and searches for that elusive way in to mass culture. Both seek not to question the pop dream of special, but to find a way to transfer that dream to community and individuals.

Toronto-based indie speaker’s series Trampoline Hall has hit upon a popular formula for its monthly gatherings. Basically, people are selected to speak as if they were experts on subjects that, quite often, they know little or nothing about. The subsequent lectures are often fascinating, mainly because we are not used to seeing speakers take the podium who 1) aren’t necessarily all that comfortable with public speaking and 2) don’t always have that much of interest to say. Inevitably, we in the audience end up thinking: hey, wait a minute, I could do that. Which is, of course, the point of the whole exercise.

Can we subvert the system by paralleling it? After the laughter and surprise has died down, many of our thoughts regarding found notes, normal people magazine

spreads, and PeopleCards inevitably revolve around our own desire to be part of the action: How would I pose for K-Composite?; What is my trading card motto? What can I talk about at Trampoline Hall? o The difference between these parallel indie culture phenomenon and pop is really one of accessibility: these are small ways to actually deliver the experience of specialness pop promises.

The collapse of the distinction between urban, suburban and rural parallels the collapse of traditional opportunities for community cultural interaction. Everywhere we go, our terrain is increasingly generic. Everywhere we go, opportunities for true cultural participation are subsumed by the vast world of pop culture. So it is that the phenomenon of a growing amateur-night hey-I'm-special-too indie subculture has the same concerns as an urban protest ethic centred around reclaiming public space. What do we want? A way into the pop dream that is also, paradoxically, a way to reclaim our individual communities as specific distinct spaces, home to specific, distinct people.

In the weird transitional space between pop culture desire and the need to reclaim authenticity, locality, and individuality, the city continues to be the place where grassroots, independent creative action occurs. Trampoline Hall and Spacing Magazine represent not just a new fusing of indie with a No Logo urban protest style, but also a groping toward a new relationship between corporate created pop culture, semi-participatory amateur culture (such as Canadian Idol and karaoke), and the inherent need to live in distinct spaces – not cookie cutter drive through grids.

The emergence and shared ideals of social and aesthetic urban movements suggests both reasons for optimism and worry. More activity with the primary goal of making the pop dream true suggests that frustration is spreading. The indie hipster, the disappointed Idol supplicant, the fervid Star Wars fan re-editing The Phantom Menace share the same dream as the school teachers, bank tellers and cable installers they may

well be in their “real lives”. If there is hope in redeeming the pop promise, it resides in the fact that the found notes, Trampoline Hall, the PeopleCards, the antics of the Toronto Public Space Committee and many other indie ventures all transcend what seem to be their limitations. Are they true alternatives to the fake glamour of celebrity culture? Not really. Nevertheless, they are compelling. They show another side of the fandom-pop culture nexus: its good side. Too small to be shut down or repressed, these kinds of urban projects give us – in incredible bursts of whimsy and intensity – new ways to understand the pop experience as fleeting, memorable yet forgettable, unifying, and accessible to all. They may not be genuine dissent, but they do show the way we can create smaller systems of inclusion that, if not wholly free of pop’s colonizing tendency, open ourselves to the unexpected quirks of other individuals, similarly colonized people around the world. Connection, communication, maybe even community – if only for an evening. Here, we have activists, indie culturities and suburbanites all groping toward mechanisms that seek to take the pop dream and make it real.

At the same time, there is the danger that the quest to translate the pop dream into accessible local happenings will result in cultural gridlock. Indie and community culture asserting the desire for unique place and identity through the ideology and mechanisms of a pop culture that relies on continuities of sameness. The gridlock occurs because we can never get deep enough into the apparatus of pop culture to take it over and substantively redeem its promise of a world of extraordinarily normal specialites; nor can we get far enough away from pop’s promise to foment genuine cultural movements that reject the ultimately dubious idea that we are all special, each and everyone of us a potential Idol.

The city, most saturated in generic pop, pens in an ever more frustrated populace demanding what pop culture promises them. To rescue the city, we need more than a new financial deal, increased funding for public transport, affordable housing, cleaner streets. If we believe that culture has the capacity to make our lives so much more than they currently are, we must find a way to reconcile the widespread, generic, but intensely personal longing for individuality in the form of pop fame, with the disappearance of unique localities that doom us to a world of cities all showing the same movie: the story

of you, starring someone else. We must rescue the city – and its multitude of Idol dreamers – from the gridlock created by mass culture's dominance of the post-urban age. In this search, we practitioners of cultural studies should consider our field as vital to the 21st century as that of scientists studying global warming and nuclear waste disposal. Like wetlands turned into swampy dumps and small towns turned into discount shopping hubs, if we cannot find a way to merge the needs of community and locality with pop's virulent and perpetually unfulfilled promise of special selfhood, what's left of the city will be lost.