In Visible Cities: Envisioning the Canadian Prairie City in Literature and Film

By

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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In Visible Cities: Envisioning the Canadian Prairie City in Literature and Film

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Vanessa Louise Lent

A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of

Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree

Of

Master of Arts

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Abstract

In my thesis I examine Robert Kroetsch's novel *The Studhorse Man* (1969), Aritha van Herk's novel *Restlessness* (1998), and Guy Maddin's film *The Saddest Music in the World* (2004) to determine how each work uses non-representational narrative strategies in order to reproduce the pedestrian experience of seeing the prairie city. In a tradition that is predominantly associated with rural landscapes, there is a struggle for artists who work outside of what has come to be known as "authentic" prairie symbols and themes: the empty and barren land, the farmer struggling with his fields, the lonely wife sequestered in her home. Such icons came to be established within the formative years of artistic development in the prairies. In literature, this movement is known as "prairie realism" and featured linear trajectories and narrative continuity. It was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that prairie literature began to react against these realist narrative forms and experiment with more fragmented, abstract forms that, instead of being based on linear trajectories, adopted spatial narrative constructions. Such spatialization abandons narrative continuity in order to more closely represent the mechanics of human perception. Instead of producing a mimetic *style* of narrative, which attempts to mirror the surface of the world resulting in a flat, one-dimensional plane, these artists produced a mimesis of *effect,* which attempts to mirror the workings of human consciousness resulting in a fragmented, multi-layered construction. Such a spatialization, I argue, allows artists to more easily enter into the urban prairie landscape because it effectively recreates the "imaginative reconstruction" the city's pedestrian must perform in order to make the "partial visibilities" of the cityscape comprehensible.

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Introduction

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau, writing of the totalizing and God-like view of New York from atop the World Trade Center, asks his reader: "To what erotics of knowledge does the ecstasy of reading such a cosmos belong?" The incredible height "transforms the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more" (92). In his chapter "Walking in the City," de Certeau breaks down the division that lies between experiencing the city from a removed, distant, and panoptic point and experiencing the city from street level. The pedestrians "whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' [...] write without being able to read it" (93). These two positions of observation are likened by de Certeau to the different ways a city may be narrated in urban literature. The reader is either privy to a totalizing point of authority that observes and narrates from an unconnected distant perspective (a position found in many Victorian texts such as Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*) or the reader experiences only what a pedestrian would observe (as can be found in many modernist and postmodernist texts such as Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* and Paul Auster's *City of Glass*). Hana Wirth-Nesher, in *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel,* identifies the pedestrian as one who "imaginatively reconstructs" the gaps in knowledge that come from experiencing the city:

> Cities promise plenitude, but deliver inaccessibility. As a result, the urbanite, for better or for worse, is faced with a never-ending series of

> partial visibilities, of gaps—figures framed in the windows of highrises, crowds observed from those same windows, partly drawn blinds, taxis transporting strangers, noises from the other side of a wall, closed doors and vigilant doormen, streets on maps or around the bend but never traversed, hidden enclaves in adjacent neighborhoods. Faced with these and unable or unwilling to ignore them, the city dweller inevitably reconstructs the inaccessible in his imagination. (8)

Douglas Tallack, in his article "City Sights: Mapping and Representing New York City," similarly notes that, in the experience of the city, "partial visibilities" are overcome though imaginative reconstruction. He writes specifically of "The Ashcan Group," a collection of American painters who worked at the turn of the twentieth century. He notes that these urban painters were influenced by "a need to know more than could actually be seen" (29): a need that resulted in the creation of abstract and non-representational images. Tallack notes: "the key factor behind these changes in representation was not an internal transformation within the discipline of painting [...] but, rather, the attempt, and even the need, to know and understand a modern city, with its new spatio-temporal dimensions. The field of visual culture knowledge depends, to some extent at least, upon achieving a point of view" (27). It is this "internal transformation" of form in order to achieve a "point of view" that I propose motivates the various constructions of the prairie city found in Robert Kroetsch's novel *The Studhorse Man* (1969), Aritha van Herk's novel *Restlessness* (1998), and Guy Maddin's film *The Saddest Music in the World* (2004). Each work, to differing extents, assumes the position of the pedestrian in order to reconstruct a vision of the

city. Although Robert Kroetsch's text begins with the seemingly traditional omniscient narrative perspective, this panoptic gaze is soon troubled by the narrator's reliability. Aritha van Herk's narrator, similarly, begins her tale from a position of authority, observing the city from her elevated hotel room. She soon discovers, however, that she too is being observed, and her position of scopic control crumbles. Guy Maddin's filmic vision of the city overtly presents a landscape filled with gaps and uses visual techniques similar to those found in cubism, "in which the modernist proposal that what is not 'normally' visible can only be made so through non-representational techniques [and] is advanced through paintings which include a number of different and literally invisible sides of an object or scene all at once" (Tallack 32). Maddin presents the city through a sometimes blurred and hazy vision, thwarting any attempt at scopic control. My thesis will argue that in the attempt to reproduce the pedestrian experience of seeing the city these artists must turn to non-representational techniques in order to present a mimetically faithful recreation of imaginative vision. Each artist turns to these techniques (usually associated with modernism but, as Erich Auerbach points out, traceable back to the Hebrew scriptures) in order to effectively communicate the *experience* of the prairie city.

There are a number of critics who have, of late, called for a re-examination of prairie literature by taking into account the wealth of works that include the urban prairie landscape. Ian Adam, in his essay "Iconicity, Space and the Place of Sharon Butala's 'The Prize'" (1998), takes on the complicated task of examining how "iconicity, as a challenge to the doctrine of the arbitrariness of the sign," relates to the use of icons in prairie writing and literary criticism (Adam 178). He notes that

"[p]rairie writing contains few icons expressing long-standing human settlement; it is non-monumental and sometimes [...] even anti-monumental. In it, icons of permanence are replaced by those of transience" (Adam 179). The prairie city, as an icon of permanence, challenges this tradition of transient icons. In a literature that so often represents the absence of cultural, historical, and artistic material, both pre- or post-contact, the city challenges the stereotype of the blank slate, or *tabula rasa*, onto which new forms (of narrative, of culture) can be created. By setting the action of a novel or film in an urban setting, the prairie artist creates an icon of permanence that contradicts and challenges any notions of "absence" within the landscape. George Melnyk argues similarly for the use of the prairie city as a mythological symbol of permanence in *New Moon at Batoche: Reflections on the Urban Prairie* (1999). He has "been disappointed to find the limited role that the cities of the West play in the dominant mythology of the region. Compared to the Métis buffalo hunter or the sunburnt farmer on his tractor, images of the Western city are almost an afterthought that expresses some kind of inauthenticity in relation to the region" (87). There is, however, not a total lack of artistic representations of the prairie city. Primarily there has been a lack of criticism regarding how these urban representations affect the understanding of *place* in prairie literature and art. Any sense of the city as "inauthentic" to prairie experience, I argue, results from this lack of dialogue and has led to a false understanding of this region. My thesis in no way comes close to a comprehensive analysis of the vast amount of artistic representations of the city. Rather, I am concentrating this study on a particular aesthetic theme that runs through three unique works. Through this focus, I hope to initiate dialogue and provide a

sliver of insight into how the city affects conceptions of place in the Canadian prairies.

Alison Calder, in "Reassessing Prairie Realism" (1998), writes of the dangers of environmental determinism in prairie realist writing. "Criticism of prairie realism," she notes, "is predicated on a belief in the primacy of the land" (56). Calder suggests that "the belief that the prairie is *only* a wasted earth and burning sun, that there is *no* imaginative possibility here, creates a critical environment in which prairie realism, with its matter-of-fact style, is seen to be a 'natural' mode of representing the prairie, and is therefore granted a privileged position in a canon which itself privileges mimesis" (59). Writing that falls outside of the prairie realist mode, then, may be seen as "unnatural" and therefore less authentic to the place of the prairies. The danger, for Calder, is that realist writing, because it suggests a fidelity to detail deemed realistic, is "invested with truth-value" and considered documentary (59). She rightly notes a failure in criticism of prairie literature to "recognize [...] that these writings present fictionalized, not photographic, landscapes" (55). To invest such fictions with "truth-value" and neglect to acknowledge their position as artistic representations results in a situation where "fiction cannot be fiction: it must be representative of a typical regional ethos" (55). The novels and film studied in this thesis, by turning to non-representative techniques, ensure that their status remains firmly established within the category of artistic representation. This position allows each work to creatively explore the complexities of *place* in the prairies without being tied down to expectations of "truth-value."

In order to better understand the dominant mythical and iconic symbols of the prairies, it is useful to turn to R. Douglas Francis' study *Images of the West: Responses to the Canadian Prairies* (1989), wherein he charts the historical, artistic, and cultural constructions of the prairies from first contact to the present day. He lists six specific yet "fluid and open" (231) categories of reception: "The Western Wasteland, 1650-1850," "The Romantic West, 1845-1885," "The West, Nation, and the Empire, 1845-1885," "The Promised Land: The Utopian West, 1880-1920," "Western Realism, 1880-1940," and "The Mythic West, 1945-1980." These categories of reception serve as mythic archetypes that have shaped and continue to shape the way in which citizens, academics, and artists think about the prairies as a region. Francis' study is intriguing because the survey of texts he uses demonstrates how the West has been written, whether by explorer, missionary, scientist, poet, or novelist, through a combination of subjective and personal responses to the landscape. "Western Realism" is the iconic style of prose and painting that emerged as a direct reaction to the unrealistic belief that the prairies were a "land of opportunity," an Edenic place where fertile land was abundantly available. Literature and art of this period is characterized as "prairie realism," featuring bleak, desperate people barely living on the edge of survival, most certainly a different conception from the optimistic "land of opportunity." Writers such as Frederick Philip Grove, Martha Ostenso, and Sinclair Ross wrote novels that "depicted prairie man as struggling against a harsh and unyielding land that ultimately transformed him into a cold, calculating, and harsh character, like the land itself" (163). Canonical literature of this time also emphasized the move many people were making from rural to urban

settings. "Mechanization of the family farm, which occurred to the greatest extent in the twenties," writes Francis, "was the chief reason for this revolutionary change. Prairie novelists [...] used the dichotomy of rural and urban as a means to comment on the strengths and limitations of these two lifestyles" (166). This dichotomous relationship primarily demonized the urban prairie centres by associating them with the dominant power structures of both the National and Colonial influences.

Like Francis, Dick Harrison, in his important study of prairie literature *Unnamed County: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction* (1977), writes of the development of Canadian prairie realism in the mid-1920s. "The techniques of this new fiction," he writes, "encouraged a more thorough representation of the prairie environment and way of life than can be found in any earlier fiction. [...] [T]here is a realization that the means of physical and economic adaptation to the environment, though initially successful, had not automatically effected a cultural or imaginative adaptation" (34-35). Harrison notes that prose and painterly styles diverged in this period because painters began to adopt more abstract and expressionist styles while novelists tended to remain aligned with traditional realist narrative techniques: "When painters move into nonfigurative expression and abandon what can be called the 'literary' or 'narrative' element of their art," he writes, "it becomes increasingly difficult to draw useful—or even sane—comparisons with the fiction" (42). Only when writers began to take on similarly abstract and expressionist styles were the traditional limitations of prairie realist style abandoned. Guy Vanderhaeghe, in his article, "'Brand Name' vs. 'No-Name': A Half-Century of the Representation of Western Canadian Cities in Fiction" (1993), argues along similar lines as Harrison.

His study of four novels, Ralph Connor's *The Foreigner* (1909), Edward McCourt's *The Wooden Sword* (1975), Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice* (1956), and John Marlyn's *Under the Ribs of Death* (1984), charts the failure of prairie realist writing to effectively represent the Canadian prairie cities. The four novels structure Vanderhaeghe's argument that, after Connor's novel, prairie novelists shied away from writing about the specific prairie cities, opting instead for vague approximations. Vanderhaeghe theorizes that there was a tendency to create non-specific, "no-name," and faceless urban centres because, first of all, prairie novelists lacked confidence and "had doubts about the material they found to hand" (128). The imperialist and nationalist stereotypes of the cultureless prairies created a self-doubt in the artists located therein about the validity of their own experiences. Secondly, Vanderhaeghe continues, writers shied away from writing about specific prairie cities because there was an absence of literary examples from which the writers could work (128). North American urban literature had, to that point, primarily been written about larger urban centres such as New York, Chicago, and Montreal. These two factors resulted in the creation of urban prairie narratives that lacked identity grounded in the real, tangible place: "The most frequent way of dealing with the problem was the creation of the no-name city, a city that tried to pass muster by refusing to give away what it really was. As a strategy, this was in most cases self-defeating, giving a strange air of unreality to novels which were, by and large, realistic in style" (128). This ironic situation, where the realistic *style* of the prose resulted in unrealistic narratives, could eventually only be overcome when artists

abandoned traditional forms of realism and began experimenting with new forms of representation that were realistic in *effect*.

I will pause here a moment in order to emphasize a distinction that will be crucial in my argument: the separation between realist *style* and realist *effect*. I will be using the term *mimesis* frequently throughout this work. Erich Auerbach's influential study *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953) will also be used throughout. His work traces the pendulum-like evolution of the representation of reality in narrative through the span of Western civilization. Beginning with Homer and the Old Testament, and working through Dante, Goethe, Rabelais, Shakespeare, and Virginia Woolf, just to name a few, the point he stresses continuously and which I will borrow in making my argument is this: in the attempt to make a narrative most accurately reflect the workings of perception, artists have frequently turned to styles that break from linear, "realist" modes and instead create depth through shifting what remains in the background and what is shown in the foreground. Auerbach identifies two distinct forms of narrative mimesis. The first, which he aligns with Homeric style, is characterized by "fully externalized description, uniform illumination, uninterrupted connection, free expression, all events in the foreground, displaying unmistakable meanings, few elements of historical development and of psychological perspective" (23). The characteristics of the second form of mimesis, which he aligns with the texts of the Hebrew Bible, include "certain parts brought into high relief, others left obscure, abruptness, suggestive influence of the unexpressed, 'background' quality, multiplicity of meanings and the need for interpretation, universal-historical claims, development of

the concept of the historically becoming, and preoccupation with the problematic" (23). Auerbach asserts that these two styles of mimesis "exercised their determining influence upon the representation of reality in European literature" (23). It is my contention that the two different versions of "reality" found in realist narrative and modern/postmodern narrative are representative of these two types of mimesis. The first type of mimesis strives for a realism of *style* and the second for a realism of *effect*. In his discussion of changes in narrative style that occurred between the two wars (a change, as Harrison notes, that was also made by prairie painters of the time but not novelists) these new narratives featured "multipersonal representation of consciousness, time strata, disintegration of the continuity of exterior events, [and] shifting of the narrative viewpoint (all of which are interrelated and difficult to separate)" (546). These self same narrative elements appear throughout the works studied herein and work together to create, in different ways, the "reality" of the prairie city. Just as Douglas Tallack notes that painters turned to "non-representational techniques" in order to express the vision of the pedestrian in the city, Kroetsch, van Herk, and Maddin similarly use these techniques in their presentation of the prairie city in order to recreate a subjective experience of *seeing* the city.

Traditional prairie realism, therefore, had struggled with the construction of the prairie city because authors were either creating cities that seemed anonymous and false-fronted, or, if the cityscapes were historically and geographically specific, they were lacking the detail and perspective necessary to carry out an "imaginative reconstruction" of the landscape. The city became easier to represent as artists began

to work with less realistic forms and began adopting more abstract methods. That is, when artists began to abandon traditional realist forms of mimesis, and instead moved into more impressionistic, abstract, and expressionist forms of representation, thereby creating a different, more subjectively structured type of mimesis, the city, with its complexities and multiplicity, became a less-daunting artistic landscape. Artists most effectively "gazed" at the city by looking away from it: distraction, abstraction, interference, and multiplicity are the tools used to achieve the effect of "imaginative reconstructions" that Hana Wirth-Nesher notes are necessary to overcome the "partial visibilities" of the city landscape. These tools of distraction and abstraction are tools that change the balance between foreground and background, creating through a billowing volume of background, a more subjective experience of the city. As Eduardo Cadava writes of historical photography: "the most faithful photograph, the photograph most faithful to the event of the photograph, is the least faithful one, the least mimetic one – the photograph that remains faithful to its own infidelity" (15). In a similar manner, artistically effective constructions of "the city" are the ones that turn away from a more traditional mimetic realism and instead employ the more subjective, more impressionistic, more surreal techniques of representation that mirror the pedestrian vision of the prairie city.

My first chapter will address Robert Kroetsch's novel *The Studhorse Man,* which features a character who has embarked upon an epic journey. Hazard Lepage and his stallion Poseidon travel a cyclical path through Alberta in search of a sire to continue the line of horses. Edmonton, in the novel, figures as a stopping point in the journey. This is a city on the cusp of mechanization and modernization; it is uncertain

of how to reconcile its history with the rapidly changing present. This flux is echoed by Kroetsch's narrator who similarly cannot find his place between the roles of archivist, mythologizer, and storyteller. The city has been turned on its head by a blinding snowstorm and a stampede of wild horses. The sense of Bakhtin's "carnival," a "two world condition" where the world and its inverted form co-exist, permeates the city and offers a substantial doubling in the narrative; authority has been inversed and societal rules abandoned. *The Studhorse Man* "imaginatively reconstructs" the fragmented cityscape by effectively "spatializing" the narrative. That is, by abandoning a traditional linear trajectory and instead creating a multi-layered narration that allows for superimposition and simultaneity.

My second chapter will examine Aritha van Herk's novel *Restlessness,* which presents a character at what appears to be the last stop along a cyclical journey. After a life spent traveling throughout the world Dorcas chooses her hometown, Calgary, as her final resting place. Within the borders of Calgary she retells to her self-hired assassin descriptions of the cities she has visited, thereby inscribing them onto the prairie city, investing one landscape with many. Doubling makes an appearance in *Restlessness* first through the doubled narration: as Dorcas narrates her story to Derrick Altman, her assassin, it is doubly related to the reader, creating a doubled audience; there are the many enunciated cities, layering their similarities and differences one over top of the other onto the ironically insinuated mirror city of Calgary; there is the appearance of the doppelgänger, the troubling notion of meeting one's own double within the city, and finally there is the carnivalesque combination of life and death states. *Restlessness* "imaginatively reconstructs" the fragmented

cityscape by creating a "polyphonic" narrative. By invoking a multiplicity of urban landscapes overtop of Calgary, van Herk creates a multi-layered landscape.

My third chapter will study Guy Maddin's film *The Saddest Music in the World,* a film that presents Winnipeg in the midst of the depression as a host city to a world wide competition to see which nation has the saddest music in the world. Maddin's visualization of Winnipeg is of a city able to take on a multiplicity of meanings, faces, and identities. The film offers Winnipeg as an all-encompassing performance, the city-as-spectacle. Doubling appears in *The Saddest Music in the World* with the combination of dead and the living existing in the same frame; the doubled nature of identity appropriations; and the ironic blurring of the filmic image, creating through doublings and visual interference a non-mimetic yet effective image. *The Saddest Music in the World* "imaginatively reconstructs" Maddin's fragmented cityscape through the use of cubist techniques. Through a combination of set design and filmic technique, the images created "include a number of different and literally invisible sides of an object or scene all at once" (Tallack 32).

The three works studied in this project work against the generalization of place, Vanderhaeghe's "no-name city," by using the cities and their historical, geographic, and cultural specificities as templates against which the narrative action is built. It is important to clarify, at this time, that although I have been writing of the "prairie city" as a unified concept, the cities of the Canadian Prairies each have a separate and unique identity. I do not wish to present the prairie city as a unified "no-name concept," but instead as a dynamic interface of places and history. This study will examine three of these cities, Edmonton, Calgary, and Winnipeg. The Edmonton

of *The Studhorse Man* is playful, cacophonous, and is made mythical by its own historical presence. The Calgary of *Restlessness* is capable of assuming many identities and of turning, eventually in on itself as a snake eating its own tail (tale). The Winnipeg of *The Saddest Music in the World* is a patchwork of history, image, voice, and identity. These prairie artists, seeking an alternative to traditional realist representation, have turned to aesthetic developments that occurred in the modernist movement, a movement that was similarly reacting against realist structures. This turn towards non-representational or "spatial" forms resulted in the creation of works that align with Auerbach's more subjective form of mimesis. Ultimately, each artist is motivated, like Douglas Tallack's Ashcan painters, by "a need to know more than [can] actually be seen." Non-representational techniques allow these works to overcome the limits of traditional realism and present unique visions of these prairie cities.

Chapter One: The Riotous City

> *... Newly arrived and quite ignorant of the languages of the Levant, Marco Polo could express himself only by drawing objects from his baggage – drums, salt fish, necklaces of wart hogs' teeth – and pointing to them with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder or of horror, imitating the bay of the jackal, the hoot of the owl. (Calvino* Invisible Cities *38)*

Dick Harrison, in *Unnamed County: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction* (1977), notes how a number of prairie writers in the 1970s "seem[ed] more interested in discontinuity in narrative structures, allowing for new collocations of the elements of prairie life." Citing Kroetsch, he goes on to write: "[Robert] Kroetsch, the most technically adventurous of the group, expresses impatience with 'certain traditional kinds of realism,' presumably because he wishes to escape the assumptions implicit in the realistic fiction which shaped an earlier vision of the prairie" (44). The "assumptions implicit in realistic fiction" that Harrison alludes to arose out of a reaction against the stylized romantic writing of the prairies, which envisioned the prairies as an Edenic promised land and cradle of nationalist pride. The realists, writing in the economically devastating depression, streamlined their prose in a way that featured "realistic fidelity to circumstantial detail" (107). The relationship the prairie people had with nature changed from the Edenic and harmonious to post-lapsarian and full of conflict. The failure to harness the land and create an agriculturally prosperous region was reflected, in these novels, by the characters' creative and imaginative failures. Robert Kroetsch, then, "wishe[d] to escape" these templates that featured very linear narratives that presupposed a dichotomous relationship between man and the land, a dichotomy that limited the way in which

novels could interact with the idea of *place*. Kroetsch's play with myth, history, and linearity manipulates the expectations produced by realist prairie writing. *The Studhorse Man* presents a number of narrative techniques that distance the work from traditionally defined boundaries of realism. This chapter will examine two of these techniques and specifically relate them to the construction of the prairie city. The first technique is Kroetsch's appropriation of Bakhtin's notion of "the carnivalesque," specifically the doubling effect and creation of a "two world condition." The carnival, writes Bakhtin, "offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; [the participants] built a second world and a second life outside officialdom" (6). This "second world" existed not separately from but simultaneously with the original world, where the institutions of power remained in control, despite all appearances. This use of doubling, where the world is both itself and its inverted self, fractures the narrative vision in a way that allows the city to take on a multiplicity of identities and meanings. The second narrative technique that will be explored in this chapter is the abandonment of traditional temporal progression in favour of a "spatialization" of the narrative action, where events take place simultaneously, in a moment of time, as opposed to progressing in a linear trajectory *through* time. This spatialization, in turn, allows Kroetsch to abandon historical narrative models, which depend on linear progression, in favour of mythological narrative models, which thrive in multi-layered constructions. These two techniques, and the resultant blurring of narrative boundaries, affect the presentation of the city because of how the narrative then mirrors the multifaceted and fractured structure of