

Edmonton Cultural Capital of Canada
Rapporteur Final Report
Sam Varteniuk

Edmonton is a new town. A young town.

It's funny to talk about a culture in terms of its age. But cultures do have ages. Even though the seeds of white civilization in North America are European and have their own ancient memories, we decided to start over here. The story of our forebears was just a preamble to ours, and everything they learned is suspect because we haven't experienced it for ourselves.

But Canada is young, and Edmonton is even younger. People came to Canada for many different reasons: for money, for political and religious freedom, for the good of the empire. But it all amounts to the same thing: opportunity.

People came to Canada to make a better life for themselves. They left behind everyone and everything they knew to arrive in a hard, untamed land. Only one thing was certain: they would have to work hard. This had to come at the expense of all other things; education and art were irrelevant to a family who could not eat.

But we've been successful here in Canada. Things have gone well, more or less, and we have some money to play with. The infrastructure is set up, we have the schools, the churches, the community centres. And there's art, culture. Of course, there's always been art and culture. Ever since a Ukrainian farmer decided to hold a traditional dance in his barn or a Scotsman pulled out his pipes at the public house, there has been art and culture in this country. But it's been the culture of our progenitors, immediately identifiable as having come from somewhere else, somewhere older.

At some point, the people of a young and successful society take a look around themselves and say, "We've done well here. It's not just about hard work and opportunity anymore: this is home." And with that comes the determination to make home a special place. The art and culture that comes from somewhere else begins to remind the people what home meant to their forebears, and what it could mean to their progeny.

People like Joe Shoctor didn't know much about art, but he knew that the city needed a space in which to create it. The Hole family didn't know how to produce a play, but they understood that plays needed to be written and created in their home. Plays that came from here, that were immediately identifiable as the work of a Canadian, an Edmontonian, and that could not be mistaken as having come from anywhere else.

I say all this because my first reaction to the Edmonton Cultural Capital Program was that it was artificial. Art, I reasoned, came from living, maybe from suffering, from the long and

hard, or the joyful and eternal memory of an old and venerable culture. Culture was a lifetime achievement award, not some badge that could be purchased for a 2 million dollar grant.

But the more I thought about it, and the more I read about it, and the more I began to pay close attention to all sorts of cultural output from many different nations, the more I began to see that my initial criticism was typical of a person who comes from a young culture.

Edmonton is not the first culture to set about trying to make a name for itself and its artists. In the late 16th century Queen Elizabeth became determined that England should develop a strong and distinct identity, and assisted this process through her generous patronage (matronage?) of the arts. The frantic filmmaking that took place in the United States during the 1930s was largely aimed at giving America a national identity. Though we tend to think of them as cultural institutions every bit as distinct as England's, Ireland and Scotland have long laboured under a feeling of being obscured under the greater rubric of Great Britain and have felt at pains to distinguish themselves as unique.

I was speaking with a musician several years ago who has been working and creating in Western Canada for almost 30 years. It came up that I'm not originally from Edmonton and so he asked where I was from. I hesitated, because it's been my experience that people sometimes react poorly when I tell them that I'm from Ontario, only an hour away from Toronto.

"Toronto is a good town," the musician affirmed. "I've been there. Good people, good arts scene."

"I've met some people here who think Toronto looks down on Edmonton, thinks they're better," I said.

"You know what that is," the musician said, "is an inferiority complex. Vancouver used to have a huge inferiority complex about 20 years ago, but now they got the whole film thing going on they've grown into themselves."

"I bet you can't wait until that happens here in Edmonton," I said.

"Nope," he replied, "as soon as that happens here, I'm going to Regina."

Maybe Edmonton has an advantage. We don't have centuries of artists that have come before, people who have already defined who we are, what we do and why we do it. Maybe the Edmonton playwright who sits down to write and thinks, "I wish there were other Edmonton playwrights I could look to for inspiration" ought to consider the English playwright who thinks, "I wish there weren't so many other English playwrights to content

with.” Maybe our sense of being adrift in the cultural sea is something others admire, others who are firmly moored and anchored in a harbour that has not changed for centuries.

So what if we’re throwing money at it? Hasn’t that always been the way it is? Isn’t art merely a reflection of a culture that has the time and the means to use its imagination for something other than managing the bare necessities?

Art is money. It always has been. Art is the excess of a rich culture being put to good use. Business, agriculture, finance – those things are quantity. We need them in certain amounts for our society to function smoothly. Arts, culture, sport, politics – this is the quality. These are the things that make sense of what we have, that help us to appreciate them, criticise them, change them.

Michelangelo’s *David* was commissioned by the woollen cloth guild of Florence. The *Mona Lisa* was commissioned by a wealthy merchant. Mozart received a fee of 100 ducats to write *Don Giovanni*. Some of the finest art in history was bought and paid for, with specific instructions pertaining to its subject and execution.

This year has been a good one for art in Edmonton. Another good one, to be specific, because for the last eight years that I’ve lived here the city has blossomed in the summer in a truly amazing display of festivals and events. I come from southern Ontario where people are more than a little blasé about culture. So it was shocking to me to see the way people come out in droves for the Edmonton Street Performers Festival, the River City Shakespeare Festival, FolkFest, Taste of Edmonton, Heritage Days – the list goes on. And people didn’t just want to attend – there are actually waiting lists at some of these places to volunteer.

So the past year, Edmonton’s year as a Cultural Capital of Canada, may very well have gone unnoticed, the new events lost amid the busy summer season of festivals. But talking with artists and arts administrators in the community, it is clear to me that the Edmonton Cultural Capital Program was not only visible, but intriguing, professional, and impressive. The biggest response I’ve heard is that people very much liked the guest speakers who came to town, particularly Yann Martel.

It’s given me pause to consider the sort of thing that’s successful in the eyes of the public, and how it often diverges from my desire to be innovative and original as an artist and presenter. For me, the exciting things were the new things: the Poetry Festival, bringing back the First Night Festival, the grant program and all the projects that came out of it. However for the public the biggest thrill was to hear that a personality – a Canadian personality with whom many Edmontonians are familiar – was coming to town. And not just coming to town the way David Bowie does, playing another vast and nameless concert hall, but to talk to us directly, answer questions, engage in dialogue. It’s made me realize that artists sometimes obsessed with the new, and forget to honour the established.

There is something of an irony that's presented itself, this time in connection with a young lady who was working with a group that received a grant from the Edmonton Cultural Capital Program. Apparently she was asked to attend several meetings on behalf of her organization, meetings held by the ECCP with all recipients of grants designed to identify problems and facilitate discussion. This young lady reported that she felt sadly shuffled aside at these meetings, the bulk of attention going to the more established artists in attendance. The meeting's became something of a "Who's Who" of the Edmonton cultural community, and in true high school fashion the cool kids went off to their corner of the room and the rest were left feeling ignored. This was an attitude not only presented by the artist, but enabled by the ECCP staff. People spoke longer depending on their social status; further, their personal issues took over the meeting and very little business was accomplished.

I think it's ironic that the grant program set out with the proclaimed intention of hearing from artists whose voices typically went unheard, but still ended up creating a hierarchy of importance. The Cultural Capital excluded many major arts organization from the potential for funding partially by design, but also by circumstance: the city was not informed that it was the Cultural Capital until quite late in the game, at which point large organizations had already done all programming for the 2007-2008 season. Edmonton has always been a wonderful resource of new, innovative, fringe performers, so it makes sense that a Cultural Capital initiative would focus on them. Not only that, but independent Edmonton artists have a wonderful sense of community. They know about each other, pass along information, and help wherever possible. It seems a real waste that those qualities could not have presented themselves at the meetings.

I think the biggest question facing Edmonton right now is if it wants to remain edgy or go mainstream. Are we defined by cool little joints like the Azimuth? Or are we striving to be more like Calgary, a place with world-class facilities housing world-class theatre? My bias is toward the former, however I've developed an appreciation for the sort of large-scale, professional theatre that goes on at the Citadel. I think every town needs both. But I think Edmonton should embrace its blue collar roots. Hegemony will put that rough and tumble theatre on world stages quicker than an overt attempt to achieve the gold standard right from the start. All great artistic traditions come from humble and honest beginnings. The Winspear Centre, far from being an originating point of culture, is in fact a museum, a place where things that have already proved themselves as successful are demonstrated for the appreciation of an already-won fan base.

The best thing about the Edmonton Cultural Capital Program was the deadlines it provided, both to the people organizing events and to the artists applying for grants. There is nothing like expectation to propel an artist toward completion. This is the most valuable thing that the ECCP did – it asked for results and watched eagerly as they were presented. This is the best thing any parent can do for a child – to encourage, to expect, and then to step aside and

watch.

Edmonton knew that it was the Cultural Capital of Canada. Word was on the street. Further, I think Edmonton knows it's a Cultural Capital of Canada, and that it will continue to know that even after this program ends. If there's one thing I hope Edmonton takes from this year's events it's to keep going, keep creating. I hope that, with all this focus on what Edmonton is and who Edmontonians are, we actually take a look at ourselves and stop comparing ourselves with Torontonians and New Yorkers and Londoners and Calgarians. I hope people keep turning out in droves, and that every week there's a new independent theatre company popping up. I hope we see more little theatres like the Azimuth popping up, supporting and mentoring young artists and encouraging them to tell their stories. I hope we become so preoccupied with ourselves, what's going on here, what affects us, what moves us, what pisses us off, that we forget about what everyone thinks.

Sam Varteniuk

Website Blogs by Sam Varteniuk

Culture is your breakfast and more

Culture is your breakfast and more. Culture is an opening sentence that the Marketing Director for Edmonton's Cultural Capital Program sends you, prompting you to write a blog entry on the topic of culture. Culture is that hastily written blog entry, typed furiously as you try to eat your shredded wheat and thank yourself that you had the brilliant idea to add raisins.

Culture is adding the word 'blog' to your Word spellchecker so you don't have to stare at all those squiggly red lines, trying to make you think you're making a mistake when it's really the software that hasn't caught up with the times. Culture is pausing in your blogging to draft a quick note to Microsoft, informing them that they need to have more active updates to their spellchecker so that words like 'blog' and 'googling' and 'bi-podding' are included, that language is not a static thing on a page but a living, growing organism of expression. And isn't it odd that spellchecker knows to capitalise Microsoft? That ain't culture. That's branding.

Culture is making it up as you go along. Culture is not pausing to consider what others might think of your cultural output. Culture is not self-conscious, nor does it depend on the approval of others. If culture were a person she would walk around naked when it got too hot for clothes. Culture would probably get thrown in jail.

Culture is the person you admire for being funny, witty, irreverent, attractive. Culture is not being jealous of that person, but deciding to watch them, appreciate them, learn from them. Culture is nothing without an appreciative audience. Culture IS an appreciative

audience.

On a rainy Wednesday afternoon, culture knocked on my email.

“Hey Culture,” I said. “What’s shaking? What’s the word on the street?”

Culture brushed past me without saying hello, poured herself a bowl of shredded wheat, and sat at my computer beside me.

“You should add some raisins to that,” I said. “It’s better.”

“I like it just fine like this,” says Culture.

Speakers Series – Glen Murray

Politician, urban advocate, educator, consultant

Keynote Address: “Cultural Capital – Building the Future”

Date: June 6, 2007, 8pm

Location: Conference Theatre, 5 -142 MacEwan Centre - 105 Street Bldg.

Glen Murray is the former mayor of Winnipeg. He is a talented and affable speaker. The tech is a bit confused, but Glen is smooth through it all.

I’m here with my best friend T. I brought him along because he’s sceptical of these sorts of things. He’s naturally opposed to anything that seems optimistic or designed to inspire. I’m not sure why – I’m even less sure why I decided to bring him along. Maybe I, too, share his mistrust of anything ebullient. But maybe I don’t trust my own ability to remain skeptical given that I’m being employed by the Edmonton Cultural Capital Project. Maybe he’s my attempt to keep it real.

T is enjoying himself. Somehow this makes me more skeptical. Why am I always compelled to adopt whatever attitude not being represented? In a room full of conservatives I’m the liberal, but if everyone starts talking about being free-form and organic I’m the one stamping my foot and demanding greater control.

For about twenty minutes I forget to take notes and just listen. Glen is talking about cities with character, cities that were built for people to live in rather than as a furious attempt to subdue and dominate the countryside with residences and Wal-Marts. He really gets my attention when he mentions Galt, which is only a short drive from where I grew up. He holds it up as an example of a beautiful city. Then he actually mentions the city where I grew up, and describes it similarly. I feel my chest swell with pride. I’ll see the same thing

happen later to T when Glen talks about Cape Breton.

This is one of the things I've learned about audiences: they love to hear about themselves. I can see Glen knows this, because at some point he mentions virtually every province and territory in Canada.

A cell phone rings. The disturbance caused by a cell phone is two-fold. The first wave is the ring itself. The second is the causal reverberation of everyone else in the room fishing in their purses and pockets, followed by a chorus of happy beeps, chirps, and chimes as they turn off their phones, not wanting to repeat the mistake of that first individual.

T laughs at something Glen says. I miss it – too busy writing about cell phone fallout. So I lean over and whisper, “What did he say?”

“I don't know,” T replies. “Other people were laughing and I wanted to be polite.”

First watch check occurs at 8:45 PM. Pretty good considering the talk began at 8.

Here is what I take from the evening:

Developing the arts is not just about funding or acquiring new capital. This is a veneer. We need to move outside of the conventional, blow the walls off our old institutions, turn the streets themselves into cultural institutions.

Suddenly I want to design subway stations. I dismiss the idea after a brief consideration of how much extra schooling this will necessitate, but I like the feeling all the same. It's a goal that seems tangible, do-able.

T leans over and says, “Do you mind if I write something down? I didn't bring any paper.”

“Sure,” I say, and surrender my weapons.

T scribbles something Glen has said:

Hang out with people whom you are afraid of.

Glen starts to wrap it up around 9:30. As soon as T gets the sense that things are winding down he whispers, “I'm going to take off duder.”

He gets up and leaves just as the audience begins to applaud. I am disappointed. There's a good feel in the room, people are going to hang around and chat, eat, drink. I had wanted to get T's reflections on the talk, and now I begin to wonder if he really did enjoy himself.

Maybe I was hoping that, somehow, the energy of the evening would overcome his essential introvertedness.

Video is Replacing the Art of Storytelling

The earliest instance of storytelling must have happened, I figure, out of a need to communicate danger.

Picture a hunter-gatherer clan of early humans. Thag (who is named that because it seems an appropriate name for an early human, the "John" of pre-history, if you will), a young hunter, goes over a particular hill on a particular day in search of more food for the clan.

As he enters into a clearing Thag spots a fawn. He hefts his spear, but before he can launch it he spies strange movement in the grass near the young deer. Suddenly, with shocking speed and ferocity, a python springs from the grass and bites the fawn in the leg. The fawn starts, trying to run away but is quickly overcome by a strange lethargy. It falls to the ground in an almost drunken stagger, whereupon the snake advances, envelops, and eventually consumes the animal.

Thag is frightened by what he sees - never before has he seen such a predator, one that kills with a single bite. The fawn, Thag realizes, was not much bigger than Thag's own son; Thag begins to worry about the toddler, who is curious, adventurous, and may one day wander over the hill . . .

Thag returns to the clan with a mission. He gathers all the children of the clan and frightens the wits out of them with his tale of the python and the fawn. Thag's son cries out as he re-enacts the grisly scene, describing in as much detail as he can how the snake moved through the grass, sprung with lightning speed, bit the fawn in a non-vital area yet still managed to kill it within seconds. Thag does not tell the story to win the praise or admiration of his peers; he has no desire to be recognized for the creativity or virtuosity of his storytelling. He is simply trying to communicate, in as clear and striking a fashion possible, the danger over the hill.

Today, Thag would not have to tell his son about the snake. Today, Thag could log on to the internet and show his son videos. If there are no videos to be seen, Thag can borrow the video camera from work and take it out to the field with him, capturing on film what he would have previously had to recreate in a story. After all, it's better to see a thing with one's own eyes than to simply have it described.

I offer this not as a condemnation of video - for the purposes of capturing and documenting events it is far more accurate than storytelling, which is prone to exaggeration, fragmented by memory, and ultimately at the mercy of subjective interpretations. I simply cite it as a

fact. It is happening.

After all, why bother to tell the story when you can just show the video?

Fringe Ticketing 2007: The Baby and the Bathwater

The new Fringe ticketing system was designed, as I understand it, to address the problem of volunteers having to carry around large quantities of cash. This is fair enough – a volunteer should not be expected to carry hundreds of dollars late at night. I'm sure there were other concerns about the old ticketing system too – it required a lot of volunteers posted at a lot of stations, which meant a lot of cashboxes that needed to be prepared and maintained. I had the sense that many aspects of the Fringe were fuelled by the very souls of the employees and volunteers, if their weary and ragged looks at festival's end was any indication. I certainly don't need people to be burning out to facilitate my Fringe experience, and I'm not afraid of change.

But here's the problems with the new system:

1. Last Minute Tickets

There is no mechanism for the sale of last minute tickets. Someone who walks by a theatre and, on impulse, decides to buy a ticket five minutes before curtain now has to walk to a ticketing booth which can be up to two blocks away. If there's a line up, which there often is, or the system is down, which it often is, then they can't make it to the show on time.

2. Line Ups

I think part of the appeal of buying tickets online is that you don't have to waste time waiting in line once you get to the theatre. And this is true if you go to the main Fringe office to pick up your tickets, however if you go to one of the booths you still have to wait in line along with everyone else. Then you have to go line up at your Fringe venue.

3. Technical Difficulties

Maybe it's just me, but it seems like at least one out of every two ticket stations is not functioning due to technical difficulties. Having a new-fangled online ticketing system is all very well and good, but it's dependent on a stable system. It doesn't even seem as though they have a Plan B for when the computers crash.

4. Price Increase

At the end of the day price increases are always a tough sell, and in this case there's been

two of them. Maximum permissible ticket prices were increased from \$10 to \$12 (which almost every show has done), however on top of this the Fringe has instituted a \$2 surcharge on all advance ticket sales. Since all ticket sales are now technically sold in advance, this not only adds a total of \$4 to the standard Fringe ticket price, but arrives in a muddily-communicated doublespeak that does not reflect well on the organization. Some people are upset at the mere principle of what they see as a Fringe tax; traditionally all money from ticket sales has gone to the artists.

The problems with the ticketing system are even more acute for the BYOVs (Bring Your Own Venue). They are typically the furthest away from satellite ticket booths. There is no longer a Fringe ticket booth in front of BYOVs, which make them more difficult to identify as venues. Further, BYOVs operating out of bars are having to turn away regular patrons who would have usually simply paid the \$10, watched the show, then enjoyed a night at their favourite bar. When faced with the prospect of walking two blocks away, waiting in line, and paying \$14, many people simply choose to drink at another bar. This becomes a serious issue for BYOVs who wish to retain their regular clientele through the run of the Fringe.

While the new ticketing system may have addressed some problems, it has created more. I think that the satellite ticket booths are a good idea and should be maintained, along with the option of online purchases. I do not, however, think that we can afford to do away with ticket sales at the door. The world is not so ubiquitously online that we can abandon the human element. Perhaps security guards could be hired to accompany volunteers with cashboxes. Perhaps the Fringe should consider the printing and sale of “Fringe Bucks”, a standardized voucher that could be used at any show. There are a great many things that are good about the new system and it does us no good to demonize it entirely, however I hope we can come up with something for next year that is not only good for the administration, but is equally good for the artists and, most importantly, the audience.

Edmonton’s Poetry Festival – A Darn Good Road

At the launch for the poetry festival Mayor Stephen Mandel put his foot in his mouth. He was in the middle of reading a poem that had been inscribed onto a commemorative plaque when he arrived at an image that disagreed with him. I don’t remember the poem, but I do remember that the thing he didn’t like was the simile ‘like a darn good road.’

“Who thought of the road analogy?” Mandel blurted in the middle of his reading, his distaste obvious. He kept reading, but interrupted himself to reflect on what an awful, common, and flat image was that ‘darn good road’.

As he finished his reading, outgoing poet laureate Alice Major whispered something in his ear.

“The road analogy was Alice’s” Mandel proclaimed, not missing a beat. “And it’s a darn fine one at that.”

I had to admire the seasoned politician’s ability to roll with the situation. I was even reminded of our once fearless leader Mr. Klein and his determination to speak his mind regardless of how poorly informed or disillusioned he was. People seemed to like it. I found myself wondering if Mandel had done it on purpose, knowing that Edmontonians like a certain brusque, blue-collar abrasiveness in their civic leaders.

But it also got me thinking about how subjective poetry can be, and how a poetic image can go from banal to darn fine depending on who wrote it.

So it was with that in mind that my wife and I made our way to the Axis Café on Jasper Avenue to take in the readings of four poets last Friday. One of the poets was my friend Karen who I know from the Schizophrenia Society. I had initially asked her to accompany me to a poetry reading event since she’s a poet and even got a grant for it once, so I was pleased to discover that she was actually involved in one of them.

The Axis Café is a trendy little joint near the corner of Jasper and 104. It’s got a balcony that spans half the length of the main floor, overlooking the rest of the café – it was up there that they’d decided the poetry reading would take place. When we arrived there were four or five other people on the balcony so we took a seat on a pair of cushioned leather chairs in the corner. Then a few more people showed up. Then some more. Then a couple of large groups. The café produced some folding chairs and we crammed in as best we could, but by the time the readings were scheduled to commence there was standing room only and we were packed in like sardines.

“Is there a weight restriction up here?” the man beside me asks.

“No no,” the poet emcee replies confidently. But there is. There has to be. And we’re definitely over it.

I remember Karen telling me once that she doesn’t like small or crowded places and wonder how she’s doing. I’m also becoming aware of the fact that there might actually be a danger here, crammed overweight into a small space. But it’s somehow fitting: dangerous poetry.

Karen uses a pen name when she writes – ky perraun. I ask her if I should call her that instead of Karen.

“Yeah,” she smiles. “Call me jelly.”

“Attention,” says a pretty young lady who’s stepped up to the microphone. “Downstairs there’s a nice little stage and, while it’s not as cozy as up here, there’s seating for everyone. Vote?”

Half of us raise our hands. Maybe less than half. But somehow that’s enough. We are in Canada after all. So we trundle off downstairs to discover a perfect little performance space all ready to go with a microphone and sound booth and mood lighting, and I’m thinking why the crap were we upstairs in the first place?

The first poet (the pretty one who’d arranged the move downstairs) isn’t a very good reader. She doesn’t enunciate and speaks in monotone. She rushes from one poem to the next, a series of images that wash over me. She pauses at one point to explain that the lack of pauses, descriptions, or titles is intentional, part of the stream-of-poetry consciousness she’s going for. I suppose she’s aware of an unspoken request from the audience for greater clarity.

The second poet is Karen. She’s a good reader, but then again I’m biased. Her poems are stories of being on the psych ward, of a person’s reality breaking down. I am thankful that I won’t have to lie to her afterward when I tell her she’s good.

The third poet reminds me of the first. Her reading is a bit more energetic, but her poems are a series of images, word pictures, written for the aesthete who wishes to savour each word, sucking on it like a Werther’s Original. I never went for that sort of candy. I prefer things I can chew on.

Which is why I like the last poet. Her poems are all about sex; dirty, zipless, lusty, torrid sex. I can connect to it. There’s a story there, and the images are serving it rather than fighting with it for centre stage.

And in the end I suppose poetry is like a darn good road. It’s best when it’s headed somewhere with clearly marked signage. Some poetry is like those roads in residential sub-divisions, the ones that bend all over in cul-de-sacs with speed bumps everywhere, never travelling very far in a straight line. They’re meant to serve the people who live there and to confuse everyone else, discouraging motorists from blasting through looking for shortcuts. Good roads take you somewhere interesting. The traffic on them moves. There are nice things to look at out the window, but the things whip by, forming a blurred backdrop to the journey which is the real thrill. If you stop too much to look at the sights you may not end up arriving where you were headed in the first place.

Yann Martel: Anti-Dentite

It really feels like Yann Martel is a man who has answers. At least, it feels like Yann Martel thinks he has answers, or thinks he ought to have answers and is working hard to

be definitive in delivering them to his public. Maybe that's because so many people have read his book *Life of Pi* and responded positively to the simple, allegorical nature of it. It seems as though there are answers to some of life's most complex questions in that book, and that the answers are so uncomplicated that they must be true. I certainly would not deny anyone the comfort of finding answers in a world full of questions. I personally loved the book.

There's something you learn early on in academia if you're at all serious about it, and that's to be wary of making broad, general comments. If you're going to present yourself as an authority then you have a responsibility to be as accurate as possible in your statements. It feels really good to start a sentence like, "since the dawn of humanity people have . . ." or "there has never been a single work of fiction that does not . . ." The problem is that those sorts of statements are usually more aesthetic than factual. They are grandstanding, theatrical moments, designed to wow an audience. They are used by religious leaders to fan the flames of passion in their followers, brushing aside contrary opinion in the fervent need to be devoutly committed to something.

So maybe Yann is just trying to live up to the expectations of his adoring audience when he attempts to define the nature of art for us as it pertains to life. "Art is the life of the mind," he declares. Good, I think, I can get behind that. "Art is amoral," he continues, "a gadfly, completely free to be objectionable." Well sure, I can see that. Art needs to have the freedom to explore things that others may consider taboo; it is in this way that minds are opened, new possibilities introduced.

Yann goes on to make a distinction between art and entertainment: the former is nutritious, the latter is candy. Entertainment is moronic, he explains, and the enjoyment of it is shameful, albeit satisfying. I've heard this kind of talk before. It smacks of elitism and I don't see how it helps, but I see where he's going. Art is that which is challenging, questioning life and encouraging thought. Entertainment is escapism. Part of me wonders why something as amoral as Art should be concerned with the lack of social conscience evinced by its unruly sibling Entertainment, but then I think I might be playing word games and decide to give my career a rest and just listen.

"Religion and art are the only ways of exploring life. Science is mechanical, and commerce doesn't even come close." Here is where he starts to lose me. I get the whole anti-commerce thing – corporate irresponsibility is out of control, and I think we need to start recognizing how soulless business can become if it's only about money. But science? Science is wonder. Science is discovery. Scientists speak of their work with the passion of artists. It is nature, a truth that is constantly being questioned by people eager to have their beliefs changed. Why is he attacking science?

"Dentistry is the opposite of artistry."

This is where Yann loses me. The comment smacks of someone who really doesn't know what he's talking about, but is determined to talk about it with authority. Maybe I'm sensitive because my mother is a dental hygienist. I just never would have figured Yann Martel for an anti-dentite.

A few notes: German culture did not commit the holocaust; to be satisfied is not moronic; men are not the only ones who work themselves to death. You're a smart man, Yann, and you tell a good story. That's plenty to be proud of. You don't have to feel as though it's your job to deliver the meaning of life to humanity.

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